

Tories' strategy on early childhood defended [ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Ontario's minister in charge of children's issues says she has not been given a copy of a hard-hitting report criticizing her government for failing to invest in early childhood development programs.

"I'm puzzled that this report is out, and I'm disappointed that it hasn't been shared with me," said Brenda Elliott, minister of community, family and children's services.

Elliott yesterday defended her Progressive Conservative government, saying it has introduced many programs to help parents and ensure children get the best start in life.

Margaret McCain and Fraser Mustard, authors of *The Early Years Study Three Years Later*, a copy of which was obtained by The Star, charge the Ontario government has failed to come up with a universal strategy.

The authors were originally commissioned by the Mike Harris government for the Early Years Study- considered groundbreaking research that outlined that governments could reap great benefits if they were to invest in early childhood development programs for all children.

The theory is that from birth to age 6, if children are given positive stimulation and nurturing, it can help with brain development and prepare them to learn in school.

The report was well received in 1999, and Harris promised to expand existing preschool learning programs and invest more money.

Elliott said she was surprised by the criticism because she has heard much praise for her government's efforts. She added that it spends \$2.2 billion on programs for children.

"We think we have an innovative series of programs. We think they have been designed to meet the needs of all Ontario's children," she said. "It is a blend of programs, both universal programs for all parents and all children, and it is in combination with some very targeted focused programs."

However, McCain and Mustard criticized the Early Years Centres- now in 40 communities and expected to rise to 103 by next spring- as merely resource centres that tend to focus on children from low-income, single-parent families, not all children.

Elliott insisted the Early Years Centres are open to all parents and children- "essentially one-stop parenting shops."

While the provincial government has not increased funding for regulated child care since it came to power in 1995, she emphasized that parents want choice and not everyone chooses day-care centres.

Child-care advocates praised McCain and Mustard for writing their own report.

"I give them full credit for standing up and saying this is not what we said Ontario needs," said Cheryl DeGras, executive director of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

Reprinted from the Toronto Star.

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