

Ottawa set to boost funds for child care [CA] ^[1]

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Source: Globe and Mail

Format: Article

Publication Date: 12 Feb 2003

AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

The Liberal government is set to announce a \$1-billion, multiyear investment in child care in the coming budget, but it still lacks agreement from Ontario to establish a national child-care program.

Finance Minister John Manley will unveil an ambitious "children's agenda" in his budget next Tuesday that will include new spending on the National Child Benefit, child care and programs for aboriginal children.

Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart will signal the government's new investment in child care with a visit to an Ottawa-area daycare Thursday. But that daycare centre may not benefit directly from the budget announcement.

Ontario has so far not agreed to spend the additional federal money on regulated daycare spaces as Ms. Stewart has insisted. However, one senior federal source said Ottawa expects Ontario to agree to allocate the money to regulated spaces, once it has been confirmed in the budget.

Ontario has said that it wants the flexibility to direct new money into subsidies for low-income parents to spend on a range of child-care alternatives, including, but not limited to, regulated daycare spaces.

In 2000, the federal and provincial government agreed to a \$2.2-billion, five-year early-childhood development program with few strings attached. This time, Ms. Stewart wants a "codicil" to the agreement that would require the provinces to use the new federal money to create subsidized, regulated daycare spaces.

"We would love to participate" in a new round of child-care spending, said Christine Bujold, a spokesperson for Ontario Minister of Community, Family and Children's Services, Brenda Elliot.

"But provinces should have the flexibility to choose the type of care that is funded. ... We don't need to be told which type of care [the federal money] needs to be targeted to."

An official with another province, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said additional federal funds would be welcome because most provinces are already increasing their support for subsidized daycare.

The official said Ontario has been alone in its "hard-line" stand that the new money should not be tied to regulated spaces.

The provinces were expecting Ottawa to inject a modest \$100-million a year into the early-childhood development agreement, money that is transferred directly to the provinces. In fact, the budget is expected to double that amount.

While 4.9 million children under age 13 live in Canada and 68 per cent of their mothers work outside the home, there are licensed child-care and nursery schools to accommodate only 12 per cent of that number.

Child-care advocates insist that to ensure quality, government money should be allocated only to regulated spaces. Other critics argue, however, that governments should support parental choice, including child care provided by family members or in unlicensed homes.

-Reprinted from The Globe and Mail

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