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There Isn't Any "Latchkey Crisis" After All

One of the arguments made by the liberals who seek to establish school-based daycare is the so-called crisis of "latchkey children." Many bleeding-heart segments have appeared on television about the need to provide daycare for children who would otherwise be left on the streets or go home to an empty house between the close of school in the afternoon and the time their parents return home from work.

Prince William County, Virginia just spent $60,000 of taxpayers' money to start a new school-based latchkey daycare program this September in seven county public schools, with 30 morning and 30 afternoon slots available in each school.

But county officials discovered in August that they can't find enough latchkey children to use the program. Fewer than half of the slots which the county had financed for before- and after-school daycare were filled.

"We're all ready to go," the program coordinator said, but "the problem is, we have no children. If there's no program, what do you do with $5,000 worth of crochet hooks and Popsicle sticks?"

The money spent so far is only for startup costs. The county planned to subsidize the daycare on an ongoing based and charge parents only $27 per week. If the daycare slots aren't filled, then the subsidy per child becomes so high that county officials can't justify it.

The county then reduced the participating schools from seven to five. Of the 310 daycare slots then available for before- and after-school daycare, only 126 applications had been received by opening day on September 4, and it is unknown how many children will actually show up.

How did Prince William County get itself into the fix of spending all this money for a service the public doesn't want? The county conducted a survey of 6,775 households two years ago to ascertain the need but, according to one of the County Supervisors, "There must have been an incorrect analysis."

That's an understatement. It now comes out that, of the 6,775 families surveyed, not one said they left their children unattended after school. The parents either stayed home with their children or made private child-care arrangements.

Prince William County Supervisors just decided that they knew better than the parents and so modeled their daycare program after a similar program in Fairfax County, Virginia which they had been told was "successful." In fact, the Fairfax program has been a hornet's nest of controversy, and many people call it a failure.

Fairfax County officials tried to make themselves the exclusive broker for all child care services by headquartering a latchkey daycare program in the public schools and denying the services to children who do not attend public schools. This discrimination caused a major flap, and ultimately Fairfax County voted to allow non-public school children to use the services, too.

The second headache of the Fairfax experiment was the financing. The plan was to use tax funding from federal, state, and local government sources, and then charge parents for daycare on a sliding scale, with the middle class paying higher fees (as well as higher taxes).

This financing caused another controversy because some parents didn't see why they should pay more than others. The property tax revolt in Fairfax County also helped to put the daycare plan on the skids.

The Fairfax County plan was a model demonstration project of the Wellesley College Center for Women, which has plenty of foundation and corporation funding behind it. The plan was to bribe parents into using public daycare rather than private or religious or parent-at-home care, and to make a government agency the broker, or manager, of all child care.

Programs such as those in Fairfax and Prince William are designed to **create** a need, **not** to fill a need. The programs are promoted by social service professionals whose goal is to establish a national, or even an international, daycare network in the public schools for all children beginning in infancy.

Their plan is to start with a latchkey daycare program in the public schools for school-age children, and thereby accustom parents to having the public schools supervise their children from the time the parents leave for their employment in the morning until they return in the evening.

Phase two of this master plan is to extend the school-based daycare downward to three and four-year-olds. This system would effectively Swedenize America and transform child care into a governmental rather than a family responsibility.

Those promoting this master plan talk privately, and sometimes openly, about costs of $100 billion a year, and say they don't care what this does to the tax burden. But the failure of the Fairfax and Prince William daycare plans indicates that the American people are not ready to accept either the theory or the financial costs of daycare in the public schools.