

MOVING CANADA FORWARD

Foundations: A National Early Learning and Child Care Program

BACKGROUND

High-quality early learning and child care programs contribute immensely to the healthy growth of children. A multitude of studies show investments in early learning and child care give kids the best start in life.

The modern reality is clear: both parents often want or are required to participate in the paid labour force while needing to have confidence their children are thriving in a caring, stimulating environment. Investments in child care and early learning can also help level the playing field for those disadvantaged by birth or background.

These programs set our youngest on a path to lifelong achievement, and a Canada-wide commitment to early learning and child care is the single best investment we can make in our future.

There are approximately 2.1 million children under the age of six in Canada, with 1.3 million children whose mothers are in the paid labour force. In 2001, there were an estimated 315,000 regulated child care spaces in Canada (outside of regulated family day-care spaces for which information is incomplete). Quebec's program is the most advanced in Canada, as the province aims to have 200,000 spaces available by 2006.

Traditional day care, however, can be expensive and does not always include an educational element. We believe every child should benefit from learning at an early age, and that no child should be denied access to such benefits by reason of cost.

Progressive systems are commonplace throughout Europe. Most Western European countries have a comprehensive, largely publicly-funded system for all children. Systems in Canada and the United States are nowhere near as advanced, but we have started to make progress.

In March 2003, federal, provincial, territorial ministers responsible for social services reached agreement on a framework for improving access to affordable, quality, regulated early learning and child care programs and services.

The federal government committed, in 2003 a total of \$900 million over five years to support provincial and territorial government investments in early learning and child care. Funds started to flow in April 2003. The 2004 Budget increased funding by \$75 million annually for both 2004-05 and 2005-06. This brought total support over five years to \$1.05 billion.

The agreement provided for further investment in regulated early learning and child care programs for children under six. Regulated programs are defined as programs that meet quality standards that are established and monitored by provincial/territorial governments.

Quebec is the North American leader in early learning and care and provides an example of well-designed, high-quality early learning and child care programs. As Saskatchewan led the way with Medicare, Quebec can lead the country in the development of a Canada-wide system of early learning and child care.

Previous efforts to reach an agreement with the provinces were not successful because, in the early 1990s, all governments in Canada were facing unsustainable fiscal pressures, and there was no agreed-upon process to align federal investments with the provinces' social policy priorities.

Since then, the two levels of government cooperated successfully on the introduction of the National Child Benefit in 1997, and those efforts have provided significant support for Canadian children. Indeed, federal commitments to the National Child Benefit have steadily increased and will reach more than \$10 billion annually by 2007.

The 1999 Social Union Framework Agreement outlined principles for the creation of joint initiatives. Agreements negotiated through this framework have been reached on early learning and child care, including the Early Childhood Development Agreement in 2000 and the Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care in 2003. Our proposed initiative builds on and significantly extends these.

THE PLAN

The Liberal government will contribute \$5 billion over the next five years, beyond funds already committed, to accelerate the building of a Canada-wide system of early learning and child care. The Foundations program will ensure children have access to high-quality, government-regulated spaces at affordable costs to parents.

The Liberal government will enshrine in legislation the four principles for Foundations – the “QUAD”:

- **QUALITY** – each facility must be provincially or territorially regulated to ensure safety and an appropriate complement of qualified child development staff.
- **UNIVERSALITY** – the program will be open, without discrimination, to preschool children, including children with special needs.
- **ACCESSIBILITY** – the program will be affordable for parents.
- **DEVELOPMENTAL** – the program must include a component of development/learning integrated with the care component.

It is estimated the average annual cost of a full-time place in an early learning and child care program (based on our QUAD principles) will be in the range of \$8,000 to \$9,000.

The cost of supporting 100,000 spaces across Canada, therefore, would be in the range of \$800 to \$900 million per year.

Federal funding will be provided to provinces that put in place early learning and child care programs based on the QUAD principles. It is hoped that provinces and territories will also contribute additional funds beyond those they are already spending on early learning and child care. Even if they do not, the federal government will provide a per capita share of funds to support new and existing provincial or territorial programs that embody the QUAD principles.