

Learning from experience? Access and quality in Québec's for-profit child care ^[1]

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Source: CRRU blog post

Format: Article

Publication Date: 26 Sep 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

Excerpt

Québec's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system has long been cited as a model for other Canadian provinces. Initiated in the late 1990s, gradually implemented and modified several times over the past 25 years, the New Family Policy (1997) stated the objectives: to support parents to balance work/family responsibilities and to foster children's development and school readiness by providing access to high-quality regulated child care for all regardless of socioeconomic status.

To what extent have these objectives been met? The answer: only partly. Both access to child care and its quality remain a problem. While Québec's ECEC system has supported employment for mothers of young children (whose labor force participation increased significantly to surpass mothers' employment in the rest of Canada), the 2020/2021 Report of the Auditor General confirms that there is not enough publicly funded child care to meet Québec families' needs. According to the Family Ministry, an estimated 34,000 children were waiting for a child care place in 2022. All the evidence points to the fact that families unable to find quality publicly funded child care are driven to pay higher fees for child care in for-profit centres whose quality is unlikely to meet expectations.

In 2021, in response to the urgent need to improve access to child care, the Québec government released *Grand chantier pour les familles*. This action plan, aimed at realizing the right of all children to child care, obliges the minister to use the necessary means to ensure this right. To create the additional 37,000 publicly funded spaces promised to fill the accessibility gap, the action plan recommended funding for-profit centres that are now unfunded.

This requires a short explanation of Québec's complex child care system, which includes both non-profit Centres de la petite enfance (CPEs) and for-profit garderies. The for-profit garderie sector features two types of centres: first, grand-parented for-profit garderies that were – following introduction of the 1997 policy – publicly funded to offer low-fee child care to parents (initially \$5/day, gradually increasing to today's \$8.70/day per child), and, second, a new sector of unfunded for-profit garderies that began to grow late in the 2000s.

At first the unfunded for-profit sector was relatively small but in 2009, a change in government led to introduction of a refundable tax credit paid to parents to encourage the unfunded for-profit sector's growth. This response to the increasing need for child care spaces resulted in exponential expansion of an unfunded for-profit sector charging market fees for which parents are reimbursed through the tax credit. The latest statistics show that today almost one quarter of full day child care spaces in Québec are in these unfunded for-profit centres.

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Region: Quebec ^[3]

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