

Dryden leaves the door open for separate child care deals [CA]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ottawa is willing to cut separate child care deals with individual provinces if a national consensus on a pan-Canadian program cannot be reached, Social Development Minister Ken Dryden said yesterday.

"Provinces and territories need to find their own best way of delivering child care in a way that meets national objectives," Mr. Dryden said on the eve of a meeting with provincial counterparts to negotiate the basic elements of the initiative.

"You move on a multilateral basis to get to a point where you can't come to a complete multilateral deal. Then you work on bilaterals at that particular point."

Ottawa says the federal money will only flow once the provinces agree to be held accountable for how they reach certain goals, and that could be a sticking point in today's negotiations.

Alberta has said it is accountable only to its own citizens and wants to receive the federal money with no strings attached. It also wants the ability to give the money directly to parents to spend as they see fit, even if that means paying a willing grandparent or an unregulated child care provider.

Mr. Dryden has said one of the federal objectives is that the money go to regulated care — child care that meets certain staffing, educational and health requirements.

Quebec also resents the accountability requirement and points out that its program has been a model that the rest of Canada is following. It, too, wants the dollars to come from Ottawa without stipulations.

Mr. Dryden said those issues would be front and centre at today's meeting in Vancouver. "Accountability is not only a requirement of the present but it is the absolute driving force of the future," he said.

But Mr. Dryden also held out the possibility of forging an initial deal with those provinces that are ready to agree to federal demands, potentially leaving intransigent jurisdictions behind.

If there are provinces that cannot agree on accountability, "then they're not part of it," Mr. Dryden said when asked if some could be denied funding.

But he did seem prepared to make some concessions to provinces that balk at demands from child care advocates that the money not be used to create spaces in the for-profit sector. They cite repeated studies that show that not-for-profit care delivers higher-quality spaces.

"What we're trying to do here is focus on quality," said the minister when asked whether he would fund for-profit care. "If you meet the standard, then you're able to get some of the government money."

That worried Tony Martin, the NDP child care critic.

"We've got to come out of the blocks on this committed to the not-for-profit and we think there has to be some legislation in place for those provinces that buy in to the principles," he said.

But there was some praise for Mr. Dryden's apparent willingness to be flexible.

Debra Mayer, the chairman of the Child Care Advocacy Association, said the notion that some provinces could get into the program without a unanimous agreement was good news.

"If we can't get a pan-Canadian buy-in for it right from the beginning then I think doing bilateral agreements with those provinces that are willing to move forward makes sense," she said. "That, at least, gets it under way."

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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