

Program to benefit thousands of kids [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Thousands of new child-care spaces could be created in Ontario this year, as the province signs on to the federal daycare program, the Toronto Star has learned.

Ontario is within days of signing on to Ottawa's \$5 billion, five-year child-care program, giving the province \$280 million this year to kickstart the creation of thousands of new daycare spaces.

"We've agreed on everything," provincial Children and Youth Services Minister Marie Bountrogianni said in an interview last night.

She described the money as substantial because Ontario spends \$600 million a year on daycare now and the new money "is almost a 50 per cent increase."

The deal came after weeks of talks with federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden, who has also reached pacts with Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Those deals are to be announced today, with Ontario signing early next week.

Ottawa set aside \$700 million for all of Canada for the first year of the program. Over the five years of the deal, Ontario's share will eventually total \$2 billion.

But there's a catch — the federal Liberals must win passage of their budget in a fractious House of Commons with a possible election looming.

"As soon as the budget is passed, we'll get the money, according to Mr. Dryden," Bountrogianni said. "If the federal Liberals lose, we will lose this money."

The deal comes as the federal Liberal government abandons its plans to forge an ambitious national agreement signed by all 13 provinces and territories. Instead, Dryden has opted to make a separate agreement with each jurisdiction.

The Ontario pact includes an accountability agreement — still being finalized — that the money must be spent on early learning instruction and child care.

The province's share will go to regulated daycare programs, and mainly to not-for-profit daycares, aimed at 4- and 5-year-olds in junior and senior kindergarten, who will attend daycare programs before and after classes, Bountrogianni said.

The money will be split between providing more subsidized spaces for children and capital funding to expand existing centres or retrofit schools with empty classrooms that can be turned into daycare rooms. A breakdown has not yet been calculated.

A daycare advocate applauded Ontario's move to sign on with the federal program, which evolved into a series of negotiations with individual provinces after efforts to establish the national system failed.

"We'll take what we can get," said Kira Heineck of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, which backs regulated, not-for-profit care.

The Ontario government says the province has about 195,000 regulated child-care spaces now, enough to accommodate only one in 10 children, according to Heineck's group, which puts the number of regulated spaces at 174,000.

"It's very limited," said Heineck, noting that eight in 10 mothers with children are working.

"We're behind, we need to catch up," Bountrogianni agreed.

There are thousands of unregulated daycare centres, usually run out of people's homes, which will not qualify for any money from the federal-provincial deal.

Municipalities seeking to boost their number of daycare spaces will apply to the province for a share of the funding and could begin getting cash as quickly as this summer.

"Toronto will get a good chunk," said an official in Bountrogianni's office. "You'll see new spaces for the new school year."

In future years, new schools will get money so that daycare centres can be included in the initial construction, under an initiative from Education Minister Gerard Kennedy.

The Ontario Liberals are planning to use schools as the "hub" for families under their promised Best Start program, which combines schools with daycares, public health services for children and screening of pre-schoolers to make sure their hearing and communications skills are good.

But the Ontario agreement, and those that will be signed with Manitoba and Saskatchewan later today, will all be meaningless if the minority Liberals fail to pass the budget. The opposition is threatening to bring down the government in a non-confidence vote in the House of Commons before the budget passes.

With a federal election in the offing, Dryden is under pressure to deliver the child-care program promised by the Liberals in last year's election.

Yesterday, Dryden said it would have been great to conclude a deal that included all the provinces, and thinks that may still happen over time.

"The point of all this is the getting on with it," he said.

Dryden and Prime Minister Paul Martin will announce details of agreements with Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

Dryden said yesterday these first two agreements would be a prototype that will be adjusted for each province and territory.

The Saskatchewan and Manitoba agreements call for not-for-profit care and will set goals. Meeting those agreed targets will be the key for the money continuing to flow from Ottawa.

"They really rolled up their sleeves and worked out the details on accountability," one source said of the negotiations. "And it's an extremely transparent process. (Provinces) have to publicly outline their plans."

The big fear for daycare advocates is that if the Liberals fall, any new federal government will not be bound to honour the agreements with Ontario, Manitoba or Saskatchewan.

In last year's election, the Conservatives campaigned against a national child-program, instead favouring a \$2,000 tax credit.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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