

National early learning and child-care framework aims for 40,000 new spaces ^[1]

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In partnership with most provinces and territories, the federal government has announced a new framework to foster "fully inclusive" early education and child care services across the country, while respecting the needs and circumstances of each jurisdiction.

Under the agreement, the federal government will send billions of dollars to the provinces and territories to focus on creating new child-care spaces for families with greater needs.

These include families that are low-income, Indigenous, single-parent, living in underserved communities or with children with disabilities. Funding will be also provided to help parents who work non-standard hours to obtain child care more easily.

"Every child from coast to coast deserves access to quality learning and child care," said Jean-Yves Duclos, the federal minister of families, children and social development. "This agreement will help give more Canadian children the best possible start and provide more support to families across our country."

The government's plan commits Ottawa to a long-term partnership with provinces and territories, following the Liberals' 2017 budget commitment to invest \$7.5 billion in child care and early learning over the next 11 years.

The government said the plan could create up to 40,000 new spaces across Canada over the next three years.

But NDP Leader Tom Mulcair said the funding announced by the Liberals won't be enough to help Canadian families cover the rising costs of child care.

"This is not at all what the Liberals promised," Mulcair said. "Once again, Mr. Trudeau promises a great deal, but always fails to deliver."

A 'fully inclusive' system

Duclos dismissed suggestions that the Liberals' focus on families with higher needs signals a turn away from the principle of universality, which has historically guided federal investments in health and social services.

Universality remains part of the government's long-term vision, Duclos said, but the Liberals committed during the last election to put in place child-care and early learning systems that are "fully inclusive," both from an economic and social perspective.

"We know how difficult financially it is for many families across Canada to have access to affordable child care," he said. "There are elements of people's family life that make it more difficult [for them] than for other families to participate in the labour market, to have access to quality child care for their children."

But the government's focus on families with higher needs is generating mixed reaction among child care advocates.

Morna Ballantyne, executive director of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, said the government must recognize that the "crisis in child care" extends far beyond those families.

"We certainly have no problem with federal funds being used to help high-needs families and children," she said. "But there are a lot of parents and children who don't have access to child care even though they wouldn't fall into the groups that the framework agreement specifies as being high needs."

Still, Ballantyne said she's glad to see the federal government re-asserting a leadership role on this issue, committing both levels of government to work together to improve child care and early learning services.

The Conservatives' critic for children's issues, Ontario MP Karen Vecchio, also had concerns about how the government's plan might be rolled out.

"Is it going to be something that's available to all Canadians?" Vecchio asked rhetorically. "It's not, because when we look at child-care spaces run by the government, they pick centres, and so there's going to be winners and losers."

Flexibility, collaboration necessary

Duclos said it's critical that the agreement recognize the varying circumstances and needs of different provinces and territories as well as systems they may already have in place.

"The keywords are flexibility and collaboration," he told reporters at a news conference Monday afternoon.

Duclos singled out Quebec as a leader in Canada when it comes to providing early education and child care, adding the province has an opportunity and responsibility to share with the rest of Canada the lessons it has learned over the past 20 years.

Quebec, which has its own low-cost child-care program, did not have a minister at the meeting and did not sign today's agreement, but will continue to negotiate a separate bilateral agreement with the federal government. B.C. also did not send a minister to today's meeting due to uncertainty in the wake of the recent election.

The Liberals have been negotiating the framework with the provinces and territories for more than a year, seeking common ground in an area of provincial and territorial jurisdiction with a patchwork of systems across the country.

The new national framework is based on five principles:

- Affordability.
- High quality.
- Flexibility.
- Accessibility.
- Inclusivity, including measures to meet the specific needs of First Nations children and recognition of francophone and minority language rights.

Bilateral agreements to be signed

The federal government's March budget outlined \$7 billion in new federal child-care funding over the next decade, starting with \$500 million this fiscal year and increasing to \$870 million annually by 2026.

Each province and territory will receive \$2 million in base funding, with the remainder of the funding allocated on a per capita basis.

In the coming months, the federal government will work with each province and territory to sign three-year bilateral agreements to flesh out the details of the funding.

The spending has been criticized for being less than what the Paul Martin Liberals offered provinces more than a decade ago in a deal that was scuttled when the previous Conservative government came to office.

As part of their campaign platform in the 2015 federal election, the Liberals pledged to meet with provinces, territories and Indigenous communities to develop a new national framework to provide affordable, high-quality and flexible child care.

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