

Agreement targets \$2.2B for children [CA] ^[1]

Author: Jaimet, Kate

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EXCERPTS

Canadian children got a \$2.2-billion boost yesterday as the federal government announced it will increase spending over the next five years on early childhood development.

But the goodwill of provincial governments is the only guarantee that this money will actually be spent on programs for pre-school children.

"I am absolutely thrilled. First ministers have said that Canadian children are a national priority," said Human Resources Minister Jane Stewart, who headed the federal initiative. "It's a program that allows the provinces to go where they need to go."

Only Quebec, which already spends more than any other province on early childhood programs, remained outside of the agreement. Premier Lucien Bouchard believes the agreement infringes on provincial areas of jurisdiction. The province will nevertheless receive its share of the federal funds, which it will use for health care.

"Quebec is spending more money than any province on childhood," Mr. Bouchard said. "We are already spending a lot of money. So we need this money anyways."

Under the agreement reached yesterday, the federal government will add a total of \$2.2 billion over the next five years to the transfer payments it gives to provinces for health and social services. This \$2.2 billion is meant to go specifically to early childhood development -- things such as child care, nursery schools, support for pregnant women and infant health. The initiative starts next year with an initial \$300-million payment.

Since the money will be part of the lump sum the federal government transfers every year to the provinces, there is no guarantee the provinces will actually spend it on young children. But several provincial premiers at the first ministers meeting repeated their commitment to early childhood programs.

"It makes no difference (that there is no enforcement mechanism)," said New Brunswick Premier Bernard Lord. "We will spend it on early childhood development."

"All premiers are committed to doing more for kids," said Manitoba Premier Gary Doer. "This will allow us to do more. For us, it's important for children with fetal alcohol syndrome."

Ms. Stewart said a mechanism of public reporting built into the agreement will hold the provinces accountable to the voters for how they spend the money. Every year, starting in 2002, the provinces will have to publish results showing where the money was spent and what effect it had on children. Measures of success could include such things as statistics on birthweight and development of thinking and motor skills.

"We can say to the Canadian public: 'We've invested your tax dollars here and here's what you get for it,' " Ms. Stewart said.

At the same time, she added, "we're moving away from the strategy that the federal government gives and takes away depending on what we think is right."

But Doug Bradshaw, executive director of the Headstart program in Moncton, N.B., wishes the federal government had insisted on the money being spent on children. Mr. Bradshaw started the Headstart program 27 years ago with his wife Claudette Bradshaw, now the federal labour minister.

He expressed concern that the money could end up going to such politically attractive projects as highways. "Children do not have a vote. They are not strong advocates, so sometimes they end up on the short end of the stick," he said.

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