

For a better child care policy [CA-QC]^[1]

Op-Ed

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EXCERPTS

In prohibiting extra-billing for added activities at subsidized private daycare facilities, the Quebec government is continuing with the centralizing and standardizing moves it began a decade ago in creating \$5 daycare (now \$7). The perverse effects of this standardized model are being felt increasingly. Are the parents it was intended to help really getting what they need? A study prepared by my colleague Norma Kozhaya provides answers to this question and comes up with some solutions.

Prior to 1997, parents received universal family allowances. Daycare fees were eligible for refundable tax credits, and the most underprivileged families were fully exempted. In 1997 the government replaced universal family allowances with sliding tax benefits based on family income, and it introduced low-contribution daycare spaces.

Nearly a decade after the reform, calculations by tax specialists show that families with incomes above \$60,000 benefit most from the new system. In 2000, more than 58% of children in subsidized daycare came from families with incomes above \$60,000 although this group accounted for only 49% of children 0 to 4 years old in Quebec.

Furthermore, parents who do not use \$7 daycare are at a disadvantage. In 2004, this encompassed 48% of Quebec families with children aged 0 to 4.

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In contrast to Quebec, the great majority of countries with active family policies offer more choice to parents. Two ways of doing this are especially worth considering: vouchers for daycare services and universal family allowances.

If the goal is to make it easier to care for children and to conciliate work and family, the government could pay the parents of each child currently in licensed daycare an amount of about \$7,000 in the form of a voucher, based on the budget allocation of \$1.353 billion in subsidies recorded in 2004-2005. This works out to \$27 per working day. Parents could use vouchers to cover part of the cost of any licensed childcare service. Regardless of stipulations, this system would offer greater choice to parents. By creating healthy competition among service providers, it would also encourage them to meet families' needs and preferences more closely, especially in terms of schedules and programs.

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Whatever the goals that family policy aims for, there are more effective ways of meeting them. By offering greater choice to parents, Quebec would move closer to other countries with highly developed family policies.

- reprinted from the Montreal Gazette

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