



The Federal/Provincial/Territorial Meetings

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Dryden leaves the door open for separate childcare deals

Barring consensus on pan-Canadian plan, provincial accords possible, minister says

GLORIA GALLOWAY

Globe and Mail

February 11, 2005

OTTAWA -- Ottawa is willing to cut separate childcare deals with individual provinces if a national consensus on a pan-Canadian program cannot be reached, Social Development Minister Ken Dryden said yesterday.

"Provinces and territories need to find their own best way of delivering childcare in a way that meets national objectives," Mr. Dryden said on the eve of a meeting with provincial counterparts to negotiate the basic elements of the initiative.

"You move on a multilateral basis to get to a point where you can't come to a complete multilateral deal. Then you work on bilaterals at that particular point."

All provinces have agreed that the proposed national program -- which has been allotted \$5-billion from Ottawa over five years -- should adhere to the four core principles of quality, inclusiveness, accessibility and a developmental focus.

But Ottawa says the federal money will only flow once the provinces agree to be held accountable for how they reach certain goals, and that could be a sticking point in today's negotiations.

Alberta has said it is accountable only to its own citizens and wants to receive the federal money with no strings attached. It also wants the ability to give the money directly to parents to spend as they see fit, even if that means paying a willing grandparent or an unregulated childcare provider.

Mr. Dryden has said one of the federal objectives is that the money go to regulated care -- childcare that meets certain staffing, educational and health requirements.

Quebec also resents the accountability requirement and points out that its program has been a model that the rest of Canada is following. It, too, wants the dollars to come from Ottawa without stipulations.

Mr. Dryden said those issues would be front and centre at today's meeting in Vancouver. "Accountability is not only a requirement of the present but it is the absolute driving force of the future," he said.

Jody Korchinski, a spokeswoman for Alberta's Ministry of Children's Services, said her government was pleased to hear that Mr. Dryden is open to bilateral agreements and was looking forward to learning more about the funding commitments that the federal government is willing to make.

But Mr. Dryden also held out the possibility of forging an initial deal with those provinces that are ready to agree to federal demands, potentially leaving intransigent jurisdictions behind.

"At some point we're going to need to get on with it, and that first step needs to be taken. For those who are ready to take that step, we take that step," the minister said.

If there are provinces that cannot agree on accountability, "then they're not part of it," Mr. Dryden said when asked if some could be denied funding.

But he did seem prepared to make some concessions to provinces that balk at demands from childcare advocates that the money not be used to create spaces in the for-profit sector. They cite repeated studies that show that not-for-profit care delivers higher-quality spaces.

"What we're trying to do here is focus on quality," said the minister when asked whether he would fund for-profit care. "If you meet the standard, then you're able to get some of the government money."

That worried Tony Martin, the NDP childcare critic.

"We've got to come out of the blocks on this committed to the not-for-profit and we think there has to be some legislation in place for those provinces that buy in to the principles," he said.

But there was some praise for Mr. Dryden's apparent willingness to be flexible.

Debra Mayer, the chair of the Child Care Advocacy Association, said the notion that some provinces could get into the program without a unanimous agreement was good news.

"If we can't get a pan-Canadian buy-in for it right from the beginning then I think doing bilateral agreements with those provinces that are willing to move forward makes sense," she said. "That, at least, gets it under way."

As to bilateral agreements. Ms. Mayer said there is truth in the suggestion that each province is starting from a different place.

"To expect that all provinces would be able to hit the ground running at exactly the same starting point is unrealistic," she said. "What we are saying is that each province and territory needs to declare its action plan."

Child-care deal step nearer; Dryden, ministers to talk again after federal budget - Lack of details frustrates some care advocates

The Toronto Star

February 12, 2005
Laurie Monsebraaten

Canada is one step closer to a national system of early learning and child care, federal Social Development Minister Ken Dryden says.

But there is still lots of work ahead, Dryden said yesterday at the conclusion of talks with his federal and territorial counterparts to hammer out the long awaited agreement. The ministers have agreed to meet again, once funding is confirmed in the Feb. 23 federal budget.

"We have moved another step forward. There are still some steps ahead," Dryden told reporters after the meeting.

Ottawa has promised to spend \$5 billion over five years to begin turning the patchwork of daycare services into a national system based on the principles of quality, universality, accessibility and development enrichment.

Dryden and the ministers agreed to those principles last November and have been struggling ever since to precisely define them so that provinces can be held to account for the money.

On that score, Dryden and the ministers said they are making progress.

"Federal, provincial and territorial ministers are committed to clear accountability to their citizens that allows them to track their respective government's progress in early learning and child care and better outcomes for children," he said.

Child-care advocates at the meeting said they were pleased the ministers are still talking, but are frustrated with the lack of details.

"There is a lot of ambiguity," said Monica Lysack of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada. "We need more details about accountability and long-term legislation that will make this accountable."

Getting this far hasn't been easy. Alberta and Quebec have argued that they should get the money from Ottawa with no strings attached.

But Ontario Children's Minister Marie Bountrogianni, who has been pushing hard for strong accountability measures in the final agreement, said the discussion is "getting better."

"Accountability is very important. My government in Ontario will spend the money on child care, but I don't know what future governments will do," she said after the meeting.

"This will take time to iron out. ... But the fact that we were all there and we all stayed there and came to some agreement is very significant."

Earlier in the day, Alberta Children's Minister Heather Forsythe told reporters "It's not up to Ottawa to dictate to the provinces how they run their programs."

"It's a provincial responsibility and it's a provincial jurisdiction and we want the ability to chose what's best for our parents and the children in our province."

Quebec Employment, Social Solidarity and Family Welfare Minister Claude Bechard was equally adamant that his province should have access to its share of the federal money without having to answer to Ottawa.

Questions of funding dog talks on national child-care program

Globe and Mail

ROBERT MATAS

February 12, 2005

VANCOUVER -- Federal, provincial and territorial ministers failed to reach agreement yesterday on funding for a national child-care program, stumbling over the scope of federal support and the design of the system.

After a three-hour meeting in Vancouver, the ministers decided to meet again once details of Ottawa's five-year funding commitment for the program are confirmed in the federal budget on Feb 23.

"We have substantial agreement on most questions, but there are some areas where we have not reached agreement and some steps ahead of us," Ken Dryden, federal Minister of Social Development, said after the meeting.

"Provinces and territories are extremely pleased with the progress we have made," said PEI Social Services Minister Chester Gillan, who was co-chair of the meeting. "We look forward to the federal budget and details around the federal commitment."

Documents obtained by The Globe and Mail showed that the federal plan for a national system had the support of only Manitoba and Ontario at the beginning of the day.

A seven-page draft agreement dated Feb 1, 2005, stated that Alberta and Quebec were advocating an alternative arrangement based on the principle of asymmetrical federalism. Alberta shares a vision of child care with other governments, but seeks an arrangement that respects provincial jurisdiction and ensures federal funding, the document says.

British Columbia also was pushing for a different system in different places. A single model across the country is unrealistic, raises expectations and doesn't allow provincial flexibility, stated a discussion paper outlining the province's position at the talks.

After the meeting, Mr. Dryden said the child-care system could be similar to the education system in Canada, where each province is accountable for its own arrangement.

"The fact is, in terms of every jurisdiction, it is their responsibility to deliver."

Every province has its own system within a national vision, he said.

The documents obtained by The Globe show that the federal government went into the talks with three outstanding issues:

Should the final agreement refer to "a national vision for provincial and territorial systems" or to "a shared vision for a national system"? Several ministers were concerned that a national system implies a single model and did not recognize provincial and territorial

jurisdiction. Others said a reference to a national system would express the ambition to act in a coherent manner, based on common objectives, principles and goals.

Should the agreement refer directly to "official language minority communities"? Some provinces and territories were concerned that the reference would create heightened expectations of provincial services. An alternative would be to refer to "children with various cultural and linguistic circumstances."

Is federal funding to continue beyond its current five-year commitment, and would funding for aboriginal child care be in addition to the \$5-billion program? Also, the territories and Prince Edward Island want a guarantee of at least \$5-million in addition to their per capita allotment.

The draft agreement obtained by The Globe says the "shared vision" was shaped by the principles of high quality, inclusion of children with special needs and aboriginal children, accessibility for all who choose to use it and developmental child care.

Programs funded will be in child-care centres, family child-care homes, preschools and nursery schools. The draft agreement does not mention funding of stay-at-home parents or for-profit daycare centres.

The draft agreement also sets out procedures of accountability. Each government would publicly release action plans for the five years, establish targets within one year and report annually on their progress.

CARING FOR KIDS IN AN IMPERFECT WORLD

The Edmonton Sun

February 13, 2005

Editorial/Opinion -- MINDELLE JACOBS

EXCERPT

In a perfect world, according to a new study by the Vanier Institute of the Family, Canadians' ideal child-care choice is a parent raising kids at home.

No surprise.

There are loads of moms who would love to ditch their jobs so they can bring up their kids.

Many dads, too, would jump at the chance to exchange the rat race for precious moments with their children.

For that matter, I'm sure there are plenty of couples who'd rather not work at all, preferring the satisfaction of child-rearing and the demands of a toddler to the insanity of the job world.

Unfortunately, life isn't perfect. What we aspire to is often unattainable. The Vanier study, done by University of Lethbridge sociologist Reginald Bibby, found that 90% of Canadians believe one parent should stay home in two-parent families.

The survey also showed that 90% of employed married mothers and 84% of fathers in the same circumstances would work part-time if they could afford it.

Almost all employed mothers who are divorced, separated or cohabiting say the same thing.

If a parent can't be home to raise children, the next choices are, in descending order, a grandparent, another relative, day care, friends and sitters.

Critics of Social Development Minister Ken Dryden's national day-care program will naturally pounce on Bibby's study as an indication that Canadians are opposed to the proposal.

I think that's a dangerous leap. While, ideally, parents may want to raise their kids at home, that's unrealistic for the vast majority of Canadians.

As for having a grandparent or other relative around to pitch in, that might be feasible in some cases, but it's pretty impractical in an era where family members are often hundreds or thousands of kilometres apart.

Besides, maybe grandma doesn't want to do the child-rearing thing again. And what about when grandma's sick? A day-care centre doesn't sound so bad now, does it?

Yet another poll, released Friday, suggests Canadians are split on how best to help parents raise children.

According to the Ekos poll, 30% favour more child-care programs, 28% want direct financial assistance for parents and 21% prefer tax breaks.

A national day-care program may be expensive but handing out money directly to parents - in effect paying them to stay home and raise their kids - would be infinitely more costly.

There would also be no accountability or assurances that money would be used to benefit children, says Debra Mayer, chair of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada...

A recent report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development described child care in Canada as "basic babysitting, but not much else," adding our quality of early childhood education is generally mediocre.

And just last month, another study reiterated what previous researchers have found - the quality is better in non-profit day-care centres than for-profit sites.

Predictably, Alberta is fighting to have for-profit centres included in any national child-care program even though there is a particularly dramatic difference in quality between non-profit and for-profit day-care operations in the province.

But if that is the price to be paid to get Alberta on board, let's live with it.

Not surprisingly, Dryden's efforts to get the provinces to agree Friday to a national child-care deal didn't quite come together.

But Ottawa must press ahead, with or without all the provinces. A partial deal is better than nothing.

Stay-at-home parents can still fight for tax breaks and other family-friendly initiatives.

But we still need a quality day-care system from coast to coast. It will benefit us all.

Alberta child care needs an upgrade: Non-profit model best for our children

The Edmonton Journal

February 14 2005

Opinion -- Laurie Adkin, professor of political science at University of Alberta

Alberta's Minister for Children's Services, Heather Forsyth, claims to speak for Alberta's parents when she says that the province does not want to participate in a national child-care program because we have "unique local needs."

She does not. There are no "unique" parental or child needs in Alberta that justify opting out of the national program. Alberta's parents are like parents everywhere in the country: we want high-quality, affordable, and universally accessible child care for our children. We want our infant caregivers and preschool educators to be fairly paid for the important work they do. Alberta's predominantly private child-care system achieves none of these objectives.

Recent studies confirm earlier research that concluded for-profit child-care centres deliver, on the whole, a poorer quality of care than non-profit child-care centres. Their staff are paid less and tend to be less qualified. They have high staff turnovers. Yes, government subsidies or operating grants to private child-care centres could improve programming, nutrition, or wage levels, but such a policy will never achieve the benefits and efficiencies of a publicly funded system for a simple reason: non-profit centres use their revenues only to operate, and to improve services and salaries, while for-profit centres seek to maximize returns to the owners. The same logic operates in the health sector, where the Alberta government also chooses to ignore any evidence that contradicts its free-market ideology. But listen folks, the care and education of our preschool-aged children do not belong in the private sector any more than health care, care for the elderly, or primary and secondary education belong in the private sector.

Early childhood development and education of the best quality should be universally available to all children, regardless of parents' incomes. Without a substantial government investment in child care, the system will never be universal. The Alberta government's current policy of subsidizing low-income parents' child care costs -- but without investing in the provision of child care -- has not and will not create the infrastructure required to meet child-care needs.

It is not true, as the Minister claims, that "we already have a great child care system in Alberta." Alberta's child care system is one of the country's poorest on almost every score. Not for the lack of good early childhood development training programs, or for the lack of good intentions on the part of committed caregivers. But because 70 per cent of our spaces are in the private sector, because far too few spaces exist to serve the real demand for child care, because without government funding centres are in perpetual financial crisis, because most parents do not qualify for subsidies and cannot afford to pay for regulated child-care spaces, because rural areas are hardly served at all, and because our child-care workers'

wages are among the lowest in the country (and these are already lower than the average hourly wages).

This is not the system that Alberta's parents want. The government of Alberta may be listening to the voices of private child-care centre operators as it turns its back on a national program that makes publicly funded, universally accessible child care a priority, but it is not listening to the voices of parents. Use of private spaces is not a "choice" for most parents, but a necessity dictated by lack of choice.

Private daycare operators can be "grandfathered" in various ways. They can even remain part of the overall system (as in Quebec) but the bulk of public spending must go to support a non-profit child-care system.

Many parents would like to have the choice to stay home with their infants, at least for the first one to two years of their children's lives. For most parents of children under six (70 per cent of mothers in Canada), the reality is that we have to work for a living and cannot afford to forgo income or risk long-term unemployment in order to stay at home with our children. If the Government of Alberta really wants to increase parents' choices, it should look at reforms to employers' obligations, income tax, and parental leave benefits that will reduce the financial penalties and risks to parents of temporary absence from the workforce. But please, spare us the nonsense of telling us that you are opting out of a system we desperately want and need, because of some "unique" Albertan preference for a patchwork of substandard, unaffordable, and unavailable child care.

How about making Alberta "unique" in the way that Quebec is presently unique in Canada -- by investing seriously in the kinds of options for child care that families really want and need? How better to invest in the future of the province in its centenary year than by showing a real commitment to the welfare of our children?

Gillan confident of agreement on national child care program

The Guardian (Charlottetown)

February 14, 2005

Armstrong, Nigel

EXCERPT

Prince Edward Island is lobbying hard for an enhanced share of any future child care funding from Ottawa and Health and Social Services Minister Chester Gillan is confident a national agreement is just a few details away...

Before the funds arrive, there has to be agreement on how and where that money will be used, said Gillan. Before such an agreement, said the ministers on Friday, there must be details of the child care money in the next federal budget. They all agreed to meet again after it is presented on Feb. 23.

The expectation from most of the provinces was that the money will be distributed according to population, said Gillan.

Child care is completely within the jurisdiction of the provinces and the Island wants a clear say in how the money will be spent here, he said. The federal government wants national standards for child care and a way to ensure they are being met.

To do that, the Island needs to have standards suitable to its situation, a system of collecting data and information about Island child care, and a suitable evaluation system of that data, including measuring child outcomes.

The Island does not have this measurement and evaluation structure in place so setting it up would need to come from the proposed federal funding, cutting significantly into the dollars that are supposed to be going directly to the cost of child care.

Gillan said P.E.I. is home to 0.43 per cent of the Canadian population. If the first year of federal child care funding was a total of \$1 billion across Canada, that would give P.E.I. just \$4.3 million.

"We are going to be meeting new expectations for early learning and child care so we are going to need more than that," said Gillan.

"What we are asking for is, well, twice that. If we could ever get up to .6 or .9, that would give us roughly \$9 million to do those things, plus other things as well."

Gillan said he joined with Northwest Territories, Yukon and Nunavut to mount a strong lobby for this increased base funding which he calculates at about \$20 million between the four areas.

The base funding is to set up the administration of the child care funds and the meeting of the national child care standards.

The proposed system allows for home-based child care mixed with non-profit child care centres but may put up limits to discourage huge multinational child care companies from setting up in Canada, said Gillan.

Any increase in base funding coming to P.E.I. will come out of the pockets of the other provinces, said Gillan. Dryden has already turned down a request to have the Island's base funding come out of some other pot.

"The other provinces give us their sympathy and their understanding, however, they haven't given us their money yet," said Gillan.

The ministers' meeting last Friday in Vancouver struck a committee, mostly of top-level civil servants from other provinces, who will look into this request for increased base funding made by P.E.I. and the others.

Gillan believes it will be a matter of negotiating between the Island's best-case request and what the other provinces are willing to concede...

"We have agreed on a national vision and principles. We have done the why and how. The next is the budget. Show us the dollars. Will there be expenses coming off the top of that?"

"We will meet one or two more times immediately following the budget to stamp out agreement on all the points that we are looking at," said Gillan....

**Provincial child-care system in crisis mode
Advocates outline major capacity and funding issues**

JOEL O'KANE

The Daily Gleaner, NB

February 14, 2005

EXCERPT

New Brunswick's cash-strapped child-care system is in a crisis that's not going to get better until more public money can create more space, advocates say.

Jody Dallaire, a New Brunswick board member in the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, said that only one in nine New Brunswick children receives quality child care and early education in licensed facilities.

Considering the thousands of children under six who need child care, Dallaire said, government must create more positions.

"That means eight of nine kids in this province don't have access to services licensed by government, and parents are scrambling to find licensed care," she said. "In terms of service quality, there's a wide range because there's no consistent program across the province."

Dallaire said she paid \$11,000 a year when her two children were pre-school age, a cost most low- and middle-income parents can't afford...

"That (assistance program) won't do anything to create new spaces," Dallaire said. "It will certainly help low-income families, but it's just putting more stress on the system. More people want access to the same amount of spaces."

Carla Flynn owns the Fredericton Early Learning Centre on Aberdeen Street.

She said child-care services are reaching a crisis level in the province.

"Child care in itself is in crisis," she said. "There aren't enough licensed spots, there's variance in quality ... we need to somehow level the playing field. Overall, we need to find a common ground that better serves our children."

While Flynn said she works hard to provide an affordable, quality pre-school education to the centre's children, it's hard when some parents can't afford the costs.

"We need more money inputted into the whole system, and it needs to come from a lot of different sources, both public and private," she said. "Here I am, a private owner, saying I think we eventually need a publicly run system, similar to the kindergarten system." ...

Dallaire said she wouldn't be surprised if a few large child-care facilities closed soon because there's no money to be made...