

Don't let child care suffer because of full-day kindergarten

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Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty undoubtedly wants to ensure his government's investment in full-day early learning remains this year's good news budget story.

But the removal of four and five year olds from child care centres, combined with a \$63.5-million loss in federal funding, has rocked the child care sector.

The City of Toronto estimates shrinking resources for child care will mean de-funding 5,000 spaces. Another 3,000 spaces will disappear from other regions.

Feeling the financial heat, Windsor City Council just voted to shut down nine municipal child care centres. The city will get rid of all the buildings and assets that have been the foundation of Windsor's child care services for decades.

What is so regrettable about this decision is how it runs completely counter to the early learning reform report the premier commissioned from Charles Pascal.

Pascal's blueprint charges municipalities with leading the way in caring for children from infancy up to four years of age as the next step in the early learning initiative.

The Windsor situation could have been avoided. The government has calculated \$119 million in staff funding will be saved in child care centres as four and five year olds move into full day, school-operated programs.

The premier should advance these funds to stabilize affected child care programs for younger children before more municipalities follow Windsor's path.

Commercial child care operators are taking advantage of the current situation to boost their business and their profits.

While pushing Windsor city councillors to close municipal centres in order to force parents to come to them, the private operators have also mounted a lobby to change child care regulations that would require fewer staff to look after more children.

What's the problem with profit-making child care? There is no profit to be made in providing good quality child care; but bad child care can be lucrative.

Last month, a Texas-based company announced it will set up another big box child care chain in Canada. It plans to raise capital by trading on the TSX Venture Exchange. This was the business model used in the meteoric rise of another multinational chain that collapsed last year taking with it millions of dollars in government subsidies and leaving thousands of parents without child care and staff with unpaid wages.

International and Canadian research consistently ranks for-profit child care lowest on quality indicators with minimal staff qualifications, high teacher turnover and poor parent relations.

These operators are also the least likely to accept children with special needs. A recent Toronto study found the quality of municipal centres was highest, followed by the non-profit sector.

Ottawa, Peel, Sudbury and Toronto have acted to protect children by curtailing new agreements with for-profit child care operators.

The province must not allow the child care sector to falter because of underfunding. Otherwise we'll be left to believe that children aged four and five merit universal, high-quality learning and care and that somehow infants and pre-schoolers should be relegated to an increasingly unregulated market.

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