

# What PEI and Quebec can teach the rest of Canada about improving child care <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

## EXCERPTS

For a top-notch child-care system close to home, Canadians should look to the country's smallest province.

Over the past two years, Prince Edward Island has launched what many experts consider the most comprehensive child-care strategy since Quebec brought in its renowned low-fee program in 1997.

PEI is tackling an issue that child-care advocates argue Canada needs to address to boost the economy, relieve families of the rising cost of care that's often poor quality and improve the futures of the next generation of skilled workers.

In 2010, PEI decided to move kindergarten – until then publicly funded but delivered by private daycare centres – into the school system. The government recognized it was creating a major problem for child care. The existing centres estimated they would lose 40 per cent of their children and a major source of revenue, so to cover the costs, they would have to hike the fees for younger kids.

To make matters worse, the province offered the newly created kindergarten teaching jobs to qualified early-childhood educators (provided they agreed to work toward a university-level degree in the field). This meant centres would lose some of their best staff, if not the owners themselves. If the daycare closed, some towns stood to lose their only source of child care.

So the province started over. Before the new program, PEI had the highest percentage of regulated spots in Canada – double the national average – though its overall financial investment in the system was low. Child-care providers complained that the combination of poor funding and seasonal work force meant they sometimes couldn't cover salaries or electricity bills.

But by 2011, a year after the first class of five-year-olds arrived at school, the province had built a network of 45 licensed Early Years Centres with stable funding agreements. Parent fees were set by the province, staff training was under way, and a provincial curriculum was in place. The number of infant spaces doubled.

It's easy to dismiss PEI's progress as too small-scale to be instructive – the province is spending \$7-million, one-tenth of 1 per cent of its GDP. (By comparison, Quebec spends \$2.2-billion on its child-care system, or roughly 0.7 per cent.) PEI has a population of just 140,000 – less than one-tenth that of Montreal – and fewer than 6,000 kids under five.

European countries have built their national child-care programs in small, focused steps. And PEI's progress has earned praise from the country's leading childhood development experts.

"The goal is to create the best positive environment for the next generation," says Premier Robert Ghiz in an interview with The Globe and Mail.

"If we want to compete with the Chinas and the Indias in the world, it needs to start with the education system."

As both Quebec – which keeps working to improve quality and add spaces to its popular, publicly funded, \$7-a-day system – and PEI demonstrate, good education and a modern family policy can start long before kids arrive at kindergarten.

Here are 10 lessons that should guide a national discussion to improve child care in the rest of the country.

### 1. Make the economic case clear

Public child care is an expensive investment and a tough political sell when the majority of the population – the segment that most votes – is long past the days of diaper bags. But the benefits of affordable, accessible child care to the economy and the health of families and children aren't confined to one generation.

PEI, along with Quebec, considers early learning a labour-force strategy as well as a child-development issue. To boost its population and its economy, PEI has increased immigration and launched public relations campaigns to lure native islanders home.

The province is trying to expand in tech industries such as aerospace and bioscience, and Mr. Ghiz says cutting-edge child care "will help train the next generation of islanders for the work force" and help attract people back.

## **2. Call it education**

One of the first moves PEI made was to shift child care from social services to the Education Ministry, says Kathleen Flanagan, the child-care consultant whose report formed the basis of the province's strategy. The move established the program's child-development goals and put educators in charge of its design. (Four other provinces and two territories have done the same.)

Like PEI, several provinces have developed guidelines for a play-based curriculum for regulated centres, focusing on areas such as language, well-being and social responsibility. The province took an extra step by assigning each early learning centre with a government "coach" to help raise teaching standards.

## **3. Create enough regulated care spaces**

Having enough licensed spaces for children, and reducing the country's growing wait lists, makes it possible for governments to set standards, control costs and build on best practices. Currently, too many families have to use unlicensed home-based care that is not even inspected for safety. Or they turn to expensive for-profit options. Ideally, child care in Canada would be offered in regulated, publicly funded, non-profit centres with certified staff and high government standards – the setting where studies consistently find quality to be highest. Once there are enough spaces in a public system, as in Sweden, niche private care can exist to provide competition.

Although some private centres and family daycares still exist in the province, PEI focused its funding on designated centres that agreed to meet higher provincial standards in care and accountability.

## **4. Make fees affordable, consistent – and capped**

Child-care costs have increased steadily as working parents scramble for too few spaces, subject to whatever the market will bear. In order to get the economic benefits of early-childhood education, fees have to be low enough that all families can afford them. Setting a reasonable, maximum fee – even if there is a sliding scale based on income, as many European countries have done – eases the uncertainty.

PEI decided on a maximum daily rate – currently \$26 for toddlers and \$33 for infants – based on the median of fees charged across the Atlantic provinces.

That is significantly more expensive than Quebec's \$7 a day, but for most island parents, their cost either stayed the same or was reduced. Still, the price is a sticking point for parents, and critics say the existing subsidy for poor families needs improvement. Affordability, claims Mr. Ghiz, is one of the next priorities. "We can't do everything at once," he says, when asked about lowering the fee. "This was a huge investment for us."

## **5. Train the teachers – and pay them for it**

A national survey last year found that the average hourly wage for a child-care worker was \$16.50, about the same as a data-entry clerk. One-quarter of those working full-time at a centre also held down a second job. No wonder about half of graduates from postsecondary ECE programs, according to Canadian statistics, don't end up working in the field.

Yet having a well-trained, professional staff is the most important ingredient for quality child care. Low wages cause high turnover, which has been linked to poor care, and create a disincentive for people to go into the field or to upgrade their skills. Staff shortages mean governments have little choice but to bend the rules on qualification standards, already low in comparison to those of many European countries. And benefits and working conditions tend to be worse in for-profit care, which is on the rise in Canada.

To tackle staff issues, PEI created a province-wide wage scale and, recognizing that pay was low, started by giving everyone a raise, with future increases tied to levels of training. Every worker is required to be certified or working toward it. Since many of the most qualified staff joined the school system, the government worked with the local university and college to design new postsecondary programs so employees could stay on the job while taking courses and use their college credits toward a university degree. The province covers the cost of tuition. Child-care staff also participate in paid professional development days, the same as school teachers.

## **6. Location, location, location**

"Child care is not going to develop like McDonald's," says California author and child-care specialist Kristen Anderson, "because it's highly regulated and there isn't a profit if the care is high-quality."

Currently, child care in Canada often sprouts up whenever someone wants to start a home daycare or where a for-profit centre can attract clientele. But building a regulated child-care system calls for careful planning – in the same way that schools are located – to make sure that money is spent efficiently and that poor families get good options. Governments and, especially, cities need to make child care a priority in urban planning, locating centres near transit hubs, growing neighbourhoods and industrial parks and offices. Although many cities already offer subsidies to new developments, they are usually too small to compensate for prohibitive property costs in downtown cores – high-traffic locations for working parents.

The best place: schools, where underused classrooms can be more easily converted, the outdoor space already exists, and, as kids grow in one place, teachers and early-childhood educators can work together. What's more, in addition to being convenient for parents and good for siblings, new research suggests that having little kids in the mix has a positive benefit on students of all ages.

Before deciding on which centres to subsidize, or where to build new ones, PEI created a plan based on demand, so that early-learning centres were funded where families needed them most – a measure that Quebec fumbled early on in its race to create spaces. Otherwise, unlicensed, unregulated care is more likely to fill the gap.

## 7. Infant care is complicated

Care for kids 18 months and under is the most expensive, the hardest to find and, research suggests, not necessarily what's best for a baby. The countries with the most progressive early-education programs typically dodge this challenge by making it easier for parents to stay home during the first year. Quebec followed their lead by boosting parental leave benefits when it started its child-care program in 1997. The \$10-a-day child-care plan being proposed by advocates in British Columbia also includes extending parental leave to 18 months.

PEI didn't go that route, instead doubling the number of spaces for infants by making care for this age group mandatory for the new early-learning centres. But wait lists persist. The province tried to encourage existing home daycares to focus on infant care by offering support and financial incentives, but hasn't been that successful. Mr. Ghiz says solving this problem is next on the list.

## 8. After-school care shouldn't be an afterthought

Families often scramble to find care for their children in elementary school. Programs also have long wait lists, which means informal care – particularly by relatives – is common. As Ontario has learned, full-day kindergarten isn't a solution if parents can't find someone to watch their five-year-olds at 3 p.m. The programs with the most success at reducing wait lists are ones run by the school board, as cities such as Ottawa and Waterloo have recently demonstrated.

PEI's plan does not include school-aged kids, although some of the early-learning centres offer programs for them. Ms. Flanagan says many of the island's families, especially in rural communities, use informal arrangements with neighbours and relatives who live nearby.

In big cities like Vancouver and Toronto, many parents don't have the same options.

## 9. Parents are part of the system

In much of the country, parents may know little about how their children spend the day – and even less about the goals of early education or the quality of existing child-care services in Canada. Currently, centres may post the results of health and safety inspections, but little about child-development goals. A regulated public system would ideally provide clear communication to parents – about logistics such as wait lists and staff certification, but also reports on quality results.

Community-based child-care centres are also well-positioned to offer parent training and other family services – important for improving outcomes of poor kids.

As part of PEI's new curriculum, learning centres are required to post safety inspections and teacher qualifications. In addition to their volunteer board, which oversees financial and operational issues, each Early Years Centre must have a parent advisory committee on child development. (In 2011, more than 85 per cent of the centres had a committee or were creating one.) As well, centre staff are expected to regularly communicate to parents by sending home letters and pictures with individual details about their children's progress.

## 10. Set a target, track your progress

Currently, Canadian governments are using drips of money to put a Band-Aid on a broken system, suggests Peter Moss, an international child-care expert at the Institute of Education at the University of London, "instead of sitting down saying, 'This is the model we want to move towards – and it's going to be done step by step.'"

That also means, he says, accepting that a high-quality system may take decades to build.

That requires policy-makers to have good statistics to plan where child-care spaces are needed, to track whether program targets are being met and to be accountable to taxpayers. As it stands, provinces don't clearly know how many families are currently on wait lists for regulated spots, let alone how many are using unlicensed care – which a mandatory public registry could correct.

Mr. Ghiz admits that it's "probably a touch easier" to roll out a new strategy on a smaller scale but says PEI's approach can be adapted: "You could do it in other provinces by breaking it off and having a whole bunch of Prince Edward Island models."

**Related link:** The daycare project <sup>[2]</sup>

**Region:** Canada <sup>[3]</sup>

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**Links**

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/18/08/what-pei-and-quebec-can-teach-rest-canada-about-improving-child-care> <sup>[2]</sup>

<https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/13/10/daycare-project> <sup>[3]</sup> <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864>