

Non-profit daycares favoured [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

From the moment Mary Ricci enrolled her 18-month-old son in a commercial daycare centre last fall, she felt something was wrong.

No one at the Woodbridge centre expressed any concern that her toddler wasn't walking or talking. The medicine box where his Epi-Pen was kept in case his food allergies flared up was never locked, contrary to regulations in the provincial Day Nurseries Act. And since the centre relied on a caterer to supply all the lunches, no one was sure the meals didn't contain peanuts, fish or eggs — food to which her son was allergic. So, the little boy was only offered snack food.

Ricci has noticed a "world of difference" since switching her son to Centred on Children, a non-profit daycare where the on-site kitchen prepares food the boy can eat and where staffers work with Ricci on her son's communication problems.

Her experience backs up a new University of Toronto study that shows quality of care is generally lower in commercial daycares than in non-profit centres.

Even when researchers accounted for the extra money non-profit centres get from government, commercial centres consistently scored lower on quality, the study shows.

Their report bolsters the findings of two recent studies on quality in commercial and non-profit centres in Quebec, where more than 180,000 children younger than six have access to \$7-a-day child care. And it mirrors the results of similar research in the United States.

The U of T study comes as Ottawa is poised to sign a national early-learning and care agreement with the provinces and territories based on the principles of quality, universality, accessibility and developmental enrichment. If federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden and his provincial and territorial counterparts reach a deal at a meeting early next month, Ottawa will spend \$5 billion over five years to begin building a new national system.

However, child-care advocates worry Dryden is downplaying the research for political reasons.

"We know provinces like Alberta and B.C. won't agree to a deal that limits the money to non-profit operators only," said Kerry McCuaig, of the Better Child Care Education Foundation.

"And Dryden has been ordered by the Prime Minister to get a deal with all the provinces."

With a minority government that could be forced into an election at any time, Paul Martin needs to show voters he has kept his promise of a national early-learning and care agreement, a key 2004 election pledge.

But this political reality may doom Canada to a second-rate child-care system, Cleveland warns. "Starting off to build something that isn't good enough is definitely a problem."

Cleveland says most commercial operators in Canada are "good-hearted people" with early-childhood education degrees, who have worked in the field and who want to make child care their life's vocation by opening their own centre.

"But when the federal government puts \$5 billion into expanding (child) care, and if it's open to commercial operators, you are going to get people who are only interested in the money. And they are going to be quite different from the commercial operators we see today."

It's an argument Dryden heard in Toronto during meetings with commercial and non-profit child care lobby groups, academics and Mayor David Miller.

Toronto operates the second-largest child-care system in the country, next to the province of Quebec, and serves more than 45,000 children. And city council has endorsed the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada's call for a new national system built on non-profit care.

"Overall, our experience confirms what was said in the U of T study," Miller said. "What I would say is that the focus should be on the (publicly) operated and non-profit sectors."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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