

Allison Hanes: We must take care of those who care for our children ^[1]

The people to whom we entrust our children's safety often get paid the least and treated the worst.

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Source: Montreal Gazette

Format: Article

Publication Date: 14 May 2018

AVAILABILITY

Read/watch online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Every morning, thousands of Quebec parents leave their little ones at their local Centre de la petite enfance until they come to get them again at the end of the work day.

We entrust our children's social, emotional and intellectual development, as well as their nutrition and physical fitness, to the educators, cooks and support workers at these subsidized childcare centres.

But do we ever wonder about how much they earn, their benefits or the conditions they work under?

Rotating strikes that have hit various CPEs in recent months, may prompt us to pause and consider their crucial work, including one set for Thursday in Montreal and Laval that could affect 3,000 children at 60 different daycare centres.

Qualified early childcare educators make between \$18.52 an hour and \$24.56 an hour, according to figures available on the site of the Quebec family ministry, though workers in private daycares may make less, not be unionized and have fewer benefits.

It's difficult to think of a more crucial job than nurturing the next generation of little Quebecers during the day while their parents work, and preparing them to succeed in school and society.

Every morning, thousands of Quebec parents kiss their children goodbye and watch them climb the steps of those ubiquitous big yellow school buses.

We trust that the drivers will ferry them to school safely and home again in the afternoons.

But do we ever spare a thought for how much those drivers earn and what conditions they work under?

Recent strikes that have hit various sectors of the school transport industry over the past few months have highlighted the plight of drivers, including one set for Tuesday that could affect 110,000 kids from 32 school boards across the province (though not the English Montreal School Board).

Many school bus drivers earn about \$17.86 per hour, for an annual salary of \$19,288, according the Secteur transport scolaire de la Fédération des employées et employés de services publics of the CSN, the union organizing the strike. Others earn just over \$12 an hour, little more than minimum wage — and hardly a living wage.

They have to leave their homes at the crack of dawn to be at the wheel for their early morning routes. Those in rural areas often drive great distances in often poor weather conditions, while those in the city have to fight snarled traffic — all while maintaining control of their at times loud and unruly passengers.

It's not a high-skilled job, although drivers are subject to rigorous background checks. But getting 521,000 school children (or 60 per cent of Quebec's primary- and high-school students) to class and back each day is nevertheless a lot of responsibility.

Every morning, thousands of Montreal children arriving on foot or bike reach their school with the assistance of a crossing guard.

We trust these adults to keep an eye out for speeding cars or kids not paying attention to the traffic signals and to help pedestrians cross busy city intersections.

But do we ever consider how much these individuals make to stand in the sun, snow, sleet and rain before and after class or even at lunchtime?

The 620 crossing guards on the island of Montreal recently voted 92 per cent in favour of a strike before the end of the school year, after rejecting their latest contract offer. No date has been set. The average crossing guard makes \$13,000 a year, according to the FTQ-affiliated Syndicat canadien de la fonction publique.

Parents may feel held hostage by the loss of childcare, school bus service and potentially crossing guards for a day. But at the same time, it begs the question: how much value do we put on the work of looking after our children?

Much like the debate a few months ago surrounding the number of Quebec nurses burning out because of forced overtime and heavy burdens of patients to look after on a shift, it often seems we undervalue caregivers in our society.

In this respect, early childcare educators can be compared to nurses or teachers, who also have complained in recent years about increasing workloads and high exhaustion rates. Early childhood educators are our partners in bringing up our children. To ensure our babies, toddler and pre-schoolers are left in the best possible hands when we as parents aren't present, we must compensate them in ways that recognize their importance — to our children, to our families, to society.

It's perhaps unfair to compare the work of a childcare worker at a CPE with a bus driver or a crossing guard, who spend many fewer hours a day with our kids, and who may only be working part time. But they are still part of our children's lives. They help protect them as they make their way to school. These drivers and guards may even be familiar and friendly faces. Yet their work doesn't generate much appreciation or respect.

How we look after the people who look after our kids says a lot about a society.

[Video available to view online: "Quebec's public daycare system explained"]

Related link: When 'universal' child care isn't universally high-quality^[3]

Region: Quebec^[4]

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