

Corporatised child care to face scrutiny ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child care centres could face spot checks and have their performance graded as part of a tougher approach to regulating Australia's increasingly corporate child care industry.

Family and Community Services Minister Kay Patterson has pledged to give parents more detail about the performance of their child's centre and has urged state ministers to adopt uniform standards on safety and quality at child care centres.

The move comes amid growing concern among educators, parents, unions and community child care operators at the rapid growth of aggressive for-profit companies like publicly listed ABC Learning, which is expected soon to control 20 per cent of Australia's 4400 child care centres.

ABC Learning, which will be worth about \$1.2 billion following a merger with the Peppercorn group, plans to capture up to 25 per cent of the market.

In an investigation by The Sunday Age, child care centre owners and staff accuse corporate owners of cutting staff and cleaning services, axing programs and slashing food bills in half in the quest for profits.

The investigation also found:

- About 180 child care centres in Australia are operating without accreditation.
- ABC Learning has taken a small, independent owner to court to stop it from opening 700 metres from its own centre.
- ABC Learning has sued a union for defamation.
- A number of centres have been, or are being, prosecuted and one in Victoria has been shut down by authorities.

A Mornington child care centre, owned by ABC Learning, faces the Frankston Magistrates Court in February after a 14-month-old boy was left asleep in a cot when the centre closed for the night. ABC Learning has pleaded not guilty to charges of inadequate supervision of children and failing to accurately maintain attendance records.

Eddy Groves, the managing director of ABC who has amassed a personal fortune from child care, said he would "fight the charges until the cows come home" and blamed the incident on the centre's staff, two of whom were sacked.

"Sometimes you can have all the policies and procedures in the world but you cannot prevent people doing, as I would like to call it, brain-dead things," he said.

Earlier this year, DHS closed the Mildura Child Minding Centre after finding it lacked qualified staff, breached child-staff ratios, provided inadequate supervision of children, had poor health, hygiene and maintenance standards and a poor quality educational program.

Child care has recently been promoted to the Howard Government's cabinet for the first time and Senator Patterson said it would be a priority for the fourth-term Government.

Ms Garbutt estimated there was a shortage of 8000 long-day child care places and up to 5000 out-of-school hours places in Victoria. "People can't find child care, and when they do, it costs a fortune," she said. "I think Kay Patterson's arguments are just a diversion from the real issues."

She said the Federal Government's market-driven approach meant that private owners established centres in locations where they could make a profit, while whole suburbs and regional centres did not have enough places.

Child care centres are regulated by state governments and accredited by the Federal Government's National Childcare Accreditation Council. Critics say the system is a farce because if a centre fails accreditation, it can still operate and parents can continue to receive the Federal Government's child care benefit.

The council's chairman, John Tainton, said if a centre failed accreditation on three consecutive inspections it was "more than likely" the benefit payment would be removed. He refused to disclose how many times that had occurred. Mr Tainton said 4.1 per cent of centres were not accredited.

Senator Patterson also called on state governments to be "more creative" in deciding where to locate new child care centres. She

highlighted moves in Sydney to require child care centres in large redevelopments.

- reprinted from The Age

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