

NDP urges Sask. government to snap up Ottawa's childcare dollars ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Saskatchewan NDP is pressing the provincial government to spend every penny of childcare funding the federal Liberals put on the table, as negotiations begin on the \$30-billion package announced in Monday's budget.

Aleana Young, the NDP's jobs critic, isn't waiting for the talks to fault the provincial government's guarded approach to the federal offer. She called it "extremely concerning" to hear Saskatchewan's finance minister worry that taking the funding could draw money away from other priorities if the province has to match the federal contribution.

"I was a bit surprised to see the Sask. Party brush off this much needed investment because, Mr. Speaker, much of Saskatchewan remains a childcare desert," Young said during question period in the legislature on Tuesday.

Education Minister Dustin Duncan said he'll be meeting with a federal minister in the coming days to discuss the program, which aims to gradually reduce the average cost of childcare to \$10 per day, apart from in Quebec, where it is already lower. Duncan later told reporters he wants to explore what the agreement will look like before making any commitments.

"It's pretty early," said Duncan. "If it makes sense for the province to take the money that's offered by the federal government, certainly we'd be very interested in doing that... Our intent is to accept dollars that the federal government puts on the table, but obviously we'll have to see what's in the details."

Duncan said it's so far unclear exactly how much money will be on offer for Saskatchewan. He plans to press for as much flexibility as possible in deciding how to spend it. He said Saskatchewan is already adding childcare spaces, including through home-based care and centres attached to schools. "I would say that's kind of an example of some of the flexibility that we'll be looking at," he explained.

He also feels that the Liberal policy was targeted more at areas of the country with more acute childcare affordability issues. Median fees for a toddler are above \$1,500 per month in Toronto and \$1,250 in Calgary, for example, while they are \$810 in Saskatoon and \$675 in Regina, according to federal data.

"I'm not discounting some of the concerns that we would hear even in Saskatchewan on affordability, but certainly when you look at kind of the cross-Canada comparison, affordability would likely rank higher than some other major centres," said Duncan.

Young argued that the fees in Regina are nothing to gloat about. She said her family was facing \$1,000 a month in fees for her new baby. In her view, helping women get back to work should be an integral part of a jobs plan as Saskatchewan looks toward economic recovery. That makes childcare a necessity.

"For the government to do anything but take the fight to that table to ensure that every single dollar goes to investing in good, affordable, accessible childcare spaces in Saskatchewan — to do anything less than that would be outrageous," she said.

Region: Saskatchewan ^[3]

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