

Ministers agree on national child care program [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Federal and provincial social ministers agreed in principle today on the need for a national child care program, including early childhood education.

But they left the key details — including who, what, when and how — to more meetings in the new year, when they hope to iron out how \$5 billion in federal funding will be allocated over five years.

The money is meant to help the provinces and territories introduce or improve child care programs.

Social Development Minister Ken Dryden said Ottawa will put \$1 billion into its next budget as the first installment on the five-year plan and he hoped cash would start flowing to the provinces by the start of the new fiscal year in April.

He said he and his provincial and territorial colleagues agreed to work together to create a national system based on universal access, quality, accountability and flexibility.

But the details — how to hold provinces accountable, how flexible the system can be, how many spaces will be created — were left to future meetings.

He said all the details have to be debated and worked out.

He did suggest, however, that the system would include a user-pay element. He said the ministers deliberately avoided the term ``universality" because that would make people think that child care, like health care, would be free.

Dryden said funding sources will have to be broad-based for the program to develop.

Quebec's key demand, which is to get the federal money with no strings attached, was not discussed, he said.

Claude Bechar, Quebec's minister of social solidarity and the family, later repeated that demand, saying Quebec's child care system should be a model for the country and that the province doesn't need conditions.

Bechar said he thinks Dryden "is open" to that.

Some advocacy groups want federal cash tied to "standards, service and quality goals and timelines outlined in legislation."

- reprinted from the Canadian Press

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Quebec ^[3]

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