

With budget looming, federal government sparks child care talks with provinces ^[1]

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The federal government reignited child care talks with the provinces days before the release of a budget that will make a significant financial commitment to daycare nationwide.

The precise details of the talks are unknown, but they come after what sources describe as months of little deliberations between the two sides as they try to work out details that will underpin a national program, and the unique needs of each province and territory.

Heather Irwin, a spokeswoman for the Ontario education ministry, said in an email Thursday the most recent teleconference between officials regarding the national early learning and child care multilateral framework took place last week.

She also noted the federal government has not yet told provinces and territories how much money they will be getting.

A source with knowledge of the talks said another teleconference is scheduled for shortly after the budget.

Child care advocates have been told to expect a long-term funding commitment in next week's budget from the Liberals' social infrastructure fund, which has almost \$22-billion to dole out over the next decade.

The exact spending figure will be released on March 22, but advocates expect the government to continue spending approximately \$500-million a year for the foreseeable future.

The minister overseeing the file says the Liberals have heard concerns from provinces and territories that one-off federal funding won't be enough for them – what they need is a long-term financial commitment.

Social Development Minister Jean-Yves Duclos said the government wants to help parents who feel the financial crunch from the rising cost of child care fees, and at the same time help companies that feel child care, housing and commuting costs in Canada's biggest cities make it difficult for them to attract high-skilled workers and grow their businesses.

In an interview Thursday, Duclos said the federal government could play a convening role for the provinces, and influence them in an area of provincial jurisdiction to ensure a level playing field across the country. He also said the federal government must use its spending might to help provincial and territorial governments to promote inclusive policies.

"It (the federal government) must assert its leadership when it comes to resources and for all sorts of reason, but the main reason I would argue is that Canadians deserve, to the best extent possible, to all equally live and do well in life wherever they may be in Canada," Duclos said.

The Liberals have hinted that child care, skills development and innovation will become key pillars of the budget and economic strategy for the next year. As well, Duclos spoke in Vancouver and Toronto this week to lay out the government's rationale for whatever it is planning and it adds up to a budget that will build on the government's agenda for "inclusive growth."

He stopped short of saying this budget would be the Liberals' way of leaving their stamp on the country's social policy.

Duclos suggested the budget will have a mix of economic measures and social investments that will build on the Canada child benefit, the increase in the guaranteed income supplement, and the government's so-called middle class tax cuts unveiled in last year's budget. That's part of the reason that Duclos, instead of other ministers, was sent out to speak about the state of the Canadian middle class this week.

"This is one explanation for which a social minister would be asked to contribute to inclusive growth because other ministers, other departments have a more direct role to play when it comes to technological innovation, to training, to physical infrastructure, (and) public infrastructure," he said.

"My department does quite a lot in including everyone in the benefits of growth."

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