

Daycare talks will focus on issue of accountability [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The provinces and territories welcome daycare money promised by the federal government, but there will be loud resistance from multiple quarters if Ottawa demands strict accountability as it tries to build a national program.

Provincial ministers will meet with Social Development Minister Ken Dryden in Vancouver tomorrow to set the bones of a child care agreement before the federal budget on Feb. 23.

The main points of contention are the establishment of national standards and what the federal government is prepared to do to ensure they are met. And, despite Mr. Dryden's placid demeanour, the conversation at tomorrow's meeting could get heated.

Quebec and Alberta both reiterated this week that they consider themselves accountable only to their own citizens and that they expect to receive their share of the promised \$5-billion over five years from Ottawa without strings attached.

Jody Korchinski, a spokeswoman for Alberta's Ministry of Children's Services, said yesterday that her province would like the money unconditionally "and we think this is fair because this is an area of provincial responsibility."

Alberta wants to provide subsidies directly to parents to allow them choices in child care, said Ms. Korchinski, whether that means not-for-profit daycare or care in a private home or even the supervision of a willing grandparent.

Claude Béchard, Quebec's minister for social solidarity and the family, issued his own statement yesterday implying that he, too, does not expect to be accountable to the federal government.

The Quebec daycare system has been the model for the rest of Canada, said Mr. Béchard, so Quebec expects to receive its portion of the money allotted to the program but will be accountable to its own population.

Marie Bountrogianni, Ontario's Minister of Children's Services, said yesterday that the point of the Vancouver meeting is to keep the momentum going, to persuade Ottawa that the daycare initiative is worthy of a large piece of the budget pie. And she is more than prepared to discuss being accountable to the federal government.

"What happened in Ontario for many years is that not one penny of that money went to child care under the former government," she said.

Likewise, Carole James, the NDP Leader in British Columbia, called yesterday for Ottawa to include accountability as a core principle in the national child care system.

The B.C. Liberal government used federal child care funds this year to offset provincial cutbacks in other programs, spending less than half of the federal money on child care.

As for Mr. Dryden, he said his focus is on quality. While he does not rule out a system that would fund for-profit daycare, he said yesterday that the program he envisions would provide money for regulated spaces.

"We have our challenges ahead of us," he conceded.

But, as far as tomorrow's meeting goes, "it's less important whether there's an agreement or not and more in terms of achieving that much more consensus, making sure that we've taken the right steps, making sure that we are setting this in motion and setting up the budget process which will follow in about two weeks' time."

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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