

Tipping the cradle [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

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REKSAP, which stands for Regina Elementary Kindergarten and School Age Program, has a waiting list of about 100 children. That's typical of day-care centres across Ottawa.

Most parents waiting for care at the Regina Street School program are in tight financial straits, says director Orllie Gogolin: single mothers, immigrant families, working parents with two low-income jobs, teenage moms.

With day-care money promised by the former Liberal government, REKSAP was to embark on an ambitious plan of renovation and expansion that would have created space for 20 more children, 18 of them subsidized.

As well, REKSAP was planning to open a second location at Severn Avenue Public School for 20 kindergarten children, most of the spots subsidized. None of this will happen if the Conservative government cancels the Liberals' child-care program. "We cannot afford to expand without subsidies," she said. "What do I do? Start new children and at the end of the year say, 'Sorry, bye, you can't stay here because you can't have a subsidy?' I see the parents that really, really need it. I have given hope to people. And now that hope might be taken away."

REKSAP is just one example of a situation being repeated in hundreds of day cares across the province, as plans for 25,000 new federally funded day-care spaces are thrown into question by the change of government.

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The Conservatives, who made child care part of their election platform, argue that their plan gives each family the opportunity to spend its child-care money as it sees fit. Diane Finley, federal Human Resources minister, has said that formal day cares -- such as those subsidized under the Liberal plan -- cater almost exclusively to parents working full-time outside the home.

"We're actually encouraging the parents to go back to work and to leave their kids at a time when it's important to spend as much time as possible with them, and when those parents want to spend the time with their children," she has said in interviews. "There have been many studies that show that the best people to raise children are the parents."

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For now, Ontario municipalities have received funding for 2005-06 -- about \$272 million. The question they face is whether to renovate and expand day-care centres like REKSAP -- knowing there will be no federal funding in future years for children to attend those centres.

Jane Joy, manager of children's services for the City of Ottawa, worries that if day-care centres expand they will stand empty or be filled only with the children of more affluent parents who don't need subsidies. She said the city received \$13 million in 2005-06, and had planned to create 700 new day-care spaces, 400 of them subsidized.

"It's heartbreaking," she said. "We're building centres in areas that absolutely can't survive without subsidized spaces."

Rural communities across the province were also counting on the federal money to build group day cares, which are currently scarce, says Larry McDermott, mayor of the township of Lanark Highlands and chair of the Rural Forum for the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

"Sometimes a person will take on a few kids and do it privately, but there's questions around those standards," he said.

"If the option of group child care isn't available, there will be talented people who will go where the option is available. They'll continue to migrate to urban centres."

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- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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