

Pre-budget Consultation Brief January, 2004

Submitted by
BC Parent Voices

Introduction:

BC Parent Voices is pleased to submit this written response for the Minister of Finance, Hon. Ralph Goodale's pre-budget consultations.

We are adding our voices from communities across BC to the many voices of parents and child care advocates from coast to coast to coast who are committed to ensuring that Canada's children and families can access a high quality, publicly funded, child care system that is inclusive and accessible to all.

Canada's reality:

Over the last three years, federal, provincial and territorial governments (except Quebec) have negotiated two separate agreements related to young children and child care. Regrettably neither agreement has led to the progress that Canada's children and families need and deserve.

- The **Early Childhood Development Agreement** (ECDA), 2000, provides \$500 million per year to enable provincial and territorial governments to "improve and expand early childhood development programs and services, including child care".

With flexibility under this agreement, some provinces/territories are using this money to fund improvements that are modestly contributing to certain aspects of regulated child care. But in other regions, *like BC, our provincial government has ensured that very little of the ECDA funds, are spent to improve provincially regulated child care.*

- The **Multilateral Framework on Early Learning and Child Care**, 2003, promises to "improve access to affordable, quality, provincially and territorially regulated early learning and child care programs" (*for children up to six years of age only*) ... and to "provide direct care in settings such as child care centres, family child care homes, preschools, and nursery schools."

But, as each province/territory develops and implements its own annual spending plan, *it is obvious that there must be more federal/provincial/territorial responsibility, accountability and compliance for spending the money as intended on direct care in provincially/territorially regulated early learning and child care programs and services. In BC, significant provincial budget cuts and government policy decisions are seriously affecting the delivery of and access to affordable, quality and sustainable regulated child care for many families.*

In addition, the federal funding to the provinces/territories for the next five years falls dramatically short of what is really needed if we are to finally start building a pan-Canadian child care system, with access to child care as an entitlement for all children.

Sadly, the majority of Canada's young children (infants to twelve year olds) are still cared for in unregulated care arrangements because:

- there are only enough licensed and regulated spaces for 12.1% of Canada's children (the number of regulated spaces range from 4.2 % in Saskatchewan to 21.1 % in Quebec, *Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2001: Summary, Childcare Resource and Research Unit*);
- many families cannot afford the current costs of using licensed child care; and
- the current funding fragility makes it impossible for providers to meet the flexible needs of families (e.g., part-time care, shift/seasonal/rural care in home communities).

What we know:

International research indicates that access to affordable, quality, regulated child care contributes to healthy child development; is a significant factor in parents' ability to work, study and participate in communities; and promotes gender equality in employment opportunities.

Canada remains one of the few highly developed industrialized countries in the world that does not have a federally led, publicly funded child care policy and sustainable child care system.

Our children and families need federal leadership, a social policy framework and funding for high quality, regulated, inclusive and affordable child care that reflects the real needs of today's families.

Recommendations to the Minister of Finance and the Prime Minister:

1. Commit sufficient federal funds to support the development of a publicly funded, pan-Canadian child care system (for children from birth to twelve years of age) that is fully inclusive and meets the needs of every child - regardless of their ability, language, culture, family income and status or where they live.

- In November 2002, the **National Liberal Caucus Social Policy Committee** recommended: \$1 billion in year one; \$2.2 billion in year two; \$3.2 billion in year three; and \$4.5 billion in year four specifically to expand spaces and cover operating costs for children 3-6 years of age.
- The **European Union** recommends at least one percent of GDP be targeted to publicly fund child care. For Canada, this 1% of GDP would require approximately \$10 billion to be spent annually.

2. Demonstrate federal leadership in developing a federal/provincial/territorial social policy framework with licensed and regulated child care as the cornerstone of Canada's "family friendly" policies.

- The **Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development** defines family friendly policies as policies that "facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life by fostering adequacy of family resources and child development, favour the parental choice about work and care, and promote gender equality in employment opportunities."
- After almost three decades of child care promises, Canada must move from a fragile patchwork of child care programs and services that vary from community to community and are not accessible to the majority of Canada's children, to building a publicly funded child care system.

3. Require that each provincial/territorial government use federal child care funds to build a publicly funded child care system that is high quality, inclusive, affordable and universally accessible, not-for-profit, and accountable for all public funding.

4. Require that all provincial/territorial governments receiving designated federal funds spend them on improving quality, accessibility and affordability to regulated child care.

- This includes: creating new high quality programs that meet quality standards and are monitored by provincial/territorial governments; enhancing the quality in existing licensed and regulated child care programs such as child care centres, family child care homes, preschools, nursery schools, and school aged programs; addressing affordability for all families; and addressing the professional development/training requirements and wages and working conditions of the child care sector.

5. Require that all provincial/territorial governments receiving federal funds designated for child care maintain or increase their spending on child care and use the federal funds to supplement, not replace, provincial/territorial child care funding.

6. Establish mechanisms to ensure compliance with the terms of a federal/provincial/territorial agreement and develop obligations for public reporting that will give clear data detailing progress in improving access to affordable, quality child care programs and services that meet quality standards and are monitored by provincial/territorial governments.