

Mixed reaction to child care plan ^[1]

Author: Bartlet, Dave

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EXCERPTS

The minister of child, youth and family services says a new two-year pilot project to develop child care spaces in family homes has the "potential to create 400 (new child care) spaces over the next two years."

The pilot project was announced in the 2011 provincial budget Monday.

Minister Charlene Johnson told reporters it doesn't make sense to build child care centres in small rural towns, so the province will instead raise the startup grants for people who want to operate a regulated child care centre in their house.

The project's goal is not only to create extra daycare spaces, but give people the chance to run their own business, creating employment.

The current startup grants will double from \$2,500 to \$5,000 and anyone who decides to run a daycare exclusively for infants under two years of age can get \$7,500.

In addition, infant-only centres will get \$200 a month per space created. Johnson said child care spaces for infants are in high demand.

Also announced in the budget was a non-refundable child care tax credit of 7.7 per cent per child on what parents pay for daycare.

The ceiling for kids under seven is \$7,000, and \$4,000 for kids between seven and 12.

Johnson said the savings amount to one free month of child care a year, per child.

When asked how the province will evaluate the success of the pilot project, Johnson said it wouldn't end after two years, but may be expanded, depending on how things go.

"It's critical from an economic perspective, it's critical from a gender equality perspective, it's critical from a child development perspective, it's critical all around," she said of the project. "The premier has touted (child care) as one of her top priorities."

Johnson's department will also get additional funding of \$9.2 million this year. Johnson said the money will pay for more social workers and program development.

She also said Child, Youth and Family Services should completely take over responsibilities for family services from the four regional health authorities by this time next year.

Reaction to the child care plan was mixed.

Linda Ross, president of the Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women, gave it a thumbs-up.

"Having child care in there was certainly a move in the right direction. So many of us have been really disappointed by the federal government's cancellation of the national child care program. So this is going to make a difference. It's not to say it's the answer to everything," Ross said.

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But the opposition parties were skeptical.

"We really expected a lot more around the child care initiative because this was one of the hallmarks of the government in their throne speech," said Liberal Leader Yvonne Jones. "We were hoping it would be more affordable child care for people. We were hoping that there would be more enhancements to the centres and more spaces created in centres. We didn't see those things at all."

The labour movement also said it wasn't satisfied.

"I thought government would really focus on child care, which we know is an important social issue for nurses and for the people of the province," said nurses' union president Debbie Forward. "The money that they did invest, \$3 million, just doesn't go far enough."

-reprinted from the Telegram

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