

Alberta pumps brakes on national childcare program ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Less than 24 hours after Canada's finance minister rolled out what advocates are calling a historic investment in childcare, Alberta's premier says he's not sure it's the right fit for this province.

The plan has been widely celebrated by children and family advocates for being forward-thinking and life-changing, particularly for low- and middle-class Canadians.

"This is a really significant investment. It's exciting to see that it looks like it's going to be some permanent funding, really building a system that will be affordable and accessible and high quality for our children and families," explained Jennifer Usher with the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta.

The Liberals are investing nearly \$30 billion in drastically reducing the costs of childcare by 50 per cent in 2022 and down to \$10 a day in the next five years.

Documents from the federal budget show the plan will allow an estimated 240,000 parents to enter the workforce.

"Chrystia Freeland was making pretty clear that this is actually going to increase economic growth. She's expecting a 1.2 percent gain in GDP. In other words, it's going to more than make up for what's being invested," explained Lori Williams, an associate professor of policy studies at Mount Royal University, on Tuesday.

But Alberta's premier gave the plan a much less glowing review, saying it would only support "urban 9-5 government- and union-run institutional daycare options."

Jason Kenney said the plan doesn't account for those who want to stay home to raise their children.

"I've never thought it's fair to tax who, for example, make that sacrificial choice, in order to subsidize only one kind of care, which excludes rural families, shift workers and many Indigenous people," he said.

The budget documents say the federal government will be "working with provinces and territories to support primarily not-for-profit sector childcare providers to grow quality spaces across the country while ensuring that families in all licensed spaces benefit from more affordable childcare."

Alberta's Finance Minister Travis Toews said the federal money has too many strings attached to it.

"Our concern would be that there's a federal government imposed national childcare system that may leave Alberta parents with very few options," he said.

That's a myth, said Usher.

It actually increases parental choice because we will see parents be able to choose many more programs because they will be affordable and they will be accessible, Usher said.

Rachel Notley, leader of the Official Opposition NDP, agrees.

"Parents don't have flexibility or choice if they can't have access to affordable, high-quality childcare," she said.

The UCP said it still wants the federal money, though.

"Alberta should simply receive the federal funding, and we can design a program that works and fits for Albertans," Toews said.

Kenney agreed, saying: "If it's a take-it-or-leave-it, Ottawa-style, cookie-cutter program, I don't think that satisfies the demands or expectations of Albertans."

Edmonton Mayor Don Iveson said the province needs to get over itself.

"I think Canadians are not so interested in this sort of jurisdictional square dance over this," he said.

"Mayor Iveson is speaking for a lot of Albertans and probably a lot of Canadians, saying we don't care about what the disputes are between politicians. We care about the very real concerns facing us," Williams added.

She said it could come off as petty politics if Alberta opts out.

"The federal government would go ahead with the provinces that are willing to work with them and that would put additional pressure on the provinces that aren't willing to work with them. People in Alberta will be looking at the other provinces and the benefits that they're getting," she said.

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