

What's at stake for Alberta as it awaits details on federal child-care plan ^[1]

Province, feds to discuss how billions in funding could be rolled out in Alberta

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EXCERPTS

The federal government is putting money on the table for child care, but Alberta's government is skeptical of the conditions that could be attached to that funding.

Premier Jason Kenney has criticized the "cookie-cutter approach" that he says would see Ottawa prescribe a daycare model on Alberta that doesn't fit the needs of parents.

The province is awaiting more details before it makes a decision, but experts say rejecting the funding could have implications for families, the provincial economy and Kenney's own political fortunes that should cause the premier to tread carefully.

"Should the Government of Alberta go down this path, they may lose their status as government in the next election, which would be a first, because child care has never been able to attract enough voters to make a difference," said Armine Yalnizyan, an economist and Atkinson Fellow on the future of workers.

"It is not a feminist issue, it is not a women's issue, it is not a Liberal issue. It's a macroeconomic issue."

The federal budget for 2021 promised \$30 billion for a national child-care program up to 2026, if provinces would match most of the funding. The goal is to cut child-care fees down to \$10 a day by that year.

Alberta's United Conservative government would take the cash but wants no strings attached to how child care would be structured.

"Any government programming should ensure that parents have choices," Finance Minister Travis Toews told CBC News.

"We would ask that the federal government would supply funding as they've outlined in the budget but then allow provinces to tailor their programs specifically for the needs of the parents in their regions."

Kenney has said the federal program would ignore the needs of shift workers and stay-at-home parents. Ontario and New Brunswick have also expressed doubts about the program.

Calgarians pay some of the highest amounts for child care

Alberta's child-care model is unique in Canada, with a mix of not-for-profit and private facilities. The government budget for it is almost \$400 million this year.

Calgarians pay some of the highest costs for daycare in the country. The median monthly amount ranges from \$1,075 to \$1,300, according to a report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives published last year.

"I don't know how people can afford \$2,000 dollars a month. It's like a mortgage payment," said Candace Bains Charbonneau, a Calgary mother of two.

"If what they're really worried about is the economy, what's going to get more people working is having somewhere safe and reliable for their children to be during the day."

Kenney is polling low with Albertans in those demographics, according to data from Janet Brown Opinion Research conducted for CBC News. Those most likely to give the premier a low rating were female (59 per cent), middle-income earners (59 per cent) living in Calgary or Edmonton.

Federal budget documents suggest the plan would allow 240,000 parents to enter the workforce. Yalnizyan says women's participation in Alberta's workforce is back to the level it was in the 1980s.

Employment in the province was down 10 per cent from pre-pandemic levels, according to Statistics Canada data from last summer — nine

per cent for men and 12 per cent for women. Employment among mothers of young children fell seven per cent last spring, according to a report by RBC Economics.

"You may not like kids, you may not have kids, you may not see the power of a measure that supports women that are trying to work, that are also trying to raise their kids. But it will affect your business," Yalnizyan said.

A 'significant' policy oversight

A month ago, the Kenney government scrapped the former NDP government's \$25-a-day daycare pilot program. It's pledged grants to providers to increase available spaces, and the province says about 11,000 families are currently able to access child care for as little as \$13 a day.

More than 60 per cent of child-care centres in Alberta are privately owned, and only one in seven parents enrol their children in licensed daycares — statistics that Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz said would put the cost of universal child care in Alberta at more than \$1 billion.

The premier can fret the details, said Christopher Smith, the assistant executive director at the Muttart Foundation, but it would be unwise to turn down the funding.

"To not access that money, at this particular point in time, I think it would be a very significant social and economic policy oversight by the provincial government," he said.

"If the Alberta government's goal is to try to support those families who aren't using regulated child care, it's got other vehicles to do that. It does not need to turn away from the federal funding."

The province says it's optimistic about negotiations between the two levels of government on the child-care funding. Alberta is willing to be at the table, but with clear conditions.

Conditions that, experts caution, could backfire.

Region: Alberta ^[3]

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