

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

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Quebec'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** ^[3] (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 Quebec'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* ^[4] confirms that there is not enough publicly funded child care to meet Quebec families' needs. According to the **Family Ministry** ^[5], 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** ^[6]. 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 publicly funding for-profit centres that are now unfunded.

This requires a short explanation of Quebec'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** ^[5] show that today almost one quarter of full day child care spaces in Québec are in these unfunded for-profit centres.

While this initiative may have been an attempt to address access to affordable child care, the question of quality – essential to meet the New Family Policy's 1997 objective of fostering child development – remains a troubling issue with regard to Quebec child care.

National and international studies ^[7] concur that not-for-profit child care is likely to be higher quality than services offered by for-profit business operators. In Quebec, two large-scale studies, *Quebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (QLSCD/ÉLDEQ)* ^[8] (for which I was a lead researcher) and *Grandir en qualité* ^[9] (carried out by the Institut de la statistique du Québec, a government agency) confirm this. Both studies show the quality of the educational environment of young children in non-profit CPEs is significantly higher than the quality observed in for-profit garderies. This is true both for publicly funded garderies, as the results of the 2005 QLSCD (conducted when there were few unfunded garderies) showed, and for unfunded garderies, which made up most of the for-profit sample in the 2015 *Grandir en qualité* ^[9] research.

How can we explain these quality differences? The fundamental objective of for-profit child care is to make profits for owners: **research** ^[7] shows that a major source of profits in child care is through hiring less qualified staff who are paid lower wages. These and other ways of "economizing" ^[10], for example, fewer paid days off for staff and less support from external professionals, lead to shortcomings in the educational environment that show up in studies of quality in Quebec, elsewhere in Canada and internationally.

As well, for-profits Canada-wide have been shown to **charge higher fees** ^[11]. While fees in Québec's funded child care centres are the lowest in Canada, the market fees charged by unfunded for-profit operators are among Canada's higher fees. Parents' out-of-pocket costs, however, are kept relatively low through the refundable child care tax credit which reimburses parents for the higher fees, so the high cost of child care is not as decisive a factor for Quebec parents as it is elsewhere in Canada. While Quebec parents clearly prefer access to the non-profit CPEs, numerically these are **limited and unevenly distributed** ^[10], so parents in need of child care are driven towards the for-profit sector. In 2022, for-profit funded and unfunded centres provide more than half the spaces for children 0 – 4 years in full day child care centres.

Overall, these market mechanisms are completely inadequate for strengthening and promoting the equitable, high quality early learning and child care system Quebec set out as a goal in 1997.

A high quality ECEC system is expensive. Recognizing this, **Quebec's budget** ^[12] for 2022-2023 included a major investment of close to \$6 billion over the next five years to develop the sector and provide high quality ECEC. Consistent with the 2021 action plan, it commits to 37,000 additional publicly funded spaces between now and 2025. This Quebec investment, along with the substantial federal funding through the **Canada-wide early learning and child care agreement** ^[13] could allow major access and quality improvements in Quebec's ECEC system.

But how the 37,000 promised spaces will be developed will define Quebec's future ECEC system. Will Quebec develop effective plans to expand the higher quality not-for-profit CPEs preferred by parents and shown to be better quality? Or will the funds be allocated to the substantial unfunded for-profit sector, now "funded" through Quebec's child care tax credit to parents?

Twenty-five years after the promise of Quebec's New Family Policy, top of mind for ECEC experts are the words of warning from Adam Pokorny, a top education expert with the European Commission:

... it is increasingly clear that access without quality is of little merit... More child care places are not enough: services have to be high quality...to consider children's and their families' wellbeing both in the present and the future (2011) ^[14].

Today there is a wealth of experience and conclusive data from studies providing evidence that for-profit child care is less likely to deliver the levels of quality

needed to foster children's development, school readiness and well being. While this may be especially critical for children from disadvantaged families who can most benefit from quality ECEC, access to quality ECEC is consequential for all children as a human right.

As Quebec nears an October election in which all political parties are grappling with child care access and quality issues, and the rest of Canada struggles to implement ambitious federal commitments to build an accessible, high quality child care system, governments' choices will be critical in determining whether the vision and aspirations for accessible high quality ECEC for all will become a reality.

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