

Quebec threatens to cut back on \$5 day care [CA-QC] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Quebec's more affluent families may soon have to pay more for the province's cherished \$5-a-day day care, as Jean Charest's Liberals advance with plans to shrink government and cut costs.

Faced with a \$4.3 billion budget shortfall, the Liberals are proposing to make higher-income earners pay more for the program and allow private operators to offer \$5 daily childcare to fill the need. Family and Child Services Minister Claude Bechard says he must trim at least \$300 million from his budget. The province pumps \$1.6 billion each year into the day care program, widely considered the most generous system in Canada.

During the spring election campaign, the Liberals promised to maintain the system and create at least 3,000 new spots by September while cutting personal income taxes.

Charest has said all government departments face budget cuts, except for health and education. Already his government has put highway projects on hold and launched an overhaul of provincial agencies that hand out business subsidies.

"Since it came to power, the Charest government is proposing to Quebecers to undo and dismantle our institutions," Opposition leader Bernard Landry said in a statement Wednesday.

"The latest idea strikes one of the most beautiful social development projects undertaken," Landry said. The popular universal program was introduced in 1997 by the former Parti Quebecois government. However, thousands of Quebec children face waiting lists of up to three years for a spot.

In Quebec City, one woman who looks after her grandchildren scoffed at the notion the system is universal in its current form, pointing to the lengthy waiting lists.

"My daughter works in the evening, and there is almost no day care after five (o'clock). There are a lot of changes that could be made to that system. Don't talk to me about universal \$5 day care. My daughters are lucky they have me."

The president of an association of private day-care operators said his members could create 20,000 new spaces in a year while saving the government money.

"We are ecstatic with the change of plan to allow us to get more involved, but we think it's also important to maintain the universal program," said Sylvain Levesque, president of a group representing for-profit day care.

"The PQ decision to keep us out was purely driven by ideology."

The range of possibilities, including a hike in the \$5 price or making the system a taxable benefit for higher income earners, is troubling to non-profit day-care operators.

"What worries us is that everything seems to be under review, and we don't even know what the choices are," said Helene Potvin, the head of an umbrella group for non-profit day care operators.

Women and children in Quebec were 20 years behind their counterparts in the rest of the developed world until the introduction of the program, Potvin said.

"We were way behind in 1997 and we haven't caught up in five or six years," said Potvin. "Women entered the workplace on a massive scale in the 1970s and '80s and we didn't set up a system of child care to match it."

Potvin said there are 167,000 day care spaces in Quebec, 135 per cent more than there were in 1997. She said 200,000 are needed. She worried that coming changes to the system might only restrict access.

"We already lack access because there aren't enough places," Potvin said. "The government should correct this. Raising the price raises exponentially the difficulty of getting access to the program."

-Reprinted from Canadian Press

Region: Quebec ^[2]

Tags: affordability ^[3]
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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/03/07/quebec-threatens-cut-back-5-day-care-ca-qc> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7855> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/affordability> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding>