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A remedy for this child-care tragedy

The parents of Eva Ravikovich are trying to drag a small good out of a huge wrong. They are using the courts to hold the province of Ontario accountable for the death of their little daughter in an overcrowded, unsanitary daycare. Precedence indicates they may get some small respite. Eva is not the first toddler to die in an unlicensed facility. Each time an official inquiry has chastised the province for the dearth of safe child choices and urged it to do better. In turn, Queen's Park responds by adding a few more daycare spaces, a few more government controls.



BERNARD WEIL/TORONTO STAR

The parents of Eva Ravikovich are suing the province and the Vaughan daycare where she died.

But Ontario has all the tools it needs to remedy its sorry child-care state without waiting for the courts to deliver another spanking. In 2010, full-day kindergarten began its rollout, on target to include all 250,000 of the province's 4- and 5-year-olds by September 2015. The legislation that brought us full-day kindergarten also included a proviso requiring schools to deliver extended day programming. In essence, schools would open as early as 6:30 a.m. and remain open until 6 p.m. Education and child care would be merged into a seamless day. Ridiculously long waits for a daycare spot would vanish, and with them the family stress inherent in ferrying children back and forth between school and babysitter.

It was smart public policy using the assets Ontarians already own in their publicly funded schools; ending the double billing needed to run two parallel services — school and daycare — for the same children. The innovation lasted for about 12 months. The daycare lobby went ballistic accusing government of stealing its clients. Then premier Dalton McGuinty yielded, reversing his own legislation to allow school boards to contract out care to daycare operators.

Most boards grabbed the premier's option. A few stood their ground and began to directly provide child care. Here's an update. The Waterloo Region District School Board and the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board now operate 2,400 and 3,200 new child-care spaces respectively. Before- and afterschool, holiday and summer programs will be available for all 4- to 12-year-olds in these regions by September 2015. Wait lists are in the past. If parents want care, they get it.

The economy of scale the school boards can offer means parents are paying less, while early childhood educators who oversee the extended day are earning more. Since parent fees cover the entire cost for all out-of-school programs, this huge care expansion has come about without any increase in school budgets.

Moreover, school space that had been used for the daycare of part-time kindergarten students is being refurbished to expand child care for preschoolers and toddlers, with an emphasis on creating new spaces for infants. Anyone coming off parental leave can attest to the acute shortage of licensed care for infants.

By comparison, Toronto school boards continued to rely on community daycare to address the needs of their students. With 10 times the number of children as the Kitchener-Waterloo region, Toronto has

added only 174 school-aged spaces since 2010, while KW created 2,400 spaces and counting. KW has no wait list for child care. Toronto's is 20,000 deep.

Meanwhile, parents camp overnight to snag the few available slots in licensed daycare, while the others have no option but to hand their babies over to unsupervised caregivers. Yet there is an available, no-cost fix. The province can require every school board to follow the lead of Waterloo and Ottawa. Multiply the new care spaces these two boards have created times the potential in 72 school boards across Ontario. The math says tens of thousand of youngsters could have quality care now.

Modern families need modern schools that operate beyond 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., 194 days a year. The new premier can bring the leadership to make this happen, and in doing so deliver a meaningful apology to little Eva's parents.

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