

## **Fundamental flaws flash over Ontario's child care plan**

[Ontario's Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework](#) contains promising language. It commits to universality; to affordable, quality care; to a recognized early childhood workforce; to targets and timelines; transparency and accountability. It is strong language to ground a dialogue aimed at addressing the pieces missing from the provincial strategy.

Indira Naidoo-Harris, the associate minister for the early years and child care, dubs the plan a transformation of Ontario's early years and child care system. The plan does suggest some big ideas but it is not transformational nor will it create a system. There will be more money, always good news to a struggling sector, but it gets layered onto a service patchwork that no amount of hub building will rationalize.

The ministry's call for hubs is so 20<sup>th</sup> century. 'Hubs' have been in the making for 20 years. They come and they go depending on local leaders. Service providers sitting around a table making nice, may be nice but it rarely results in noticeable improvements for service users. Education, child care, and family support services will not 'hub' until their mandates and funding require them to do so.

Absent from the 40 pages is the naming of a responsible body to create the infrastructure necessary to meet its laudable goals. The assumption persists that a primed child care market will do the job. Doubling the number of child care spots by relying on the ad hoc capacity of child care providers is unrealistic.

This kind of expansion needs a mandate and resources to municipalities to directly take on not just the planning, but the direct development of spaces. Think of the resources the ministry put into full day kindergarten and it had school boards as on-the-ground developers. Municipalities have the leavers with their access to public spaces, planning and zoning to take on development. Throwing money at a fragile sector and hoping that it will produce 'first class' child care is public policy naivety.

School boards are another source of development support. The ministry 'invites' boards to send in proposals. Full day kindergarten wasn't an option for boards. It was a directive. Boards already have a mandate to secure after-school care for their students, a responsibility most hand off to child care operators resulting in long lines of parents waiting for care, and large numbers child care staff working split shifts. These deficiencies don't exist when boards directly operate the programs.

It is telling that 'development organizations' are included as examples under the innovation fund; a recognition that this capacity is necessary, but it is left to the sector to create.



The renewal document also maintains an old-fashioned perspective of early learning and care as a labour market support. Is a service really universal if participation depends on your mom holding down a job? Getting a handle on parent fees is a necessity. Otherwise all those new spaces will sit empty. More and more families are dependent on seasonal and precarious work and need fee subsidies to pay for their children's care. If they do win the subsidy lottery, the subsidy evaporates when their work contract ends. Their children cycle in and out of child care in tandem with their parents' access to work. Any strategy cognizant of child development would dump this design.

The ministry will take on the agency costs of licensing and monitoring home care providers removing what everyone agrees are unfair burdens to impose on dependent contractors. But, the plan stops short of banning unlicensed care. It is hard to compute that it is illegal to dispense hot dogs without meeting health and safety standards more stringent than any licensed child care provider must meet, but the health and safety of thousands of small children are left to chance.

There is much to commend in the ministry's document, but the fundamental flaws are flashing. As long as child care remains a market-driven service, designed as a workforce support and co-existing alongside an unlicensed black market, quality, affordable, universal, transparent, and accountable will remain words, and not the drivers of system transformation.

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