

When 'universal' child care isn't universally high-quality ^[1]

Quebec made up for shortages in its day-care system by letting private centers step in—and different families are getting very different experiences.

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EXCERPTS

It was one of the more surprising presidential vetoes in U.S. history. Having passed Congress in 1971 with bipartisan support (and with input from the Nixon administration), the Comprehensive Child Development Act arrived on President Richard Nixon's desk with decent prospects. The country was poised to rebuild the national child-care system it had built during—and abandoned after—World War II.

But it was not to be. In announcing his decision to veto the bill, Nixon warned that a universal child-care system would “commit the vast moral authority of the National Government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against the family-centered approach.” The veto bolstered conservative skepticism of public funding of child care, which has helped stymie efforts to expand early-childhood education ever since.

Today, the U.S. is somewhat of an outlier among developed countries, which tend to offer more-substantial public support for paid parental leave and child care. The Canadian province of Quebec, for example, is two decades into a policy experiment that provides generous parental leave, monthly cash benefits families can use for their children, and a heavily subsidized child-care system. The *politique familiale* (“family policy”)—which was launched in 1997 with a policy brief entitled *Les enfants au cœur de nos choix*, or “children at the heart of our choices”—shows how such programs can be framed as economic imperatives. It also reveals that a universal child-care system doesn't have to be a singular, unitary institution: It can be delivered via numerous different types of care centers, both public and private.

Quebec's family policy begins with up to 55 weeks of paid leave for parents when they have or adopt a child, as well as a yearly allowance of anywhere from \$500 to about \$1,900 (in American dollars) that families receive per kid under the age of 18. But the policy's central piece is Quebec's full-day, year-round child-care program for all children under 5, which the province annually subsidizes with roughly \$2 billion in public funding. Quebec families cover part of the costs on a sliding scale, with the wealthiest families paying around \$17 per day for their first child. In 2016, nearly 300,000 children were enrolled in the province's system.

But just because the program is “universal” does not mean it is uniform. A plurality of the province's young children attend *centres de la petite enfance* (CPE)—publicly subsidized, nonprofit child-care centers that collect small daily fees. Families apply through a centralized lottery system, with many kids granted preference to a given center if their siblings are already enrolled there or (in some cases) if their parents work in the same building. But funding limitations mean CPEs can't serve everyone who wants their services. Families say it's normal to spend several years on CPE waitlists before getting a slot.

So, in 2003, provincial leaders created a tax credit that reimburses families for up to 75 percent of tuition at private child-care centers and home-based care options. This new option helped ease Quebec's child-care-undersupply problem for more families. It also helped the number of seats in unsubsidized private centers in Quebec skyrocket: Slots in these centers, many of them for-profit ones, grew by 3,000 percent between 2003 and 2016, reaching more than 55,000 seats. The total number of child-care seats in the province grew by a relatively modest 73 percent during the same period.

Cristian Cano, a restaurant manager who immigrated from Chile and has lived in Quebec for 21 years, is among the thousands of parents

who ended up enrolling their kids in an unsubsidized private center because of the CPE space limitations. Cano and his wife resorted to a home-based child-care center run by a Haitian woman they knew. While happy with the outcome, Cano argued that the provincial government ought to allocate more funding to CPEs.

A visit to a CPE—one of the nonprofit, publicly subsidized centers—makes it clear why these centers are so popular with Quebec families. CPE Populaire St-Michel is located in a borough just northwest of downtown Montreal, where almost half of the residents are immigrants. Its 220 children are spread across three programs—the infants are in a nursery that employs one adult for every five children; older kids are grouped by age in noisy, cheerful classrooms connected by a purple hallway.

Teachers put kids in charge of their learning, its director explained, encouraging them to move and explore. Part of a local cooperative aimed at getting more children outdoors, CPE Populaire St-Michel's courtyard features a sandpit and (in the spring) a butterfly garden. If children get dirty, they can wash off using hoses with showerheads that accompany the padded mats, balls, and the bucketful of hockey sticks in the center's motricite ("movement") room. St-Michel even keeps its children active during the long winters when it's too cold outside, letting kids ride bikes up and down the hallway. Then it refuels them with fresh lunches prepared on-site. When I visited, the kitchen served kids broccoli omelettes with mixed salad and grilled potatoes; they were slated to have Greek turkey dumplings and herbed rice with tzatziki sauce the following day.

In and of itself, variability in the delivery of public education isn't a bad thing. Families have diverse needs and preferences—parents' schedules can be inflexible, their kids may have allergies, and so on. A single curriculum, delivered through a single type of child-care center, is unlikely to meet everyone's needs. What's more, new public early-education initiatives don't arise in isolation. It was easier for policymakers to provide public support for private child-care providers than it was to dramatically expand the CPEs.

But Quebec's example shows that a diverse system of child-care providers also comes with challenges. The government imposes stricter learning standards on the publicly subsidized CPEs; it has less oversight of the private providers. As a result, a given private provider may be able to attract families concerned primarily with cost not by its educational quality but rather by its low tuition. As part of a 2014 government study, observers rated the CPEs considerably higher than they did private providers across a range of factors, including teachers' interactions with infants, the facilities, and educational programming. The upshot: In creating the tax credit, Quebec may have achieved one prong of the family policy's mission at the expense of another. As the University of Quebec at Montreal economist Pierre Fortin put it, "We have two tiers of child care: One that is of very high quality and one that is of low quality."

Still, in subsidizing such programs, Quebec has ultimately made well-resourced, affordable early-childhood education the norm. When the provincial government had to cut the equivalent of about \$93 million in CPE funding several years ago as part of austerity measures, a 2016 Montreal Gazette article lamented that one center "had to ration food" by reducing the amount of meat it served and halting its fresh-fish offerings; the center, the article noted, could "no longer afford to make sandwiches with croissants." Such cuts certainly aren't negligible—CPE St-Édouard's director Luce Vandemeulebroecke, for example, had to reduce her teachers' hours, and many centers have found themselves increasingly reliant on philanthropy. Still, that a rollback on croissants made headlines attests to the relative strength of public commitment to the program.

While CPEs serve children from birth to 5 years old, most American public prekindergarten sites only serve 3- and 4-year-olds. For comparison's sake, a cut of \$93 million would eliminate about 40 percent of the pre-K spending in Washington, D.C., which runs one of the country's most widely accessible early-education systems. D.C. preschoolers wouldn't just lose field trips and balanced meals. The program would cease to exist—at least as a system striving to serve all children.

It doesn't have to be that way. Quebec's CPEs show that it's possible to create an expansive, publicly funded system of high-quality child care and early-education centers whose reach extends far beyond the most impoverished kids. Of course, "expansive" sounds expensive, and new public funding is always challenging to come by.

Fortunately, Quebec's family policy also demonstrates that these systems produce economic benefits for the public by means of easing pressures on working families, especially when combined with paid parental leave and child allowance programs. Eighty percent of Quebec mothers with children 5 or younger participate in the labor force, according to Fortin—9 percentage points higher than mothers living in other Canadian provinces. In the United States, that figure is 65 percent of mothers with children 6 or younger.

Increases in the number of working mothers generate additional tax revenues and help offset the province's labor shortage caused by the

province's aging population, with data suggesting that the increased productivity helps the universal-child-care program pay for itself. One study estimates that the program raised the province's annual GDP by the equivalent of about \$3.9 billion. Quebec's business community was initially wary of the policy because of its high costs, noted Michel Leblanc, the president and CEO of Montreal's chamber of commerce. "But very rapidly the impacts on the participation of women in the workforce were very clear," he said, "While Quebec was lacking in this regard before," he said, "now Quebec is leading Canada."

The business case for expanding early education and family-support programs can help expand political coalitions for these systems. After all, the United States's first large, public child-care system wasn't designed as an entitlement program, but rather as a means of funneling more mothers to the World War II assembly lines.

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