

Dryden bears brunt of child care debate [CA] ^[1]

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Source: Kingston Whig-Standard

Format: Article

Publication Date: 31 Jan 2005

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

A dirty little fight is festering within the child care community and some activists fear it could impede the Martin government's promise to pursue a quality national program of early learning and child care.

The dispute revolves around whether private child care operators should qualify for any of the \$5 billion in new funds promised by the federal government to help jump-start a "truly national" child care program.

For now, the debate is a faint echo of the pitched arguments over public versus private health care in Canada.

But the battle is heating up as the federal, provincial and territorial governments get closer to signing an agreement that will pave the way for the first federal injection of funds into the program. The agreement is set to be inked next month and Social Development Minister Ken Dryden and his counterparts across the country have been the subject of fierce lobbying campaigns by both sides.

Nonprofit activists are mailing federal and provincial ministers pieces or pictures of Lego in a pitch that urges governments to "get the building blocks of the new system right from the start."

Dryden's office says the Lego campaign has produced about 4,000 pieces of mail and a couple hundred pieces of colourful plastic blocks - not to mention a handful of wooden ones crafted by children.

Some say the debate is counterproductive and risks jeopardizing progress at a time when Prime Minister Paul Martin and Dryden say they're prepared to move forward.

"We have a prime minister and a minister who are absolutely devoted to look at the child care needs of families," says Kathy Graham, CEO of the Association of Day Care Operators of Ontario (ADCO). "I think we have done them a great disservice by bringing up this petty debate."

ADCO, which has a 75-25 split of private and nonprofit membership, respectively, argues the issue is quality, not ownership.

Dryden plans to meet his counterparts in Vancouver in mid-February to seal an agreement. The Liberal government has pledged to invest \$5 billion over five years in a system it says must be based on the principles of quality, universality, accessibility and developmental enrichment.

"We're trying not to pick a fight in any way, shape or form with the current private operators," said Maryann Bird of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada. "We have no quarrel with them. We acknowledge the work they've done."

But the association, backed by the Canadian Union of Public Employees, wants any expansion of the system, financed by federal dollars, to happen under the auspices of the not-for-profit sector. Bird suggests existing for-profit operations be grandfathered, an idea that has some current operators seeing red.

Wendy Taylor, owner of the privately-operated Corner Clubhouse Day Care Centre here in Kingston, says she fears being squeezed out of business because grandfathered operations might not get the same treatment as not-for-profit centres.

Taylor also says she's fed up with the assumption private means bad quality. "I just don't think you can paint private with one brush," she said. "All the private operators I know are small - just women who are starting a small business, wanting to do it for the right reasons."

Dryden has been at pains not to pronounce a preference on the ownership issue. His silence has led activists to speculate individual provincial and territorial governments will be free to direct the federal funds where they see fit, as long as the spending enhances the quality and affordability of early learning and child care programs.

- reprinted from the Kingston Whig-Standard

Tags: [advocacy](#) ^[2]

[quality](#) ^[3]

funding ^[4]
privatization ^[5]
federal programs ^[6]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/05/02/dryden-bears-brunt-child-care-debate-ca> [2]
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/advocacy> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [4]
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/privatization> [6]
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs>