

Allison Hanes: Education strategy is welcome, but is it progress or patching holes? ^[1]

In its deficit-slaying, budget-balancing drive, Quebec Liberals put the squeeze on education

Author: Hanes, Allison

Source: Montreal Gazette

Format: Article

Publication Date: 15 Jan 2018

AVAILABILITY

[Read online](#) ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Investing in its youngest citizens to give all children have an strong start in life is one of the smartest things a government can do, especially in a society as well off as Quebec.

So the announcement of a \$1.4-billion strategy Tuesday, made with much fanfare by Premier Philippe Couillard, Education Minister Sébastien Proulx and Family Minister Luc Fortin, aimed at the 800,000 children age 8 and under in this province, must be evidence of this government's commitment to kids and families, right?

In many ways it is: all Quebec children will get an eye exam paid for by the government to diagnose any vision problems as they enter kindergarten; Quebec will fund free breakfasts for children in schools with a high number of under-privileged students so they start the day with full bellies; 8,000 more resource personnel, like speech therapists, psychologists and behaviour specialists, will be hired in primary schools over the coming years to help children experiencing difficulties; some of these remedial resources will also be made available to children in daycare; more pre-kindergarten classes for 4-year-olds will be added to the 289 that have already been formed, mainly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods; an electronic file will be created that will follow youngsters from daycare to school to smooth this important transition; there will be funding for community groups that work with children who don't attend daycare.

The measures are welcome and needed. It's hard to criticize \$1.4 billion being poured into young children between now and 2022. And unlike last year's provincial budget, where the bulk of new funding was geared toward children age 4 and up, this plan for 0- to 8-year-olds does have some money for preschool children, especially the most vulnerable ones.

But it's hard not to question whether these new investments are a marker of real progress or simply repairing earlier damage inflicted on the early childhood and primary education system?

Recall that one of the first orders of business for this government when taking office in 2014 was to cancel universal \$7-a-day parental contribution for subsidized daycare and replace it with an income-contingent fee structure that charged parents up to \$20 a day. (Indexation means that today, those in the top income bracket pay \$21.95).

Perhaps this unexpected hike could have been justified as a necessary reinvestment in their children's care, but the Liberals went on to slash more than \$110 million from the operating budgets of Centres de la petite enfance. So despite paying more, Quebec parents soon found their children were getting much less.

Meanwhile, in its deficit-slaying, budget-balancing drive, the Liberals put the squeeze on education. Annual spending increases were held to such minuscule amounts that they felt like funding cuts, even if they didn't represent one in real terms. So during those lean years, there were fewer library books, resource personnel to help students with special needs were let go and help with homework was axed.

Now the Couillard government has made a 180-degree turnaround. With public finances overhauled and a thriving economy filling public coffers, the Quebec Liberals are making children and education one of their top priorities heading into an election. That's all well and good, but the rate of reinvestment makes one wonder: Why exact a pound of flesh from education in the first place?

Quebec has started rolling out pre-kindergarten classes and giving school boards more money to hire back resource personnel. In addition to money for what happens in the classrooms, the government this week announced \$740 million to renovate crumbling schools, including \$286 million for those in Montreal, where the need is greatest.

But playing catch-up for the last few years has been destabilizing. The pre-K rollout has been so quick that an early assessment suggested it might not be reaching its goals. The competition for hiring more staff on such short notice has been so fierce, some classes had no teacher on the first day of school or have since had a revolving cast of supply teachers. And the sum allocated for renovations may seem huge, but so is the need. It will cover mostly minor projects — 2,000 fixes in 1,300 schools — and so far there is nothing for brand-new construction, especially in downtown Montreal where there are zero public schools for more than 300 children currently living there.

And there has been very little love for CPEs from this government over its mandate. They've basically abandoned a jewel in Quebec's family policy crown, preferring tax breaks for parents to send their children to private daycare centres instead of ensuring all families have access to public early childhood centres. Never mind that studies consistently show CPEs offer better quality care — of the calibre the Quebec government has now deemed so crucial to small children's future success.

Let's give the Couillard government marks for recognizing, if belatedly, the importance of the transition to school and the first few years of primary education. But let's not forget that in some ways, they're making up what should never have been lost in the first place.

-reprinted from Montreal Gazette

Related link:

Region: Quebec [3]

Tags: funding [4]

investment [5]

non-profit [6]

quality [7]

infrastructure [8]

pre-school [9]

disadvantaged children [10]

early intervention [11]

family [12]

policy [13]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/18/01/allison-hanes-education-strategy-welcome-it-progress-or-patching>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/18/01/allison-hanes-education-strategy-welcome-it-progress-or-patching> [2]

<https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/columnists/allison-hanes-education-strategy-is-welcome-but-is-it-progress-or-patching-holes> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7855> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/investment> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/non-profit> [7]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality> [8] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/infrastructure> [9]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/pre-school> [10] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/disadvantaged-children> [11]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/early-intervention> [12] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/family> [13]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/policy>