

Inside Canada's 50-year fight for national child care^[1]

Women in leadership, robust advocacy, helped Canada make progress toward affordable, subsidized child care

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Source: The Hechinger Report

Format: Article

Publication Date: 5 Oct 2023

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

Excerpts

Just over 50 years ago, long before a global pandemic knocked 100,000 Canadian women out of the work force and left child care providers reeling, a national commission urged the Canadian government to underwrite the costs for a nationwide child care system that would also lower fees for families.

Now, an offshoot of that recommendation has come to fruition. In 2021, Canada's leaders committed \$30 billion (about \$24 billion in U.S. dollars) over five years to the country's first federally-funded child care system.

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Canadian experts say a host of factors contributed to the country's eventual success in taking large-scale federal action on early learning. Ultimately, though, it took a pandemic, shutting down businesses and schools, for Canada to invest such a large amount of funds.

This movement came after decades of structured, organized advocacy, much of which started after the commission's report. Child care has been a cornerstone of the feminist movement in Canada, and parents and various nonprofit groups have partnered to champion the cause. Canadian labor groups have also supported the efforts, something that has recently become a more prominent strategy in the United States, especially after efforts to pass child care legislation faltered in 2022.

More recently, advocates have presented child care as a public good and a right, similar to K-12 education. That argument has helped build support, said Morna Ballantyne, executive director of Child Care Now, an advocacy association in Canada.

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Having women in positions of power — including Chrystia Freeland, the nation's first female minister of finance — was crucial to ushering the proposed program through Parliament in 2021, experts say, despite continued opposition from some conservative lawmakers. Similarly, in Quebec, education minister Pauline Marois helped usher in the province's child care system two decades ago.

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Quebec also stood out from the rest of the country during the pandemic.

"Canada saw that the [child care] system was not really affected by the pandemic in Quebec," said Mathieu. "Childcare in Quebec is heavily subsidized, so the fact that they didn't get the parents' money didn't really affect them."

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These isolated efforts by provinces to pay for child care with public money helped inspire larger change, and could be a strategy for child care advocates in the United States, said Martha Friendly, executive director of the Canadian-based nonprofit Childcare Resource and Research Unit, who previously worked on child care policy in the United States. While a bottom-up approach can't be the only strategy to ease the challenges in the child care industry,

"You can do things incrementally to push things forward locally, on a state level or on a regional level, and sometimes that does have a way of pushing the envelope on something [larger]," she said.

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Long before the pandemic, far more Canadians than Americans embraced the idea that the government should offer extensive, universal

support to families.

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“We expect government to step up,” said Susan Prentice, Duff Roblin Professor of Government at the University of Manitoba. “There remains, still, a Canadian tradition in believing that government is part of the solution.”

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