

National child-care plan targets families in need ^[1]

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Ontario and other provinces will be able to spend \$7 billion in new federal child-care dollars on programs that are high quality, accessible, affordable, flexible and inclusive, according to a 10-year funding framework to be signed by Ottawa and the provinces Monday.

But unlike Ontario's historic commitment last week to build a universally accessible child-care system for all parents who need it, Ottawa's funding for the next three years is targeted to the neediest families.

A summary of Ottawa's national framework, contained in a Manitoba order in council recently posted online, says three-year bilateral agreements will direct provinces and territories to focus on families "more in need." This includes single parents, those in low income, in under-served areas, who are Indigenous, working non-standard hours, or raising children with disabilities.

The clause has alarmed child-care advocates who note the Liberals' 2005 national child-care plan under Paul Martin listed universality as one of its four guiding principles.

"This Liberal government is approaching the building of a child-care system as if it's a welfare program when we are so beyond that in so many areas of social policy," said Morna Ballantyne of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

"We know that the best way to create equal opportunity is to provide public services and public programs for all," she said. "History has shown that programs for the poor end up to be poor programs."

The Liberals are also breaking their 2015 campaign pledge "to create a new national early learning and child-care framework, to ensure that affordable, high-quality, fully inclusive child care is available to all families who need it," Ballantyne added.

"It's a complete contradiction of their promise to help the middle class and those aspiring to join it," she said. "If you target the funding to those with the lowest incomes, by definition, you are cutting out the middle class."

No one in Ottawa would comment officially on the framework until it is announced. But a government source said the clause shouldn't prevent Ontario from meeting its goal of serving all families.

"The main word that we use is flexibility," said the source. "We want to be flexible to best respond to provinces' needs."

For example, Ontario could use federal money to improve the quality of its child-care programs, which would serve all families, the source said.

Ontario last week unveiled a five-year action plan to create high quality, affordable child care for all families, including \$1.6 billion in capital spending. It was in addition to \$200 million announced in the April budget for new subsidies and spaces this year and is part of the Wynne government's previous commitment to create 100,000 licensed spaces for children under age 4 by 2022.

Ontario is the second province after Quebec to commit to a universal child-care system. Quebec pledged \$5-a-day child care in the mid-1990s and now charges parents up to \$20 a day.

A spokesman for Ontario's minister for early learning and child care, Indira Naidoo-Harris, said he could not comment on the federal framework until it is released Monday.

But provincial advocates are disappointed about the lack of vision in the federal plan.

"Child care should be part of our social infrastructure in this country, available to everyone who needs it," said Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

"It's good that Ontario is moving forward, but I think the federal government should be pushing things further along, not just handing out the cheques," she said.

"The federal spending power gives Ottawa the ability to lead the way," she added. "If we don't have a real vision for child care in this

country, we'll keep seeing stops and starts in different provinces."

The multilateral framework sets out a long-term vision, guiding principles and funding to help provinces and territories invest in their early learning and child-care systems. Under the agreement, provinces would not be required to match federal funding to access the cash.

Families, Children and Social Development Minister Jean-Yves Duclos, along with provincial and territorial ministers responsible for child care, will sign the agreement in Ottawa Monday.

Ontario is expected to sign its bilateral agreement on Friday.

Ottawa has committed \$500 million for child care this year, ramping up to \$870 million a year by 2026-27. But the \$7 billion commitment over 10 years has been criticized for being about one-third less than what the Martin Liberals were prepared to spend 12 years ago, before their plan was axed when Stephen Harper's Conservative were elected.

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