

Ad hoc approach to child care panned ^[1]

Author: Canadian Press

Source: Canadian Press

Format: Article

Publication Date: 25 Oct 2004

EXCERPTS

The Liberal government's proposed national child care plan could spark another ugly round of federal-provincial squabbling, says a researcher involved in an international report on Canada's "dismal" patchwork of programs.

The study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development says the Canadian system provides "basic babysitting, but not much else," for working parents, and disregards the importance of early education.

Fixing that fragmented patchwork is going to require federal-provincial co-operation, said Martha Friendly of the University of Toronto's Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

"If there isn't a (jurisdictional) fight, it will probably mean the federal government didn't push for anything," said Friendly, one of three Canadians who wrote a background report for the OECD study.

The OECD said overall funding for child care programs needs to be increased to help those who can't afford private care, citing single mothers and low-income and aboriginal families as among those in need.

Ken Dryden, the federal Minister for Social Development, agreed Canadian child care services are uneven but said there's a will to create an integrated, common system.

Dryden suggested a federal budget coming in February could provide new money to the provinces - with strings attached.

Ottawa is "looking to get that money out and in the right kind of ways: with standards; with expectations; with measurements," said Dryden.

He's meeting with his provincial and territorial counterparts next week in Ottawa.

While other industrialized countries are investing in education for preschoolers, Canada is languishing in terms of quality and investment in education and care for children, says the OECD report.

"The main two recommendations, really, are that there needs to be much more money used much more efficiently," said Friendly, who spent the last decade pushing the federal government to make good on its 1993 promise of a national child care system.

"The provinces, who have responsibility for this, need to have a plan . . . (with) goals and objectives and targets and timetables."

While day care centres in five provinces were examined, only Quebec was lauded for its ambitious early education and care policies.

Most other provinces appear to lack the political will to enact change, said Friendly.

"The federal government is going to have to bribe them with money."

A team of researchers visited early childhood centres in Ottawa and also in Prince Edward Island, British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.

Other provinces declined to participate in the study.

While more Canadian mothers with young children work outside the home than in almost any other country, Canada invests less than half of what other developed nations devote on average, in terms of economic output, to early childhood education.

Canada has enough regulated child care spaces for less than 20 per cent of children under six with working parents while other countries are putting in place publicly funded systems of early learning for all children.

In the United Kingdom, 60 per cent of young children are in regulated care; in Denmark, 78 per cent.

Friendly said governments, both federal and provincial, have continually ducked their responsibility to implement coherent, efficient programs for children.

"Who gets shafted in these things is people," she said.

- reprinted from the Canadian Press

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