

Ottawa signs child-care deal targeting families in need^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Liberal government has signed a national child-care agreement with the provinces and territories aimed at helping families who need it most.

Families Minister Jean-Yves Duclos was joined by his provincial and territorial counterparts in Ottawa on Monday to sign the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework. The deal sets out five conditions for the \$7.5-billion in child-care spending the Liberals allocated for the next 11 years: quality, accessibility, affordability, flexibility and inclusivity.

“This agreement will help give more Canadian children the best possible start in life and provide more support to families across our country,” Mr. Duclos said.

“It will consider the needs of the most vulnerable children and also ensure that child care is appropriate in other dimensions such as language, cultural appropriateness for Indigenous children, accessibility and other dimensions in the lives of our families and children.”

Quebec did not join the deal, as it has its own universal child-care program. British Columbia skipped Monday’s meeting because it is dealing with the impact of its recent provincial election.

The minister said the federal government will sign individual three-year agreements with each province and territory in the coming months. The bilateral agreements – totalling \$1.2-billion over the next three years – will outline the federal funding for each province and territory to address their specific early-learning and child-care needs. The funding is part of the \$7.5-billion for child care in the Liberals’ 2017 budget.

According to a Manitoba cabinet order recently posted online, the first three years of the federal child-care deal will give priority to families in need – low-income, Indigenous, single-parent or in underserved areas – and children younger than six.

Child-care advocates criticized Monday’s deal for its focus on particular populations rather than all families – a concept known as “universality.”

“The federal government’s targeted approach goes against all the evidence that quality child care is critical to the healthy development of all children and that the best child-care systems are those designed to be inclusive of all children regardless of their circumstances,” said Morna Ballantyne, executive director of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

The Liberals campaigned on a promise to create a national child-care framework to “ensure that affordable, high-quality, fully inclusive child care is available to all families who need it.”

The Canadian Child Care Federation says the Liberals have broken away from that promise.

“Child care, not unlike public education and health-care services, needs to be rooted in equitable standards, availability, accessibility, affordability, inclusivity and high quality for all Canadian children and not just targeted populations,” said Don Giesbrecht, CEO of the Canadian Child Care Federation.

Mr. Duclos defended the government’s decision, saying the Liberals are working toward a universal program.

“The long-term vision is universality,” Mr. Duclos said.

“To get there, we need to proceed by steps. The reason we need to proceed by steps is that the provinces and territories want to have the flexibility to implement a child-care system that responds to their initial conditions and to what they perceive as the greatest needs for their families and children.”

Conservative families critic Karen Vecchio said Monday’s deal confirms the Official Opposition’s position that a universal child-care program will not adequately meet the needs of Canadians.

“The Liberals need to work with the people who know what is best for children – their parents. When it comes to child care, parents need

flexibility and choice,” Ms. Vecchio said.

NDP families critic Brigitte Sansoucy said that while the child-care deal is a step in the right direction, the federal government has not set aside enough money to create necessary daycare spaces.

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