

Ontario urged to expand daycare in non-profit sector ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

With Ontario poised to pump up to \$3.75 billion into 100,000 new child-care spaces over the next five years, advocates are warning against spending that cash on for-profit centres.

“The market is excellent at providing daycare spaces quickly and cheaply,” said Brooke Richardson, a parent and Ryerson University lecturer who is writing her PhD thesis on child care.

“But the conversation needs to shift to caring for children. And that’s something the free market, motivated by the fiscal bottom line, is not so good at doing,” she added.

“If the government is serious about bettering the well-being of Canadian families and children, then spaces are not enough. We need high quality care environments,” said Richardson, 32, whose son Kai, 2, attends a non-profit daycare in the Toronto’s east end.

Currently, there are licensed spaces for just 20 per cent of Ontario kids under age 4 and spots for less than 5 per cent of babies under 18 months old. Waiting lists for spots are long and for parents lucky enough to secure a space, fees are often higher than mortgages.

Not surprisingly, last week’s throne speech announcement, aimed at doubling the number of licensed child-care spaces for infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers by 2022, was music to parents’ ears.

But Richardson and other daycare advocates are worried about so-called “big box” child care and corporate chains swooping in and taking over.

Although just 26 per cent of licensed child care in Ontario is run by for-profit centres, advocates point to Alberta-based BrightPath Early Learning Inc.’s recent purchase of one of the GTA’s largest private daycare chains.

BrightPath, Canada’s first publicly-traded child-care company, bought 20 Peekaboo Child Care centres in Halton and Peel regions on Sept. 9. It brings BrightPath’s total number of centres to 76, including 35 in Ontario.

Canadian and international research shows that quality in commercially-operated centres tends to be lower than in public and non-profit programs, said Martha Friendly, executive director of the Toronto-based Child Care Resource and Research Unit.

Since for-profit centres usually pay lower staff salaries, there is more turnover as trained early childhood educators move to better-paying jobs. Turnover leads to a lack of continuity for kids, which impacts quality, Friendly said.

“There is no instance of a country that has a good early childhood system with predominantly for-profit centres,” said Friendly, who has been tracking the issue for more than 30 years.

Spending public child-care dollars on commercial centres, especially those traded on the stock exchange, is an inefficient use of public money, she added.

“Basically, what you are doing is creating a Frankenstein’s monster,” Friendly warned. “Rich, publicly-traded child-care chains can afford to hire lobbyists and experience shows that they lobby against what’s good for children and families.”

In Australia in the early 2000s, corporate child-care chains successfully lobbied the government against paid maternity leave, which wasn’t introduced until 2011 and is still under fire, Friendly said. One of the chains grew from a single centre to the world’s largest child-care conglomerate in less than 30 years before collapsing in 2008 and forcing the Australian government to spend millions to keep programs open for families, she noted.

During the 1980s, when Brian Mulroney’s Conservative government planned to fund a national scheme, commercial operators in this country lobbied against improving training requirements, Friendly said. In Ontario, private interests have been behind attempts to bring in poorer staff-child ratios, she added.

Mary Ann Curran, CEO for BrightPath, says she hasn't seen data that shows non-profit centres are always better than commercial operators.

A study her corporation conducted in Alberta five years ago showed quality in their centres was better than a control group which included non-profits, she said.

"My conversations with the government are around how we can improve the quality of care in this province," Curran said. BrightPath will continue "to look for potential opportunities for growth in Ontario" and open new centres where there is a need, she added.

Since the Liberals were first elected in 2003, all provincial funding for child-care expansion has gone into the school system, where programs are generally run by non-profit or municipal daycares.

More than 56,000 licensed spaces have been added since 2013, bringing the Ontario total to almost 351,000.

The non-profit YMCA, Ontario's largest child-care provider, operates more than 60,000 of those spaces, including about 16,000 spots opened since 2013 in the GTA, mostly in kindergarten and school-age care.

"It's a fundamental belief of the Y that families and children deserve quality child care and we have delivered big-time on that," said Lorrie Huggins, general manager of training, research and program development for the YMCA of Greater Toronto.

"Certainly the literature supports the fact that quality and not-for-profit is the way to go," she added.

Although expanding child care in schools is still a provincial priority, cash will also be available to add new spaces in workplaces and other community settings. New operating funding to support quality programs and make fees affordable for families is also part of the government's expansion plans.

Most municipalities, which oversee child-care funding for the province, send operating grants and fee subsidies to both profit and non-profit centres. Only Toronto and Sudbury have policies barring for-profit centres from receiving new operating grants or fee subsidies.

Education ministry officials note the government's child-care funding framework already includes direction to municipalities to prioritize not-for-profit child care "in key funding areas," such as general operating funding.

But Associate Education Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris, appointed in August to oversee child-care expansion, has not ruled out new funding for commercial daycares.

Instead, she says she will consult parents, child care operators, advocates and experts on how best to build a high quality child-care system for Ontario.

"When it comes to our historic commitment to expand child-care spaces by 100,000 over the next five years, we are committed to getting it right," Naidoo-Harris said in a statement.

Consultations on "a new child-care framework" will begin this fall with "all partners involved in providing high-quality child care in Ontario," she added.

Ryerson University's Richardson, whose research on for-profit and non-profit child-care centres in Alberta is being published in an upcoming book by UBC Press, says the province has to decide if it considers early childhood education a public service or a market commodity.

"We wouldn't dream of expanding our school system through private businesses," she said. "Why would we look to this solution for our youngest and most vulnerable children?"

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