

Ontario lowers bar for how we care for our children in the name of profit ^[1]

Author: Langford, Rachel

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EXCERPTS

Among the references to agriculture, pawnbrokers, mines, and wireless services in the Progressive Conservative government's omnibus bill, Restoring Ontario's Competitiveness Act, there is a proposal to increase the number of very young children an unlicensed home child care provider can care for.

The government says this bill is to ease regulations for businesses and to take away unnecessary red tape so businesses can expand.

Government House Leader Todd Smith adds the bill will make it "viable for private daycare operators to actually have a home business." Is this how Ontario citizens should view the care of Ontario's children — as a business proposition? Is this what we want for the care of Ontario's youngest children — less red tape, more profit?

There is something seriously wrong when child care is lumped in with mining and pawn broking. Children are not products to be exchanged in a marketplace from parents to an unlicensed home child care provider for a profit.

This exchange thinking ignores the fact that the care of young children is all about relationship. As Joan Tronto says, the marketplace satisfies on human wants, not human needs. And what do children under the age of 2 need?

They need good care that focuses on consistent, attentive, responsive, and meaningful interactions between children and adults. How can this be achieved by increasing the number of children under age 2 in the care of unlicensed home providers?

Responding to children's needs takes time. In businesses like agriculture and wireless services, an increase in production can be made more efficient. Care cannot be made more efficient. Good care requires time — time to listen and engage with children.

There is something seriously wrong when changes to child care regulations fall under a competitiveness act.

It appears these changes are designed to increase competitiveness in the child care marketplace among unlicensed home providers. How can these providers be competitive?

Andrea Hannen of the Association of Daycare Operators of Ontario (ADCO) says that the changes will make child care more affordable. There is no research or evidence to support that. And this is likely because prices are driven by what families can bear, and families are desperate for child care.

Furthermore, in a child care free market, families do not have equal opportunities to find good child care when expansion and profitability are major aims. Poor families will end up with poorer quality care.

Minister Smith says regulations and "red tape" are burdensome for unlicensed child care providers who want to run and expand a business. But removing regulations and red tape for the care of very young children is ethically dubious.

Regulations establish a minimum standard, and Smith is throwing that minimum standard out: He's lowering the bar for how we care for our children in the name of profit.

These are just some of the many problems when market thinking is applied to the care of young children. They lay bare how disconnected this government is from what children and families actually need.

Try as they might, this government can't sell protecting the interests of businesses as protecting the interests of children and families. Maybe that works for pawnbrokers and mines, but it doesn't work for child care.

Rachel Langford is an associate professor at the School of Early Childhood Studies, Faculty of Community Services, Ryerson University.

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