

Martin vows child care funding [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Prime Minister Paul Martin committed \$26-million in new money for child care in Manitoba on Friday, kicking off what is expected to be a series of rapid-fire agreements across the country aimed at building a national day care scheme.

The first announcement came early Friday in Winnipeg. A second is expected later the same day in Regina, followed by a series of further federal-provincial agreements through next week in other regions.

Friday's federal-provincial pact is the first of its kind in Canada.

"The creation of a national child care system is one of the cornerstones of our government's commitment to all Canadians," an exuberant Mr. Martin said, detailing the plan before a Winnipeg audience.

Under Friday's announcement, Ottawa will transfer another \$26-million to the Manitoba government this year for child care and early learning, boosting its total commitment for the year to \$34.2-million.

By 2009-2010, the amount of new funding will climb to \$42-million, bringing Ottawa's total transfer for that year to \$54.8-million.

Over the agreement's five-year period the new cash totals \$176-million.

In last winter's budget, Ottawa committed \$5-billion over five years for child care. Of that, \$700-million is to be spent this year.

"This will give children a tangible head start and set them on the path of lifelong achievement," Mr. Martin said.

"Needless to say, a national child care program represents a major initiative. It is worth the effort and the investment because of its potential benefits obviously to our society and our economy."

Manitoba officials have said the province plans to add 5,000 child care spaces to the system, increase wages for child care workers, train more early-childhood educators and expand the province's nursery school program by the end of March, 2007.

But the plan depends on the federal funding.

Federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden has been negotiating with the provinces on a national child care plan.

A meeting with provincial and territorial ministers in Vancouver in February failed to reach a national deal.

Last fall, Mr. Dryden had said he hoped to strike a multi-lateral deal with all the provinces and territories, although that failed to materialize when provinces like Alberta balked at some of the conditions tied to the federal cash, including the stipulation that funds go toward regulated care.

Friday's announcement won support from the NDP which called the Manitoba and Saskatchewan agreements the "first steps toward building a truly national, non-profit system."

"This is a good day for childcare," NDP Leader Jack Layton said in a statement.

"New Democrats are working for a truly national, non-profit program that benefits families.

"By committing to non-profit delivery, Manitoba and Saskatchewan are setting a standard for all provinces. Protecting these first steps is one more reason why we must move quickly to pass the new budget."

Conservative intergovernmental affairs critic Rona Ambrose said child care remains an issue at the forefront of that party's agenda, but she criticized Friday's Liberal plan as lacking flexibility.

"I still criticize the plan, because it doesn't offer choice," she told a news conference.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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