

Questions of funding dog talks on national child care program [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Federal, provincial and territorial ministers failed to reach agreement yesterday on funding for a national child care program, stumbling over the scope of federal support and the design of the system.

After a three-hour meeting in Vancouver, the ministers decided to meet again once details of Ottawa's five-year funding commitment for the program are confirmed in the federal budget on Feb 23.

"We have substantial agreement on most questions, but there are some areas where we have not reached agreement and some steps ahead of us," Ken Dryden, federal Minister of Social Development, said after the meeting.

"Provinces and territories are extremely pleased with the progress we have made," said PEI Social Services Minister Chester Gillan, who was co-chair of the meeting. "We look forward to the federal budget and details around the federal commitment."

Documents obtained by The Globe and Mail showed that the federal plan for a national system had the support of only Manitoba and Ontario at the beginning of the day.

A seven-page draft agreement dated Feb 1, 2005, stated that Alberta and Quebec were advocating an alternative arrangement based on the principle of asymmetrical federalism. Alberta shares a vision of child care with other governments, but seeks an arrangement that respects provincial jurisdiction and ensures federal funding, the document says.

British Columbia also was pushing for a different system in different places. A single model across the country is unrealistic, raises expectations and doesn't allow provincial flexibility, stated a discussion paper outlining the province's position at the talks.

After the meeting, Mr. Dryden said the child care system could be similar to the education system in Canada, where each province is accountable for its own arrangement.

"The fact is, in terms of every jurisdiction, it is their responsibility to deliver."

Every province has its own system within a national vision, he said.

The documents obtained by The Globe show that the federal government went into the talks with three outstanding issues:

Should the final agreement refer to "a national vision for provincial and territorial systems" or to "a shared vision for a national system"? Several ministers were concerned that a national system implies a single model and did not recognize provincial and territorial jurisdiction. Others said a reference to a national system would express the ambition to act in a coherent manner, based on common objectives, principles and goals.

Should the agreement refer directly to "official language minority communities"? Some provinces and territories were concerned that the reference would create heightened expectations of provincial services. An alternative would be to refer to "children with various cultural and linguistic circumstances."

Is federal funding to continue beyond its current five-year commitment, and would funding for aboriginal child care be in addition to the \$5-billion program? Also, the territories and Prince Edward Island want a guarantee of at least \$5-million in addition to their per capita allotment.

The draft agreement obtained by The Globe says the "shared vision" was shaped by the principles of high quality, inclusion of children with special needs and aboriginal children, accessibility for all who choose to use it and developmental child care.

Programs funded will be in child care centres, family child care homes, preschools and nursery schools. The draft agreement does not mention funding of stay-at-home parents or for-profit daycare centres.

The draft agreement also sets out procedures of accountability. Each government would publicly release action plans for the five years,

establish targets within one year and report annually on their progress.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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