

Child care choice

By KATE TENNIER

Tuesday, May 31, 2005 Posted at 12:08 AM EDT

Special to Globe and Mail Update

In virtually every realm of Canadian life, we enjoy choice. But if the proposed child-care deal signed by Ottawa and Queen's Park becomes reality, parents in Ontario will see severe restrictions put on their ability to make meaningful choices about how their children are cared for and educated. The government's plan to develop a regulated, universal daycare system is unfair to the vast majority of families who want care options that aren't controlled by government.

With similar child-care deals also being struck in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, this is a national issue. A substantial number of Canadian families reject the idea of universal daycare. A recently released study by the Vanier Institute of the Family indicates that 90 per cent of Canadians rank daycare centres as their fifth choice in child-care options. So why is Ottawa pushing ahead with a child-care plan so many Canadians clearly do not want? Further, in opting to finance universal daycare, the government is depriving parents of direct tax benefits that could be used for care and early learning experiences of their own choosing?

Those who lobby for universal daycare seem to spend equal energy condemning the notion of choice by stating that any vote for choice is a vote against what they regard as "quality early-learning programs and child care" and, more preposterously, charging that parents do not know how to make appropriate choices on behalf of their children.

The universal child-care lobby argues that, if parents were allowed to use their own tax dollars to access the already extensive and thriving system of child-care and early-learning opportunities in Canada, money would be taken away from their version of "quality" early learning and child care.

The government's plan would deny providing direct child-care dollars to parents, so that a great proportion of taxpayer money can be pumped into the capital costs and bureaucracy of a government-run "one-stop shopping" model of child care.

It seems the state believes it can do a better job than parents. Our new organization, Advocates for Childcare Choice, along with other groups across Canada, believes parents must retain decision-making power in how their children are cared for. We believe choice must be the cornerstone on which any new child-care deal is predicated.

We represent a full spectrum of care choices, including parents who use daycare centres. But we say that what families enjoy now in their daycares (small, responsive, often parent-board run) is nothing like what the government is proposing.

Are we overstating how little choice will be available under this new deal? No. Even now, there are severe restrictions on care options for families in need of daycare subsidies - they are permitted only government-

sanctioned care. And the vast majority of middle-class families have no real choice, either, as they are hampered by a regressive child-care tax policy that the government has shown no indication of changing. The new program will severely limit choices; with tax dollars directed to the universal daycare model, parents will not receive equal funding for their own choices.

What exactly does this one-stop shopping model of care and early learning entail? Although the government has never clearly articulated its plan, all indications point to a universal, regulated daycare system similar to public education. The government started off saying the program would be modelled on the Swedish system, where formal academic work is not initiated before the age of 7. They are now touting it as a "school readiness" plan and imply that young children will fall drastically behind without it.

In Ontario, the McGuinty government's Best Start agenda, along with the universal daycare lobby, touts school readiness as a "seamless" (read long) day of measurable, "effective" learning as the justification for this one-size-fits-all model. I spent many years as a primary teacher. The students who were the most "school ready" were those who were secure, had a strong sense of self and had been exposed to the wonders of the world. School-readiness skills such as lining up and printing one's name are not high-level thinking skills - most young children master them in a few days.

Those of us in the choice movement are tired of being portrayed as working against the common good of children and society. We find the government's social engineering to be regressive. The rhetoric that charges that a vote against universal daycare is a vote against children doesn't apply to us. We are just asking that the billions of dollars about to be allocated for child care in Canada be given to parents, so they can secure the kind of care and early-learning experiences they believe their children need and deserve.!

Kate Tennier is founder of Advocates for Childcare Choice, a non-partisan Ontario-based group affiliated with other child-care choice organizations across Canada.