

Keep child care public, economist tells Dryden ^[1]

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie

Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 14 Nov 2004

AVAILABILITY

Available below

EXCERPTS

Child care must be a public service and not a market choice, says an economist with the University of Toronto's management studies program.

For the market to work, consumers need to be able to easily judge quality and use their purchasing power accordingly, Gord Cleveland told 650 delegates at a national child-care conference yesterday.

However, when it comes to child care, quality is not easy for parents to see because most of the care and learning goes on when mothers and fathers aren't there, he said.

"And if you don't have good quality child care, you don't have anything," he said in a presentation that was crafted as a letter to federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden.

Dryden, who opened the conference Friday and attended sessions yesterday, has been charged with delivering on the Liberal government's pledge to commit \$5 billion over five years to begin building a national system of early learning and child care, based on the principles of quality, universality, accessibility and developmental enrichment.

A meeting between Dryden and his provincial and territorial counterparts earlier this month resulted in a general agreement on Ottawa's four principles as a basis to move forward. They are scheduled to meet again in January to finalize a plan in time for the Liberals to commit \$1 billion in their February budget.

Cleveland said it's important for Dryden and the ministers to get the goals right at the outset. And one of those goals should be to create a public system in which public money funds non-profit services available to all children instead of funding subsidies for parents or commercial centres, he said.

While most private child care in Canada today consists of "little mom and pop centres" that don't look much different from community-run operations, Cleveland warned that when governments start pumping billions of dollars into a national system, large corporate enterprises will spring up, as has happened in the United States and Australia.

"They will have an incredibly poisonous effect on the evolution of child care over time and the public will lose control over how much quality we want," he warned, adding that numerous studies have shown quality tends to be better in non-profit operations.

Earlier this month, Dryden said Ottawa's definition of universal child care does not mean it will be free. Cleveland agrees, saying parents should be expected to pay about 20 per cent of the cost, or about \$7 a day, as is the case in Quebec. In Europe, where most countries have early learning and care systems, parents pay between 10 per cent and 30 per cent of the cost, he noted.

Parental fees are important because they reduce the public's cost, are fair to those who don't use the system, and give parents a stake in their children's care, he added.

It is estimated Ottawa would have to spend roughly \$10 billion a year in today's dollars to fund a high-quality system that is accessible to all children. Since Ottawa is starting with just a tenth of that amount, Cleveland urged Dryden to begin with 4- and 5-year-olds so that services quickly become universal.

"Start with something that gives parents the promise of a coming system," he said. As with Quebec, which also began with older children first, the public will make it impossible to slow down or turn back, he said.

In an interview yesterday, Dryden said he has thought about the value of focusing the first federal money on 4- and 5-year-olds, who in many provinces are already enrolled in kindergarten programs funded through the education system, but he's not convinced Ottawa should be so specific.

As for the question of commercial versus non-profit delivery for child care, Dryden told reporters Friday it's still up for discussion with the provinces.

But just like education and health care, which were initially provided by a range of operators before becoming public systems, child care, which is delivered in many provinces through commercial centres, must be allowed to evolve, he said.

However, a legal opinion sponsored by the Canadian Union of Public Employees released Friday suggests that the North American Free Trade Agreement and other foreign trade deals signed since public education and health care were established could tie Ottawa's hands in the future if it allows public funding to go to commercial child-care operators.

Without negotiating specific new arrangements under these trade deals, governments would not be able to limit investment by foreign child-care companies attracted to Canada by increased public funding, warned Steven Shrybman, a lawyer with Sack Goldblatt Mitchell.

"Creating a system that allows commercial child-care companies to acquire a significant stake in the system represents high-risk behaviour that significantly increases exposure to trade companies and foreign investor claims," he wrote. Dryden said he has thought about the issue, but he hasn't yet read the legal opinion.

Region: Canada ^[2]

Tags: economics ^[3]

funding ^[4]

privatization ^[5]

public management ^[6]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/04/11/keep-child-care-public-economist-tells-dryden>
Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/04/11/keep-child-care-public-economist-tells-dryden> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/economics> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/privatization> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/8166>