

Corporate link to child care draws concern [CA-ON] ^[1]

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Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie

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EXCERPTS

Toronto-area parents looking for child care may be forced to call Brisbane or New York to find a space in their neighbourhood centre if corporate daycare takes hold in Canada, says an Australian academic on a national tour to warn about the phenomenon in her country.

A company linked to Brisbane-based ABC Learning Centres & the world's largest multinational child-care chain & has bought several Alberta daycares and made offers for centres in B.C. and Ontario.

And Canadians should be wary, said social policy professor Deborah Brennan, who has advised governments on child-care policy.

"The market approach has been a spectacular failure in Australia and I think it would be prudent to be concerned here," said Brennan, whose trip is being sponsored by an Alberta public policy group and various university, labour and child-care advocacy organizations.

Allowing these companies to establish operations in Canada pits business interests against the needs of children, she said in an interview before speaking to students and faculty at the University of Toronto yesterday.

"Shareholders seek high returns on their investment while children require high-quality care that is expensive to deliver," she said.

When Australia's government began investing heavily in daycare in the early 1990s, about 80 per cent of the country's centres were run by municipalities or non-profit community groups, a situation similar to Ontario today, Brennan said.

But now more than 70 per cent of Australian child care is owned by corporate interests that are using publicly funded parent vouchers to fatten their bottom line.

The Australian government initially welcomed private child care for the same reasons Canadian governments give for allowing public subsidies to flow to private care: to broaden parent choice, keep public costs down and to increase quality through competition and innovation, Brennan said.

"But what we've seen in Australia is nothing like what the community and the government anticipated," she said.

Instead of expanding parent choice, child-care chains in Australia gobbled up small operators. Parent fees have soared.

And the corporate child-care sector has lobbied against raising staff wages, stiffening regulations or lowering child-staff ratios, Brennan said.

...

"It would be a great time (for Canada) to look around the world to see what's actually happened."

Last month, provincial children's minister Deb Matthews said she wasn't worried about child-care chains setting up in Ontario because standards here are high and they'd find it hard to make money.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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