

Alberta premier demands federal child-care deal with no strings attached^[1]

Alberta, Quebec deserve to be treated equally by Ottawa, says Jason Kenney

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EXCERPTS

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney is demanding the federal government give the province unconditional funding for early learning and child care similar to that Quebec has negotiated.

"Apparently, one province is more equal than others," Kenney told reporters at a news conference Friday in Bowden, Alta.

"Apparently, Quebec parents and kids get favourable consideration over Alberta parents and kids. It is indefensible."

The Canadian government is traipsing into the provincial jurisdiction of child care to offer universal, affordable, high-quality early learning across the country. Each province and territory will need its own deal for the program.

Quebec is the sixth province to reach a deal with the feds.

Kenney's comments come after the federal government announced Thursday a \$6-billion deal with Quebec to expand access to their pre-existing universal child-care system, as some families struggle to get their children into those spaces.

Alberta Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz said she was frustrated to hear about Quebec's "sweetheart deal" a day after, she says, the federal government rejected the same proposal from the Alberta government.

Each province's deal is unique and Alberta has yet to make an offer that meets the standards in other deals, said Mikaela Harrison, press secretary to the federal minister of families, children and social development.

Only 14 per cent of Alberta parents use the licensed child-care spaces Ottawa wants to fund, according to the provincial government.

Clock ticking to reach deal as federal election looms

With a federal election call expected soon, Schulz is getting nervous that failing to reach a deal soon will substantially delay funding to the province.

"I want these dollars to be invested in child care to support Alberta working parents and our child-care sector — especially as we come out of the pandemic," Schulz said Friday.

The situations in Alberta and Quebec are incomparable, though, says University of Calgary economics professor Lindsay Tedds.

he federal budget was clear that Quebec's universal child-care system — which has existed since the 1990s — puts it in another league, she said.

"It's night and day. Apples and oranges," said Tedds, a tax policy expert. "It's actually apples and grapes."

The federal budget stipulates any new plan must meet three criteria: funds must go "primarily" to non-profit early learning centres; funds must pay for the training of early childhood educators; and the money must be spent to halve average child-care fees by the end of 2022 and reduce child-care costs to an average of \$10 per day by 2026.

Quebec's program already ticks these boxes, Tedds says.

Alberta politicians are pleading for flexibility in how the money is spent, pointing to an existing mix of private, for-profit child-care centres, day homes, relatives who care for children and caregivers offering after-hours and weekend options.

If the province wants flexibility, it should invest the federal funds in the non-profit centres the federal government wants and redirect any previous provincial funding however they see fit, Tedds said.

Publicly-funded early learning is a sound economic investment that pays off in the long run by fostering critical early development and getting parents into the workforce, she said.

Governments spar over negotiations

Minister Schulz wouldn't say what the sticking points are with her federal counterparts.

But she did say Alberta can meet a cost of \$10 a day or less for "low-income families" and cut fees by an average of half by next year.

That offer is news to the federal government, Harrison said.

The six provincial agreements signed so far all commit to meeting the \$10-per-day average cost by 2026, to make regulated child-care spaces affordable in a timely fashion, to add more regulated spaces and make "significant investments" in early childhood educators, she said.

"To date, the Alberta government has not been willing to meet those standards," Harrison said.

Region: Alberta ^[3]

Tags: federal budget ^[4]
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