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Go Public, Take Leadership

The Path to Better Child Care in Ontario

IN 1944, BETTY AND two-year-old Susan lived close to the small Ontario town of Milton, while husband Gordon was fighting overseas with the Canadian Armed Forces.

Betty kept the farm going on her own, with no nearby family to help mind the toddler. There were some wartime child care centres, mostly in Toronto and larger communities. Even so, farming wasn't deemed essential war work, so Betty probably wouldn't have been eligible for a child care spot. It wasn't easy, but Betty got through it by relying on a patchwork of friends and sitters to look after Susan. →

**Martha Friendly
and Trish Hennessy**

Ontario showed leadership on child care in the 1940s

By 1980, things hadn't changed much in the world of child care. Betty's daughter Susan was grown up, living in Toronto, and happy to be part of Canada's budding feminist movement. Child care centres were still a rarity, as well as controversial, but Susan was keen to keep working when Ashley was born.

Susan and her husband joined a group at the university that created a parent co-op for child care. They soon found that keeping the centre operating was a full-time job and that financing it — mostly through parent fees and fundraising — was solely their responsibility. But they did it and, in the process, they became advocates of a publicly funded, not-for-profit child care system. Susan's been fighting for that ever since.

It's 2012. Ashley is an adult and a PhD student. Ashley and her partner are about to become parents of twins. She's discovered not much about child care in Ontario has changed since her mother gave birth to her. Quality, publicly funded child care is still the exception to the rule, especially for infants and toddlers.

The minute Ashley's pregnancy was confirmed, she signed on to 10 wait lists at municipal and non-profit centres, some of which charge a nonrefundable wait list fee. But even if she's lucky enough to secure two infant spaces — those are in high demand in Toronto — the fees will be at least \$3,500 a month.

Their modest income makes them eligible for a fee subsidy and they've filled out Toronto's online application form, but

there are more than 23,000 other eligible families ahead of them on Toronto's subsidy waiting list. Their chances of accessing a fee subsidy are not great.

Amina, a recently settled refugee from Somalia, doesn't have three generations of child care struggles in Ontario to lament but she shares a similar frustration. She is a single mom newly located in Toronto, needing to find a job but struggling to secure affordable child care for two-year-old Asad.

Her mother lives in Toronto too, but she works full-time, and the child minding program Amina accessed when she took English as a Second Language classes isn't available to her now that she's completed her course. Amina hadn't been familiar enough with the way things work in Canada to know that she needed to put her name on child care centre and fee subsidy wait lists years ago. Now she's out of luck, out of the workforce, and waiting to find part-time work when Asad goes to full-day kindergarten in two years' time.

Like Betty in the 1940s and Susan in the 1980s, both Ashley and Amina are on their own for child care solutions. There simply aren't enough affordable, publicly regulated child care spaces available to meet the need.

Today, there are far more working women like Ashley and Amina than there were in Betty's time in the 1940s or Susan's time in the 1980s. In 1944, even with the workforce demands of the war effort, few mothers of young children worked full-time outside the home. Only about 2,500 were in Ontario day nurseries during that period. The numbers were small, but compared to other provinces, Ontario showed leadership on child care in the 1940s. It was the only province to take up the federal government's wartime child care funding in a significant way. Post-war, Ontario led the way with Canada's first child care legislation and provincial child care funding.





But over the course of three generations, Ontario has fallen behind other jurisdictions in terms of child care leadership and public funding. The most pressing problem for parents in 2012 continues to be inadequate access to high quality, publicly funded child care.

Since the 1960s, massive demographic, social and economic changes have reshaped the lives of Ontario families. By the 1970s, working mothers had begun to swell the ranks of the paid labour force. By the mid-1980s, the majority of mothers with young children found themselves trying to balance work and family life.

Ontario responded to this quiet revolution by becoming the first province to require early childhood training for some child care centre staff and to set limits on group sizes in Ontario's child care centres. Aside from those interventions though, child care remains remarkably similar to child care in the olden days.

Despite ample research, copious evidence, and new knowledge about best practices, numerous policy papers, multiple initiatives, community consultations and implementation plans, child care in Ontario remains a market rather than the broadly accessible, publicly managed program it can, and should, be.

While some women have always worked outside the home, today's young families need two incomes to survive. Ash-

75 percent of mothers with young children are in the paid labour force

ley's twins and Amina's Asad are among a substantial majority of children with working mothers: Today, 75 percent of mothers of young children are in the paid labour force and many more are in education and training programs. Lifetime employment and professional careers for women have become the norm.



Families have also come to appreciate how beneficial good quality early childhood programs can be for children's well-being. Indeed, many families seek good early childhood experiences for their children within the regulated child care sector even if they don't "need" child care. They know it gives

25 percent of child care spaces in Ontario are for-profit. That's up from 17 percent in 2001.

their children an added advantage when they can be with other children from an early age.

Despite the demand for better programs, there simply aren't enough options out there for parents. High quality, publicly funded, public and non-profit child care is still limited in Ontario. Most families must pay the full cost of child care, which is too expensive for ordinary families. Full fees for an infant or toddler in Toronto and Ottawa can cost more than rent – as much as \$2,000 a month. Funding support is still mostly based on the fee subsidy approach, which was established by the federal government in 1966 and is an outdated model. Rather than funding child care services directly, to make programs more affordable for all parents, the fee subsidy approach awards public funding to individual parents who can qualify as "needy". It does little to improve broad access or the quality of child care in Ontario.

Left with few options, the vast majority of working parents turn to unregulated, informal child care arrangements, despite underlying concerns about its reliability, quality and safety.

It's worth remembering that, in 1981, a Conservative government made "improving the quality of informal care" a key policy initiative. Today, most parents continue to have unregulated child care as their only options: regulated child care spaces are available to only about 20 percent of Ontario children aged 0–5 years old. At election time, every political party promises to help working families but, strangely, better child care hasn't been front and centre. In their search for child care, parents are left to their own devices, much like Betty was in 1944.

Most child care in Ontario is still private, with the number of for-profit centres growing. A large body of research shows that child care facilities whose aim is to make profits tend to provide poorer quality, access and accountability than public and non-profit child care programs.

At one time, Ontario was headed in the right direction. In the late-1980s and early-1990s, both the provincial Liberal (Peterson) and NDP (Rae) governments took steps that reduced the relative size of the for-profit child care sector and limited its access to public funding. But these initiatives were reversed, first by Mike Harris' Conservative government and then by the current Liberal government.

As a result of such backward moves, child care in Ontario is being turned more and more into a money-making venture for child care businesses. 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.

Today, Ontario fails to have a coherent early childhood education and care policy. It has services, but no public policy to tie them together, nor the commitment to





go public that could revive the sector. As a result, the small supply of public (municipal) child care in Ontario is dwindling through government neglect.

Over the years, Ontario has developed various early learning initiatives, including expansion, quality improvement, enhanced training, inclusion, changes to funding arrangements, information for parents, Best Start, full-day kindergarten, and others. These have, by-and-large, been disconnected from one another and disconnected from well-coordinated forward planning.

In recent years, some Ontario provincial initiatives on early learning have been unfurled with clear disregard for well-respected evidence about what works and what doesn't. Certainly in the case of Ontario's full-day kindergarten implementation, the new program threw into crisis a child care system that was already teetering from underfunding. It was a fully preventable crisis.

There is, of course, an alternative to the status quo. Rather than leaving the

demand for more and better child care options to the market, it's time to go public. After three generations, the market has proven not to be responsive to the real needs of working families, nor will it be.

It's time for Ontario's provincial government to take leadership on child care. Working together with the community, municipalities, school boards and boards, it's completely within the Ontario government's ability to create a child care system

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with services that are publicly managed, widely accessible, affordable, high quality, publicly funded, public and non-profit — a child care system that would make the Bettys, Susans, Ashleys and Aminas of this world proud to raise their families here.

The solution to a three generation-old problem is quite simply political leadership to create a coherent public policy framework that integrates all childhood education and care programs — from child care to kindergarten to school-age care — based on the best evidence available, with ur-

A commitment to accessibility means everyone benefits

gent, short-term, mid-term and long-term actions.

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 9 to 5 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 would 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 or using family child care. 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. It's in the best interest of our children and their families.

Taking leadership on child care means designing coherent public policy that can make child care work for families in large, small and suburban communities all across Ontario. It means inviting community stakeholders and parents to have conver-





sations about concrete options that can lead to real solutions, not just band-aid measures. It means using the best available evidence to design these options. And it means getting on with this job now to ensure that future generations of Ontario women, children and families are not struggling with mid-20th century child care problems well into the 21st century.

By going public with early childhood education and care programs, the Ontario government would show the leadership truly required to modernize child care. Instead of handing child care over to profit-driven corporations, the Ontario government would commit to legislating universal entitlement to public and non-profit early learning and child care programs. It would prove its commitment with clear targets and timelines to make it a reality. There would be an immediate moratorium on new for-profit licenses, because the care and education of our children is too important to be left to the vagaries of the market. Going public with child care would mean eliminating the

intrusive fee subsidy system and replacing it with predictable and stable public funding to programs and low parent fees. Affordability for families, not profit-seeking for businesses, would be a core aim. Services would be publicly monitored to ensure high quality, and the province would demonstrate accountability to families by regularly reporting on the quality, accessibility and impact of its public early childhood education and care system.

Families have been dealing with second best for long enough

That's what going public in the 21st century would look like in Ontario. For the Ashleys and Aminos of this province, and for their children, now is the time for the Ontario government to take leadership and go public with child care. Families have been dealing with second best for long enough.

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