

Child care agreement stalled: Provinces, Ottawa hit stumbling blocks over plan to establish a national program [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The federal government and the provinces failed Friday to reach an agreement that would establish a national child care program across Canada.

Federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden, after concluding a "challenging" all-day meeting with his provincial counterparts at a Vancouver hotel, said that despite strenuous negotiations, the governments involved were not able to reach a final deal on the coast-to-coast child care initiative.

Dryden said he plans to meet again with the provincial and territorial ministers responsible for children and social services after the federal budget is tabled in the Commons Feb. 23.

The idea of a national child care program was first promised by the federal Liberal government 12 years ago.

But it took until last November for Ottawa and the provinces to hammer out a framework for a national early learning and child care system.

The program under discussion is being structured around four principles that have been given the acronym QUAD: quality, universal inclusiveness, accessibility and a developmental focus.

Dryden said Friday he envisions a child care system similar to Canada's education system, where the provinces deliver the program with the help of federal funding based on national objectives.

The federal government has committed to spend \$5 billion over five years on the national child care program. The money will be formally allocated in the upcoming federal budget, Dryden said.

However, provincial ministers have asked for funding commitments beyond five years, to which Dryden responded earlier this week: "There are no guarantees."

He appeared to be less adamant Friday, acknowledging that a national program should go beyond five years.

Some Liberal Members of Parliament have called for at least \$10 billion in funding for a sustainable national child care program.

Other key stumbling blocks continue to be Quebec's demand that the federal government compensate it for the \$7-a-day provincial child care program it currently funds.

Alberta has said it won't sign a deal that does not include for-profit day care centres, which it calls a crucial link in Canada's weak chain of early learning services.

Speaking to reporters Friday, Heather Forsyth, Alberta's children's services minister, said her province had problems with being accountable to the federal government under the program and following Ottawa's "cumbersome" accounting rules.

Child care advocates were out in force at Friday's meeting, and they urged the government ministers to firmly establish the national child care program.

"We know the amount of money on the table now is not going to create a spot for every child in Canada. But we want to see a national child care program built. We want it to get started," said Susan Harney, a spokeswoman for the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C.

Sheila Davidson, a child and youth advocate who reports to Vancouver city council on children and youth issues, said the lack of available spaces at day care centres and the high cost of fees is forcing many parents to leave their children at the homes of family members or acquaintances, where kids are babysat, but learn little.

"Quality child care enhances a child's learning," she said.

Many child care advocates are calling on Ottawa and the provinces to cap fees charged at day care centres and set up a non-profit system across Canada.

Dryden alarmed child care advocates earlier this week when he said for-profit child care centres that meet federal standards will be eligible for government funds.

Child care advocates such as Sharon Gregson, spokeswoman for the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, say they don't want a for-profit system that uses corporate day cares.

"We don't want the big-box chains moving up from the U.S.," she said, referring to corporate day cares.

- reprinted from the Vancouver Sun

Region: Canada ^[2]

Quebec ^[3]

Tags: budget ^[4]

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federalism ^[6]

federal programs ^[7]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/05/02/child-care-agreement-stalled-provinces-ottawa-hit-stumbling-blocks> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7855> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/budget>

[5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federalism> [7]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs>