

Harper government urged not to scrap federal day care agreement [CA-AB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Day care advocates hope that a strong opposition and common sense will make the new Harper government think twice about his campaign plank to scrap an agreement with the province to boost the quality of child care.

Stephen Harper, the prime minister-elect, has said one of his top five priorities is to walk away from the outgoing Liberal government's agreements with the provinces over day care and instead pay parents \$1,200 per year for each child under six.

The proposal is causing controversy, especially in Quebec, where Premier Jean Charest has called for Harper to respect the agreement signed with the Liberals, saying that day care is under provincial jurisdiction.

But Calgary Tory MP Monte Solberg, believed to be in line for a cabinet post, said Wednesday the child subsidy proposal was so popular during the eight-week federal election campaign other parties won't dare fight it.

"It may be the most popular thing that we proposed ... and so one of the arguments we can muster on these things is, 'Look, we did receive a limited mandate from the public, but one of things that did seem to get a lot of support is this item,' " he said.

The Alberta government has not addressed the Harper plan.

Jody Korchinski, spokeswoman for Children's Services Minister Heather Forsyth, said Wednesday the minister looks forward to discussions with her federal counterpart once cabinet is appointed, but it is too early to say what Alberta would seek in the negotiations.

When the five-point plan was implemented in October, Forsyth said in a news release: "By making child care more affordable and increasing access to early childhood development opportunities, we are investing in our future."

She also said Albertans had expressed interest in tax credits for stay-at-home parents, which were not included in the Liberal agreement. Forsyth said she would continue to advocate for that.

Sherrill Brown, the acting director of early childhood education at Grant MacEwan College, praised the federal-provincial deal the Liberals signed. She said it has improved the day-care system by providing more financial incentives for centres which get provincial accreditation and by topping up the salaries for day-care workers who upgrade their training.

Brown said she hopes the Harper government will rethink its plans and recognize that 70 per cent of families with children under six have both parents working.

"You never want to pit the centre-based or family day home or infrastructure for day care against the needs of stay-at-home parents," she said.

"In my mind, they are two different issues and both need to be supported. I don't think you want to get into an either/or situation here."

Harper's plan would do little for the quality of day care and would be a step backwards in Alberta, the first province to have an accreditation program based on quality, Brown said.

Anita Moore, chairwoman of the Hospital and Community Day Care located in the university area, said the prospect of Ottawa honouring only the first year of the agreement, which Harper has indicated, could cause chaos for the child-care system.

"What happens when people put in all this time and energy just to get accredited? Here we thought we had stability in our system and it's all going to be pulled away," Moore said.

While Harper says parents are in the best position to make decisions about what their children need, some parents need help, she said.

"We assume that because he has two children he knows what it's all about, but he has resources that most people can only dream about."

- reprinted from the Edmonton Journal

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