

Norfolk residents angry over child-care funding [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Four dollars a day for child-care isn't enough. That's just one of the messages concerned parents and child-care advocates want to send to Haldimand-Norfolk MP Diane Finley.

About 35 people gathered at a town hall meeting in Simcoe Wednesday to discuss the fate of the Best Start program in Haldimand-Norfolk and to write messages to Finley, who, as human resources and social services minister, is responsible for child care.

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Critics say the Tory plan does nothing to create new daycare spaces and the money provided isn't enough to pay for quality, licensed child care.

"The grants are taxable at the income level of the lowest earning spouse," said Sally Landon of Rural Initiative for Social Equality, a local anti-poverty group which sponsored the evening in conjunction with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. That means low-income families where both parents work will get to keep a smaller portion of the money than families with a higher income where only one parent works.

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Under Best Start, Haldimand-Norfolk was to get \$7.7 million over three years to create 165 new child-care spaces and provide related services for young children and their families. Plans were scaled down after the Harper government announced that federal funding for the program would end in March 2007.

Still, the area has done "an amazing job" with the money available, said Patti Moore, Norfolk County's general manager of health and social services, one of several speakers at the meeting.

"We're used to doing a lot with very little money in small, rural communities. We know how to stretch a buck."

About 100 new child-care spaces have already been added to existing daycare centres in Townsend, Cayuga, Simcoe and Langton. Another 60 spaces are expected to be created by next January at three area schools: Ecole Ste. Marie in Simcoe, St. Michael's in Dunnville and Houghton Public School. An early learning hub will also be created at Houghton, which will link families to health and other community services.

However, plans for hubs and additional child-care spaces in Hagersville and Dunnville had to be shelved when the funding was cut. And there's still lingering uncertainty about exactly how many dollars will flow into the area through Best Start.

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Those at the meeting were also urged to sign a petition asking the federal government to sustain the program. Landon said Finley will be asked to present it in the house "or we'll ask a member of the opposition, if she refuses."

- reprinted from the Brantford Expositor

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