

Parents march to protect \$5 day care [CA-QC]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Hundreds of parents marched through downtown streets Saturday with one message for the newly elected Liberal government - hands off the \$5-a-day day-care program.

Premier Jean Charest's government has said it wants to change the province's signature social program by allowing private day-care centres to provide the service and possibly charging high-income parents more.

The program costs Quebec taxpayers \$1.6 billion a year and has waiting lists of up to three years.

But it has many parents and social groups supporting its universality and non-profit nature.

"The day cares constitute an essential service and must be protected for the social good," Michele Asselin, member of a provincial women's group, said in front of Charest's downtown office after the march.

Some parents fear changing the universality of the program could lead to a two-tier system or make it inaccessible to middle-class parents.

"It's egalitarian the way it is," said Christine Boivin, 40, a day-care educator. "I fear, we could end up with private day cares for high-income earners and other day cares for low-income children."

A mother agreed with her.

"I have one 2-year-old, (if there were changes) my husband and I could afford it," said Roxanne Thibault. "But if I had two or three children and price went up I don't know if we'd be able to manage. That's why I'm here today," she said.

Another supporter spoke of its uniqueness.

"It's special to Quebec. The quality of the education, the quality of the educators is excellent. It should stay as it is," said Suzanne Courval, 60, a grandmother with a 2½ year-old in the \$5-a-day program.

A petition with more than 100,000 signatures calling for the maintenance of the universal program was presented in the provincial legislature last Wednesday.

Helene Potvin, the head of an umbrella group for non-profit day-care operators, praised the marchers for coming from all over Quebec to show their commitment to the program. Between 2,000 and 3,000 supporters turned out for the rally.

She called on parents and educators to keep fighting against any changes.

"We are going to continue," she said.

The cherished program was introduced by the former Parti Quebecois government in 1997.

The Liberal government has said that as many as 35,000 children do not have access to the program.

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