

# Allison Hanes: Toward free early childhood education for all? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Twenty years ago, Quebec distinguished itself as the most family-friendly place in North America by introducing high-quality, subsidized daycare at an affordable price.

Of course what started out as a universal \$5-a-day program in 1997 increased in price over time and parents now contribute between \$7.75 and \$21.20 per day, depending on their income. But compared to families elsewhere in Canada, who pay the equivalent of a second mortgage for sometimes sketchy care, Quebecers are blessed.

As the network turns 20, the Association québécoise des centres de la petite enfance is now looking toward the future. It set up a roving independent commission that held consultations last fall on the next frontiers for daycare. On Tuesday, it issued a report that dreams big, calling for free, universally accessible early childhood education that is better integrated with the school system.

The pitch is at odds with government policy since the Liberals took office in 2014 and cut \$300 million from daycare, raised rates, put the brakes on expansion and rolled out more junior kindergarten for 4-year-olds.

The commissioners could have just pushed for a reinvestment. Instead they make a strong case for a revolution that starts with the premise: why does society take responsibility for educating children starting at age 5 (or, increasingly, age 4) but, for the most part, leaves the development of babies and toddlers to chance?

As Pierre Landry, one of the three commissioners put it: no one is questioning whether health care or high school should be free, so why is early childhood education any different? "It's a question of coherence."

It's fine to think children belong at home with their mothers (or fathers) until they are ready to start school. That's a choice many make. But not all parents can afford not to work. Not all parents want to give up their jobs. The reality is more children are spending increasing amounts of time in childcare. Therefore it is imperative that this care be of the best possible quality.

But there have never been enough publicly funded daycare spaces to meet demand, despite Quebec spending \$2.3 billion a year on 225,000 places. Parents practically have to sign their child up at the first sign of a positive pregnancy in hopes of securing a coveted spot some day. If nothing materializes in time, they turn to private daycares with an educational program, or home-based daycares, both regulated and not.

Quebec offers a tax credit for parents who use private daycare — a measure of fairness to families who don't have access to a CPE. It even pays it out monthly. In 2015, the province provided \$609 million in tax relief for childcare expenses to 455,000 households.

But subsidizing daycare is about more than defraying costs. It should be about nurturing the next generation, ensuring their optimal development and setting them on the right path early. Tax credits don't create quality daycare the way investing in a network does.

To be sure, there are some good private daycare centres just like there are some sub-par CPEs. But generally speaking, studies that compare the quality between public and private daycare — even ones with educational programs — show there is no contest.

In depth evaluations done by the Institut de la statistique du Québec in 2014 found that two thirds of children under 18 months received good or excellent care in CPEs, while just two per cent received poor quality care. In private centres it was the reverse: four out of 10 babies received poor care while a mere 7 per cent benefited from good care.

For older children, ages 18 months to 5 years, 45 per cent of children received good or excellent care in CPEs, while 51 per cent got acceptable service and 4 per cent poor quality care. In private centres 10 per cent of children got good care, 43 per cent got acceptable care — but 36 per cent received care that didn't meet educational program requirements.

CPEs are the foundation to build upon if Quebec wants to take its already progressive family policies to the next level. The AQCPÉ commissioners offer a vision of what's possible in a not so distant future: one ministry in charge of family and education policy from birth until age 16; guaranteed access to free, high-quality care for all children; a continuous approach to child development from daycare

through the school years.

The commission didn't cost out its plan, but past research has shown a significant return on Quebec's investment in subsidized daycare. Some 70,000 more mothers participating in the workforce had contributed an additional \$5 billion to GDP by 2008. A 2012 study by three renowned Quebec taxation experts from the Université de Sherbrooke found that each \$100 of daycare subsidy paid out by the Quebec government generated a return of \$104 for itself and a windfall of \$43 for the federal government.

Free early childhood education for all may sound inconceivable today. But once upon a time so did \$5-a-day daycare and a made-in-Quebec parental leave program that provides higher benefits to more people and exclusive time just for fathers. This is exactly the kind of projet de société Quebecers have a knack for turning from dream to reality.

Highlights of early childhood education commission report:

- The government should recognize that all daycare services are meant to be educational with a focus on nurturing, socialization, stimulation and development through play-based learning.
- Early childhood education should be free for all children from birth to age 4, just like school.
- One minister and ministry should be in charge of education for all Quebec children from birth to age 16.
- There must be better continuity in educational services from early childhood through to school years.
- One tool be created to track a child's development during early childhood to help facilitate the transition to school.
- Early childhood educators should have better training, including being required to have a diploma or degree and to participate periodically in professional development seminars.
- All new family-based daycare providers should receive a college diploma before being accredited and that a specialized program be created with their needs in mind.
- Degree programs for early childhood and primary education should offer more courses on preschoolers to better prepare kindergarten and pre-kindergarten teachers.
- Tax credits should be cancelled for unregulated daycare centres to give parents incentives to put their children in an educational milieu.
- Daycares that bill themselves as educational should be required to meet minimum standards or lose their accreditation.
- More outreach and recruitment should be done to attract children from disadvantaged backgrounds to early childhood education programs.
- To reach more vulnerable children, those who have never attended daycare should get priority in junior kindergarten programs for 4-year-olds.

-reprinted from Montreal Gazette

**Region:** Quebec <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** quality <sup>[4]</sup>

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