

Child care funding cut risky [CA-ON] ^[1]

Author: Monsebratten, Laurie

Source: The Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 14 Nov 2001

AVAILABILITY

Text below

EXCERPTS:

The Ontario government would face "considerable risk" if it slashes its \$470 million child-care budget by \$200 million, says a confidential government report obtained by The Star.

A government spokesperson says the report is just a preliminary draft that was never seriously considered. But according to the report, dated last month, social services ministry staff were asked to develop policy options for regulated child care if more than 40 per cent of the budget is chopped. The report warns all options present "considerable risk" because many child-care programs would close, forcing parents to rely on unlicensed and unregulated babysitters.

The report does not say what the provincial Tory government would do with the \$200 million saved. But it sets out options for the remaining \$270 million, including putting it directly in the hands of parents. When asked about the report yesterday, Dan Miles, spokesperson for Social Services Minister John Baird said it "quite frankly never even made it to the minister's office ... it's not something we're actually considering right now."

Asked if the current level of child-care funding is secure, Miles was less clear. "Even though the options are something we're not even considering, I don't want to speculate on what could happen."

Of the current \$470 million, almost \$300 million is spent on fee subsidies to help about 70,000 families pay for child care. Another \$116 million subsidizes the wages of some 16,000 day-care workers. The rest helps fund child-care resource centres and programs for disabled children.

The report suggests three possible policy options for the remaining \$270 million fund a leaner system.

Eliminate the wage subsidy and the resource-centre budget and cut fee subsidies by \$64 million.

Scrap child-care funding and fold the money into the Ontario Child Care Supplement so low-income working families can spend it as they wish.

Scrap child-care funding and create a new provincial children's benefit for both working poor and welfare families.

Child-care advocates reacted in horror yesterday. "Under any of these options the whole system would collapse," said Martha Friendly of the University of Toronto's Childcare Research and Resource Centre.

Ministry staff concede in the report that children's aid societies may face more costs if children with special needs lose access to regulated care.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR IN RESPONSE TO THIS ARTICLE

BUDGET ALREADY MEAGRE

The Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario is disturbed to learn that the Ontario government has invested time and money on a report that would slash 40 per cent from an already meagre child-care budget.

This clearly demonstrates this government's lack of understanding about child-care and the important role it plays in the lives of parents and Ontario employers.

The repercussions will destroy what is left of regulated child-care in this province. Not only will subsidized spaces disappear but entire centres will have to close their doors.

When will this government accept the reality that the majority of families in Ontario have working parents who need regulated child care in order to work and who rely on trained teachers in their centres to provide their children with quality education and care?

Stripping regulated child care of funding will eliminate this option for working parents. If the government truly wants to give parents more child-care options it should not be robbing them of such a valuable service.

At a time when the Ontario government is promoting the importance of quality care and education of our young children, it is ironic that it would consider dismantling a system that provides children of Ontario with a "healthy start, an adult who cares, safe places to learn and grow, and the tools to succeed and the chance to make a difference" (Ontario's Promise).

Eduarda Sousa

Executive Director, Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario

SHUTTING THE DOORS ON YOUNGEST MEMBERS OF SOCIETY

The Ontario government is considering cutting funding to child-care again. As a child-care professional, I am not surprised. If the Ontario government cuts \$200 million from the child-care budget and takes the remaining \$270 million out of regulated child care, it will shut the doors on the youngest members of society; those who are not able to advocate for their own health, safety, and well-being.

Our children deserve the right to credible care where caregivers work in teams of ECEs and assistants, so when the going gets tough or patience runs thin, as it often does when we work with those who are learning, there is always someone else to call on for help.

In regulated child-care centres, food is healthy and nutritious. Cooks or dietary managers are trained and certified food handlers. Under the care of professionally trained Early Childhood Educators, children rarely watch television, but they do spend two hours each day outside playing in a group atmosphere, closely monitored for safety. Children sing songs, read stories together, discover numbers, letters, sounds, smells, learn how to share, and be independently interdependent.

In regulated child care, parents have the reassurance that staff assist each other, but that they also monitor each other. Parents know that regulated child-care centres are inspected by numerous levels of government authorities, including the Ministry of Community and Social Services, the municipal children's services department, the fire department and the local health department.

Child-care workers advocate on behalf of the children they care for — a responsibility our Ontario Conservative government will be shirking if it reduces funds that currently assist low income parents and boost low staff wages.

Roxanna Gumiela

Oshawa

reprinted from The Toronto Star.

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