

Sale of three area Montessori schools draws criticism: Alberta company gets 3 locations, 484 spaces for \$5.5M ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Three award-winning Windsor-based Montessori centres have been purchased by a large Alberta day care company in a move that critics fear could lead to the commercialization of Ontario's early childhood education system.

The Edleun Group Inc. of Calgary announced it had purchased seven day care operations in Ontario, including the three Windsor Children's House Montessori centres. The company paid \$5.5 million for the three local operations, which have 485 licensed child care spaces.

Edleun has not disclosed the names of the four centres it acquired in the Toronto area. The three in this area are located on Labelle Street in South Windsor, Malden Road in LaSalle and in the town of Lakeshore.

Julie Roy, who operates the Windsor Children's House Montessori Centres, said the quality of services provided to local children and families will not diminish under the terms of her deal. In fact, she says, educational opportunities are more likely to improve.

...

"Nothing is going to change in terms of quality, teachers and staffing," she said. "It's status quo for all concerned.... Edleun was looking to acquire operations of high quality to purchase in Ontario and we were the first. That says a lot about our quality."

But Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, said Tuesday expansion of large scale, profit-driven day care in Ontario could be detrimental to children's learning.

She called for a provincial government inquiry into the acquisitions before the trend goes too far and threatens the integrity of Ontario's early childcare system.

"Research shows the quality of education is poorer when centres are run for profit," said Friendly. "Why is it appropriate to make a profit from little children? Is it in the public interest or is it a business? Is it ethical? Maybe there should be a full inquiry. I'd welcome it."

But Ontario Education Minister Laurel Broten said in an interview from her Toronto office that an inquiry would not be necessary. She said Ontario's mixed system of day care and early childhood education makes room for both non-profit and for-profit operations.

Regardless of status, she said, all must adhere to "the strict licensing and high standards" set by the Ontario Day Nurseries Act, which sets regulations for staff training, instructor-to-children ratios and maximum group size.

She said the ministry monitors all operations through regular inspections and, in the case of these acquisitions, will be especially vigilant to ensure all standards are met.

"My message is you must meet our expectations," she said. "It doesn't matter who you are."

She said that 75 per cent of providers in Ontario are non-profit but there are communities in the province where such centres do not exist and it is important to offer a mix of services to ensure all families have access to the system.

Broten said the Windsor deal involves two private for-profit companies and, as such, results in no change in the local mix of profit to non-profit operations and is simply "a transfer of ownership."

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Ty Durekas, Edleun's president, said the company was acquiring three centres of "exceptional quality that are market leaders in their communities."

Upon completion of the current round of acquisitions, the company will operate 45 centres in three provinces, including Alberta and British Columbia.

Friendly warned the Edleun model is something that has not been seen in Ontario before and it threatens the entire system.

"This is a situation where money is scarce, the economy is weak and day care services are crumbling all over the province," she said.

"This is exploiting that situation."

-reprinted from the Windsor Star

Region: Ontario ^[2]

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