

To Cure Ontario's Child-Care Woes, Fund Families Directly

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Children play at a daycare in Coquitlam, B.C., on March 28, 2018. Darryl Dyck/The Canadian Press

OPINION

By Andrea Hannen

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Commentary

In Ontario, the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care program (CWELCC), marketed to voters as \$10-a-day child care, has resulted in

long waiting lists and lack of access for families, suppression of wages for child-care staff, and crushing levels of government red tape.

In October, some Ontario child-care centres participated in “awareness days” to highlight these challenges. Some even aligned themselves with groups from other provinces that were urging the

Share: federal government to scrap the current federal–provincial agreements in favour of “no-strings-attached envelope funding.” More recently, Ontario Education Minister Jill Dunlop [called for more federal funding](#) and more flexibility in the national program.



Given the red tape that has characterized Ontario’s child-care system for nearly three decades, however, it is naive to imagine that these moves alone would result in more access to licensed child care for Ontario families.



Granted, the CWELCC program’s implementation in Ontario is uniquely complicated. The federal funding flows to the province and must be deployed as per the terms and conditions laid out in the Canada–Ontario CWELCC funding agreement. A portion of the federal funding then flows from the province to 47 municipalities and must be deployed as per the terms and conditions laid out in the Ontario Ministry of Education’s guidelines for service system managers. The final portion of the funding then flows from each of Ontario’s 47 municipalities to the licensed child-care centres each has selected to participate in the program, and must be deployed as per the terms and conditions the municipality has laid out in the local implementation documents it has issued.

Since 2022, this has amounted to roughly 4,000 pages annually of government memos, spreadsheets, and guidelines that Ontario’s child-care operators must review. For a small business owner or a volunteer board of directors trying to run a centre and provide a high standard of care, it’s a struggle just to keep up. The mandatory reporting requirements constantly change and when questions arise, it’s difficult to get answers.

But, the challenges associated with Ontario's [bloated child-care bureaucracy](#) aren't new. They began in the 1990s, when the provincial government downloaded social services administration to municipalities. This created more paperwork and more ambiguity for child-care centres. The situation worsened during the McGuinty and Wynne years, particularly after the passage of the Child Care and Early Years Act (CCEYA), which gave municipalities more power over provincial child-care licensing decisions. In 2019, the Ford government tried to reduce municipal child-care administration costs, but the [move was met with near hysteria](#). Since signing onto the CWELCC, the province seems to have abandoned any effort in this direction.

In fact, it recently introduced a major change to [how it will administer](#) CWELCC funds in the last two years of the five-year program. It is also [amending the CCEYA](#). It remains to be seen if these changes will reduce the administrative burden on child-care centres. It seems unlikely, given that to accommodate this change, the Ministry of Education has already spent countless hours orienting both municipalities and child-care licensees to the change, generating hundreds of pages of new documentation in the process. Interestingly, the one expense category that child-care centres will no longer have to track relates to the cost of administration.

Increasing the federal funding flowing to Ontario or changing the CWELCC program to a simple federal transfer wouldn't save the 500 or so centres that are likely to close because of the Ministry of Education's August [decision to cut](#) provincial wage and operating grants to non-CWELCC centres at the end of December. These grants are wholly unrelated to the federal program and in most cases, predate it.

Changing the CWELCC program to a simple federal transfer also wouldn't change Ontario's public schools-first approach to child-care expansion, outlined in the Ontario [Provincial Planning Statement](#). Nor would it alter the [provincially legislated conflict of interest](#) that allows Ontario's municipalities to run their own child-care centres while also making funding and expansion decisions concerning all other centres in their jurisdictions.

Ultimately, the same provincial and municipal bureaucrats who designed the current system would be involved in deploying the federal transfer. There's no evidence they're willing to relinquish any of the control they currently exercise over Ontario's licensed child-care sector or the billions of taxpayer dollars that fund it. There's even less that any provincial politician would have the temerity to insist that they do.

The best hope for the tens of thousands of Ontario families who are stuck on child-care waiting lists is to have federal funding sent directly to them, where more of it can actually be used for child care.

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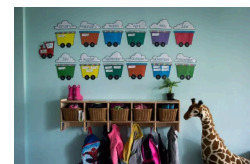
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