

Daycare expert flies in a warning [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

When Australian daycare expert Lynne Wannan heard about Canada's plans to invest \$5 billion in child care, she jumped on a plane.

The diminutive Aussie embarked on a three-week mission to warn Canada against allowing private companies to turn child care into big business.

"I've come to Canada to say we got it wrong," Wannan told a provincial child care forum last week.

Ontario has said both non-profit and commercial centres will have access to operating funds under its Best Start plan to expand child care for 4- and 5-year olds. But since the provincial plan focuses on school-based child care, Ontario expects non-profit centres will provide most of the anticipated 25,000 new spots.

Wannan says she has been impressed by Ontario's good intentions, but urges legislation banning public funds from being used to expand for-profit child care as the best safeguard.

"We thought we had a really good foundation in 1991," Wannan says of Australia's child care expansion that began that year. "Our road down this privatization pathway was totally unexpected."

Like Ontario, Wannan says, most child care in Australia before 1991 was provided by municipal and non-profit, community-based centres, with a smattering of small, privately-owned businesses. Today, about 70 per cent of centres in Australia are commercially owned and the sector is dominated by large publicly traded child care chains.

The largest chain — ABC Learning Centres, owned by Canadian Eddy Groves — runs about 25 per cent of Australia's 4,400 child care centres. The company, which is projecting a profit of more than \$80 million this year, reports that about 50 per cent of its revenue comes from government fee subsidies. Groves has expressed an interest in opening centres here in Canada.

The commercialization of child care in Australia means shareholder profits trump quality and public investment is at the mercy of the market, says Wannan. If a small commercial operator decides to retire or if shareholders in a large chain decide to sell, she says, the system could collapse overnight, forcing governments to step in or boost subsidies to keep commercial profits flowing. Another disadvantage, she says, is that the big chains lobby hard to keep standards low.

Wannan's message was warmly received at last week's child care forum, where Children's Services Minister Mary Anne Chambers said the province would not fall into the trap Australia did.

"There is no place for large commercial child care operations in Ontario," she told about 260 children's services workers and advocates in attendance.

Although Ontario policy doesn't ban child care expansion in the for-profit sector, Chambers said capital grants will only be available to non-profit centres. In addition, she has asked municipalities that will oversee Best Start to let her know if commercial chains start buying centres and expanding.

"The message is: in order to achieve the highest quality child care, we do not want commercialized child care," she told the Star.

Kira Heineck, executive director of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and a forum organizer, appreciates Chambers' position, "but until we see policy in writing, I think Lynne Wannan's warnings are very real."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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