

Cash for early learning lags while national interest grows ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

National interest in early learning is sweeping the country with three provinces, including Ontario, planning to expand kindergarten programs in the next year, says a new report on the state of early childhood education and care in Canada.

But Canada is still spinning its wheels when it comes to government funding and program growth, says the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, a national child-care policy research institute, in a report to be released today.

Total provincial budgets for early childhood care grew by a healthy \$538 million between 2004 and 2006, from \$2.4 billion to \$2.9 billion. But the pace of that growth has dropped, with an increase of \$147 million in the past two years.

And in six provinces, more than half of the new child-care spaces were created in for-profit centres that are less stable and offer lower-quality care than non-profit or public programs, the report adds.

"Provincial interest in bridging early childhood education and child care has really picked up," said the report's co-author, Martha Friendly, noting that Ontario, British Columbia and Prince Edward Island plan to expand half-day kindergarten to a full school day starting next year. "But on the ground, it's very thin: Overall, growth seems to be tapering off while the commercial sector is picking up."

Toronto family physician Allyson Merbaum, who has a 5-year-old son and twins, 3, can't understand why child care isn't integrated into every local school so parents like her aren't forced to hire nannies to ferry children from nursery school to kindergarten and after-school programs. "I think kids at this age want to be learning more ... and having them in the same place all day is so much less disruptive," she said.

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In Ontario, provincial early learning adviser Charles Pascal recently released a \$1 billion blueprint to turn elementary schools into community hubs for children from 7:30 a.m. until 6 p.m. Education Minister Kathleen Wynne has said the province supports the scheme. But so far, Queen's Park has promised nothing beyond a phase-in of full-day programs for 4- and 5-year-olds starting next fall.

P.E.I. is planning full-day kindergarten for all 5-year-olds next year, and B.C. is aiming for universal coverage by 2011. Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia already offer kindergarten for 5-year-olds for the full school day.

Provincial interest in early learning stems from a growing awareness of how far Canada lags behind other developed countries, including the United States, said Lynell Anderson of B.C.'s Human Early Learning Partnership, a provincial research institute. (Canada placed last among developed nations in a United Nations review of early childhood education last year.)

Provinces are also reacting to research that shows between one-quarter and one-third of Canadian children arrive in kindergarten seriously behind their peers in terms of social and cognitive development, Anderson added.

The slower pace of growth in provincial budgets reflects the 2006 cancellation of a federal \$5 billion plan to build a national child-care system.

"Money is important," said Friendly. "Certainly all eyes are on Ontario, where there is potential for transformative change."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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