

Child care advocates hope Liberals follow through on child care promise ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child-care advocates are cautiously optimistic the Liberal government will soon begin laying the groundwork for negotiating a national daycare plan with the provinces.

“There are incredibly high expectations in the community, so for people who have been fighting for child care, we are recovering from this lost decade, but there is a tremendous amount of optimism,” said Monica Lysack, a professor of early childhood education at Sheridan College who also ran for the Liberals in 2008 and 2011.

The Liberal platform contained a promise that received little attention during the marathon election campaign that brought Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to power: “We will meet with provinces, territories, and indigenous communities to begin work on a new National Early Learning and Child Care Framework, to deliver affordable, high-quality, flexible, and fully inclusive child care for Canadian families.”

The New Democrats made the promise of a national child care plan — providing 60 per cent of the funding required to create or maintain one million spaces costing no more than \$15 per day within eight years — central to their campaign, but child-care advocates say the Liberal pledge, which did not come with specific targets or costing, could end up creating a similar program.

“It is certainly clear from the way they frame the whole thing they are talking about it being ‘for all.’ They use the words affordable, accessible, quality,” said Martha Friendly, the executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit who was often cited by NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair, although she noted the promise was short on details.

Jean-Yves Duclos, the minister for families, children and social development, told the Star last week it was too early to get into specifics, but said the Liberal government is open to the program being universal.

“All options are open and most importantly, we are open and eager to discuss with provinces and municipalities to find the best thing for Canadians,” Duclos said in an interview.

“I’d like to tell you now what we will do, but to be responsible, to be open, to listen and to demonstrate our willingness to be collaborative, I need to be discussing these with colleagues,” said Duclos, who has not yet set a date for a meeting with his provincial and territorial counterparts on the issue.

The Liberal platform said this would not be a “one-size-fits all” national program with predetermined costs, but it remains to be seen how the Liberal government will define affordability, an important question when daycare fees vary so widely across the country, or even within a province.

Don Giesbrecht, CEO of the Canadian Child Care Federation, said the promise was vague but it is a start.

“It allows for a conversation to start with those jurisdictions, and with the sector hopefully as well, with a fairly blank slate,” said Giesbrecht.

As far as process goes, child-care experts envision something like what former Liberal cabinet minister Ken Dryden followed during the Paul Martin government in 2004-05, when he successfully negotiated bilateral agreements with all 10 provinces after failing to secure a single, multilateral agreement.

Those agreements, later cancelled by the Conservative government, were based upon what were called the “QUAD” principles, an acronym that stood for quality, universality, accessibility and developmental programming.

Duclos did not rule a Dryden-inspired process out, but noted much has changed since those agreements were signed.

“I think we will be very attentive to the needs and the opinions of provinces and municipalities, since over the last 10 years things have

changed quite a lot, so we need to re-contact, to be again in touch with our colleagues in other jurisdictions to know how we will be most useful,” said Duclos.

One thing that has changed significantly since the Dryden efforts is that Ontario has increased annual spending on child care to more than \$1 billion and brought in two years of full-day kindergarten.

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/national> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/universality>