

Stop the scramble for child care [CA-ON]^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 6 Sep 2007

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Labour Day 2007, and another summer is over. Children head back to school, and the fall child care scramble is on as another generation of Ontario parents struggles to find scarce-as-hen's-teeth, priced-out-of-reach, or not-good-enough child care spaces.

Today, Ontario has more than 1.2 million children with employed mothers but child care & for those who can afford it & covers only 12 per cent. Despite plentiful political rhetoric about the importance of the early years, high quality early childhood education and care is still an elusive goal for most Ontario families.

Back in 1985, a minority Liberal government took power at Queen's Park promising to make child care "a public service, not a welfare service." The government identified access and quality as goals, brought in the first global program funding and, in a throne speech, then-premier David Peterson touted full-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds. But despite promises, new starts and false starts, improvements since then are barely visible.

There is no doubt that families need child care. Ontario recognized this as far back as 1946 when it brought in Canada's first child care legislation. Today, most mothers work outside the home; their participation in the labour force has risen steadily so it now reaches 75 per cent. This translates into 508,000 children 5-years-old and under with working mothers but only an estimated 135,000 full-time child care spaces. It doesn't get better after the early years are over either: 84 per cent of mothers of 6- to 15-year-olds work outside the home, so 742,000 6- to 12-year-olds compete for 71,000 regulated after-school spaces.

And then there's the issue of quality, identified in research as the unquestionably critical factor that determines whether early childhood education and care is an asset or a detriment for children. But both investigative reporting by the Toronto Star and research show that an Ontario government licence doesn't guarantee "educational" quality or & alas & even basic health and safety.

There's no doubt that, compared to most OECD countries, Ontario children have limited access to the early childhood education that benefits them in myriad ways, provided the quality is good. Ironically, in 1883, Toronto became the second jurisdiction in North America to introduce public kindergarten, which was widespread and funded by the provincial government before 1900. For some years, kindergarten was full day and served 3- to 5-year-olds, similar to early childhood education programs in many other countries today.

After all these years, and contrary to best practice in early childhood programs and policy, kindergarten and child care in Ontario remain two solitudes. Ontario is still the sole province with universal 4-year-old kindergarten but Ontario parents of 4- and 5-year-olds scramble for child care because kindergarten is not set up to acknowledge families' workforce realities.

Ontario was once a leader in early childhood education and care. But present-day governments have & at best & done much too little, too late, failing to take children's and families' needs seriously. Ontario has timidly tinkered, making neither fundamental change nor committing public funds.

In contrast, most other OECD countries have put resources into steadily building relatively integrated early childhood education and care systems that most children access. And Quebec & although not yet achieving a mature early childhood system & has massively improved accessibility by growing the supply of programs and removing most of the costs from parent fees. As part of this, Quebec brought in full-day kindergarten for all 5-year-olds, together with substantial expansion of after-school programs.

What should Ontario do? Ontario needs a serious plan, not more bits and pieces, and promptly & a plan to integrate kindergarten and child care; expand public and non-profit programs so parents of younger and older children have something to choose from; make programs affordable for all families; and fund the programs, rather than subsidizing parents, to support the quality children need. This will mean coming up with better policy and serious money so as not to continue shortchanging Ontario's children and families.

And Ontario should get busy before another September goes by and another generation of parents is left to scramble for child care.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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