

Trying to build bigger families [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

While the fate of Canada's stalled child-care system provokes passionate public debate, a related area of family policy is evolving in a quieter, but no less important, way.

As usual, Quebec is taking the lead.

This year, the province withdrew from Ottawa's 35-year-old parental benefits program to set up its own.

The Quebec plan is more generous, includes self-employed women (who do not qualify for federal benefits) and has explicit provisions for new fathers.

But what really differentiates the Quebec strategy from the national one is its motive: to increase the province's fertility rate. "We feel that this sort of program will definitely encourage families to give birth and maybe have more children," said Social Solidarity Minister Michelle Courchesne.

Policymakers in Ottawa and other provinces are watching the Quebec experiment with interest. Canada has one of the lowest birth rates in the Western world.

This is the latest in a series of innovations Quebec has tried to promote larger families. In 1988, it introduced an allowance for newborn children. It paid parents \$500 on the birth of their first child, \$500 for their second child and \$3,000 for all subsequent children. Four years later, the government enriched the incentives, offering \$1,000 for a second child and \$8,000 for all subsequent children.

The results were dismal. In 1997, the province cancelled the scheme and tried a different approach.

It brought in a groundbreaking \$5-a-day child-care program. All parents, regardless of income, were eligible for subsidized care at a non-profit facility.

Although the child-care system expanded rapidly, only about 50 per cent of preschoolers could be accommodated. Nor could the cost be sustained. In 2004, the government raised the daily fee to \$7.

Now the future of the whole program looks uncertain. Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who does not support institutional child care, is negotiating a "transition" arrangement with the province. The availability of cheap child care did coincide with a slight increase in fecundity. But Alberta's fertility rate rose faster and it has the least developed preschool system in the nation.

The third phase of province's population boosting campaign — enhanced parental benefits — began in January.

Quebec's program differs from Ottawa's in several key ways:

- There is no two-week waiting period for benefits.
- Self-employed workers, who account for about 5 per cent of new parents, are covered.
- A new mother can choose between 18 weeks of maternity benefits at 70 per cent of her previous earnings or 25 weeks of benefits at 55 per cent. Under the federal program, maternity benefits are available for 15 weeks at a replacement rate of 55 per cent of insurable earnings.
- A new father in Quebec is entitled to five weeks of paid leave, with 32 weeks of parental leave for the couple to split. In the rest of the country, parents have 35 weeks of leave to share.

Obviously, Quebec's plan is more expensive than Ottawa's. The province pays for it by charging higher Employment Insurance premiums.

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Region: Canada ^[2]

Quebec ^[3]

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