

Child-care modernization plan panned by critics ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

OTTAWA - The provincial government wants to modernize Ontario's child care system, but some are questioning whether the plans outlined in a recent discussion paper go far enough.

Early learning in Ontario is undergoing a huge transformation, starting with the introduction of full-day kindergarten, says the 16-page paper, which was posted on the Ministry of Education's website at the end of June.

While the vision behind full-day kindergarten was to give children a stronger start in school, the current focus on child care recognizes the key role it plays in promoting healthy development during the most critical years of a child's life.

However, it's hard to strengthen the child-care sector when money's tight in Ontario, the paper warns, noting it's not about expanding the current system, but about "transforming (it) to enable higher-quality, consistent services that can support growth in the future."

The province says it needs a child-care plan in sync with its \$1.5-billion kindergarten initiative, which focuses on locating programs in or linked with schools to enhance seamlessness for children and families.

But a comprehensive vision for early learning and care for children 0-12 was already laid out in 2009, when Charles Pascal, the Premier's Special Advisor on Early Learning, tabled his report, *With Our Best Future In Mind*.

Pascal conducted dozens of roundtable discussions provincewide, received more than 2,300 submissions and talked to just about every stakeholder imaginable: from parents and people working on the front lines of the child-care and education sectors to municipal, school board and First Nations leaders.

He summed up what he heard concisely on the report's fourth page: "The current fragmented patchwork of early childhood services too often fails the best interests of our children, frustrates families and educators, and wastes resources."

In the latest paper - which sets out a three-year timeline - the province pledges to introduce a new funding formula, make capital investments to help operators adapt programs to suit younger children, develop mandatory program guidelines for child-care operators and update the Day Nurseries Act, which hasn't been reviewed for almost 30 years.

That's not good enough, some industry insiders say.

"We're glad they've come out with a discussion paper, but we're disappointed it doesn't have a long-term plan that will build a system," said Shellie Bird, a Canadian Union of Public Employees representative for more than 300 unionized child care workers in Ottawa.

There's no commitment to support the non-profit child care sector and no clear sign the province views child care as an extension of education, even though the day-to-day management of the file has been moved from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to the Ministry of Education, Bird said.

She also fears the cash-strapped province will let private, for-profit child care operators pick up the slack in terms of creating new spaces, which is why the union and others are calling for a moratorium on the licensing of new private child-care centres.

"I think (the government is) bummed about the potential capital cost to grow the system, so it's easy to let the corporate sector to do it," she said.

Martha Friendly, a leading early childhood education and care researcher, said the province was redoing an exercise that had already been done.

It's imperative that the system be modernized, Friendly said, but the questions involved include what that means and how it gets done. "I don't think the paper addresses those things," she said. "This should be much, much more advanced in its thinking."

Friendly would like to see a long-term, policy framework supporting a publicly-managed and publicly-funded system.

Kim Hiscott, executive director of Andrew Fleck Child Care Services, says the paper is proof the province is listening.

She says improving quality assurance, updating the Day Nurseries Act and addressing the funding formula to make accessing care more affordable for families represent steps in the right direction. "It shouldn't be such a financial burden," she said.

Pascal's landmark report may have set out the province's vision, but the details will come as a result of this latest discussion paper, Ottawa

Centre Liberal MPP Yasir Naqvi said.

"There is a systematic approach that is being taken to implement various pieces of the vision that Pascal outlined and for each part you need to have a very clear implementation plan in place," he said.

Naqvi said his own vision of child care was an affordable, seamless system for children and families that included, particularly in the early years, an educational component. "We're just not talking about daycare service. We need to make sure that children are getting a good, pedagogically-proven form of education from as early as possible."

-reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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