

Quebec child care model has its flaws [CA-QC] ^[1]

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Source: Toronto Star

Format: Article

Publication Date: 21 Dec 2005

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

The Liberal and Conservative proposals for increasing support for families with young children has brought the issue of child care to centre stage in the election campaign.

Prime Minister Paul Martin, in particular, has made prominent reference to Quebec as a model on which to base a national child-care system.

Quebec's system is, indeed, unique in Canada.

Starting in 1997, it has developed a network of fixed-fee services that aims to facilitate work-family balance and provide children, no matter the financial status of their parents, with high-quality early childhood education and care that fosters their social, emotional and cognitive development as well as readiness for school.

The short- and long-term benefits of high-quality care are well documented and it is well known that quality is most crucial for the most vulnerable. However, a recent study of quality at 1,500 child-care establishments published by the Institute for Research on Public Policy has a sobering message: Underprivileged children do not fare particularly well with regard to access to quality care in Quebec.

Only one-quarter of these child-care settings obtained a global quality rating of good, very good or excellent.

The majority of settings turned out to be of minimal quality, and almost one in eight was inadequate, failing to provide children with an educational environment and ensure their health and safety.

The global quality of child care varies significantly according to the type of setting. Nonprofit and family-based early childhood centres (Centres de la petite enfance, or CPE) generally provide better quality care than other types of settings, such as for-profit daycares and unregulated home-based daycares.

Moreover, the study reveals a number of disconcerting findings with respect to parental socio-economic characteristics.

Not only are children from low-income families less likely to attend any kind of child care, there is also a significant quality gap: Children from poorer families are more likely to be in child-care settings that are of inferior quality (20 per cent vs. 9 per cent of children from well-off families).

These results underline the importance of continuing to invest in order to create a child-care system accessible to all children, irrespective of their parents' socio-economic status.

We also need to seriously question the development of family-based care in low-income neighbourhoods, as these services are generally of much lower quality than CPEs.

Given this portrait of the quality of child-care services in Quebec, the government's repeated budgetary cutbacks for the child-care system and the proposed restructuring of the network of CPEs compromise all efforts to create and maintain a system of high-quality child-care services.

For example, because almost 80 per cent of the budget of a centre covers fixed costs such as rent and salaries, cutbacks necessarily deprive settings of important resources that would otherwise enable them to improve the children's educational and social experience.

Furthermore, the very role of for-profit daycares needs to be debated.

Paralleling a number of other studies, our report shows that for-profit services offer care that is generally of lower quality: 27 per cent of for-profit daycares were rated inadequate, compared to 7 per cent of non-profit CPEs.

The Quebec government's decision to promote the for-profit sector of child care to attain its objective of 200,000 child-care places will have negative consequences for the quality of the network and the children attending it.

Several lessons stand out if Canadians decide that the "Quebec model" is right for them.

First, universality with inadequate funding is virtually guaranteed to lead to quality gaps.

Quebec, whose quality gaps are significant, spends roughly \$1.3 billion annually on its child-care system, compared to the \$1 billion per year in "seed money" that the Liberals proposed to furnish nationally over the next 10 years.

A related point is that targeting resources in the context of a universal system can reduce gaps in quality. In Quebec, a nominally universal system has inadvertently led to the quality gaps that are correlated with families' socio-economic status.

Targeting vulnerable populations and increasing investment to improve their services are essential, particularly when financial resources are scarce.

A universal approach that does not define specific measures to deal with disparities may, in fact, aggravate them.

Voters should reflect on these realities as they cast their ballots in January.

- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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