

Child-care spaces shrink despite federal funding [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Regulated child-care spaces have slightly declined since 2001 across Canada despite millions of new dollars from Ottawa, says a new report.

Cuts in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia statistically undercut improved services in six other provinces - especially Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia, says the study released Tuesday by Campaign 2000, an independent coalition working to end child poverty.

What should be a good-news story is tainted by how politics has stunted progress in provinces still dragging their heels on child care, the report concludes.

Culled from federal, provincial and municipal statistics, the study finds that the number of licensed spaces nationally fell by almost 10,600 or two per cent from 2001 to 2003.

"I was dismayed and very upset to see even a slight decline," said Laurel Rothman, national co-ordinator for Campaign 2000.

"Federal funding has brought improvements to those provinces that don't let their ideology get in the way," Rothman said.

Campaign 2000 and other groups have argued for years that prohibitive child-care costs and lack of spaces are keeping some families, especially single moms, in poverty.

Ottawa's biggest effort to help children - the \$2.2-billion Early Childhood Development Initiative - was noble but flawed, critics say.

The five-year program, introduced in 2000, allows provinces to spend the money on four broad areas of early childhood education. No cash was specifically tagged for child care.

Conservative governments in Alberta and formerly in Ontario have been criticized for not creating more regulated spaces despite pressing needs.

And in B.C., newly elected Liberals in 2001 repealed large sections of the Child Care B.C. Act passed by the former NDP government, says the report.

Still, Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart says she's heartened by improvements in most provinces.

In an area of provincial authority, Ottawa has worked hard to offer help, she stressed.

Almost \$1 billion over five years was committed to child care in the last federal budget and provinces have agreed to use that money as intended, she said Tuesday.

They called on their own government to lift annual child-care funding within four years to \$4.5 billion so that, by 2007, "every three- to five-year-old child who needs it should have a preschool place."

Canada's largely informal child-care system lags woefully behind what's offered in several European and other countries, they said.

Almost 70 per cent of Canadian women with children under 12 work, but there are licensed spaces for just 12 per cent of kids in that age group.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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