

Only way to expand child care is to raise wages

The child care workforce crisis has worsened in Ontario to the point that many programs are limiting enrolment because they cannot staff.

By Carolyn Ferns & Alana Powell, Wed. June 21, 2023

The federal government's child care legislation passed unanimously in Parliament on Monday. It was a day 60 years in the making thanks to generations of child care advocates – inside and outside of government – who never gave up the fight. But even with this legislation passed, Canada's journey to \$10-a-day child care for all will not be without its challenges.

During final debate of the legislation Minister Karina Gould referred to the child care workforce as “the backbone” of the child care system. But here in Ontario that system is being built on child care workers' backs.



The current wage floor in child care in Ontario, introduced by the Ford government, is a shamefully low \$19-per-hour.

The child care workforce crisis has worsened to the point that many programs are limiting enrollment because they cannot staff. The YMCA of Greater Toronto reported earlier this year that, despite long waitlists, they only have 16,000 children enrolled in their 35,000 spaces because they cannot retain and recruit enough educators to staff their programs. It's the same story at child care centres across the province.

The root cause of this problem is wages. For years wages in child care stagnated because, under our old market system, educator wages were funded by parent fees. Operators couldn't raise wages without raising parent fees, and fees were already unaffordable.

The introduction of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care system was supposed to change all of that. But both the province and the federal government seem content to try to do child care on the cheap.

Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce is under pressure after a Canadian Press story revealed that everyone the province has consulted with on child care has told them to raise wages. And last Wednesday Toronto City Council unanimously passed a motion calling on the province to raise wages in child care to make them “comparable to positions in the public sector.”

In response Minister Lecce has talked about a “boost” but with no specifics, timelines or transparency.

So the child care community is back to the grassroots advocacy that we have known for decades. On Tuesday June 20, one day after the federal legislation passed, child care programs across Ontario held [Worth More](#) events to raise the issue of decent pay in child care, talking to families, and calling politicians.

And politicians of every stripe need to answer that call. The workforce crisis is a major roadblock on the way to \$10-a-day child care for all, and it won't be solved without both the province and the federal government working together and anteing up.

And a note to any politicians thinking of jumping on this crisis to make political hay and call for a return to the cheques-in-the-mail of the Harper era. You will find families want the \$10-a-day child care system; it's here to stay. What needs to happen is to fund it right, build it faster and pay educators what they are worth. Here in Ontario we need a salary starting at \$30-per-hour for Registered Early Childhood Educators and \$25-per-hour for non-RECE staff.

The federal/provincial/territorial ministers responsible for child care are meeting this summer. The child care workforce should top the agenda. If we do not significantly raise the wages in child care, the “backbone” of the system will not hold out much longer.