

A quiet plot to destroy child care [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

High up in the provincial government, someone with the authority to execute a most pernicious policy is contemplating the destruction of Ontario's day-care system.

There is no other way to read the confidential report, leaked to The Star's Laurie Monsebraaten and reported Wednesday.

Dated last month, the report is chilling. Its very context and devious design is enough to incite and enrage.

The stated context: Chop \$200 million from the province's \$470 million child-care budget and recommend options to operate the system with just \$270 million.

Why the cut? "Current ministry constraints," says the report. It assumes the decision has already been made and staff is to recommend "preliminary direction regarding options around redirection" of the remaining \$270 million.

In other words, \$200 million or 42 per cent of the child-care budget is gone. Tell us how to redirect the remaining 58 per cent.

There's been no debate about this, no forewarning, no announcement in an economic statement or budget or campaign document or policy speech. Like most everything else this government does, its minions move surreptitiously to do the bosses' bidding, and before the victims know what's afoot, it's too late.

Only, this time some brave soul spilled the beans. And now government spokespersons are busy trying to downplay the significance of this dastardly play.

Three options are offered — each one a progressive ripping-apart of a post-war program built with deliberate effort, care, study, research, advocacy and painstaking political debate.

Option one: Run the current system on \$200 million less and do nothing more.

The report says this option presents a "considerable risk" for the government, because there would be fewer day-care spaces, child-care centres would close, day-care fees would rise and subsidized spaces would fall — creating a problem of access for parents and a political mess for the government.

Day-care advocates appearing before a city hall committee yesterday had much more to add.

"This is a huge disappointment; I could literally cry," said Jane Mercer, of the Toronto Coalition for Better Child Care.

"I don't get it with these guys at the province that they would have a hate on for the kids and working women of this city."

Option two: Scrap the child-care funding totally; give the \$270 million as a tax credit to the working poor (about \$1,464 per family), but exclude welfare families.

Staff said that in addition to the risks involved in option one, this option would raise "criticism from advocates, child care workers and/or the media."

And it would fly in the face of the government's commitment to ensure welfare rates are 10 per cent above the average of the other nine provinces.

Option three: Scrap child-care funding totally and replace it with a new provincial child benefit for working poor and welfare families.

The benefit would amount to less than \$1,000.

Reading between the lines of the document being circulated at Queen's Park, this is the best of the three options — for the government, not Ontarians.

Under all scenarios, users of regulated child-care spaces face whopping increases to make up for the \$200 million in government cuts. Here's why:

Child-care workers, already underpaid, would lose, according to the report, some \$116 million in provincial government wage subsidies.

Many workers would simply quit, and centres would be forced to close. Centres with enough well-heeled parents would retain workers by increasing fees.

The average non-subsidized space in a regulated day-care centre would jump to \$10,000 from \$7,000 — forcing out the many who are barely able to afford the current going rate.

What we are messing with is a system in place since World War II that provides top-notch care for 170,000 children across Ontario. In Toronto, 800 centres care for 44,000 children. And the estimated economic benefit to Toronto's economy — if that's the only measure of value to Queen's Park — is \$400 million.

Ontario has the option of following its provincial counterparts, governments across Europe and elsewhere in expanding support for regulated child-care. Instead, it is dismantling what others are busy trying to build.

The next step, according to the document, asks for "consensus and direction for further options," permission to consult with finance staff and the development of a cabinet submission, drafting of regulations and possible legislative changes.

With most governments, one could assume the politicians would listen to the voices of outrage, scrap the plan as disastrous and go back to the drawing board. Not the Mike Harris Tories. They take on city councillors, school trustees, school boards, doctors, labour unions, teachers, and anyone who's worked to build Ontario into a dynamic, prosperous, progressive province.

And more often than not, the innocent victims have been children.

- reprinted from The Toronto Star.

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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