

Edleun Group, an Albertan company, is building a national network of for-profit child care centres ^[1]

Is child care a business or a public good?

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EXCERPTS:

The vast majority of child care spots in Canada are provided by small mom-and-pop operations or by not-for-profits that serve maybe 50 to 70 kids each. But the Sherwood Park Learning Centre is owned by Edleun Group, a Calgary-based company that launched in 2010. In May of that year, it bought 11 child care centres from 123 Busy Beavers in Calgary and simultaneously went public on the Toronto Stock Exchange, raising \$40 million. It is now the biggest for-profit operator of child care centres in Canada, with 44 centres spread over Alberta, B.C. and Ontario, and five more under construction. In total, Edleun has space for almost 4,500 kids.

Some say it's a success story, an entrepreneurial approach that is helping the country close the gap between supply and demand, estimated at 165,000 spaces. Others say it's the wrong way to go, that private child care, particularly on the large corporate scale, will inevitably fail to deliver the quality and quantity of child care this country needs. As the first company to try the corporate-chain route in Canada, Edleun has become a lightning rod for attention in the communities it enters. Little Blake, Johnny and Jenna, absorbed in their play, are completely oblivious to the fact that they're at the centre of a debate about how best to fund and deliver child care in Canada.

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Martha Friendly is one of those who spoke out against corporate child care. She is the executive director of the Toronto-based Childcare Resource and Research Unit, and she herself opened two not-for-profit daycares when her children were young. She says there are many things that suggest child care should be considered a public service and not a business. "You don't do public policy by throwing it open to the market and letting it make decisions about where you put child care, and who they serve and who they don't serve," she says. But she wouldn't suggest shutting down the for-profit sector, since Canadians have come to depend on it. Her concern is that none of the provinces have what resembles a coherent policy on either child care or early childhood education. "The provinces should have a policy framework and it should have planning and it should think about what the research says," she says. "In that, I don't think we should be supporting the development of child care businesses."

- reprinted from *Alberta Venture*

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