

Be wary of large-scale day cares, warns U of C sociologist^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Well-known author and University of Calgary sociologist Tom Langford is warning Alberta parents to watch out for large, corporate child care facilities coming to the province.

In 2007, the Alberta government removed the 80-child cap on the maximum number of children that could be accommodated in a child care facility.

With the size deregulation, Langford said corporate day care centres that look after 200 or more children are in Alberta's immediate future.

"At this size, corporate day cares will be larger than some of our local elementary schools," says Langford, an assistant professor at the U of C who wrote a book called, *Alberta's Day Care Controversy*. "Attending them will be a very different experience than our current stock of smaller non-profit and commercial day cares."

Langford argues that since the capital for corporate day cares is provided by investors expecting sizable returns on investment, generating profits rather than putting children first becomes the bottom line.

"The commercial chains do well when the market is expanding," he said. "They fill up new centres, make a profit and everything's good."

"But when we're in a recession, the vacancy rate goes up, they run into trouble, and the commercial chains are forced to not reinvest in child care. They no longer invest in new curriculum or programs for the kids, quality goes down, and their centres aren't as attractive to potential investors anymore."

But the provincial minister in charge of day cares argues the current child care scene in Alberta doesn't reflect a situation of large, corporate day cares.

"We aren't experiencing situations where child care providers want to exceed that original cap of 80 children," said Yvonne Fritz, minister of children and youth services. "The regulation was lifted in 2007 because it was a non-issue."

Fritz said only three per cent of child care centres in Alberta accommodate more than 80 children.

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Leslie Wulf, CEO of Education Learning Universe (EDLEUN), said there's no reason for people to believe that a larger child care centre means less quality.

"Many other countries believe that smaller is better for child care centres," Wulf said. "But Edleun spends an awful lot of money remodelling the centres that we buy to bring them up to our standards. Quality is No. 1 for us."

The Edleun chain of child care centres came to Alberta in May 2010 and currently operates 20 child care centres in the province, with three new Calgary-area learning centres under construction.

Edleun is the only publicly traded child care corporation in Canada, and stated in its financial prospectus last May that it intends to own 10 per cent of all child care spaces in Canada within the next six years.

"We're a Calgary-based, Canadian company with a lot of interesting stuff on the horizon," Wulf says.

One of Edleun's largest child care centres to date is currently being built in Chestermere. The Chestermere Lakes Learning Centre, a 2,300-square foot facility, will accommodate 247 children - including 45 kids from six to 12 years old in the before- and after-school program. The remaining 202 spaces are set aside for children six weeks to five years old.

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"There's a need for more child care spaces across the country, and we don't have a problem investing in child care in Alberta," Wulf says. "We're not afraid to spend the capital."

"We're going to continue to grow in the province and provide a quality child care environment. We are going to be part of the community, just like the library, the grocery store, and the bank."

Langford, however, points to Australia's failed ABC Learning Centres child care chain as an example of large-scale corporate child care

operations gone awry.

By the time ABC Learning collapsed beneath \$1.6 billion of debt in November 2008, it had grown from a single centre in Brisbane to include 1,200 Australian child care centres, as well as 1,000 centres in the United States, 116 in New Zealand and 112 in Britain.

"When ABC went belly up, hundreds of centres closed and families and children were thrown out on the street," Langford says.

"My argument is this, we have had day care chains such as KinderCare and Educentre go bankrupt in Alberta before. With young children, stable learning and care environments are important. It's risking too much to have large corporate child care systems take over. Their track record in Alberta and around the world is too much of a risk."

Langford predicts large child care corporations will make sweeping moves into the province in the next period of economic expansion.

"We're going to have to wait for another boom for this to happen, but that's what the future could hold for Alberta's child care system."

"Parents should ask themselves, do they want a child care system where child care facilities could go bankrupt, or should we build a child care system where that type of a calamity won't happen?"

As a result of the Alberta government's Creating Child Care Choices plan, a total of 15,138 new spaces were created in day homes, preschools, day cares and out-of-school care programs in the past three years.

- reprinted from the Calgary Herald

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