

Allison Hanes: Pandemic has reminded Quebecers to cherish our daycare system ^[1]

The COVID-19 crisis has been a stark reminder of the importance of this essential and beloved public service to both children and parents.

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Source: Montreal Gazette

Format: Article

Publication Date: 20 Aug 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

My youngest daughter will say goodbye Friday to the friends and educators who have been a big part of her life for the past four years. It's her last day at daycare before she starts kindergarten. One chapter of her young life is drawing to a close, and a new one is set to begin.

It's also a bookend on a long segment of parenthood. Daycare — drop-offs, pickups, daily conversations with educators, crafts, holiday parties — has been a linchpin in the existence of our busy, modern family for many years now. I am forever in debt to the kind folks who have been my partners in nurturing, teaching and inspiring my kids, so I could pursue my career goals without pangs of guilt.

But as both my girls now age out of daycare, I am also grateful to live in a place that has done better than most when it comes to supporting parents, promoting women's equality and giving children a strong start in life.

Quebec's non-profit, government-subsidized, universally accessible Centres de la petite enfance are the crown jewel of its generous family policies.

CPEs receive over \$2.5 billion a year in public funding, but they're more of an investment than a cost. Studies have shown the network more than pays for itself, given the extra tax revenue generated by having more mothers in the workforce. Quebec has the highest labour market participation rate for young women in the world, and that's the direct result of high-quality child care that is affordable and readily available.

That's something we should all be proud of. But it's also something we must not take for granted.

The pandemic has been a stark reminder of the importance of this essential and beloved public service to both children and parents. And it has underscored the fragility of women's progress even in a wealthy and stable society.

As of mid-March, many parents found themselves working from home due to the economic shutdown while caring for young children. During the confinement, we heard the frustrations of families with school-age kids about the difficulties of trying to balance jobs with online learning. But working parents of the toddler set, many of whom were too young for digital activities or virtual playdates, were just as stressed — if not more so.

Mothers, in particular, have borne the brunt of the extra emotional labour required by COVID-19 — the caring, playing, teaching, entertainment and stimulation that comes with having little ones constantly around. For many, being a stay-at-home mom and working a full-time job took a heavy toll. Fathers also stepped up, to be sure. But many experts fear the gains women made in the labour force over the last few decades will be eroded by the coronavirus. No one seems to have the same concerns about men's careers

Perhaps that's why, as soon as CPEs reopened, families quietly started sending their little ones back. They voiced few of the reservations we're now seeing about back to school. Perhaps many felt the benefits to their kids after so many months of missing their friends and educators outweighed the risks. Perhaps it was a recognition from struggling parents that they need their allies in child care almost as much as their kids do.

Despite a full reopening in mid-July, the situation in Quebec's daycares has remained stable, thanks to rigorous safety protocols.

Quebec's daycare system is not perfect. Perhaps the biggest flaw is still accessibility, because there aren't enough subsidized places for every child. A parallel network of at-home and private daycares picks up the slack, but some disparities in quality and cost persist.

When I got the call from a different centre about a spot for my youngest just before my maternity leave ran out, I felt like I won the lottery. Seven years and two CPEs later, I can say we truly hit the jackpot.

Region: Quebec ^[3]

Tags: system ^[4]

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