

B.C. poised to join child care deal as alarms raised about for-profit centres ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

British Columbia will become the seventh province to strike a child care deal with Ottawa amid growing concerns that government support of for-profit centres will dilute standards.

The announcement comes as child advocates get set for a national tour, warning Canadians that commercial day care isn't the best option for kids.

Private operators dismiss such fears as groundless. But the most recent in-depth research comparing the two approaches concludes that pre-schoolers and big business aren't an ideal mix.

B.C.'s per capita share is about \$92 million next year - \$633 million over the course of Ottawa's five-year pledge to pump \$5 billion into a national child care system.

Social Development Minister Ken Dryden has billed the fledgling program as a policy revolution.

Yet he has left the door open to publicly funding for-profit operators. It's a pragmatic recognition that many children, especially in rural areas, are privately cared for in family-based centres for modest returns, he says.

Monica Lysack, executive director of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, says that opens the door for commercial child care that could limit the affordable, accessible programs Ottawa says it wants.

"What we could end up with, simply through oversight or lack of planning, is a market approach to a social program," she said.

A better option is to ensure public funds go to not-for-profit centres that are truly community based, she said.

Lysack and Mab Oloman, a child care consultant in Vancouver, cite Australia as an example of what can happen when so-called "big box" ventures take root.

There, more than 70 per cent of day-care centres are now owned by commercial interests. The craftiest entrepreneurs hit the jackpot when the Australian government made hefty public funding available to private operators in 1991.

While the companies boast of top-notch classrooms and low staff turnover, critics say high demand and corporate control mean Australians have never paid more for child care.

She also worries that for-profit operators will shun rural and small communities where less money can be made, and that a sense of community will be lost.

"That's baloney, quite frankly," said Jill Eiland, spokeswoman for Knowledge Learning Corp. based in Portland, Ore. The company runs almost 2,000 child care centres in 39 states.

There is little difference between private and public centres, she added.

Gordon Cleveland, an economics professor at University of Toronto, disagrees.

He co-authored a study of 325 child care classrooms across the country - 90 of them in for-profit centres. Funded by Social Development Canada, it's the most comprehensive recent comparison available.

Cleveland says non-profit centres outperformed private ones by 10 per cent, even after variables such as funding discrepancies were considered.

His advice to Ottawa?

"A 10 per cent difference can magnify a lot in terms of the development of a child in their pre-school years. I'd say, let's work together on

figuring out how to build a non-profit system."

- reprinted from the Canadian Press

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