

Selling children short; The Ontario Tories' lukewarm approach to a national child-care program may result in fewer spaces and grave risks to its future [CA-ON] ^[1]

Author: Chow, Olivia

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EXCERPTS

The agreement by the senior governments on a national child-care plan is quickly being soured by reality for Ontario families.

If you have children and expect that the Ontario and federal governments will be delivering a plentiful supply of regulated child-care spaces in the near future, forget it.

In fact, licensed child care in Ontario may be on a slippery slope resulting in fewer spaces and grave risks to its future. Here is what we know.

Unlike most provinces, Ontario is a reluctant partner in the federal plan. Most worrisome, Ontario says the agreement gives it flexibility in defining regulated child care.

If so, this is because the federal government failed to deliver on a commitment to "attach strings" and ensure that a recalcitrant Ontario targets new funds to licensed care that safeguards quality and is most effective at achieving early learning goals.

Ontario has yet to spell out its plan for spending the new funds. Will Ontario's licensed child care benefit or will we see a move towards funnelling public funds to less accountable, de-regulated child care solutions that will not provide the early learning and care that parents want and that the provincial government says it supports?

The national child-care plan will spend \$25 million next year across Canada. Toronto estimates its share will provide about 400 new spaces, a far cry from easing the city's current waiting list that grows monthly by 500.

Only Ontario among the provinces refuses to use the other source of federal funds for children, the Early Childhood Development Initiative (ECDI) to support licensed child care. So far, Ontario has received \$266 million from the ECDI. It received another \$192 million as of the beginning of this month. Some of this should be spent on child care.

Ontario's position is disconcerting because Toronto's licensed child care system is in crisis.

The Eves government has maintained a decision made in 1999 to cut annual provincial base funding for Toronto's child-care program by nearly \$12 million.

As a result, Toronto is at its lowest level of subsidized spaces since 1992.

No new spaces have been created since 1997 and 1,616 subsidized spaces were cut in 2002. Another 700 subsidized spaces may be cut this year.

It is unclear where all of the early childhood development money has been spent or what services the new allocation will support.

Even the federal government has complained that Ontario's reports are thin and infrequent. We do know that, so far, none of it is going to licensed child care at a time when communities across the province need more spaces.

Instead, Ontario is using much of the ECDI money to fund Early Years Centres, a one-per-riding series of information kiosks that provide literature and make referrals at an annual cost of more than \$50 million. In many instances, the centres duplicate the services of existing family resource centres.

In addition, their effectiveness is limited. Since none of the funding can go to child care, the Early Years Centres cannot be fully integrated with licensed child-care services and therefore cannot serve a full range of child and family needs.

Two critical questions must be asked Will Ontario use federal funds from the new national plan for licensed child care?

Given that these funds will not flow to the provinces for some months, why does it not use available ECDI funds now to provide immediate

support to the urgent child care situation?

Quality child care is an essential social and educational service for families that enriches early childhood development and learning as well as providing care to children.

Ontario must be a full partner with Toronto and participate in strengthening child care instead of contributing to its decline.

Child care is important to our economy, enabling parents to work or learn and train while helping to prepare our children for a better future. Every dollar spent on high-quality child care pays \$2 back in areas like improved school attainment and expanded parental ability to work and avoid poverty. Wise investments in child care today will ensure the competitiveness of our workforce and our economy in the future.

An election will take place later this year - Child care will be on the front-burner.

Ontario's half-hearted participation in the national child-care plan does not go far enough and invites more criticism. The public will continue to question provincial refusal to use any of the federal ECDI funding for licensed child care.

The decline in the child-care system in Toronto must be reversed. It appears that the Ontario government is getting ready to do more damage that ultimately will harm efforts to provide our children with the best possible opportunities for a successful future.

If the Eves government is serious about early childhood development, it will offer a well-funded policy to invest in a new deal to deliver quality, licensed child care as part of a meaningful approach to early childhood development that benefits Ontario children and families.

- reprinted from The Toronto Star.

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