

Liberals say they'll create 250,000 new child-care spaces; Party says Canada hasn't done enough for preschool children [CA] ^[1]

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Source: The Ottawa Citizen

Format: Article

Publication Date: 4 Jun 2004

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

The Liberal election platform promises a groundbreaking \$5-billion, national child-care program that would for the first time enshrine into law principles the provinces must observe to qualify for federal dollars.

The plan could add up to 250,000 licensed child-care spaces to the supply across Canada over the life of the five-year spending plan, Prime Minister Paul Martin said yesterday as he unveiled the party's election platform.

Child-care advocates cheered the plan as a good beginning.

Acknowledging that Canada has "clearly not done enough" in the area of early childhood development, the Liberal platform skips lightly over previous unmet Liberal promises to build an effective national program and suggests recent successful federal-provincial child-related initiatives signal a new spirit.

Martha Friendly, director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit at the University of Toronto, applauded the Liberal plan as a significant step toward establishing a quality national early learning and child-care program. At this point, only Quebec has a universal system where community organizations provide child care for the nominal fee of \$7 a day.

Ms. Friendly said the need for regulated early education and child-care spaces is "gigantic," considering there are about 2.1 million children under age six in Canada, including 1.3 million who have working mothers. Ms. Friendly said she's pleased the Liberals are promising to enshrine the principles of the new program in law.

"I've been quite concerned about these agreements being potentially ephemeral," she said. "It's not the same as having legislation."

In an echo of the Canada Health Act, the four principles for the program are:

- Quality: Each facility must be regulated, safe and staffed with qualified child development staff.
- Universality: The program will be open without discrimination to pre-school children, including children with special needs.
- Accessibility: The program must be affordable for parents.
- Developmental: The program must include an element of childhood development and learning with the care component.

The Liberal plan promises to phase in the \$5 billion worth of new spending over five years. The document says it will cost up to \$900 million a year to support 100,000 regulated spaces.

The platform says funds will be provided per capita to provinces and territories that put in place early learning and child-care programs based on the principles. Unlike some existing proposals, it does not make federal funding contingent on matching funds from the provinces.

The Liberal platform on early childhood development and child care differs markedly from the approach advocated by Conservative leader Stephen Harper, who has shown no enthusiasm for increasing funding to child-care institutions. Although the party has yet to unveil its official platform, Mr. Harper has indicated a preference for reducing the tax burden for families with children so they can make their own child-care choices.

"What we'll be proposing is direct money for families with children -- whether it's one income or two incomes, whether they're using institutional day care or other forms of child-care arrangement," Mr. Harper said.

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

Region: Canada ^[2]

Tags: election ^[3]

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