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Better Child Care for Ontario:

Response to the Ontario Ministry of Education's consultations on child care and early years strategy

Trish Hennessy

The Ontario government has proposed four principles to guide the development of a provincial child care policy: accessibility, affordability, quality and responsiveness to families. We propose modifying these to: universal accessibility, affordability, high quality, responsiveness to families and public/not-for-profit.

Child care should be universally affordable to all – no child should have to miss out on quality child care and early learning opportunities because their parents cannot afford the fees. But for too many parents, the price of child care in Ontario presents too steep a barrier.

Ontario is home to the most expensive child care fees in Canada. A 2016 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives report shows monthly child care fees in Toronto, Kitchener, Vaughan, Markham, Ottawa, Mississauga and London are among the highest in the country. Median monthly fees for infants, toddlers and preschoolers in Toronto are the highest in Canada, at \$1,649, \$1,375, and \$1,150 respectively. Contrast those with the median monthly child care fee in Montreal: \$164.¹

Parents in Toronto can find themselves paying \$36,000 per year for regulated child care for an infant and a toddler. For many families, child care fees take up the biggest portion of their budget – more than rent, even.²

Ontario also has the distinction of being the sole province in which eligible families must join long wait lists for child care subsidies, with Toronto's wait list over 18,000 long.³ City councillors in Toronto have called on the province to invest more in child care, in order to help the city reduce its subsidy wait list. As the *Toronto Star* reported, "Although licensed child care in the city has grown by almost 15,600 spaces to more than 69,000 over the past six years, only about 2,000 more subsidies have been added."⁴

Why do three provinces — Quebec, Manitoba, and PEI — have the lowest child care fees in Canada? Their provincial governments have created policies that support affordable child care through base funding, illustrating just how much public policy matters for affordability. Fees vary predictably across the country based on provincial policy, but they are lowest in provinces that set fees rather than allowing the market to drive them.

Research into the value of Quebec’s low-fee child care system by Pierre Fortin, a professor of economics at the University of Quebec, concluded that the value of the program “is more than paying for itself ... thanks to increased employment and economic activity, it generates a fiscal surplus that can be used for tax reduction, increased spending (in health care, education, other social programs, etc.), or both.”⁵

When the government accepted the recommendation of the Special Advisor on Early Learning, Charles Pascal, to create a full-day kindergarten program as part of a seamless early learning and child care system, we applauded Ontario for leading the way on early learning. However, it is high time to make good on the outstanding recommendations and turn the province’s attention to some of the unintended consequences of creating full-day kindergarten without shoring up the province’s patchwork of child care programs.

In *A Path to Better Child Care*, a 2012 Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives publication on Ontario child care, we mapped out a path to better child care services, noting that in the absence of universal, affordable, regulated public child care, many Ontario parents had no choice but to fall back on unregulated child care. Unregulated child care puts children at greater risk, with no public oversight to ensure children’s health and safety are protected.

A Path to Better Child Care also raised concerns about Ontario’s reliance on for-profit child care: “For-profit child care now represents more than 25 percent of Ontario’s child care spaces — a rapid increase since 2001, when it was 17 percent. The number and size of chain operations has been growing, while new mega-corporations borrow questionable tactics from Australian and U.S. child care businesses and import them into Ontario.”⁶ With the allure of substantial new public funds and without coherent public policy that breaks with our historical reliance on for-profit child care, rapid expansion in for-profit child care could very well compromise a progressive modern vision for quality, accessible child care in Ontario.

As Ontario considers a broader strategy for child care in Ontario, we point to the recommendations in our *A Path to Better Child Care* report as a guide moving forward. These correspond with the “pillars” of child care policy put forward in Ontario’s current consultation and provide advice about operationalizing them.

The future of Ontario’s child care programs should be based on a few key assurances:

Accessibility

Early childhood education and care programs should be fully accessible to all children and all families. It's clear that the market and privately owned child care won't do this — that's one of the main reasons why Ontario needs to go public. A commitment to accessibility means the province would ensure an adequate supply of child care services throughout Ontario. It means everyone could afford a good quality child care program, no matter where you live, what your income level is, the age of your children (infants, toddlers and pre-school or school-aged), whether a child lives with a disability, and whether parents need services beyond the typical nine-to-five schedule. A commitment to accessibility means everyone benefits.

High quality

Child care services in Ontario should draw from the best practices known to contribute to children's development and well being, because every child deserves high quality care and education. This means Ontario's publicly managed child care services would take into account the family's needs, such as work schedules and the goal of a healthy work/family balance. This means staff would be well trained in early childhood education and would receive wages and benefits that reflect the value of the work. It would mean Ontario's child care programs would be based on a strategic, coordinated approach to early learning that respects children and families. Children's health and safety would come well before the profit motive of a market-based system. Child care programs would take part in ongoing quality improvement so that best practices become the norm. Child care programs would be housed in physical environments that enhance children's learning and well being. Child care programs would make learning fun, since play time is how children learn. And parents would be encouraged to participate in their children's child care and kindergarten programs.

Better options

There should be a variety of services to accommodate parents' needs as well as their children's. That would include giving parents the option of enrolling their child in a program for only part of the day. It would include better options for after-hour child care needs, especially for parents who work shift jobs. It would include better maternity and parental leave packages, so that all parents could have the option of staying home during the earliest years if they prefer. Finally, all of this is premised on the idea that Ontario's provincial government would take the leadership required to go public.

Notes

1 MacDonald, David and Martha Friendly. December 2016. A growing concern: 2016 child care fees in Canada's big cities. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/growing-concern>

2 Tiessen, Kaylie. April 2015. Making ends meet: Toronto's 2015 living wage. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/making-ends-meet>

3 Crawley, Mike. January 10, 2017. Daycare crunch: Toronto looks to the province to boost subsidized child care. CBC News. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/daycare-child-care-subsidized-ontario-1.3929545>

4 Monsebraaten, Laurie. January 9, 2017. Toronto urged to add more child care subsidies. Toronto Star. <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2017/01/09/toronto-urged-to-add-more-child-care-subsidies.html>

5 Fortin, Pierre. September 2015. Child care win-win: Quebec's low-fee child care programme. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2015/09/OS120_Summer2015_Child_care_win_win.pdf

6 Friendly, Martha and Trish Hennessy. September 2012. The path to better child care in Ontario. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Ontario%20Office/2012/09/Path_Better_ChildCareON.pdf

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Trish Hennessy is the director of the CCPA-Ontario.

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