

Quebec hikes fee for day care to \$7 a day [CA-QC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Get used to calling it \$7 day care.

Quebec's most popular and praised social program - known until now by its \$5-a-day price tag - is going to cost families 40 per cent more after yesterday's announcement of the first fee hike in its five-year history.

The Liberal government says the \$1.3-billion-a-year (and growing) day-care network is no longer sustainable at the current rate.

So starting Jan. 1, parents are going to have to pay an extra \$2 - an increase that will cost the average family about \$500 more per child each year.

The increase will allow the government to create enough places to meet demand while freeing up money to develop a policy that recognizes the choices of all families, Junior Family Minister Carole Thériberge said.

"The phenomenal progression of day-care services have been accompanied by a significant cost increase. In 1997, the program cost taxpayers \$297 million. Now it costs \$1.3 billion, and in the end could reach \$1.7 billion," she said.

"It's important to note that taxpayers still cover 84 per cent of the cost."

The Parti Québécois called yesterday "Black Thursday."

Day care was the PQ's baby. In 1997, a PQ government launched a province-wide network of non-profit, early-childhood centres.

Today, there are about 180,000 \$5 day-care spots for children - near the ultimate goal of 200,000 by 2005.

Jonathan Valois, the opposition family critic, said this is the beginning of the end of the much-loved program, which offers high-quality child care at affordable rates.

"It's a sad day for Quebec families," Valois said. "The government has decided to finance their tax cuts on the backs of families."

Action démocratique du Québec leader Mario Dumont said the Liberals have misled middle-class families, who not only find themselves paying more for day care but for electricity and drug insurance as well.

"They were saying they would reduce taxes to give people more purchasing power, but now they have to pay more for all these things," Dumont said. "All these increases - that's people's tax cuts."

Parents might face additional increases in the future.

The government is going to index parental contributions to keep pace with increases in the cost of the network, Employment, Social Solidarity and Family Minister Claude Béchard said. "We don't want to come back to this same debate year after year."

This worries Hélène Potvin, president of the Association québécoise des centres de la petite enfance. "Parents should not feel very reassured," she said. "The government said parents are paying less than 17 per cent of the cost, but it's still an increase of 40 per cent. ... And from the information we have, we don't know how much they'll be paying in the future."

Potvin is also worried about the universality of the system. It has been maintained for now; Béchard said it wasn't touched because there wasn't time to address it.

"It seems like we saved it for one year," Potvin said.

The provincial body that advises the Quebec government on family and child policies warned the increase will penalize low- and middle-income families.

A 40-per-cent increase "is too much," Nicole Boily, president of the Conseil de la famille et de l'enfance, said in an interview. "If a hike was necessary, it should have been linked to the cost of living."

Still, the poorest Quebec parents have been spared an increase. Households on social assistance, and low-income families already receiving an extra day-care subsidy, won't have to pay more.

Bécharde said the Liberal government also will address the needs of the 35 per cent of Quebec families that either don't use subsidized day care or have one parent stay home.

"We don't want to leave anyone out and we don't want to put all our eggs in one basket."

Not everyone was upset with yesterday's announcement.

Sylvain Lévesque, president of the Quebec Association of Private Day Care Centres, said the fee hike was inevitable.

"Parents I've talked to are saying \$7 won't keep them from being able to bring their children to day care," he said.

Lévesque also is pleased the government will allow more private centres to offer the \$7 service. "This is a very acceptable scenario and it doesn't change the universality," Lévesque said.

- reprinted from The Gazette

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