

Child care deal remains elusive [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ottawa's quest for a national child care deal is now into overtime.

After clashing over accountability and funding in Vancouver on Friday, Social Development Minister Ken Dryden and his provincial and territorial counterparts will meet again after the Feb. 23 federal budget to try to score a deal.

With an unprecedented \$5 billion in federal cash on the table and a minority government in Ottawa that could fall at any time, there's pressure from all sides to act quickly.

The federal Liberals need an agreement to show they have finally delivered on a promise first made in 1991 and billed as a key election plank by Prime Minister Paul Martin in last summer's federal campaign.

Meanwhile, cash-strapped provinces and territories know if the talks fail before an election, Ottawa's money may disappear for good and parents desperate for improved child care services will blame them.

As Dryden has been saying since Martin gave him the job of crafting the daycare deal last summer, child care is a fact of life in Canada. More than 70 per cent of mothers with pre-school children are in the workforce and a Statistics Canada report last week confirmed that 53 per cent of kids under age five are now in some form of non-parental care while parents work or study.

The vast majority of this care is not regulated. And a recent OECD study warned that the lack of quality, affordable child care in Canada is both a social and economic problem that is putting the country's future competitiveness at risk.

It all seemed so easy last November when Dryden and the ministers agreed to begin building a national early learning and child care system based on the so-called QUAD principles of quality, universality, accessibility and developmental focus.

But defining exactly what those principles mean and how provinces and territories should meet them has proved "challenging," Dryden admitted Friday after talks adjourned.

There is general agreement the money should be used to improve and expand child care in centre- and home-based daycares, nursery schools and preschools. Provinces will have the flexibility to spend Ottawa's cash building more centres and improving existing facilities, lowering fees and improving staff training, Dryden said.

But provinces are worried about the lack of a long-term funding commitment from Ottawa.

Until late last week, it was widely believed Dryden was under orders from Martin to hold out for a Canada-wide agreement at any cost. But Dryden surprised both the provinces and child care advocates on Thursday when he raised the possibility of offering bilateral deals with provinces ready to run with the federal plan.

The news was heartening to Ontario and Manitoba, which both have ambitious provincial child care plans they are anxious to roll out.

And it buoyed advocates who had feared Ottawa was ready to sacrifice quality and accountability to get all provinces and territories to sign on.

Many child care advocates who began fighting for a national program more than 25 years ago when they were young mothers are now grandmothers. And although they are among the most tenacious and tireless lobbyists in the country, even they are growing weary.

"There's no question Dryden needs this win," said Martha Friendly of the University of Toronto Childcare Resource and Research Unit. "But we need it too. I don't know how we're going to engage the next generation if we don't get a breakthrough now."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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