

Child care advocates hail Throne Speech [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The ambitious child care program promised in yesterday's Throne Speech would be the equivalent of a Canada Health Act for the care of children -- entrenching the principles of quality, universality, accessibility and development.

But while experts praised the significant nature of the federal government's promise to establish "a truly national system of early learning and child care," they were left wondering how the plan will be accomplished -- and when.

"It's historical that a national child care system has been mentioned in the Throne Speech," said Kira Heineck of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child care.

"We're happy to see that commitment. But we are very concerned about the lack of detail."

Ms. Heineck, who watched the speech with other child care advocates and parents in a room at Toronto's city hall, said she hopes to hear more from Prime Minister Paul Martin when he gives his response to the Throne Speech today.

"We want to know about legislation to enshrine those principles," she said.

"We want to know about the dollars that were committed during the election -- the \$5-billion over five years to get us started -- and we're also very interested in the language on accountability."

But Ken Dryden, the federal minister for social development, said yesterday that the time has come to act.

He said the time that has lapsed since 1993 has helped the country to determine what it wants from the program.

Mr. Dryden would not say whether his government is talking about a program that is both publicly delivered and publicly funded. Those are the kind of details to be determined through future discussions, he said.

While the new system will chart a national course for child care, the Throne Speech made it clear that the provinces and territories will be able to develop and administer their own programs. The minister said any agreement will include requirements that the provinces report back to the federal government on their progress. But ultimately, he said, "the public is going to hold both of us accountable."

Maryanne Bird of the Child care Advocacy Association was pleased by the Throne Speech, particularly its promise that children with disabilities would be included.

But, like Ms. Heineck, Ms. Bird said "we still are looking for a legislative framework in the long run because we believe this will really secure the development of a system across the country."

Laurel Rothman, the national co-ordinator of Campaign 2000, one of the country's largest anti-poverty groups, said it was encouraging that the government has promised a national child care system. "We are somewhat distressed by no sense of timing or timelines," she added.

- reprinted from the Globe and Mail

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