

Let's make day care a great place to learn [CA-NS]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Canadians are increasingly aware of how important the early years are to the development of children.

Unfortunately, I think many of us still view child care as a safe place to drop off the kids as we go off to work. A recent study by the OECD, that examines child care policy in industrialized countries, notes that "it is clear that national and provincial policy for the education of young children in Canada is still in its initial stages. Care and education are still treated separately."

The funding associated with a recently signed federal provincial agreement provides an opportunity for Nova Scotians to develop a child care system that combines affordable quality care and learning opportunities for children, while offering family support and strengthening neighbourhoods and communities.

The Minister of Community Services, David Morse, told me in an interview that the soon-to-be-released five-year draft plan for the use of federal child care funding will focus on improving accessibility by increasing and reforming fee subsidies. The minister also stated the intention to revise regulations so that they are applied equally to all centres in the province.

We will have to wait to see what the draft plan actually contains, but there are concerns that the provincial government will not use this opportunity to take a leadership role in developing a sustainable early learning and care system. By limiting itself to reforming the existing system, the provincial government risks building on already flawed foundations and not keeping up with current research and progressive practice being implemented in other provincial and international jurisdictions.

For example, a key issue across the country is whether new public funding should be allocated to the development of new for-profit child care centres. Recent research shows that the quality of child care provision is significantly higher in non-profit centres.

Not-for-profit centres are preferred by many parents because they have an organizational structure that allows for parental and community participation. Non-profit centres are also preferred because many taxpayers are reluctant to see some of their tax dollars going to profits rather than to supporting young children.

A recent study by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit found that within most of Canada the trend over the past decade has been towards a decreasing percentage of regulated child care being provided by for-profit centres. But within Nova Scotia the trend has been the opposite &em; towards increased provision by for-profit centres.

The issue for me is not so much that the existing mix of child care providers includes for-profit centres (about 50 per cent); it is the continuation of the trend towards an increasing proportion of for-profit centres. Increased federal public funding will make the child care sector more attractive for private investors and will contribute to a further expansion of the number of for-profit centres, including some whose first interest may not be quality child care.

Will the minister's draft plan encourage this trend? How will the plan ensure that for-profit centres owned by individuals or by corporations are accountable to parents and the community in which centres operate?

The minister's response to my question about the increasing role of for-profit centres was that the government does not want to limit parents' choices.

But for many Nova Scotians, choice in the provision of child care is an illusion. What choice do parents have in areas not well served by child care centres, for example, in a smaller rural community? What real opportunities do parents have to influence the operations of the centre if it is a privately owned by an individual or a corporation?

The notion of choice, in this case, is really about a justification for government reluctance to curtail the growth of for-profit centres. It is about the development of a for-profit market for the provision of child care. Parents are relegated to being consumers buying the quality of service that they can afford.

The minister told me there will be "broad public consultation" over the next few months. One can only hope that the consultation will not follow in the path of far too many consultations where the key decisions have already been made and the consultation is merely a public relations exercise to provide the plan with legitimacy.

- reprinted from the Halifax Herald

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