

B.C. can learn what works and what doesn't from Quebec's child care plan, says economist ^[1]

As British Columbia hashes out its child care plan a Quebec economist says the province can learn what works and what doesn't from the two-decade-old Quebec system.

Author: Nuttall, Jeremy

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EXCERPTS

A Quebec economist has words of advice for British Columbia as the province grapples with creating its own universal child care plan, including not buying into rhetoric about inflated costs of such a program.

Pierre Fortin, a self-described "right-of-centre" economist with the University of Quebec at Montreal, said his research has found the Quebec system actually makes money for government coffers rather than draining them. B.C. can learn from Quebec's successes, but also from where it's fallen short in its program, Fortin said.

"My take is that it's been a very successful in improving work-family balance," he said. "But, on the other hand, there are a lot of challenges remaining to make sure that children get the best education and health quality standards."

The program has been credited for Quebec having more women between age 20 and 44 participating in the labour force than any modern economy in the world at about 87 per cent. It's one of the systems being looked at by the provincial government as B.C. develops its own program.

B.C. Minister of State for Child care Katrina Chen said the province aims to build the system around affordability, quality and accessibility, believing ideas to make it happen can be found within Quebec's 20-year-old system.

"We have to make something that works for B.C. communities," Chen said, stressing B.C. has its own specific challenges. "We are a very diverse community with different needs."

Currently there are only enough child care spaces in B.C. to serve 18 per cent of the children in the province. In its recent budget B.C.'s government started down a path to create 22,000 more with a three-year, \$1 billion plan.

B.C.'s New Democrat government's push to establish a universal child care within the next decade began earlier this month with some parents eligible for childcare fee reductions. Further reductions for families earning fewer than \$111,000 a year begin in September.

Chen said through reducing costs, boosting subsidies and creating spaces, many of them public, parents will eventually see a reliable and affordable childcare regiment in B.C.

The province has asked private child care providers to voluntarily opt in to a government program paying for a portion of child care costs to, in turn, lower them for parents. So far the plan has received mixed reviews from operators, according to media reports.

It's the start of some relief child care advocates have been saying is desperately needed for families in one of the world's most expensive cities, where wages remain relatively low compared to other Canadian cities at about \$80,000 per year in 2015.

The median cost for a child care space in B.C. is \$1,250 jumping to \$1,360 in Vancouver while, according to Statistics Canada in 2015, parents in Quebec pay an average of \$200 a month. Quebec's system is the only comprehensive universal child care program in the country.

As Victoria builds its child care system, Lynell Anderson of the Coalition for Childcare Advocates of B.C. said fee reductions and space development need to come in balance with quality control.

Anderson said to accomplish the goal the program must be phased in carefully.

"When you stage it in you can make sure to attend to the quality and affordability and availability over time," she said.

Advocates are not proposing simply implementing the Quebec program verbatim, she said, merely to learn from it because B.C. is smaller and has different needs.

More rural areas in the province and programs tailored to Indigenous needs will need to be considered in the province, Anderson said.

Borrowing from the Quebec system is a sound idea but B.C. must not inadvertently recreate its problems, said Fortin.

The province also needs to ensure the benefits of the program are clear to all, Fortin said.

"The fear the B.C. premier may have is it's going to be very costly," he said.

But Fortin's research found the Quebec system not only pays for itself, it creates a surplus. In 2008 the program cost \$1.2 billion, but netted \$2.1 billion in revenue for the federal and provincial governments, according to his numbers.

He said the additional funds came from taxes due to the boost of women entering the provincial labour market, stressing B.C. residents must understand they will not see a similar benefit immediately as it takes time for a significant amount of women to join the workforce.

But the Quebec system has had some consistency issues. Studies show children who have attended the Centre De La Petite Enfance — public daycare centres — have better cognitive and behavioural results as they grow up.

At the same time research has found fully private daycares in Quebec often don't measure up, he said.

About 17 per cent of Quebec children in child care attend fully private operations and parents receive subsidies to pay for them, taking some strain off the overloaded public system.

Such facilities are found to be of considerably lower quality and do not deliver the same results for the children attending them, Fortin said.

B.C. must have a reliable enforcement regime to keep private daycares up to the standard of their public counterparts to keep the system consistent, he said.

The province must also avoid tying subsidies to household income to gain widespread support from the region's top earners, he said,

Minister Chen said recruitment and retention strategies for child care workers to make the system happen will be a priority for the province.

It has also earmarked \$136 million to boost education for early childhood educators as part its \$1 billion plan.

Low wages making the sector unattractive to potential child care workers is also an issue, she said, and the province is working with the Public Service Alliance of Canada to determine fair wages.

Chen said more funding announcements related to the program will be announced in May.

-reprinted from The Star Vancouver

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