

Province counting on federal money to improve child care [CA-ON]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The provincial government will rely on federal funding to extend child care to more families and younger children across the province, linking the sector to the political fortunes of Prime Minister Paul Martin's embattled government.

The federal Liberals recently allotted \$272-million for Ontario child care funding in 2005-06 and promised that figure would rise to \$451-million by 2007-08.

Yesterday's provincial budget, presented by Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government, outlined plans to utilize the federal dollars in the Best Start program, increasing child care spaces, extending family subsidies and creating a College of Early Childhood Educators to regulate the industry.

"Best Start represents a strong new partnership between the federal government and the province," Finance Minister Greg Sorbara said.

But he acknowledged that the initiatives will only succeed if the multi-million-dollar infusion materializes from Mr. Martin's government, which is in danger of falling to a non-confidence vote and taking its recent funding allocations with it.

Before the budget was tabled, provincial NDP leader Howard Hampton criticized the McGuinty government for relying entirely on money from Ottawa.

Kira Heineck, executive director of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, also expressed concern that Mr. McGuinty is tying the future of child care in the province to federal purse strings.

"We're concerned that so much of the funding is federal dollars," she said. "We continue to urge the provincial government to invest their own funding in child care. They committed in the election to \$300-million -- we'd still like to see that."

The budget did not articulate whether increased funding would be shared between not-for-profit and private child care providers.

"We're urging that those dollars be spent only in the not-for-profit sector," Ms. Heineck said. "It's a significant allotment of public dollars, and we feel strongly that they should stay in public hands."

Mr. Sorbara's budget did pledge to redesign child care subsidies to increase the number of families that can access them by shifting from a needs test to an income test.

And the budget took a large step toward regulating the industry by establishing a College of Early Childhood Educators, modelled on the bodies that oversee the province's teachers, nurses and doctors.

"We've been saying for years that, without a college, you can't deliver the quality that you need in this area," said Eduarda Sousa, executive director of the Association of Early Childhood Educators. "You have to hold these people accountable if they're going to be working with children of this age."

- reprinted from the National Post

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