

Some provinces skeptical about federal daycare plan [CA] ^[1]

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Source: Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 2 Nov 2004

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Many provinces remain hesitant about participating in the national daycare plan proposed by Ottawa, skeptical that the federal government will not inject enough money to finance an ambitious program.

Yesterday provincial ministers responsible for family policies met in Ottawa before today's meeting with federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden, who will outline details of the proposal as part of a protracted consultation on the shape of a national daycare system.

"The ministers have a lot of questions and expressed a great deal of hesitation. That's why they are anxious to hear what Mr. Dryden has to say on Ottawa's commitment to funding the program," said Claude Béchar, Quebec's Minister of Employment, Social Solidarity and Family.

The federal government is considering creating a national daycare program based on the Quebec model. Quebec is the only province with a publicly funded program that costs parents \$7 a day per child. The province spends about \$1.3-billion a year for 181,000 subsidized daycare spaces. It plans to have 200,000 subsidized daycare spaces by 2006.

Mr. Béchar warned his federal and territorial counterparts yesterday that based on Quebec's experience, once the program is set up, demand for more spaces will rapidly grow. Unless Ottawa commits to covering the anticipated costs of meeting that demand, provinces will be forced to foot the bill.

Because Quebec already has its own program, it is demanding the right to opt out of any national daycare program with full compensation.

The Bloc Québécois defended Quebec's position yesterday.

Bloc Leader Gilles Duceppe rose in the House of Commons to complain that Mr. Dryden has talked about imposing standards on all provinces, including Quebec.

Mr. Dryden replied that the federal government is "very respectful" of Quebec. But he would not agree that it could go its own way and still get a slice of the \$5-billion a year the Liberals have committed over five years to the program. He said the issue of national standards would be part of the federal-provincial consultations.

But Quebec's decision to assert its authority in this area could make such an agreement more difficult to obtain in a tight timetable.

Lured by the prospect of more federal funding, not all provinces expressed the same degree of skepticism. Ontario's Minister of Children and Youth Services was buoyed by the meeting yesterday and is optimistic the negotiations will lead to tangible results.

"It's wonderful. The stars are aligned," said Marie Bountrogianni. "We're in agreement with the principles of quality, universality and accessibility."

"We're very supportive of Minister Dryden," she said. "I think it's an excellent start."

Child-care advocates want the government to fund a national system of early learning and care that would grow to about \$10-billion a year.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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