

Sure I'm Happy But?

by SHERALYN ROMAN

If perhaps you've had other things on your mind lately, say COVID, for example, and the additional risks we're all facing right now even though the pandemic is over, you may have missed the recent announcement on daycare funding that saw both Mr. Ford and Mr. Trudeau gracing our neighbours to the south with their presence.

Speaking in Brampton on Monday, March 28, they jointly announced the long-awaited signing of a daycare agreement that would cap the cost of your child's attendance at a daycare facility at \$10 per day. 'That's a great deal,' you say and it is, but it's been too long coming and has cost parents a significant amount of money in the meantime. So, I'm happy but, well with me there's always a 'but' isn't there?

Our Prime Minister rightly called this a 'historic moment,' allowing families across the country to access affordable daycare and early learning opportunities. We know this is crucial to all children and families but particularly those who struggle with low income.

Numerous studies have shown the benefit of early learning interventions for children who are disadvantaged and these were in fact, a justification for full time kindergarten put forward by Dr. Charles Pascal (in a reported dated 2009) and fully implemented in 2014 during the Wynne government years.

We know too that skyrocketing daycare costs often meant parents (and, more often, specifically mothers) had to make difficult choices about whether to have a family or a career, or whether to pay their daycare costs for the month or make rent and food a priority expense. Making the cost of daycare affordable will help to empower women, children and families to make better choices for themselves and their unique situations and to get early access to a wide variety of age-appropriate educational programming. All good things, but I have to ask - why so long and why now?

Of particular concern to me (suspicious type that I am) is why the words used by Doug Ford during his turn at the microphone included this comment: 'It's a deal that provides flexibility in how we allocate federal funding, flexibility that was critical to making this program work in Ontario.'

I really hope it's not the same type of flexibility they applied to 'distributing' rapid tests to schools and to families across the province.

I can't help but wonder, and I am most certainly not the only one judging by the all the press I've heard, watched and read these past few months, why on earth Ontario was the last province to sign on to this 'great deal for Ontario parents,' as Mr. Ford also referred to it.

These funds have been available for some time now and every other province and territory seemed to have no problem lining up to sign up.

Part of Ontario's delay apparently had to do with concerns that funding would dry up after the initial five year agreement yet the same federal budget that allocated the money also guaranteed to continue funding the program at \$9 billion annually.

Meanwhile, with an Ontario election looming just two months away and the potential for this daycare deal set to expire on March 31, the day you're reading this, it's suddenly NOW that Mr. Ford thinks it's a good deal? It certainly couldn't have been a prolonged stall tactic just for the sake of good polling numbers, could it?

We're told that Ontario managed to negotiate close to an additional \$3 billion dollars and that the deal is spread out over six years

not five (as in the other provinces) but I still have concerns.

Parents have to do nothing according to our Education Minister; it will be up to the individual childcare operators to enrol and they need to make that decision before September ? with any savings then ?trickled down to the parents.?

Red flags are popping up all over for me about some of this wording. How it will ?trickle down?? What is the exact decision the daycare operator needs to make? Payments, we're told, will be retroactive to April of this year but what might have been better is payments made retroactive to the date the Conservatives could have first signed this deal ? a year ago - especially as families suffered through the pandemic!

By the way, lest parents think this affordable daycare starts immediately, please be aware that we will not actually see \$10/day daycare in our province for another three years, until September of 2025! Note that even then, the language says ?an average of \$10/day,? so it's not necessarily a guarantee.

Given that Canada's Minister of Families, Children and Social Development says ?parents in Ontario currently pay, on average, \$46 a day for child care,? two things appear glaringly obvious to me: 1) the average family with just one child in daycare could have saved far more this past year than the meaningless license plate renewal fee we're being teased with, and 2) it would be so much better, especially for our pandemic ravaged economy, if this initiative was effective immediately.

When Minister Lecce himself comments that Ontario parents pay some of the ?most expensive child care in Canada,? you would have thought that would motivate our provincial government to negotiate all the harder and faster to secure this deal rather than leaving it until less than three days before it expired.

Thousands of extra day care spots will open up over the next few years and there's even references to pay increases for ECE and RECE workers and that's good news. These are the people with whom we are entrusting our children's care and they should be making a more liveable wage than the current minimum of \$18.00/hour. As Ford said during this same news conference, ?they deserve more money,? because ?the job is very, very difficult. It's a job I wouldn't be able to do,? and he's right ? he's having enough trouble doing the job WE hired him to do almost four years ago and failing to sign this agreement until mere moments before it would have been withdrawn is just one example.