

# Click! Franchises for chicken and children [CA-AB]<sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

Martha and Henry are the two people that Alberta Premier Ralph Klein talks about when he wishes to discuss issues that affect "ordinary Albertans." They get a lot of junk emails and one caught their eyes for an online franchise offering opportunities for Kentucky Fried Chicken, Dunkin' Donuts and Petland.

They also found, on that American website, that there are franchise opportunities for child care centres! That's right. In the U.S., you can franchise chicken and children with only a few clicks of the mouse. Martha just felt this was wrong. Child care needs to be outside the realm of profit. Doesn't it? Well, not according to the Alberta government.

In spite of the federal government's \$5 Billion commitment to a national child care strategy, the Alberta Government has already indicated that it will not be participating, arguing that national standards mean a "lack of choice" for parents. The Province's Minister for Children's Services, Heather Forsyth, says that the Government would rather take its share of the money and set up its own system - one that would allow parents to spend day-care dollars where they see fit.

While we wish to support parents' choices for child care, we are concerned that Alberta's lack of commitment to a comprehensive, regulated and public child care strategy will signal more of the same - increased privatization of child care, low wages for child care workers, lack of quality and lack of systemic accountability for Alberta's most vulnerable.

In a number of national studies Alberta's child care (particularly in the for-profit sector) has ranked among the poorest in the country. Not only has Alberta's spending for regulated child care steadily decreased since the early 1990s, but Alberta's allocation for regulated spaces and for each child 0-12 years has fallen to that of the lowest in Canada.

There appears to be little needs assessment and planning in place, so that in cities such as Calgary, where the number of working families with young children has been growing rapidly, waiting lists for high quality child care programs are extensive. For some centres, children have to wait up to two years to be admitted to a program.

The quality of care offered in many licensed child care centres remains problematic; child care operators find it difficult to hire and retain trained caregivers; salaries are low and staff turnover is typically high. Women make up 98.3 per cent of child care workers so this is an issue for women on so many levels. One college educator told Martha that she finds it hard to recommend the career for her students when she knows she is saddling them with low pay, poor working conditions, and few opportunities for advancement.

Provisions for special needs care, for rural and aboriginal child care are also extremely limited. In many other provinces there are excellent examples of innovative programs that meet families' needs in these areas; Alberta provides little in the way of support or incentives to develop them.

A number of these problems stem directly from Alberta's policy to leave the development of child care in the hands of commercial operators, thus treating the early education of children as a market commodity, and not as a public good. This focus on operating child care as a profit-making business rather than as a community service, however, has not worked and has contributed to the current mediocrity, inaccessibility and piecemeal care. Continuing present policies can only lead to more of the same - or worse - the "Kentucky Fried" franchising of child care by large-scale operators.

While Colonel Sanders makes a mean piece of chicken, Martha says let's keep child care out of the hands of the for-profit world. The federal proposals offer an opportunity to develop community-based non-profit centres and day home programs where funding is directly invested in children, rather than into making profits that go into the pockets of corporations and their investors.

- reprinted from Martha's Monthly

**Region:** Canada<sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** funding<sup>[3]</sup>

federalism<sup>[4]</sup>

privatization<sup>[5]</sup>

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