

Education reform excludes some children ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Why are school-age children being excluded?

Provincial government statistics indicate just under 13,000, or 12 per cent of, children aged six to 12 years, had the opportunity to attend licensed school-age (SA) child-care programs in our province. But if Bill 47, The Early Learning and Child Care Act, is passed this may no longer be the case. It is not what is written in this bill that is worrying, but what is missing.

This bill defines a "child" as an individual under the age of 12, a "preschool-age child", as a child two years of age or older who is not a SA and an "infant" as a child under two years. Yet, within the body of the bill there is no mention of services for SA children.

For example, under Part 2, it states, "A licensed provider who provides care and supervision of one or more infants or preschool-age children at a centre must provide an approved early-learning program as part of the care and supervision." Even though the act describes a SA child in the definitions, there is nowhere within the act that one could interpret that they have been included.

The omission of SA is leading those of us in the sector to question if there is a plan to eliminate this age group from the funding model.

If we examine the current legislation, the Community Child Care Standards Act, it defines a "child" as a person 12 years and under. This is clear; no one feels left out because it is an inclusive statement. Any six-year-old can tell you one of the biggest sins on the playground is to "exclude."

Another thing that children learn about is history. Regarding Bill 47, it is vital that the backstory to SA care in Manitoba be understood. Organized child care in Manitoba goes back to the early 1900s with day nurseries. These programs provided care for infants through to elementary-school children and assisted women who were the heads of households and who had to work.

In 1974, with the help of the Canadian Assistance Plan, the province established the Child Day Care Program. The focus of this was on infants and preschoolers. With more women entering the workforce the need for SA care was becoming an obvious issue.

In the 1970s and '80s, the term "latchkey kids" was being used to describe a generation of SA children who were being dismissed from school to spend the next few hours at home unsupervised. During this era, several charity groups started offering Lunch-and-after-Four programs (LAAF) but these were sparse. The documents from the Social Planning Council of Winnipeg and the Manitoba Legislature from 1975-80 illustrate the pressure that was being applied to fund care for SA children at the same level as preschool children.

In 1980, the door to funded SA care opened a crack when the budget included money to be used to meet the needs of families with SA children. Over the next few years there was a great deal of activity in relation to child care for all children up to 12 years as the province and the child-care sector geared up for the 1983 Community Child Day Care Standards Act. With this new Act, the care of SA children was under the same umbrella as their younger peers.

If the government plans to discontinue funding SA care, they will also lose control over the quality of care these children receive. Currently, licensed SA care programs must meet all regulations in the current act. One requirement is half of the staff must be trained Early Childhood Educators (ECEs). These professionals have specialized training in child development focusing on birth to 12 years. Many of these programs are also an extension of infant and preschool programs. This system works efficiently because the programs can share resources, expertise, and staffing. There can be a continuity of care and this can be critical when it comes to children with additional support needs.

By excluding SA children from the protection of the proposed Early Learning and Child Care Act, the government will take us back to the 1970s. Again, children in grades 1 through 6 will be left to fend for themselves until a parent gets home from work. This becomes a bigger issue for families on non-instructional days. The worst situation will be parents unable to re-enter the workforce, at the end of this pandemic because they are unable to obtain safe and affordable care for their SA child.

It is critical that all children and their families have access to quality care until the child is of the age where it is safe and reasonable for them to begin to experience independence.

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