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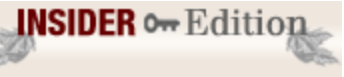
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Canada's child care is failing, OECD says

By MARGARET PHILP
From Monday's Globe and Mail

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Canada's child-care system is a fragmented, money-wasting patchwork of programs that provides babysitting for working parents but disregards a growing body of global research that shows educating preschool minds provides lifelong dividends, says a new OECD report.

At a time when other industrialized countries are pouring money into early-education systems for children younger than formal school age, Canada is languishing in terms of quality and investment in education and care for children, the OECD says.

The report, to be released Monday by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, says the only province not faltering is Quebec.

"Canada seemed to be much more focused on child care rather than early development and learning," said John Bennett, a Paris-based project manager for the OECD. "It was some place for the children to go while the parents work rather than focusing on the children themselves and what do these children need."

While more Canadian mothers with young children work outside the home than in almost any other country, Canada invests less than half of what other developed nations devote on average, in terms of economic output, to early-childhood education.

And while Canada suffers a steep shortage of regulated child-care spaces — enough for less than 20 per cent of children under 6 with working parents — growing numbers of countries are putting in place publicly funded systems of early learning for all children. In the United Kingdom, 60 per cent of young children are in regulated care; in Denmark, 78 per cent.

The review of Canada, one of 20 nations whose early-learning policies have come under OECD scrutiny, paints a picture of a child-care system adrift, with no overarching vision. It is underfunded, with pitiful staff salaries and subsidies inequitably doled out to a small number of the poorest families. The premises of child-care centres are often shabby, workers are poorly trained and

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frequently quit. Many centres catering to aboriginal families are low-quality with "tokenistic concessions to indigenous language." And waiting lists are long, with more than half of Canadian children stuck in unregulated care.

"Canada certainly would not be as energetic about young children and the development of young children as the Nordic countries, countries like Finland and Sweden," Dr. Bennett said.

"They are more concerned about young children and giving the best that a country can afford to young children. Even today, the U.K. is making huge investments in children that Canada is not matching, given the size of the population.

"There needs to be some sort of a policy agreement about the services for young children to give them as high a quality as possible."

The report, obtained from the OECD, was produced after four European investigators interviewed bureaucrats and child-care experts and toured dozens of programs in Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and British Columbia, the only four provinces that agreed to be in the review.

While they came across some child-care centres that were top-notch, many other centres were found wanting, with quality depending most on the calibre of the child-care director.

In many centres, they found barren, poorly lit rooms with an abundance of plastic toys and games that were "of doubtful learning quality." Playgrounds were lacking.

Overprotective child-care workers were frequently forcing their charges to sit down and not move, which runs counter to children's natural instincts to be active.

And unlike other cold-climate countries such as Sweden and Finland, where preschoolers spend hours at a time outdoors, the Canadian children spent almost all of their time inside.

"Children are staying inside far too much," Dr. Bennett said. "You have the strong aboriginal culture which gives a great deal of respect to nature and the outdoors. And this is very good for children, but it's not very visible in the centres."

The investigators also visited kindergartens in schools catering to five-year-olds which the report describes as "rather conventional" with "weakly planned activities" and children who sometimes appeared "bored or disoriented" and teachers who, while holding university degrees, were untrained in working with young children.

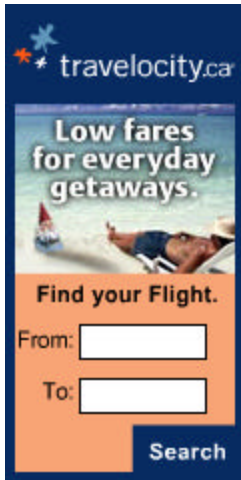
The report calls on the federal and provincial governments to draft a coherent vision for a publicly funded, universal system of early-childhood learning and care, based on the latest social science, with hard and fast steps, benchmarks, time frames and budgets for putting into place a program in every province that would be the cornerstone of Canadian family policy.

The provincial social-service ministers are meeting in Ottawa with federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden on Nov. 1, with early-childhood education at the top of the agenda.

The report's recommendations to Canada include:

- Increase funding to OECD levels (Canada now spends 0.2 per cent of GDP), with Ottawa and the provinces each paying 40 per cent of the cost and parents the remaining 20 per cent;
- Integrate child care and kindergarten;
- Improve the training and recruitment of workers.





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