

Money's there for child care - how will Quebec spend it? [CA-QC]^[1]

Author: Riga, Andy

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EXCERPTS

Quebec stands to get \$165 million in fresh child care cash from Ottawa over the next year, but day-care advocates fear the province won't actually spend it on kids.

They were reacting to yesterday's federal budget, which included a new, five-year, \$5-billion "early learning and child care initiative."

For children, Finance Minister Ralph Goodale fulfilled a Liberal day-care election promise.

Between now and March 31, 2006, all provinces will be able to draw cash, on a per-capita basis, from a \$700-million federal child care trust. Quebec is entitled to \$165 million of that money.

Another \$4.3 billion was put aside for the following four years. Goodale did not outline how that cash will be divvied up.

Ottawa had promised a child care program with national standards but has been unable to agree with provinces on details. Yesterday, Goodale said Ottawa will continue to negotiate with provinces "on a framework for quality programs and services."

Quebec, which already has its own subsidized day-care network, has long insisted it will not abide by federal standards.

Yesterday, Finance Minister Michel Audet said the federal day-care funding is not enough.

Pierre Lefebvre, a day-care expert at the Universite du Quebec, said he suspects Quebec won't use the money on kids.

"This may or may not be good news for Quebec - we'll know when we see the next provincial budget," said Helene Potvin, president of the Association Quebecoise des centre de la petite enfance, which represents 900 non-profit day-care centres.

"The fear is they'll put the money in the general fund and not earmark it for child care."

She said some of the funding could be set aside to boost the number of subsidized, \$7-per-day child care spots in Quebec.

There is a shortage of day-care spots in poor neighbourhoods and of specialized care for handicapped kids, she said.

Federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden has pointed to Quebec's day-care network - which includes about 190,000 \$7-per-day spots - as a model for other provinces to follow.

Across the country, there are 315,000 regulated child care spaces for Canada's 2.1 million children under six, according to the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada.

Association executive director Monica Lysack described the new federal child care cash as a "a strong start" and "a solid down payment on child care."

She said child care advocates will keep a close eye on how provinces spend the money.

"Canada's families need good child care they can count on and afford," she said. "They've waited for decades for governments to solve the child care crisis. They can't wait any longer."

The Canadian Labour Congress, a national union federation, said Goodale's child care announcement was lacking.

"There remains no clear plan, no accountability to ensure we get the kind of child care program working parents need and no rules to prevent public dollars intended for children from being taken for profit," the CLC said.

- reprinted from the Montreal Gazette

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