

Quebec daycare bill to be passed, PQ to vote against ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The major reconfiguration of the way daycare spaces are allocated will become a reality in a few days with the expected adoption of Bill 1 in the National Assembly in Quebec City.

The Parti Quebecois opposition is fiercely opposed to the government's approach and will vote against its adoption.

PQ spokesperson Véronique Hivon said the legislation is "a missed opportunity" because Family Minister Mathieu Lacombe has not taken advantage of the change in law to provide Quebec with a truly comprehensive network of low-cost educational daycare services, based on the model of the program set up by the Lucien Bouchard government and Minister Pauline Marois in 1997, which has not been completed.

Hivon said the daycare system is in a major crisis, with a waiting list for subsidized spaces exceeding 50,000 names and a shortage of thousands of daycare workers.

In October, the Legault government committed to creating 37,000 new spaces by 2025 and the minister tabled a bill to facilitate and accelerate the allocation of these spaces.

Hivon, however, fears an anarchic development of the network over the next few years.

"The problem is what kind of spaces will be offered to parents," she said.

Hivon feels that the government wants to proceed "as fast as possible," "as fast as I can," by going in all directions, instead of creating only Early Childhood Centres (ECCs), recognized for their quality.

In particular, she criticized Lacombe for refusing to exclude the 70,000 unsubsidized private daycare spaces from the calculation.

Quebec, she said, is therefore setting up a "multi-speed" system in terms of accessibility, as the daily cost of a space can vary greatly.

She also criticized the government for "putting the brakes on" the plan to convert unsubsidized spaces to subsidized spaces at \$8.70 per day.

"We are at a critical point in the system," she said, "so it is important not to develop anything, anyhow. The three pillars of the 1997 program were accessibility, universality and quality of service."

Hivon maintains that Lacombe has said publicly that he wants a 100 per cent subsidized network, while continuing to "fully recognize unsubsidized private daycares", which are therefore seeking to make a profit. Paradoxically, some of these spaces remain vacant because parents cannot afford to fill them.

The MNA for Joliette said parents' confidence in the government on the early childhood file is at an all-time low. Hivon maintains that in recent years, Premier Francois Legault was only concerned about pre-kindergarten four years old, forgetting about daycare. It was an "obsession", she said, adding that the premier "went so far as to put his seat on the line" to achieve this electoral commitment.

Until recently, "the government had no plan in place" to develop daycare services, she added, believing that Quebec City has allowed the crisis to fester and worsen for three years, culminating in the educators' strike last fall.

Hivon said that in order to address the severe shortage of educators, the minister lowered the quality criteria from two out of three to one out of three qualified educators required to be in the facility.

Bill 1 will change many of the rules of the game.

To speed up the process, Quebec plans to move to a continuous call for tenders, rather than targeted calls as in the past, which can result in delays stretching over several years.

The new law will give the minister more powers, particularly to ensure better development of services at the regional level. In the absence of interest from promoters in a given region, the minister will be able to create spaces in regions where needs are not being met.

The needs assessment mechanism will be reviewed to allow the minister to better determine supply.

Bill 1 will also create a one-stop-shop to replace La Place 0-5, which has been a source of frustration for parents. Parents will have to go through the one-stop-shop to get a space once it is up and running. This will make it easier for parents to know where they are on the waiting list, which is virtually impossible now.

The rules for registration at the One-Stop Child Care Centre will be formulated to give priority to children living in disadvantaged areas.

The maximum number of children per facility will be increased from 80 to 100, and temporary space will be allowed to accommodate them as needed.

The government calculates the total cost of its project to be \$3 billion, but the cost of creating the new spaces is estimated to be \$1.8 billion.

Region: Quebec ^[3]

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