

Copy Quebec daycare, PQ leader says [CA-ON] ^[1]

Author: Monsebraaten, Laurie

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EXCERPTS

If Ontario wants to cut child poverty and improve student achievement, it should copy Quebec's \$7-a-day child care system, says the architect of the popular program that began in 1998.

Since then, Quebec's child poverty rates have dropped by 50 per cent, school test scores have gone from among the lowest to the highest in Canada and the percentage of mothers in the workforce in the province is now the highest, said Parti Québécois Leader Pauline Marois.

"If you think your small children and your young families are a priority ... you pay the amount of money necessary," she said of the program that costs \$1.8 billion annually and serves 209,000 children or about 70 per cent of Quebec children under the age of five.

"It's a choice you make," she said in an interview yesterday, adding that both Quebec's extended parental leave and child care policies are responsible for the impressive results.

Marois, who was in Toronto this week to receive an award from Ontario child care advocates for her decade of commitment to the issue, was minister of education and family in the PQ government in 1996 when then-premier Lucien Bouchard said he wanted to boost job growth and help Quebecers balance work and family.

"It was clear that we suddenly had an opening that had to be seized upon," she told advocates at the award ceremony at Ryerson University. "I jumped at the opportunity."

At the time, Quebec & not unlike Ontario today & was in debt and facing difficult political, financial and administrative challenges, Marois said. Even though she didn't have all the details nailed down, Marois charged ahead in 1998 with full-day kindergarten for five-year-olds and after-school care for children up to the age of 12 for \$5-a-day to be run by school boards.

Child care for younger children in community-based centres and regulated homes began the next year for four-year-olds, with \$5-a-day programs for three-year-olds starting in 2000, two-year-olds in 2001, one-year-olds in 2002 and infants in 2003.

Initially, Quebec used funds from its universal family allowance program to pay for the new services.

But child care proved to be so popular with parents, that the government was forced to spend new money and eventually raise fees to \$7 a day. Today, tax revenue from working mothers covers 40 per cent of the cost and Quebecers view child care as an essential service alongside health, education, road infrastructure and the environment, Marois said.

Ontario Children's Minister Deb Matthews, chair of the province's cabinet committee on poverty reduction, met with Marois yesterday but refused to say whether child care would play an expanded role in her government's plan to cut poverty, expected in December.

Ontario is already planning to introduce full-day kindergarten beginning in 2010, she noted.

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With talk of a fall election swirling in Quebec this week, Marois said she is keen to complete the work she began and ensure 100 per cent of the province's children have access to \$7-a-day child care.

"I say, one child, one space," Marois said. "If we will form the government. I will finish the job & quickly."

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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