Privatizing child care remains controversial in Germany [DE] [1]

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EXCERPTS

There are too few day care centers for children in Germany. Can privately-run institutions fill the gap? Critics and advocates of the proposal remain deeply divided.

"Positively bored and desperately unhappy." That's how Jelena Wahler saw her daughter in a German day care center. The young family had returned from their time studying in the US, and compared to the day care centers there, the German Kindergartens, as they're called, were "simply management."

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Germany's first nationwide company of private day care centers, "Little Giants" was born. There are plans to build 50 centers in three years amid growing demand. The idea is to set up small groups and plenty of well-trained caretakers -- including English-speakers.

Critics fear erosion of quality

The German government is now drafting a bill meant to support and expand childcare. At present, however, the law is hotly contested. One of the thorniest issues is the question of how private child care operations like Little Giants will be dealt with in future. Should non-profit as well as commercial day care enterprises receive state benefits?

For parents who send their children to private day care and pay up to 1,000 euros for a spot in some places, the answer is simple.

"That's pretty hefty," said Michael Weinmann, a father in Stuttgart who as an office clerk, doesn't make a lot of money. But there were no other childcare options at the time for his daughter Natasja other than in a private day care center.

Weinmann said state subsidies for such private centers are absolutely necessary in a country that plans to establish 750,000 new Kindergarten slots. "They'll never manage that alone," Weinmann said.

But critics, who include the church and labor unions, fear that subsidizing private childcare would prompt the state to withdraw from its important caretaker role, leaving national quality standards at the mercy of markets.

"Childcare isn't something that can be done the way you do business with say trade in Spanish pepper," said Bernhard Eibeck from the education labor union, GEW. He added private day care would open the door to global low-cost kindergarten chains.

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Opponents of private day care would probably feel vindicated by an example in Australia where entrepreneur Eddy Groves became the continent's richest men as a result of his publicly-listed day care company, "ABC-Learning."

The chain branched out, expanding into Canada, England, and the US until share prices tumbled in 2008, leaving thousands of parents in Australia worrying about childcare in a country where non-profit day care centers are hard to find.

In Britain, more than 85 percent of all day care is handled by private firms. Helen Penn, professor of early childhood education at the University of East London sums it up: Private childcare often lacks quality and social responsibilty.

But Dieter Dohmen, director of the Research Institute for Education and Social Economies (FIBS) warned of a distorted view of private childcare that automatically equated it as "being bad."

He admitted that the stockmarket and short-term gains shouldn't be dictating rules in childcare and education. At the same time, there are plenty of examples of "hugely awful" not-for-profit childcare institutions in Germany, Dohmen pointed out, saying he was basically in favor of competition with private childcare "if it's a fair one."

The question is not between private and public education, Dohmen said, "the key is quality control."

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