

New child-care study redundant and too late, say critics ^[1]

Author: Laroche, Jean

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EXCERPTS

The group that represents private child-care operators in Nova Scotia is skeptical the McNeil government really wants to hear from its members and is ready to truly collaborate with the province's daycare sector.

"The trust is a little low," said Pam Streeter, co-chair of the Private Licensed Administrators' Association of Nova Scotia.

On Aug. 29, the province signed a \$75,000 contract with Thinkwell Research Incorporated for a three-month contract to consult and report back to government. According to that agreement, the company is expected to:

- create and conduct a telephone and online survey to understand the child-care needs of families with children under 12 years old.
- provide feedback on potential changes to the daycare regulations.
- explore possible partnership opportunities with existing child-care providers.
- gather information and feedback from child-care operators to align current regulated services with new pre-primary program.

Review, surveys already done

Streeter can't understand why the province wants to redo work completed in March 2016, when Nova Scotia concluded an extensive review of child care, which included 23 focus groups involving 409 participants and an online survey completed by 7,000 people, including 5,853 parents.

"To consult again on some of the issues that we've already consulted on just doesn't make sense," said Streeter.

"In our past experience with surveys with the department, it hasn't been positive. And surveys are very difficult to craft to get the information that you really need, and this may be a case in point. So clearly, if they're having to go back and do it again, they didn't get the right information the first time around."

Streeter said talk of another round of consultation isn't helping narrow the rift that was created by the province when it unilaterally created a pre-primary program rolling out this fall.

"It's creating additional mistrust, I believe, within the sector because we did have a plan in place and now it's been totally turned on its head and we weren't consulted."

'A new reality'

Education Minister Zach Churchill said the government isn't redoing the work completed in 2016. The introduction of pre-primary has fundamentally altered the landscape, which is why new consultations and surveys were in order, he said.

"That creates a new reality for the business models in the child-care sector," said Churchill.

"We want to work with them to help them transition into that new reality and ensure that we're all working together to achieve what I think our common objective is, to make sure more kids are accessing these critical programs."

Liberal connections to firm

PC Leader Jamie Baillie called the work "a PR exercise and a waste of money."

"They don't really care what daycare operators think, don't really care what parents think," he said of the governing Liberals. "They're implementing a program without any of the details figured out, causing even more confusion in our schools."

"And now we're going to have a pretend consultation, after the fact. They're literally getting it backwards."

Baillie is also worried about Thinkwell's Liberal connections. The founder of the firm, Len Preeper, is a longtime Liberal who was a policy adviser in the office of Premier Russell MacLellan and stayed on to be his chief of staff in opposition in the late 1990s.

Government responds

Churchill said Thinkwell got the job after four companies were approached by government and it was the only one interested.

He said Liberal ties had "nothing" to do with it.

"Len Preeper is a consultant that has a good reputation and has been used by governments of multiple political stripes."

Neither the March 2016 report and recommendations, nor the June 2016 response by the government to the review on regulated child care talked about the possible establishment of a pre-primary program in schools.

Churchill said it became an idea afterwards, as politicians and bureaucrats looked more deeply at the research.

"The literature is conclusive: Pre-primary, early learning matters in the lives of kids. It helps them. It helps us identify children with special needs earlier. It helps with transitioning into an academic learning environment and the vast majority of our kids are not accessing these programs. That's the motivation for this."

That research was alluded to extensively in both reports.

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