

Canada worse than United States in child care, study says [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A shortage of licensed daycare spaces and lofty fees for them have left Canada trailing other wealthy countries in the proportion of its children who attend regulated child-care across the country, says a new report released yesterday.

The antipoverty group Campaign 2000 found that 82 per cent of the 2.1 million children under the age of six have no access to regulated child-care, nursery schools and junior kindergarten, even though most of their mothers are holding down jobs.

Among Canadian three-year-olds, only 14 per cent receive early-childhood education and care, compared with 95 per cent of children in France, 85 per cent in Denmark, 100 per cent in Belgium and 89 per cent in the United States, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

"The proportion of children who have access to early-childhood education and care is way lower in Canada than any of the other countries that the OECD looked at," said Mab Oloman, author of the Campaign 2000 report, "Diversity or Disparity? Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada."

"The bottom line is the majority of countries recognize that early-childhood education is a good thing for public investment," she said.

"Many countries have recognized that at age three or four, many children attend early-childhood education because it's definitely in the interests of the children," she added. "Not in Canada, where it's about economic viability for families."

The report decries the fragmented child-care system in Canada, where the calibre of care for those under the age of six (years regarded as crucial for laying the groundwork for lifelong learning) varies widely among provinces.

In contrast to other provinces, Quebec has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into a \$5-a-day child-care system.

Across Europe, far more children are enrolled in government-funded early-childhood education programs before they start school than in Canada. Even in the United States, hardly known as a social-welfare state, most children spend some time in child-care centres and nursery schools, although the reputation of U.S. child-care is spotty.

The report criticizes the prohibitive cost of licensed care, even after government subsidies, that blocks plenty of families from registering their children in the child-care and nursery-school programs they would like, even when spaces are available.

In Saskatchewan, a family with two children, whose income is low enough to collect full child-care subsidies, earning less than \$21,000 a year before taxes, would still be on the hook for \$3,408 in fees.

The report also points to the huge discrepancy in the investment that provinces pour into older children in the public-school system and those receiving early-childhood education. In Ontario, where the province spends an average of \$7,133 on every student every year, its investment in children in regulated child-care is just \$238.40.

In the recent Throne Speech, the federal government promised "to work with its partners to increase access to early-learning opportunities and to quality child-care."

In British Columbia, where subsidies have been cut or eliminated outright for 10,500 families since the government lowered the income threshold by \$258 a month last April, the shortage of child-care is poised to worsen.

Debra Morris, 36, has just received a letter that her children's daycare in Castlegar, a blue-collar town of about 7,000 people south of Nelson, is expected to close in March, along with the other three licensed centres in the area.

The Liberal government of Gordon Campbell is no longer willing to subsidize the union wages of the centre's child-care workers, and it can only afford to remain open for a few more months unless it gets the extra money it needs from parents.

As a single mother of three children, a college student still a semester away from graduating with a diploma in computer-information systems, she is frantic. Already her subsidy has been cut and she has been struggling to pay \$625 a month from her student loans. Now, she might have to turn to an unlicensed babysitter. The last time she left her children with a neighbour, they were glued to the television.

"Other than the daycare, we're looking at finding people to babysit our children, and who knows what you'll end up with?" she said. "There are some good ones out there, but with a lot of others, you don't know what's going to go on . . ."

-Reprinted from The Globe and Mail.

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