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Dryden urges co-operation to get national day-care program underway

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WINNIPEG (CP) - Squabbling over national day care could sidetrack efforts to get a program up and running, Social Development Minister Ken Dryden warned Friday.

Dryden told 600 delegates at a national child-care conference in Winnipeg that the program will be a reality, but there is still a lot of work to be done with his provincial counterparts and those who work with young children.

"My biggest fear is that in the months ahead, the history of little fights will distract us and de-energize us from the big fight to create a national early-learning and child-care system," said Dryden.

Dryden met with provincial ministers last week, but said another meeting is needed early next year to iron out how \$5 billion in federal funding will be allocated over five years.

The money is intended to help provinces introduce or improve day-care programs. Governments will be held accountable for how the federal dollars are spent.

Dryden said he can't guarantee talks won't stall because of the same jurisdictional wrangling that has plagued federal-provincial health-care talks for years, but he believes there is momentum.

"What we need to do is come out absolutely front and centre and say, 'This is what we need and we're taking these steps to get there and those looking to stand in the way of that do it at their peril.' "

The child-care conference, organized by the Canadian Council on Social Development, is the first major policy gathering focusing on early childhood education in 20 years.

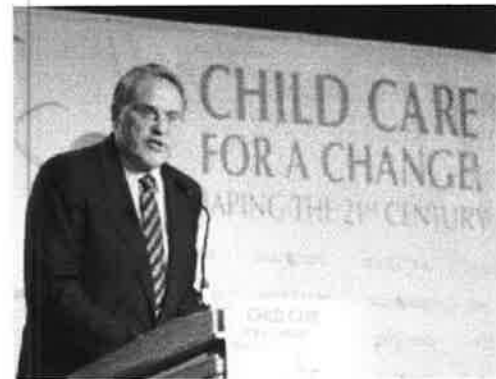
There was an air of optimism at the Winnipeg Convention Centre among day-care advocates, who say they're confident Ottawa and the provinces are committed to making a national program a priority.

Council president Marcel Lauziere said the most important thing is to get the right program in place, one that will offer publicly funded, non-profit child care to everyone who needs it.

"There's really a mish-mash right now," said Lauziere. "We could simply decide to sprinkle that money around and just not fix anything, so let's take the time to do it well."

Dryden said many issues, such as whether the national day-care system will include for-profit operators, still need to be worked out.

However, the Canadian Union of Public Employees released a legal opinion at the conference warning



The Honourable Ken Dryden, Minister of Social Development, gives a speech. (HO/Social Development Canada)

Dryden that Canada could open itself up to trade challenges under NAFTA and the World Trade Organization if the day-care program is not public from the outset.

That could lead to U.S. box-store-style day-care chains expanding in Canada, said the report written by lawyer Steven Shrybman.

But a publicly funded system is not the only priority of day-care operators such as Caryn Lafleche, who was host to Dryden earlier in the day at her francophone centre.

She said higher wages and public education are also key.

"Instead of the public thinking we're glorified babysitters they need to understand exactly what it is we do and how crucial it is to a child's development," said Lafleche.

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