

Quebec offers public childcare for \$6 a day. Why can't the U.S.? Rethinking childcare ^[1]

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Excerpts

CLEVELAND, Ohio — Childcare in the United States is expensive. In fact, it's some of the most expensive in the world, and it's become an enormous burden on working families.

For many American parents, the offer of inexpensive, high-quality childcare accessible to everyone would be a dream come true. So what's standing in the way? The cost?

Although that's what many an American politician has claimed, our Canadian neighbors say otherwise.

The Canadian province of Quebec has had universal childcare since 1997, costing families a mere \$8 per day (just under \$6 in U.S. dollars), and after 25 years of scrutiny, economists say the system not only pays for itself; it actually makes money.

You read that right. It doesn't cost taxpayers a penny. It generates revenue. And what's more, the publicly funded childcare centers are consistently of higher quality than private ones. So much so that families are leaving the competing system of private childcare centers for public ones, and the government is taking them over.

If that surprises you, you aren't alone. A few Canadian economists had to eat crow too.

"Private markets for childcare have unfortunately been a failure," wrote Pierre Fortin, emeritus professor of economics at the University of Quebec at Montreal and former president of the Canadian Economics Association in a 2021 op-ed for the Canadian newspaper *Daily Globe and Mail*.

Adding parenthetically, "That's hard to admit for me, given I've spent my entire career promoting market-based solutions to economic problems, but that's how it is."

At the time Fortin wrote that, Chrystia Freeland, the Canadian Minister of Finance, had just announced her plan to expand the universal childcare model that was so successful in Quebec to all of Canada, effectively changing a for-profit childcare system much like we have in the United States, to the government-subsidized model like they have had in Quebec for the past 25 years.

Since then, Canada has divvied up C\$30 billion in initial funding amongst its provinces with the goal of creating 250,000 new childcare spaces that will cost parents only C\$10 a day by March 2026. Currently midway through the transition, parents received a 25% rebate in 2022. That rebate increased to 50% in 2023 will continue to increase until the goal of C\$10 per day per child (just over \$7 U.S.) is reached in 2026.

It's a plan the women (and men) of Canada's liberal party had been pushing for years without success, said Gordon Cleveland, economist and Associate Professor Emeritus at the Department of Management, University of Toronto Scarborough.

"Women in all parties had been quite favorable to moves on childcare for years, but with the boys running the show it really hadn't come to the top of the pile yet," said Cleveland.

That is, until COVID-19 demonstrated how crippling the loss of childcare could be to women, families and the economy. While childcare centers in the U.S. and across Canada shuttered, those in Quebec not only managed to stay open, but thrived, paving the way for Freeland to reintroduce the idea.

"She said, this is a good idea, let's mimic what they've got in Quebec, let's finally put money forward," Cleveland said.

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