

Allison Hanes: The policies and politics of early childhood education ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Sommet sur l'éducation de la petite enfance was not supposed to be political.

The conference, bringing together early childhood educators, researchers and business leaders Thursday and Friday at the Palais des congrès in Montreal, was organized to reflect on the first 20 years of Quebec's subsidized daycare program and discuss where to go from here.

But worrying moves that may imperil its future and threaten to undo the good work of the last two decades prompted a few of the participants break the taboo, starting with Pauline Marois.

The mother of the cherished program, Marois introduced \$5-a-day daycare as Quebec's Family Minister back in 1997. Regardless of what you think of her politics, Quebecers owe Marois a debt of gratitude for helping make this the most family-friendly place in North America. Along with parental leave, which since 2006 has offered higher premiums and exclusive time for fathers, the daycare program Marois pioneered today boasts 230,000 subsidized childcare places, mainly in 1,500 Centres de la petite enfance. It has helped 70,000 mothers enter the workforce and led to a return on investment of \$104 for every \$100 Quebec spent on the initiative (plus \$43 for Ottawa).

But since Premier Philippe Couillard's Liberals took power in 2014, they have ended universality, imposed income-based fees, cut \$300 million, put the brakes on expansion and allowed an explosion in the number of private centres.

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it," Marois said, to a standing ovation from the room.

It was a tough act to follow for Sébastien Proulx, Quebec's Minister of Family and Education, who touted the \$8 billion the province spends annually on family policies, from tax breaks to daycare, as well as his government's new drive to recognize early childhood education as key in helping young Quebecers succeed in school and life.

This acknowledgment is among the slightly more positive signals that the Liberal government has been sending (belatedly) toward public daycares. There was a very modest reinvestment — \$130 million over five years — in CPEs in the recent Quebec budget in a chapter on education spending hopefully entitled: "A plan for success: Lifelong learning from early childhood."

But in his address, Proulx also referenced an announcement he'd made a day earlier: a vast "revision operation" to look at where government-subsidized early childhood education services are plentiful and where they are needed. If the objective is simply to help prioritize investments in new CPEs or figure out the best place to roll out its new pre-kindergarten programs, that would make sense.

But something far more sinister may be afoot. Searching for "surplus" spaces and putting in place "incentives, on a voluntary basis" to "encourage the taking back of certain places" sounds downright alarming.

For starters, I don't know of anywhere there is a "surplus" of places in CPEs. If the program has had one flaw in its 20 years of existence, it's that there have never been enough spots to meet demand. There may be some areas that are reasonably well-served compared to others, but there are waiting lists everywhere, especially for babies and toddlers.

Some CPEs might be finding it more challenging to compete for 4-year-olds now that 188 pre-kindergarten classes are being rolled out across Quebec. But then the government should help refocus resources on younger children who are waiting, not suggest it will claw back subsidies.

If the government in any way tries to shrink the number of spaces in CPEs, it would shirk its responsibility to all Quebec children.

The Liberals have been relying on the private sector to step in to meet demand pressures. It has allowed 14,000 new places in private daycares in the last year alone, where barely 5,000 were created in CPEs. Meanwhile, income-based fees of between \$7.75 and \$21.20 a day in public centres coupled with tax rebates for families who use private ones, are making CPEs less attractive to budget-conscious

parents. This is despite wide and well-documented disparities in quality that show the vast majority of CPEs offer superior care.

Proulx peppered his speech Thursday with mentions about providing “service to parents.” But that just shows his priorities are skewed. At its heart, daycare is about the children.

Camil Bouchard, a psychology professor, who authored a landmark 1991 report “Un Québec fou de ses enfants” that inspired the daycare program, said private centres may be more efficient, if dollars and cents are the sole measure. But that means they pay their employees less and don’t offer them many benefits – which results in constant turnover that disrupts children’s attachment to their educators and undermines care.

If anything, Bouchard said Quebec should be moving toward the recommendation made by a roving commission set up last year by the Association québécoise des centres de la petite enfance: free quality childcare for all children. Quebec doesn’t charge income-based fees from primary or high school because it recognizes it as an essential public service. So why charge for the education of children ages 0 to 5 – the most crucial period in human development?

Quebec now spends \$2.5 billion a year on subsidized childcare for its youngest citizens. Lest you should balk at this amount, consider the wisdom of Alexandre Taillefer, a prominent Quebec businessman who has recently taken up the defence of CPEs as a crucial social good that supports workers, boosts the economy and invests in the next generation from the start.

During a panel discussion at the conference, Taillefer, who professes himself apolitical, said the government should not be looking at money it puts into early childhood education (or education or public health or mental health for that matter) as “spending.” Rather, it should see it as a valuable investment that will pay off in a thriving society down the road.

The system ain’t broken. It’s just being neglected.

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