

Region sees \$350,000 of federal fund for children [CA-BC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Helping children get the most from their early years is the aim of a \$2.2-million federal funding announcement made in Victoria Wednesday.

Ken Dryden, the federal minister of social development, told a gathering at the Queen Alexandra Centre for Children's Health that B.C.'s share of federal money for the Understanding the Early Years (UEY) program has been distributed among six communities, including Greater Victoria and Campbell River.

Greater Victoria receives \$350,000 and Campbell River \$368,000, with the rest of the money going to Mission, North Vancouver, the Sunshine Coast and Okanagan-Similkameen.

Michele Fryer, who belongs to a local group called Partnership in Learning and Advocacy for Young Children (PLAY), said Dryden's announcement fits in well with what the organization has been doing over the past three years.

"We know now, without a doubt, that the first years do really last forever," Fryer said. "The group I represent is a diverse group of people and organizations who share a common vision and collective responsibility for the health and well-being of young children, from birth to school-entry."

Dryden said the money earmarked for B.C. comes from a 2004 federal budget commitment of \$68 million to early-childhood initiatives. The plan is to spread UEY funding through 100 communities across the country, he said.

"From this, of course, we want to come upon some new ideas and a new fresh sense of possibility on how we can do better. That's what UEY is all about.

The key is that federal money is used by local communities to create local initiatives, Dryden said. He said it begins with local kindergarten teachers doing a simple, half-hour assessment of each student covering such areas as physical health, social abilities, language skills and general knowledge.

From this, needs can be determined and projects can take shape, he said. In Newfoundland, information gathered led to development of a playground in an area of a city where physical fitness was found to be low. Prince Edward Islanders decided a new child-care program was needed in Summerside, while a region in southern Manitoba launched literacy initiatives for youngsters when testing found children's development in that area to be under federal benchmarks.

"Some big things, some small," Dryden said. "All of them missing in a community, all of the best answers to them originating from within the community for the kids of those communities."

The overall goal is to allow children to be their best at each stage of growing up, he said, adding that other benefits emerge, as well.

"In helping children, UEY is also bringing together parents, school boards and others -- building relationships, building stronger communities."

- reprinted from the Victoria Times-Colonist

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