

Sask. 'on cusp' of reaching billion-dollar child care deal: minister ^[1]

Advocates call Saskatchewan a “child care desert” where parents resort to pricey or unlicensed providers.

Author: Vescera, Zak

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EXCERPTED

Saskatchewan Education Minister Dustin Duncan says he is “on the cusp” of striking a deal that would bring more than a billion dollars in federal funding to Saskatchewan over the next five years.

He’s “optimistic” he will put pen to paper by week’s end, racing against the start of a possible federal election expected any day, he said on Wednesday.

“It’s over a billion dollars over the past five years, so there is going to be back and forth and give and take from both sides,” Duncan said. “But I think we’re very close to signing the deal, perhaps by the end of the week.”

If Saskatchewan succeeds, it will be the latest province to claim its share of \$27.2 billion in child care cash promised by the latest national budget over the next five years, an investment the federal government hopes will bring costs down to \$10 a day and create roughly 40,000 new spaces.

Postmedia contacted the office of federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development Ahmed Hussen but got no response by publication time.

Child Care Now Saskatchewan spokeswoman Sue Delanoy started fighting for a national program when she was a mother.

“I’m a grandmother now, and my grandkids haven’t even got child care,” Delanoy said. “At this point I’m looking at my great-grandchildren, which is ridiculous.”

Delanoy calls Saskatchewan a “child care desert” where parents often resort to pricey or unlicensed providers because of a dearth of affordable options. She said Saskatchewan has fewer than 15,000 licensed spots, a shortfall that hinders economic growth by tying caregivers to the home.

“I’ve seen what other provinces have, and we do not have what other provinces have,” she said.

Duncan did not say how many spaces the deal would create, but indicated the proposed agreement includes an investment to increase the number of early childhood educators in the province.

He said it would also meet federal requirements of reducing the cost of childcare by 50 per cent by the end of 2022 and moving toward \$10 per day by the second fiscal year. The provincial government does not currently expect to invest more than it already spends on childcare, he added.

Saskatchewan NDP education and early learning critic Carla Beck said she’s glad a deal is close but worries the expected election has politicized what she calls one of the most significant national programs since Medicare.

She wants details about where the cash will flow and is frustrated the whole affair could be derailed by the start of the campaign.

“I don’t think it’s any secret that we are expecting the writ to be dropped on a federal election any day now. The fact that we are sitting here up against that deadline ... I have a lot of questions and frustration about how these negotiations have gone on behind the scenes,” Beck said.

Duncan’s office issued a statement on July 16 stating that he had submitted a proposal. On Wednesday, however, he said the entire deal was negotiated in a “whirlwind” of about two weeks. He claimed the federal government began talks with provinces like B.C. earlier, which is why they announced agreements before Saskatchewan.

Asked if he had sufficient time to negotiate a deal, Duncan was undecided.

“I don’t know. It is what it is,” he said. “I think there’s a lot of speculation because of the federal writ perhaps being dropped in the coming days; we don’t have a lot of time. I think at the end of the day we’ll get a good deal for the people of Saskatchewan.”

Duncan said he hopes the writs are not issued before a deal is struck.

“If that is the case, we will pick up negotiations with whatever government the people of Canada return.”

Region: Saskatchewan ^[3]

Tags: universal child care ^[4]

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