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B.C. should improve lives of children in care, says rep

B.C. needs a long-range plan similar to one adopted in New Zealand to improve the lives of children in care, the province's new representative for children and youth said yesterday.

Judge Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond called on government and opposition MLAs to put aside political differences to develop a five- or 10-year plan by July.

The non-partisan road map would set five to seven objectives, such as that children should be healthy, safe, and successful in their education. It would also establish key areas that Turpel-Lafond would track, and then report to the public on how the progress of the 9,500 to 10,000 children in government care or home placements -- half of whom are aboriginal.

"British Columbia is certainly one of the wealthiest, healthiest provinces with one of the best education systems in Canada if not more widely," she said. "However, these children are still not doing well. And so my real goal is to see that they do well, because if those children are not doing well, I don't think any parent or family can feel confident."

Turpel-Lafond laid out her proposal to the select standing committee on children and youth yesterday with a pointed reference to the B.C. government's goal of being the best jurisdiction in Canada for children.

"That is a very high aspiration," she said. "Those aspirations need to be put into a clear and comprehensive plan that can be measured and that an independent office such as the representative's office can report out to the public and say: "Here's how we're doing."

Turpel-Lafond noted, for instance, that young girls in care are four times more likely than other teenagers to become pregnant.

This, in turn, means they face greater likelihood of confronting education, health, and mental health issues.