

Ontario urged to champion child care on national stage ^[1]

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie

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EXCERPTS

With Ottawa poised to begin federal-provincial talks on a promised national early learning and child-care framework, advocates are urging Queen's Park to set bold objectives and play a leadership role.

"Now that Ontario has a 'willing partner' on child care, the province has a chance to start thinking a little bigger, beyond wage subsidies," said Carolyn Ferns of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

The province announced the second of two \$1-an-hour wage enhancement grants on Friday for workers in licensed child-care centres and home daycares. It will boost wages by up to \$2-an-hour in the chronically underpaid child-care field.

Although the wage grant is a welcome start, Ontario needs a comprehensive workplace strategy to address low wages, poor working conditions and high staff turnover that has plagued child care for years, Ferns said.

You can't build a high quality system for children and families when workers with four-year university degrees or two-year college diplomas, earn a median of just \$16 an hour and are forced to work split shifts to serve children in full-day kindergarten, she said.

For parents, who have seen daycare become the second-largest household expense after housing, addressing affordability is equally important, she added.

A spokeswoman for Ontario Education Minister Liz Sandals said the province "looks forward to engaging in meaningful dialogue with our federal partners on a strategy and partnership for child care."

The province's vision for child care is "to ensure all Ontario's children and families are well supported by a system of responsive, high-quality, accessible and increasingly integrated early years programs and services," Alessandra Fusco said in an email.

Ferns and other advocates recognize that it will take time for Ottawa and the provinces to hammer out co-ordinated plans to build a high quality system of affordable and accessible child care and family-friendly policies for all parents.

"We want the (federal) minister and the provincial ministers to take the time and really map this out," said Don Giesbrecht of the Canadian Child Care Federation, a national professional association which includes operators, early childhood educators and researchers.

"We need a framework that makes high quality child care accessible and affordable to families, and builds a high quality workforce," said Giesbrecht, one of several advocates who met with federal Social Development Minister Jean-Yves Duclos earlier this month.

"And we need a framework built on research so that we are informing ourselves and building on best practices," Giesbrecht said.

But in the meantime, federal and provincial governments need to include money in their 2016 budgets to shore up a system that is in crisis after almost a decade of federal inaction on child care, he said.

"Child care was included as part of the (federal) government's social infrastructure fund and we expect it will be included as part of the stimulus funding," Giesbrecht said.

Child poverty activist Anita Khanna of Campaign 2000, who was also at the meeting with Duclos, said daycare will be key in addressing the minister's mandate to work with the provinces to develop a national anti-poverty strategy.

"We have always seen it as an important element in the fight against child and family poverty," Khanna said. "We know it requires a long-term vision, but that doesn't preclude action in the short term."

Campaign 2000, which has been pressing Ottawa to live up to its promise to end child poverty, has called on the new federal government to invest at least \$500 million in its first budget to immediately address child-care affordability for families and quality in the system.

"We saw really positive signs of an open ear and the possibility of collaboration with community groups," she said of the meeting with Duclos. "I believe our message about the need for collaboration and the need to move beyond a patchwork of services was heard."

Getting the child-care architecture right:

In a meeting with federal Social Development Minister Jean-Yves Duclos earlier this month, child-care advocates offered to work with federal and provincial governments to build a national early learning and child-care framework.

The group representing child-care professionals, child-poverty activists and researchers proposed a shared framework based on three broad principles which they have also circulated to provincial and territorial ministers responsible for the issue. The principles include:

Child care should be viewed as a public good and human right accessible to all and not a commodity.

Federal and provincial governments must develop plans with long-term, sustained funding.

The framework must include shared goals around quality, the need for a well-trained child-care workforce, supportive family policies such as maternity/parental leave and workplace flexibility, and support for research, data collection and evidence-based planning.

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