

All-day kindergarten under threat? ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Big-box child care is setting up shop in Canada and critics worry it will undermine quality, scuttle chances for a national daycare program and thwart provincial plans for all-day kindergarten.

The new company, Edleun Inc., has "identified a large and growing supply and demand imbalance" and is looking to acquire and develop "high quality" child care and early education centres across Canada, according to documents filed with the TSX.

Edleun already owns a chain of Alberta daycares with links to the failed Australian-based ABC Learning Centres. It has merged with a Montreal capital company and plans to begin trading on the TSX Venture Exchange.

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Edleun includes a former ABC executive and lists one-time Ontario education minister John Snobelen as a board member.

The company, the first Canadian child-care chain poised to trade on the stock market, says it is hoping to raise \$15 million.

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Snobelen said he has confidence in the new group's abilities.

"I do know about some difficulties in the past," he said in an interview. "But I think the people involved in this are high quality, know what they're doing and they're going to put a good program together.

"They did design-build operations for daycare and early education, which is a lot better than trying to shoehorn these things into the public schools," Snobelen said.

Snobelen, who is critical of Ontario's \$1.2 billion plan to provide all-day kindergarten for all 4- and 5-year-olds by 2015, said Ontario's public schools can't afford such a costly plan with a \$24.7 billion deficit.

"I think there is going to be a big appetite for some private sector co-operation in both early childhood education and daycare," he said.

In the absence of a national early-learning and child-care strategy, Edleun's arrival on the Canadian scene was inevitable, says Toronto-based child care researcher Martha Friendly.

"We are the only Anglo-Saxon country where child care is not primarily commercial or run for profit," said Friendly, who has been following the international rise of so-called "big-box" child-care chains. "We are sitting here like a little ripe peach."

About 80 per cent of Canadian child care is not-for-profit, with a small number of public centres mostly operated by municipalities. The remaining commercial centres are either owner-operated daycares or small private chains run as community businesses.

A large international body of research has found that for-profit daycare provides lower quality care for young children than non-profit or public programs. Non-profit and public daycare are also more accessible and affordable for parents and more accountable to taxpayers, research shows.

"Once child care becomes a big business traded on the stock exchange, there isn't even a pretense that it's being operated for the love of children and families," Friendly said. "The stock exchange isn't about public services; it's about profit, pure and simple."

Three years ago, Edleun's Wulf signed dozens of form letters addressed to private daycare operators in Ontario asking if they wanted to sell their businesses.

Wulf's company, Adroit Investments, eventually bought 11 daycares in Alberta on behalf of 123 Busy Beavers Learning Centres, a company based in Oakville and registered in Ontario and Alberta. 123 Busy Beavers was once a partner of 123 Global, an Australian firm that described itself as ABC's "growth engine."

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Five municipalities -- Toronto, Peel, Ottawa, Sudbury and Kenora -- have local policies that restrict public funding to non-profit operators only, Meilleur said. Together, these municipalities are responsible for more than 44 per cent of the province's 160,000 licensed spaces in daycare centres, she added.

But Ontario has a large daycare market that needs more protection from corporate players, Friendly said.

"When other countries have shifted and become predominantly for-profit, it's happened by corporate, publicly traded child care."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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