

Critics decry day-care fee hike [CA-QC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Laurel Rothman, co-ordinator of Campaign 2000, a Canada-wide coalition of groups committed to ending childhood poverty, did not mince words when asked about the Quebec government's attempt to tamper with \$5-a-day day care.

"Quebec has been a beacon - a beacon - for Canada in showing us how to conduct social policy," she said in an interview from Toronto. "Now it all threatens to go by the wayside. We are distressed, for child care is a long-term investment, one we should stick with in the good times and the bad times, just as we do with RRSPs."

Rothman was echoed by a couple of experts.

Shree Mulay, director of the McGill Centre for Teaching and Research on Women, and Martha Friendly, co-ordinator of the Childhood Research and Resource Unit at the University of Toronto, agreed with Rothman.

They all decried provincial Family Minister Claude Béchar'd's announcement Tuesday that the government is considering upping the amount parents pay for day care, all while remaining committed to the Parti Québécois's goal of creating 200,000 day-care places.

It's a recipe for shutting single mothers out of the workforce, they said, because even \$1 more a day can break them.

They warned that it signifies a chipping away of significant gains won since the provincial government first introduced \$5 day care in 1997, not because it might cost \$2 or \$3 or \$5 more, but because the notion of a means tests is antithetical to a universal program to which everyone is entitled, no matter how much or little they make.

"Public schools are fully funded," Mulay said. "Similarly, every child should have the same access to day care."

It is inevitable, they continued, that there will be more for-profit day cares, which by their very nature are there to make money.

And they noted that subsequently there could be a higher incidence of childhood poverty; according to Rothman, the latest available statistics show the rate decreased in Quebec from 21.6 per cent in 1999 to 18.7 per cent a year later.

Friendly spent most of yesterday on the phone trying to get the go-ahead to testify before Quebec government hearings that are scheduled to be held this month.

"This is a Canadian issue, not a provincial one," she said from her office.

"Quebec was the first province to introduce a real child-care and early childhood education program that reflected what's happening in western Europe and the theory that high quality child care is good for all kids. In France, a millionaire's child goes to the same day care as an immigrant's child from Tunisia."

Not that it has worked like a dream. Nothing does, not at first. Diane Nyisztor, co-ordinator of the early-childhood education program at Vanier College, noted that the term "universal day care" is really a misnomer, given the long waiting lists for placement in one of the province's 983 public day care centres.

"In theory, it's a great idea, but practically it's not working," she said. "Increasing the cost ... still won't help those parents who don't have access."

Nyisztor continued that the government seems to want to cut its costs and commitments and that putting more money in the provincial kitty won't exactly help waiting parents.

"I started working in day care in 1978, and it's interesting to see how, as the government has become involved, to see the changes and differences in the kinds of services offered," she said. "I really feel for young parents."

-Reprinted from The Montreal Gazette.

Region: Quebec ^[2]

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