

Accessible child care in theory ^[1]

editorial

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Source: PEI Guardian

Format: Article

Publication Date: 3 Sep 2011

EXCERPTS

The provincial government may have put a provincial registry in place for child care, but it's clear from the experiences of working parents that it's far from perfect. Government should address the apparent flaws in the system if it's serious about addressing parents' needs.

Last year, the province unveiled a new pre-school strategy pledging to revamp early learning, and as part of that, many private day cares transitioned to provincially funded centres. These centres charge regulated fees, have certified staff and offer an approved, standardized curriculum. They are also larger and can take in more children than most private operations. As a result of the changes over the last year, 102 new spaces for babies under age two were created, bringing the total of infant spaces across the province in licenced centres to 210.

To make things run more smoothly, government also created a provincial child care registry to allow parents to get detailed information about the centres and put their child's name on a list for the spaces.

But since the registry went online last spring, some parents have found the registry wanting. One parent interviewed for a story in this newspaper said she registered even before her baby was born, but almost a year after, hadn't heard from any centres she had applied for. Even worse, she discovered at least one centre had lost her name. Another new mother who put her name on multiple lists through the registry received messages that her application had been withdrawn because they were unable to meet her needs. Another mom got a response after several months of being on the registry, but the email was for someone else's child.

Provincial officials agree the registry is not operating as intended, and that they're working on improving it.

Fair enough. Considering the massive changes in early learning this past year, it's not surprising that a provincial registry set up to better facilitate the need for child care spaces is having growing pains. But hopefully the province is taking seriously some of the parents' experiences and devoting the resources to fixing them. Clearly there have been some misunderstandings this first year about what parents should do and expect from the registry. The province needs to better communicate with parents about when they should register, and what to expect from the registry. They also need to work more closely with the centres themselves. Right now, the use of the registry by the centres is voluntary, so the province should look at whether this helps or hinders parents in finding spaces.

And finally, they should explore what the Early Childhood Development Association identifies as the root problem: the shortage of spaces. As Sonya Corrigan, executive director of the centre, put it, the "bottom line issue is the unavailability of enough spaces for people wanting child care."

The province deserves credit for trying to make child care more accessible to Island parents, and for introducing a registry for doing that. But a year or more after doing so, it's clear it hasn't reached that objective. It needs to fix the registry, and if the basic problem is too few spaces, then the tougher challenge may be in creating more. That would require a significant infusion of cash into subsidizing more spaces.

- reprinted from the PEI Guardian

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