

Alberta can show the way [CA-AB] ^[1]

Part four of a four-part series

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For all their criticisms of the province, child care workers agree Alberta's tough new child care accreditation program may set national standards. And the recent addition of more subsidies for low-income families, funded by the federal Liberals, is a big step in the right direction, they say.

"The national/provincial agreement on child care that was just signed will open the doors to put that kind of program support in," said Corine Ferguson, who heads the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement.

"Once you make a commitment to something such as establishing staff support - and it took the industry many years to be heard on the subject - the harder it is to take it away later and the better the argument for properly funding it."

But Ald. Bob Hawksworthy, president of the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association, cautioned against assuming the changes are what Alberta wants, as opposed to what it needed to do to untie the federal funds.

"If there's no political vision from the province that this is an important direction to go, all the money in the world won't matter," he said. "Alberta has more money than it knows what to do with at the moment. If this were a priority, they would've announced it as such already."

"Why did they need to wait for the federal government? Our concern has been for many years that the children who are the future of this province and are in supervised care are not a priority for this government, in that it has not provided the funding or the regulatory framework required to ensure a quality, high-standard system."

And there's a broader concern: in rural Canada, the hardest place to find qualified child care, activists fear a lack of national standards will lead to the child care industry being targeted by U.S. companies under NAFTA as prime for expansion.

While there's little to suggest they'll hurt the quality of care in larger centres - assuming they work within an accreditation system - there will be very little profit motive in opening small-town branches.

"As a child care advocate who has worked across this country, I can guarantee you that if they come in, they will come into Edmonton, they will come into Calgary but they will not come into Bashaw, they will not come into Claresholm," says Jane Wilson, of the national child lobby Rural Voices.

Wilson has seen affordable, qualified child care work in rural communities with as few as 100 people, and believes that if programs were started in partnership with parents, with minimal intervention but plenty of support from government, Canada would get the national child care program successive Liberal governments have promised.

"Langruth (Man.) has 100 people. We were surrounded by farms and had no industry, but we've had a child care program with trained early childhood education workers for 15 years," she notes.

And the community got past stereotypes about farm wives staying at home and strangers taking care of their kids. With only 100 people, it used a resource Wilson considers essential to community-based child care: it trained local people.

She's since repeated the project in other communities and, through the Rural Voices website, offers parents a program of activism to ensure their community is supported.

"You can't just dump money into a system that doesn't work," she says.

"It's like pouring water into a bucket full of holes. It just ends up wherever, with nothing left to get the job done. Government has a social responsibility to care enough for its citizens that they have the necessary tools to do what needs to be done."

That doesn't come, Wilson suggested, by throwing loaded survey questions at them, a political reality at every level. She believes Alberta politicians would be wise to realize that rural constituents deserve the same options as parents in cities.

"If you ask a rural parent if he or she needs more help with child care, and the only child care they've ever seen is unqualified babysitting,

then of course they're going to say no.

"But if you ask them if their child would benefit from pre-school, junior kindergarten, school-age care, youth programs, parent resources and other forms of care, then the answer is always yes."

Wilson says her efforts to improve rural child care in Manitoba were largely successful because of the endorsement of farm agencies like the dairy producers.

"It was a matter of going to them and pointing out that they deserved the same kind of option for their kids as someone sitting in an office tower in Winnipeg," she says. "Believe me, if you show up at the Manitoba legislature with the support of four male farmers, then the politicians start to listen."

- reprinted from the Edmonton Sun

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