

Day care spending on the rise [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Research to be released today by one of Canada's foremost early learning and child care experts offers some hopeful news.

"There have been a number of improvements to early learning and child care," said Martha Friendly, the co-ordinator of the Child care Resource and Research Unit of the University of Toronto who wrote the report with her colleague, Jane Beach. "If you look at it over time, the spending has really increased."

In fact, between 1992 and March of 2004, the total amount of provincial and territorial spending on child care grew to \$2.4-billion from \$726-million. That allowed the number of available spaces to increase to 745,254 from 373,741.

After years of stagnation, the period between 2001 and 2004 showed substantial growth, said Friendly, who has conducted this study every two years since the early nineties. Spending, she said, "actually picked up this time, even outside of Quebec. There was more expansion of space in Quebec than in the rest of Canada as a whole, but it actually did pick up."

After years of delay, the Liberal government has promised \$5-billion will flow to the provinces over five years to establish a system of early learning and child care that will fund regulated day care across the country.

It's not a plan everyone supports. The opposition Conservatives have consistently criticized Mr. Dryden as inflexible and unwilling to offset care that is not regulated. They argue parents should have a choice.

But Friendly said it is important to remember the system Mr. Dryden is discussing is not simply meant to provide care but high-quality learning experiences.

And, although her report includes some positive measures, it also has negatives, including the fact that the system of regulated care in Canada varies enormously between provinces.

While 15.5 per cent of children from birth to age 12 could be accommodated in regulated care, for instance, that number ranges from a high of 30 per cent in Quebec to 4.9 per cent in Saskatchewan. There is also a huge range in the amount of money provinces devote to child care -- from \$816 a space annually in Alberta to \$4,856 in Quebec.

It could be argued each province is different and variations are inevitable, Friendly said. But when it comes to the participation of mothers in the work force "they are all very high, and they all are increasing every year."

Friendly says a significant gap that needs to be addressed is how much people are paid for giving child care and the fees parents are charged. She hopes Mr. Dryden's work on a national system may ease those problems.

"I think by having a system in place, we're going to be able to develop some stability and move it forward more consistently. It doesn't have to be identical [across the provinces], but it needs to be at least equitable, and it needs to be coherent over time."

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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