

Promising start for child care [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

It may not shorten the waiting lists for licensed child care spaces today, but the federal budget holds the promise of a better future for Canada's children, says a University of Guelph child care expert.

But parents must keep the heat on municipal, provincial and federal officials to come up with a long-awaited national early-learning and child care system, says Donna Lero, a researcher in child care policy and practice for 25 years.

"Let it be known at every level . . . that this is something way past its due date and they need to get on with it," said Lero, a professor in the department of family relations and director of the Centre for Families, Work and Well-being.

"This is not just your child and my child. This is a whole generation and the next generation of the workforce and . . . of leaders. We keep ignoring them at our peril."

Lero said yesterday's federal budget paves the way for serious negotiations to continue between the provinces and territories and the federal government for a national early-learning and child care system based on quality, universality, accessibility and developmental enrichment.

In the budget, the minority Liberals said they will cut a no-strings- attached cheque for \$700 million to the provinces this year in a drive to launch national child care before an election.

The budget will create a trust fund that provinces and territories can draw on until the end of this fiscal year.

But finance officials conceded Ottawa has no way of ensuring the money will actually help parents find regulated child care.

The Liberals have pledged \$5 billion over five years to set up a national early-learning system on par with medicare and public education.

In addition to yesterday's announcement, another \$700 million is promised next year and \$1.2 billion in each of the next three years.

The federal government has also indicated that it recognizes the need for ongoing funding behind the five-year period, Lero said.

And that's what the provinces and territories wanted to hear -- that they would not be left hanging after five years, she said.

Lero said the initial \$700-million will "kickstart" the process, but it isn't a lot of money spread across the country. "It's good new money so it's a gift in that respect and it's for child care. But it will only go so far."

Lero said Ontario is fortunate that it has a provincial minister committed to a quality early-learning and child care system.

Priorities include increasing subsidized spaces and placing child care in or near schools.

On Monday, provincial officials will meet with local child care stakeholders to discuss what's needed, she added.

The region is also reviewing the area's needs at this time.

Lero said she's worried about Alberta and any other province that doesn't want a federal agreement to tell it how to spend the money.

"It's a concern that money intended for high-quality regulated child care won't be spent (on that)."

Lero said it's critical that an agreement be reached, even if it doesn't include all the provinces.

"I think there should be continued discussions to reach a strong agreement with the provinces and territories as soon as possible," she said.

However, if a province holds out, "the next best thing would be to make agreements with those provinces prepared to move ahead."

- reprinted from The Record

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