

Pre-kindergarten classes risk hurting subsidized daycares: workers ^[1]

"Is (pre-K) where we should be putting the money today?" asked the Quebec Liberal Party's critic for families, Jennifer Maccarone.

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EXCERPTS

The operators of the province's network of public daycares voiced their opposition Sunday to tabled legislation by the Legault government that would establish universal pre-kindergarten classes across Quebec, warning that the plan is poorly conceived.

The province's two largest daycare organizations — representing operators as well as workers — are also raising concerns that the government's proposed investment of up to \$700 million a year to set up pre-kindergarten classes for four-year-olds will end up hurting subsidized daycares, known in French as Centres de la petite enfance (CPEs).

"The CPEs have a clear mandate for which there already exists a legislative framework," Francine Lessard, director of the Conseil québécois des services éducatifs à la petite enfance, said in an interview after a news conference.

"We already have buildings that were constructed for children zero to five years old. We also have qualified personnel who work with children and who have three years of training on (preschool) development. The scientific research shows that this is the correct milieu for their development."

"If we are not able to welcome all four-year-olds, let's create more spaces in the CPE network," Lessard added.

Lessard's group and the organization representing daycare workers, the Fédération des intervenantes en petite enfance du Québec, have gathered more than 19,000 names on a petition urging Premier François Legault "to put the brakes" on the pre-kindergarten plan.

Although the two organizations are saying they are part of a common front, Lessard ruled out pressure tactics beyond the petition.

Lessard was joined at Sunday's news conference by representatives of the three opposition parties: the Parti Québécois, Québec solidaire and the provincial Liberals.

Véronique Hivon, the PQ's education critic, suggested the Legault government is giving Quebec parents a false choice.

"They're saying that parents will have the choice if they prefer (that their child) be in a CPE, they will be able to go there, and if they want to be in kindergarten for four-year-olds, they will be able to go there," Hivon said.

"But what real choice is there when you put all the investment in the school system for pre-K for four-year-olds and not one dollar has been announced yet for the CPEs, when there are thousands and thousands of families in Quebec who are still waiting for a place in a CPE?"

Hivon urged the government to hold what she called a real debate on its reform.

"When you decide as a government to invest as much as \$700 million in a reform — and everybody shares the objectives of being able to give the best services to our little ones — it is our responsibility to make sure that this reform will really bring the results that we want," Hivon added.

On Thursday, Education Minister Jean-François Roberge unveiled Bill 5, which would modify the Education Act to make pre-kindergarten classes available throughout Quebec "regardless of economic background."

At present, Quebec has a dual system of more than 400 existing pre-K classes for four-year-olds across the province as well as subsidized daycares. Initially, the Legault government proposed to establish pre-kindergarten at age four in every elementary school in Quebec, but has since modified that message to set up the pre-K classes in areas where there is a need.

But a number of school boards have advised the government that their schools lack the spaces and the personnel to carry out what's being proposed.

Bill 5 follows through on a campaign promise by Legault. The premier has responded to the criticism by saying his detractors only prove that they are "resistant to change."

Jennifer Maccarone, the Liberals' opposition critic for families, told Sunday's news conference that parents haven't asked for pre-K spots for four-year-olds, and she accused the CAQ government of a robbing-Peter-to-pay-Paul strategy.

"Nobody is against the four-year-old pre-K," Maccarone said in an interview. "What we're talking about is strategic investment. We have schools that need significant intervention for infrastructure. We have schools that do not have places to receive students. Is (pre-K) where we should be putting the money today?"

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Region: Quebec ^[3]

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