

National law on child care sought ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 15 Nov 2004

AVAILABILITY

Available below

EXCERPTS

Activists and parents shouldn't settle for crumbs when Ottawa and the provinces meet in January to hammer out the country's first national child care agreement, Canada's former U.N. ambassador Stephen Lewis told a national conference on the issue yesterday.

"Don't be intoxicated or hypnotized by what has taken place," he said, referring to the Liberal government's pledge to pump \$5 billion over the next five years into a national system based on the principles of quality, universality, accessibility and developmental enrichment.

In an address that closed the three-day conference, Lewis told about 650 child care workers, activists, parents and academics they should push for a national child care act — like the Canada Health Act — that legally binds the provinces to spend the new federal money on programs that promote Ottawa's stated principles.

Federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden and his provincial and territorial counterparts came to a general agreement on those principles at a meeting Nov. 2, but Lewis reminded the gathering there are many details to be nailed down before they meet again.

Lewis now serves as the United Nations special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa.

In addition to legislation, advocates must push Ottawa to put more money on the table and promise financial support beyond just five years, Lewis said, adding about \$10 billion annually should go into early learning and care programs.

Advocates must also insist the new money funds programs - not fee subsidies or vouchers, Lewis said.

Currently, most public spending on child care outside Quebec is used to subsidize parent fees, leaving no money to build new centres, upgrade existing facilities or improve programs.

"We don't need funding to shore up the fragmented, piecemeal child care system we have now. We need to create something new and formidable," he said. "And I profoundly believe you've got to ratchet up those dollars and ratchet them up quickly."

Lewis said advocates need to bombard federal and provincial politicians with their demands.

"Remember, the politicians are embracing a principle for which you have laboured for a lifetime," he said. "Don't let it slide away or emerge deformed or undermined."

University of Toronto child care expert Martha Friendly, who has been advising federal bureaucrats on this issue for more than 20 years, believes the country has never been closer to a national agreement.

In addition to direct lobbying of federal and provincial politicians, Friendly said advocates will be turning to provinces, like Manitoba, which supports national legislation, non-profit services and a long-term financial commitment from Ottawa, to play a leadership role in January's federal provincial meeting.

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