

Big-box child care buys Ontario centres ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Big-box child care has arrived in Ontario.

Calgary-based Edleun Group Inc., which began trading on the Toronto Stock Exchange in early 2010, announced plans Monday to acquire seven daycares in the province, including four in the Greater Toronto Area and three in Windsor.

Edleun's expansion into Ontario comes at a time when the province's patchwork of mostly non-profit daycare programs is teetering on the verge of collapse due to municipal cuts, chronic provincial underfunding and the loss of 4- and 5-year-olds to all-day kindergarten.

Advocates who have been lobbying for a public or non-profit system of high-quality, affordable child care for all families that need it, say Edleun's arrival marks the beginning of the privatization of daycare in Ontario.

"From the point of view of children and families, this is one of the worst things that could possibly happen in Ontario," warned Canadian daycare expert Martha Friendly, of the Child Care Resource and Research Unit.

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 daycares are also more accessible and affordable for parents and more accountable to taxpayers, research shows.

Publicly traded child-care companies are particularly problematic, Friendly said, because they can raise large amounts of capital and quickly become major corporate players. Since their primary goal is to return profits to shareholders, they have an incentive to keep standards low, she noted.

Education Minister Laurel Broten said she is aware of Edleun and continues to monitor the percentage of private child-care centres in Ontario, which has grown to 26 per cent from 23 per cent two years ago. But she won't declare a moratorium on new private licences or subsidies because some communities don't have any non-profit providers.

"We've always had a balance in our delivery model for child care," she said, adding that both non-profit and for-profit programs must adhere to the same licensing standards.

Edleun has links to Australia's now-defunct ABC Learning Centres, once the largest child care conglomerate in the world. ABC made international headlines in 2008 when it went belly-up amid reports of stock market irregularities, poor quality and rising parent fees.

Edleun President and Chief Operating Officer Ty Durekas refused in an interview to comment on the demise of ABC Learning. And he rejected advocates' warnings that corporate child care delivers inferior programs.

"We believe that we can provide an equal quality (program) for children and families in Ontario," he said.

Ontario Early Learning adviser Charles Pascal, who has just returned from Australia where he talked to child-care staff who worked at former ABC Learning centres, is alarmed by the arrival big box child care in Ontario.

"I heard horror stories of corner-cutting designed to make profits off of low-quality care. Nice-looking environments, badly paid, badly trained workers, with cookie cutter toys," he said.

"The (Ontario) government noted in its (election) platform that it's time to 'modernize child care' in the province," he said. "There should be no place for big-box child care in its plans."

-reprinted from the Toronto Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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