

Quebec's the odd one out in its ambition for day care^[1]

But funding has been reduced for two years and many centres rely heavily on volunteers

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EXCERPTS

Quebec child-care workers are not about to let the recent praise from the OECD of the province's day-care system go to their heads.

They've heard it all before from their colleagues in the rest of Canada.

"Everybody is really jealous of our system," said Samir Alahmad, vice-president of the Quebec Association of Private Day Cares.

He was one of several representatives from Quebec's day-care sector to meet with officials from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development during the course of their survey of Canada's child-care system. He wasn't surprised to see Quebec singled out as having "one of the most ambitious and interesting early education and care polices in North America," even though it didn't actually participate in the study.

Quebec is held up as an example at several points in the report, which stresses that it is the only jurisdiction in Canada to have seen significant growth of services in the past decade.

The province's 180,000 subsidized spaces account for 40 per cent of regulated care in the country, the report said.

While it criticized Canada's overall system for not putting enough stress on early education, the report praised Quebec day cares for focusing on training and child development.

Two out of every three workers at licensed day-care centres in Quebec must have a degree, diploma or certificate in early childhood education. There are more than a dozen qualifications for those entering the field to choose from, ranging from a CEGEP certificate to a university master's degree.

Quebec has also recognized the importance of a solid foundation during the first five years of care to a child's success at school later on, said Colasurdo, who is also the Quebec representative for public day cares at the Canadian Childcare Federation.

The government has set a basic education requirement for all day care centres to follow and promoted specific programs like "Jouer, c'est magique," which encourages child-care workers to incorporate a learning component into all day-care activities.

Centres are also required to spend one per cent of their budget on professional training.

Verna Sukhdeo, who runs a subsidized home day care for nine children in Notre Dame de Grace, and her employee attend a minimum of seven hours of training a year - everything from seminars at the local CLSC to parenting classes at McGill University.

Increased funding is key to maintaining a well-trained work force in Quebec's child-care sector, Colasurdo said. Most day cares are still forced to rely heavily on volunteers and parents to function effectively.

The 2.5-per-cent reduction in subsidies of the past two years, - about equal to the salary of one child-care worker - doesn't bode well in this regard, Cliche said.

With another 20,000 spaces to be added to the day-care system by 2006, centres are being asked to expand, improve quality and cut back all at once.

"If we keep growing the service but reducing the financing, eventually we'll hit a brick wall," Cliche said.

He and his colleagues all agreed that despite deficiencies such as lack of spaces, Quebec's child-care system deserved the OECD's praise, but they warned against a wholesale Canada-wide adoption of the system.

Creating a federal system of child care, as the report recommends, would be beneficial and have a greater impact on child education, Colasurdo said.

However, any national system must be flexible enough to allow not only provinces and territories but individual day-care centres the autonomy to adapt it to their own needs.

- reprinted from the Montreal Gazette

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