

A closer look at Quebec's pre-K plan, and whether it's a good idea ^[1]

Pledge to get 4-year-olds into school has plenty of detractors. Here's what the research shows

Author: Shingler, Benjamin

Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 5 Mar 2019

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

Ready or not, kindergarten for four-year-olds is coming to schools across Quebec.

The CAQ government has promised to offer a public school program for four-year-olds across the province within five years, starting with 250 more classrooms by next fall.

The plan, tabled at the National Assembly last month, has plenty of detractors, and it shakes up the province's approach to early childhood education.

As several school boards have pointed out, it also presents a major logistical challenge, given the shortage of teachers and classroom space in some parts of the province.

Here's a deeper look at the CAQ's plan and what the critics are saying.

Why does the CAQ want more pre-K classes?

Premier François Legault says pre-K will give children a head start, and in a classroom setting, it will be easier to identify learning difficulties than it is in daycares, or early childhood education centres (CPEs).

Legault has acknowledged the CAQ plan is controversial but insists it's the right thing to do.

"It makes sense that if we bring children in school earlier, especially the ones having learning difficulties, that it will help them," Legault said, announcing details of the plan last month.

He has stressed that parents will still be able to choose between daycare and pre-K, and he says opening schools to four-year-olds will ultimately free up 50,000 public daycare spots.

What can Ontario teach us?

In announcing details of his pre-K plan last month, Legault said the change would bring Quebec in line with Ontario (and much of Europe), where school begins at age four.

A longitudinal study conducted in Ontario, which introduced universal kindergarten starting at age four in 2010, found that the program puts children "significantly ahead" in reading, writing and number knowledge.

Studies in the United States, as well, have shown that pre-K helps kids from low-income families make significant gains compared to those who stay at home until kindergarten.

In Quebec, however, the circumstances are different.

The public daycare system, which has strong pedagogical standards and trained educators, is already an option for parents — though, of course, not everyone can find a spot.

Research, as well, indicates that children from underprivileged neighbourhoods are significantly less likely to be enrolled in a CPE. That's part of the reason Quebec introduced pre-K to many schools in low-income areas a decade ago.

What can we learn from the existing program?

The pre-K program for schools in low-income areas was launched in 2010 by the Charest Liberal government and expanded in 2016 by the Couillard Liberals, with the aim of giving children from underprivileged backgrounds a head start. About 5,000 students are already enrolled across the province.

Christa Japel, a Université du Québec à Montréal professor specializing in early childhood education, conducted a major study of the program.

The results were not favourable.

Japel and her team concluded that "the quality of the educational environment is generally low" in pre-K classrooms, and it "does not contribute significantly to children's progress."

She questions whether pre-K represents an improvement over the province's public daycare system.

"These programs are meant to foster school readiness. We're not seeing this, at this point," she said.

Pre-K vs CPEs?

Experts are divided on how public CPEs — or good private daycares — stack up against pre-K.

Both can be effective places of early, play-based learning, said Japel. But there are other considerations.

For working parents, the short days at pre-K mean that children often end up spending just as much time in care programs before and after class as do children in full-time daycare, Japel said.

"There's a lot of change for those little four-year-olds, whereas with the CPE, you have a lot of continuity," she said.

There is also less potential for one-on-one attention in pre-K: currently, the maximum educator-to-child ratio is one-to-10 for four-year-olds in a CPE, and one-to-17 in a kindergarten classroom.

There is nothing in the bill to suggest that ratio will change with kindergarten for four-year-olds, although Education Minister Jean-François Roberge has promised to hire more specialists to assist in the classroom.

Is the plan realistic?

School boards and unions have already raised concern about a lack of teachers and classroom space, and daycare workers worry the funding of CPEs will be cut to put more money into pre-K programs in schools.

The Commission Scolaire de Montréal (CSDM), the province's largest school board, is among those worried about a lack of room and resources.

The CSDM, which is already facing a staffing shortage, would require 475 additional classrooms — the equivalent of 23 new schools — to introduce pre-K across its network.

Finding teachers with the right training will be a challenge.

Nina Howe, an early childhood development expert at Concordia University, said teaching four-year-olds demands a set of skills and training far different from, say, those required to teach Grade 6 students.

"Those teachers are not really trained to work with young children," Howe said.

She said it would have been prudent for the government to hold consultations before going ahead with such a major change.

"I think if they are going to do this that it needs to be rolled out slowly and thoughtfully, and it needs to be done with people on the front lines," she said, adding that some of the criticism is legitimate, while some "is a fear of change."

The government says universal pre-K would come with an annual price tag of \$400 million to \$700 million, but far less — between \$30 and \$40 million — in the first year.

What does it mean for English schools?

Of the 250 new classes, 36 will be on the island of Montreal, mainly in English-language schools, many of which have the space to accommodate more children.

Starting next fall:

The English Montreal School Board will have 13.

Lester B. Pearson School Board will have 19.

As well, Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board, which covers Laval, the Laurentians and Lanaudière, will have 10 new pre-K classrooms, Riverside School Board on Montreal's South Shore will get two, and the New Frontiers School Board will get six pre-K classrooms.

Russell Copeman, the executive director of the Quebec English School Boards Association, said QESBA is in favour of the plan. He said it will give parents options and be "beneficial to certain school boards who's enrolment is flat."

"And you know, it may encourage more students in our network ... so we viewed that as very positive," he said.

Related link:

Region: Quebec ^[3]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/19/03/closer-look-quebecs-pre-k-plan-and-whether-its-good-idea>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/19/03/closer-look-quebecs-pre-k-plan-and-whether-its-good-idea> [2] <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-pre-k-cpe-explainer-1.5043731> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7855>