

Four ideas to make Quebec's child-care system a model for all of Canada ^[1]

Quebec child care is mainly known outside the province for the low cost it offers some parents. The next step should be to improve access.

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With its promise to complete the network of early childhood services launched 25 years ago, the Quebec government has set itself “the objective of offering a place for every child in the network of educational child-care services.” This goal is far from being achieved, with Family Minister Mathieu Lacombe missing his target for the creation of new spaces by 2021-22. Should we be concerned?

For thousands of families, particularly those part of a new movement, *Ma place au travail*, dedicated to the plight of families who cannot find child care, the answer is obvious. Without questioning the urgency of creating new child-care centres, particularly to keep mothers employed, the “one child, one space” accounting logic will not, in the long run, promote the equal opportunity at the heart of Quebec's family policy.

It is in Quebec's interest to maintain its position as a leader in providing affordable, quality child care in North America, and to improve its standing when it comes to equitable access. Here are four suggestions for reaching these objectives.

What is the Quebec model?

In other provinces, the Quebec model is understood primarily in terms of services offered at low cost, regardless of the employment status of parents. The reality is obviously more complex, because access to child care in Quebec is not a right – unlike the education system – and supply is conditional on the resources the state or the market make available.

Quebec has 25 years of lessons, successes and challenges that allow it to better define this model. More than subsidized spaces, which can be offered by for-profit daycares, it is the early childhood centres (known in Quebec as centres de la petite enfance, or CPEs) that must be put back at the heart of this model.

Currently, only a minority of babies and toddlers – 22.1 per cent of children under five in 2018 – attend CPEs. And yet, it is these child-care centres that offer the best quality services and are the least likely to be at the mercy of the market. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the spaces offered in CPEs are the most permanent, while 1,236 private family day cares closed between March 1 and October 31, 2020. These figures do not account for temporary closures during lockdown periods. It is the CPE system that offers the most reliable quality care.

The profile of toddlers who do not have access to quality child care

A 2019 report revealed nearly 36 per cent of children aged 0 to 4 years did not attend a regulated child-care centre. Behind this general finding are many questions. Are these children being cared for at home or in non-regulated child care? What are the systemic, economic and cultural barriers to families accessing child care? What is the profile of families who do not use child care, in terms of social class, ethnicity, language and geographic location?

Some answers to this last question were offered in the Quebec auditor general's 2020-21 report, following a performance audit on the accessibility of early childhood education and care services. The report reveals, among other things, disturbing disparities in access to child-care services, and in particular quality services, between affluent and less affluent families, especially in Montreal and Laval.

In the neighbourhoods of Parc-Extension and Saint-Michel as well as in the borough of Montreal-Nord the number of spaces offered can be up to 85 per cent higher in non-subsidized daycares than in CPEs. These three disadvantaged neighbourhoods have on average only one child-care space for every seven children, compared to one space for every three children in Westmount. It is vital the government act so poorer neighbourhoods have access to care equal or greater than the level of service available in wealthier areas.

Training educators during a labour shortage

How do we reconcile the urgent need for workers in CPEs with the desire to attract and retain certified educators who have completed a diploma in early childhood education?

This is a major challenge, especially since two trends are at work.

On the one hand, the government has introduced a new initiative, the early childhood work-study program, to recruit and train future educators. People enrolled in this program are paid to learn the skills necessary to practise their profession, while having immediate access to part-time employment in an early childhood education centre. The government has also relaxed educational child-care regulations, reducing the number of qualified staff in child-care centres from two-out-of-three to one-out-of-three, thereby facilitating the hiring of unqualified staff.

The government should create ambitious new programs to hire and train workers, such as the one Quebec implemented to search for 10,000 new personal support workers for nursing homes. This kind of approach would help address the labour shortage while not sacrificing quality of care.

The link between parental benefits and child-care use

This last issue is discussed less frequently. However, the link between the availability of child care and the possibility of extending parental benefits was recently raised by *Ma place au travail*. It called for the development of a form of urgent financial assistance for parents who do not have access to child care, an idea that would, however, run the risk of further “motherizing” child care.

It should be noted, however, that the timing of toddlers entering child care is often a headache for parents, because the integration of new children follows the school calendar. The result is that some parents are forced to send their child to care while they are still receiving parental benefits, while others are forced to take weeks of leave at their own expense at the end of their benefits, until their child is integrated into care.

Finally, despite the generosity of Quebec’s family policy, the support offered by the state to families is not universal, with the exception of the family allowance. For example, in Quebec, 11 per cent of births are not covered by the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan (QPIP), as parental benefits are dependent on economic activity and a minimum employment income of \$2,000.

It is therefore likely that the families excluded from the QPIP are also those whose children do not attend daycare. The most vulnerable families are thus doubly excluded from the state support that might be available to them, an inequity the government must address.

Region: Quebec ^[3]

Tags: accessibility ^[4]

affordability ^[5]

child care expansion ^[6]

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