

An open letter to Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Early Learning and Child Care ^[1]

Author: various [See complete list of signatories at the end of the letter]

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Dear Ministers:

We are writing to urge you to embark on a policy review of the important issue of ownership of early learning and child care services. We believe that there is overwhelming evidence that public and non-profit delivery is the best way to ensure that Canada's newest social program will meet the high expectations we all share for Canada's children and families.

As you know, our community was most enthusiastic about the 2004 federal election commitment to create a national early learning and child care program based on the QUAD principles, and we have continued to be optimistic that we are at the beginning of the universal, high quality, inclusive system of child care for which we have advocated for almost three decades.

At the same time, we have consistently urged governments to "get it right from the start". From our perspective, this means using the now considerable Canadian and international knowledge that speaks to recognized best practices in policy and services that live up to the QUAD principles. One of these involves a commitment to a transition plan that moves to public and/or not-for-profit delivery of child care services.

There is overwhelming evidence to show that public and not-for-profit delivery is much more likely to deliver high quality programs that support the "early learning" to which a commitment has been made; to provide equity by ensuring that children with special needs are included; that services are accountable and stable; that the risk of trade challenges is mitigated; and that limited public resources are used to maximize quality and developmental programming, not to provide private profits.

The policy review we are suggesting would involve a working group of policy experts from federal, provincial and territorial governments as well as researchers, academics, and community experts. This group would look carefully at the research evidence on child care auspice (who owns and operates services) and advise on the design of a transition plan based on grandparenting existing for-profit child care operators by bringing them into the new funding regime but restricting funding for new services to non-profit and public delivery.

Last year, we expressed concern that it will be difficult if not impossible to build a high quality system if this fundamental policy issue is not addressed. Our October 2004 Open Letter to you emphasized this point. Others did as well. For example, a letter from Charles Coffey of RBC Financial Group and Margaret Norrie McCain said - among other things - that "auspice matters", urging serious consideration of this key policy issue. The influential Canada Review of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2004) also commented on auspice. The review reminded Canadians of the experience of other countries:

"A protective mechanism used in other countries is to provide public money only to public and non-profit services, and then to ensure financial transparency in these services through forming strong parent management boards. At the same time, the provision of services across a city or territory - not least in terms of mapping where services should be placed - should be overseen by a public agency."

A new paper by Professor Susan Prentice of the University of Manitoba reviews the Canadian research regarding auspice in child care, documenting, among other things, significant quality differences even when funding is held constant. The evidence she cites causes her to conclude that:

"New evidence and policy arguments demonstrate that where public policy and financing discourages for-profit child care, the proportion of for-profit care is lower and the quality of care is higher; conversely, where legislation and funding supports for-profit child care, the proportion of for-profit care is higher and the quality is lower. In environments sympathetic to for-profit care, the for-profit sector both finds and makes opportunities to further entrench its interests. Regulations play only a small role in tempering these associations: licensing and regulatory regimes set generally minimal floors, and even these are regularly breached. Policing and compelling minimum standards is costly to jurisdictions, and diverts funds from more proactive quality improvements."

Over the last three weeks the child care community, policymakers and government representatives across Canada have had the benefit of hearing about the Australian experience with public funding of for-profit child care from Lynne Wannan, an early childhood policy expert from Australia. Her description of the takeover of child care services by large corporations over a period of less than 15 years has heightened our concerns about the obvious risks in the route Canada is taking thus far.

If policy-making is to be evidence-based, the impetus for ensuring that the future of Canada's newest social program should be based on public and non-profit delivery is clear; the evidence from Canada and from other countries is overwhelming.

The federal health minister on Monday reiterated Canada's commitment to strengthen public delivery of health care by ensuring strong conditions on funding in order to protect medicare. We believe that a similar commitment from governments is the only way to ensure that Canada's newest social program serves the best interests of children and families and meets accountability criteria.

Sincerely,

- Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada
- Canadian Council on Social Development
- National Association of Women and the Law
- Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario
- Canadian Union of Public Employees
- Family Service Association of Toronto
- Canadian Union of Postal Workers
- National Organization of Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of Canada
- Integration Network Project, Institute of Child Study, OISE/University of Toronto
- Rural Voices
- Saskatoon Communities for Children
- ELCC Coalition of Saskatchewan
- Success By Six Saskatoon

- National Coordinator, Campaign 2000
- Canadian Council for Reform Judaism
- SpecialLink
- City of Vancouver
- Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care
- New Brunswick Parents for Quality Care
- National Anti-Poverty Organization
- Canadian Auto Workers
- KAIROS: Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives / KAIROS: Initiatives œcuméniques canadiennes pour la justice
- Child Care Coalition of Manitoba
- Ontario Federation of Labour
- Campaign Against Child Poverty
- Ottawa Federation of Parents' Day Care Centres
- YWCA of Canada

Individuals

- Donna Lero, Co-Director of Research of The Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being at the University of Guelph
- Dr. Susan Prentice, Professor, University of Manitoba
- Martha Friendly, Child Care Resource and Research Unit
- MPP Andrea Horwath, Hamilton East, Ontario (NDP Critic for Children and Youth Issues)
- Michael Krashinsky, Chair, Department of Management, U of T
- The Rev. Dr. Lillian Perigoe, Conference Minister for Personnel Policy and Support, Toronto Conference, The United Church of Canada
- Gordon Cleveland, Associate Chair (Economics), Department of Management, U of T

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