

Quebec daycare model enters third decade: What can the US learn from it? ^[1]

Author: Dubb, Steve

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EXCERPTS

Quebec's publicly subsidized daycare system has "spawned a global subsidized child-care model," reports Molly McCluskey for CityLab, with imitators in Japan, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Australia.

As McCluskey explains, Quebec's program, "which introduced low-fee, universal childcare in the province in 1996, centered on a few core premises: that if the government helped make child care accessible and affordable, it would allow more women to join the workforce, increase childhood development and social skills, and ultimately raise revenue for the government through increased payroll taxes."

But Quebec almost didn't get there. In 1995, Quebec nearly voted to secede from Canada in an election in which an astonishing 93.5 percent of eligible voters turned out. (By contrast, a near-record 49.2 percent of voters turned out in last year's US midterm elections.) The "no" side won with 50.58 percent of the votes. As Quebecois social work professor emeritus Yves Vaillancourt of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) explains, the 1996 jobs summits from which Quebec's childcare system emerged relied heavily upon "the strategic alliance that was forged" in the fall 1995 pro-secession referendum campaign.

McCluskey points out that the childcare system that emerged has had a lasting impact on the province's fortunes. According to Pierre Fortin, a UQAM economist, who McCluskey deems "the country's leading expert in the economics of subsidized child care," the Quebec program has increased participation of women in the workforce.

A 2018 Statistics Canada paper by Melissa Moyser and Anne Milan notes that in neighboring Ontario, the labor force participation rate of women was 75 percent in 2016, while in Quebec it was 81 percent, even though women on average have more children in Quebec than Ontario. Moyser and Milan add that, "Between 1996 and 2016, the labor force participation rate of women whose youngest child was under the age of three increased by nearly 20 percentage points in Quebec, compared with a four percentage point increase in Ontario."

It was 1997 when the program really took root, when the government published its "family policy" with the theme of *les enfants au coeur* (children at the heart). The program is not perfect—for instance, government-subsidized private providers are widely seen as being less good than their parent-run children's center (*Centres de la petite enfance*, or CPEs) counterparts, which serve a third of the province's toddlers. Still, Conor Williams in the Atlantic notes that whether by CPEs or subsidized private care, the province has "made well-resourced, affordable early-childhood education the norm."

Williams explains some of the details:

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 five, 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.

The cost for parents? In Montréal, parents paid on average \$10 a day for childcare in 2016. Wages for early childhood education workers as of 2016 were CDN\$18.15 an hour (US \$13.64 an hour) in Montréal—the highest in Canada and certainly higher than US levels, but still low.

One perhaps surprising feature has been the impact on government finances. As noted above, the government outlay at CDN\$2 billion, in a province that is home to about 8.45 million people, is not small—an equivalent program if run nationally in the United States would likely cost over \$75 billion. But Fortin's research, notes McCluskey, finds that the program has generated more revenue for cities and the province than it costs. "In other words, it costs zero, or the cost is negative," says Fortin, "The governments are making money out of the program."

Fortin notes that local and provincial governments gain both through the taxes earned by the increasing number of young women in Quebec's labor force and because "fewer families depending on social benefits, which in turn increases government savings."

Related link: The global legacy of Quebec's subsidized child daycare [3]

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