

EDITORIAL

Politicians drop the daycare ball



Published Mar 1 2010

In the current troubled economic situation, one would think the politicians would jump at the opportunity to target stimulus funding to a program that would create jobs for thousands of workers; free up others to upgrade their education; and help set young children on the path to success.

Unfortunately, our municipal, provincial and federal governments are shying away from a much-needed expansion of our child-care sector. Worse yet, all three levels seem poised to adopt budgets in the coming weeks that actually cut subsidized child-care spaces, lay off workers and drive up costs for full-fee parents. That would force some to quit their jobs rather than pay more for child care than they earn.

Toronto's proposed budget, unveiled last month, would strip nearly \$6 million of funding for rent for 370 school-based daycares. Child-care advocates predict such a move would drive up costs by \$60 to \$80 a month per child.

As well, nearly 8,000 subsidized spaces across the province – and several thousand child-care sector jobs – are at risk of disappearing if neither Ottawa nor Queen's Park allocates \$63.5 million for the spaces in their respective budgets (Ottawa's on Thursday, the province's later this month).

These spaces were funded by a federal Liberal agreement with the provinces. But that was one of the first programs killed by the Conservatives when they took office in 2006. Fearful that the necessary funding will not be included in Ottawa's budget, child-care advocates are urging the province to step into the breach.

Troublingly, however, the province maintains the \$63.5 million is Ottawa's problem. "We can't step in every time the federal government walks away from their responsibilities," says a spokesperson for Ontario's Children's Minister Laurel Broten.

As well, there are ongoing shortfalls in provincial transfers to municipalities to operate child care. And there have been no assurances the provincial government will provide the necessary transition funding to mitigate problems associated with the introduction of full-day kindergarten. Little wonder, then, that parents feel they are in the midst of a perfect storm.

In Ottawa, the Conservatives have shown nothing but disdain for child care and the transformative effect it can have on families and our economy. There is little reason to believe that will change.

But surely the more progressive regimes at city hall and Queen's Park – beset though they are by red ink – can recognize that need.

What is disheartening about this entire debate over child-care funding is that it is focused on just maintaining the spaces we already have – not on the desperately needed expansion of the system.

Child care delivers both social and economic benefits. Our governments need to ensure the required funding is not stripped from their budgets in a short-sighted deficit-fighting move.