

For-profit firm plans seven centres in B.C. ^[1]

Critics charge 'big box child care' too risky, push for control to move to Ministry of Education

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Source: Vancouver Sun

Format: Article

Publication Date: 8 Aug 2011

EXCERPTS

A for-profit, publicly traded company that is rapidly expanding across Canada plans to open seven child care centres in B.C.

Edleun Group, Inc. purchased five B.C. daycares - three in Metro Vancouver and two in Kelowna - for \$4.1 million, Calgary-based Edleun said in a news release. The company also plans to build two new centres in Kelowna.

Edleun's name is short for Education Learning Universe, and the company says it is the largest for-profit child care operator in Canada with 30 centres. The company's website states that its goal is to acquire 10 per cent of the 8,800 child care centres in Canada.

This expansion has some child care workers worried about the "commercialization" of child care, expressing concerns that the quality of care decreases when the provider is a for-profit business. But Edleun's chief executive officer Leslie Wulf said in an interview that his company is all about quality and choice.

"Closing of these acquisitions cements our initial move into the British Columbia marketplace, which broadens national awareness of the Edleun brand and creates new child care spaces in underserved communities," Wulf said in a news release. "These acquisitions are quite material, both strategically in terms of entrenching our expansion into British Columbia and financially due to their contribution to our bottom line profitability and cash flow."

However, Sharon Gregson, Vancouver school board trustee and an operator of several notfor-profit child care centres, worries about "big box child care."

"Their primary concern is meeting the needs of their shareholders, which means making a profit," Gregson said. "The only way, from experience, that anybody makes a profit in child care is by gouging parents with high fees, or gouging workers with low wages and benefits or gouging kids with poor quality care."

But Wulf said that is "misinformation."

"We charge market fees and our employees are paid equal to or more than market rates. On an annual basis we do reviews and everybody gets a raise," Wulf said, adding that the company offers a career path for early childhood educators that smaller daycare centres can't.

Rates at the Maple Ridge West Learning Centre range from \$400 a month for after-school care to \$975 a month for fulltime care for an infant up to 36 months old, information provided by Wulf shows.

Gregson cited the Australian experience with ABC Learning Centres, which expanded rapidly, then went broke, as a cautionary tale for Canada.

"That should be a big heads up for our provincial governments in Canada as to the dangers of having one company with that much control," Gregson said.

Michael Lanier, chairman of the CUPE BC child care working group and president of CUPE local 1936, is also concerned.

"In Vancouver, only approximately 20 per cent of children have access to a licensed, highquality daycare," Lanier said. "The waiting lists are huge. The average fees are anywhere from \$900 to about \$1,400 a month. That can be a real problem for families.

He says that's why CUPE supports a new plan that would move child care from the control of the Ministry of Children and Family Development to the control of the Ministry of Education.

The plan, created by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC, has been endorsed by several B.C. bodies, including Vancouver city council and Metro Vancouver. It calls for "Early Years Centre Networks" through which boards of education would take responsibility for child care from the time children are born. The centres could be existing not-forprofit ones that join the new program, centres within schools, or new purpose-built centres.

The plan proposes a public system of child care that caps parent fees at affordable levels (Gregson said it calls for \$10 a day for all ages); improves staff education and wages; is open to all children, including those with special needs; and offers play-based programs. The more corporate daycare grows in B.C., the more difficult it will be to move to a public system, Gregson said.

She said Edleun is one of three big corporate players in the Canadian daycare scene; the other two she named are Kids and Company and

Core Education Fine Arts.

Kids and Company recently opened its first location in Vancouver, a 10,000-square-foot licensed facility that can accommodate up to 100 children. The company has a unique business model in that employers pay an annual fee for child care space for their employees' children.

Core Education Fine Arts offers franchises of its junior kindergarten program - for kids aged two to five - and lists 11 locations in Metro Vancouver on its website. The Metro Vancouver Edleun centres, which will have 422 licensed spaces, are in Maple Ridge, Coquitlam and Port Moody.

Edleun centres have a standard curriculum and set meal plans designed by a registered dietitian, the company says on its website. The company has a director of training and a director of education, Wulf said.

-reprinted from the Vancouver Sun

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