

Quebec to get special deal [CA-QC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ottawa is preparing to sign a special child care deal with Quebec that would give that province more autonomy over how it spends its share of the early-learning pie than has been granted to other provinces.

Prime Minister Paul Martin will fly to Montreal this afternoon to put his signature on the agreement that comes after months of occasionally heated negotiations. The decision by Quebec to sign on to the federal program will provide the province with an extra \$1.25-billion over five years and leaves just Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and the territories without a formal child care pact.

But the Quebec deal is more loosely structured than the seven that preceded it. As with the others agreements, there will be a requirement that the province must account to its own people about how the money is spent. But, unlike the others, there will be no demands that the money is to go specifically toward child care. It could, instead, be used for "related objectives for the well-being of families."

That could mean education, child-assistance programs and programs to help families better balance the home and the workplace, said a source in the Quebec government, which had demanded the more flexible wording.

Federal sources said it did not mean that the money could be put toward infrastructure or tax breaks for parents. But proponents of high-quality, universally accessible, non-profit child care are worried.

"This is a really, really big concern," said Monica Lysack, executive director of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada. "The federal government has been weaker and weaker on these agreements and this is, as far as I'm concerned, throwing the whole thing out the window."

The deal comes as Quebec prepares to take \$50-million out of its child care system and as it weakens the power of community councils that have supervised and supported child care in that province.

Alberta, which signed an earlier deal, wanted to be able to give the money it received from Ottawa directly to parents to spend as they see fit -- something that the federal government would not concede. "What's to stop Alberta from coming back and saying we want to use our money for related objectives of the welfare of families?" Ms. Lysack asked.

But Quebec argues its existing child care program is advanced beyond those offered in other parts of Canada, and people who are immersed in the issue agree.

"One needs to respect where Quebec is," Social Development Minister Ken Dryden said after a cabinet meeting yesterday.

"And the fact is that, in our last reporting date which is 2002-2003, Quebec had invested about \$1.2-billion in early learning and child care. That needs to be accepted, respected and understood in terms of any agreement with Quebec."

Quebec decided several years ago to put money into child care while other provinces were investing in other things, he said. "So there is a greater flexibility in terms of where Quebec can put their money now."

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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