

Alberta child care needs an upgrade: Non-profit model best for our children [CA-AB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Alberta's Minister for Children's Services, Heather Forsyth, claims to speak for Alberta's parents when she says that the province does not want to participate in a national child care program because we have "unique local needs."

She does not. There are no "unique" parental or child needs in Alberta that justify opting out of the national program. Alberta's parents are like parents everywhere in the country: we want high- quality, affordable, and universally accessible child care for our children. Alberta's predominantly private child care system achieves none of these objectives.

Recent studies confirm earlier research that concluded for-profit child care centres deliver, on the whole, a poorer quality of care than non-profit child care centres. Their staff are paid less and tend to be less qualified. They have high staff turnovers. Yes, government subsidies or operating grants to private child care centres could improve programming, nutrition, or wage levels, but such a policy will never achieve the benefits and efficiencies of a publicly funded system for a simple reason: non-profit centres use their revenues only to operate, and to improve services and salaries, while for-profit centres seek to maximize returns to the owners.

Early childhood development and education of the best quality should be universally available to all children, regardless of parents' incomes. The Alberta government's current policy of subsidizing low-income parents' child care costs -- but without investing in the provision of child care -- has not and will not create the infrastructure required to meet child care needs.

It is not true, as the Minister claims, that "we already have a great child care system in Alberta." Alberta's child care system is one of the country's poorest on almost every score. Not for the lack of good early childhood development training programs, or for the lack of good intentions on the part of committed caregivers. But because 70 per cent of our spaces are in the private sector, because far too few spaces exist to serve the real demand for child care, because without government funding centres are in perpetual financial crisis, because most parents do not qualify for subsidies and cannot afford to pay for regulated child care spaces, because rural areas are hardly served at all, and because our child care workers' wages are among the lowest in the country (and these are already lower than the average hourly wages).

This is not the system that Alberta's parents want. The government of Alberta may be listening to the voices of private child care centre operators as it turns its back on a national program that makes publicly funded, universally accessible child care a priority, but it is not listening to the voices of parents. Use of private spaces is not a "choice" for most parents, but a necessity dictated by lack of choice.

Private daycare operators can be "grandfathered" in various ways. They can even remain part of the overall system (as in Quebec) but the bulk of public spending must go to support a non-profit child- care system.

Many parents would like to have the choice to stay home with their infants, at least for the first one to two years of their children's lives. For most parents of children under six (70 per cent of mothers in Canada), the reality is that we have to work for a living and cannot afford to forgo income or risk long-term unemployment in order to stay at home with our children. If the Government of Alberta really wants to increase parents' choices, it should look at reforms to employers' obligations, income tax, and parental leave benefits that will reduce the financial penalties and risks to parents of temporary absence from the workforce. But please, spare us the nonsense of telling us that you are opting out of a system we desperately want and need, because of some "unique" Albertan preference for a patchwork of substandard, unaffordable, and unavailable child care.

How about making Alberta "unique" in the way that Quebec is presently unique in Canada -- by investing seriously in the kinds of options for child care that families really want and need? How better to invest in the future of the province in its centenary year than by showing a real commitment to the welfare of our children?

- reprinted from the Edmonton Journal

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