

Canada blazes trail on day care ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Imagine dropping your child off at a high-quality day-care center where the flat-rate tuition is \$3.40 a day, regardless of the family income level.

That's not happening in the United States anytime soon - but it's a reality for growing numbers of Canadian families.

In Quebec, an innovative government-sponsored program has won wide praise from child-care specialists, educators and parents groups. This week, British Columbia became the second Canadian province to create a publicly funded day-care system open to all families - rich, poor, and the sprawling majority in between.

As in Quebec, day-care centers in the western province will charge a minimal fee for care in licensed centers staffed by trained teachers and paraprofessionals.

In the 1960s, Canada carved a defining social policy line between itself and the United States with the adoption of a national health care system, free to all citizens. Now this country appears to be blazing a similar path in day care.

"These provinces are taking pioneering steps that could be followed by the rest of the country, as happened with the medical system," said Gillian Doherty, adjunct professor of family relations at Ontario's University of Guelph. "It shows Canadians remain committed to publicly funded social support systems, as opposed to the [American] obsession with cutting government expenditures no matter what the social cost."

The sharpest contrast between day care in United States and the two Canadian provinces shows on the bottom line, with Quebec and British Columbia families paying about \$70 a month for the same level of care for which middle-income families in New England shell out \$800- to \$1,200 a month, on average, per child.

"We have a long ways to go to make child care as affordable for working class families as it is becoming in Canada," said Mark Smith, coordinating director for the Massachusetts-based Parents United for Child Care.

The British Columbia program will be less innovative and far-reaching than that of Quebec, which has doubled provincial spending on day care while slashing fees and is also underwriting related programs such as government-subsidized extended maternity leave. Nonetheless, the British Columbia move marks a dramatic step toward a system providing affordable, licensed care to all families.

Until now, the best day-care services in Canada tended to be those offered the poor or the rich, with middle-income families unable to afford the top echelon centers and unable to qualify for government-funded programs.

"This is what all governments should be doing," said Sharon Gregson, a mother of four in Vancouver, where the provincial Ministry of Social Development has pledged to spend \$30 million to launch a new program open to all families on equal terms. "Parents, some of whom are paying as much as \$1,000 a month, are going to be getting a break that is literally going to change lives."

Other provinces may follow the lead set by Quebec and British Columbia, raising the possibility that Canada will join Scandinavia in offering a national system of day-care centers staffed by teachers and licensed child-care specialists.

The path taken in Quebec and British Columbia seems to suggest that Canada is still a long way from shedding its precept that government programs - as opposed to private initiative - form the bedrock of social policy. That notion, long representing a major ideological difference between Canada and its southern neighbor, has eroded somewhat in recent years as the federal government and several provinces, notably Ontario and Alberta, have touted tax-slashing as the first duty of government.

But British Columbia and Quebec represent a contrary trend that suggests many Canadians want to stick to the course of socialized democracy, even with the burden of higher tax bills.

"Society is moving quickly toward recognizing that child care is a critical part of a child's development," said Jan Pullinger, the province's minister of Social Development. "A publicly funded system makes sure that everyone's children get to benefit."

Meanwhile, Quebec's 2-year-old \$1 billion day-care program is considered by some observers to be the most innovative in North America, with more than 100,000 children enrolled in government-run programs that cost parents the equivalent of \$3.40 a day.

"Quebec is in the forefront of recognizing that a regulated system is more likely to provide more consistent standards of care than the hodgepodge of private and subsidized programs now typical for Canada and the US," said Doherty, one of five authors of a major day-care study that was recently released by the University of Guelph's Center for Families, Work and Well-Being.

One of the hallmarks of the Quebec system is the doubling of salaries of day-care workers, a bid to attract more trained child-specialists to what has long been perceived as a dead-end job for unskilled women.

"Quebec recognizes that support for young families accomplishes a greater social good," Doherty said. "In the end, it's about helping families bring up children who will become good, productive citizens."

-Reprinted from The Boston Globe

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