

Daycare: The debate over space ^[1]

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EXCERPTS It was first proposed in 1970 - a program that would provide affordable daycare across the country. It was promised when Brian Mulroney and the Conservatives swept to power in 1984. And again four years later. By the time Jean Chrétien's Liberals did some political sweeping of their own in 1993, promises of a national daycare strategy had fallen victim to the realities of a government wallowing in debt. With budgetary knives sharpened and drawn, daycare would have to wait. But the economic climate began to shift — and in 1997, Quebec introduced its own daycare system, offering subsidized spaces at \$5 a day. Demand quickly surpassed supply. StatsCan weighs in According to Statistics Canada, 54 per cent of Canadian kids age six months to five years received some care from someone other than their parents in 2002-2003. That's up from 42 per cent in just eight years. About 28 per cent of those children were enrolled in a daycare centre as their main care arrangement, up from 20 per cent in 1994-95. In Quebec, 52 per cent of children were getting subsidized daycare. But a growing number of children are being cared for by relatives. Over the same eight-year period, the proportion of kids cared for by a relative grew from eight per cent to 14 per cent. The proportion of children who were looked after in someone else's home by a non-relative fell to 30 per cent from 43 per cent. The growth in the use of daycare is not just an urban phenomenon. It is even more pronounced in rural areas. Statistics Canada says that in 1994-95, 36.3 per cent of rural kids used some form of daycare. By 2002-2003, that rate had grown to 52.4 per cent, nearly the same as the rate in urban areas. By 2004, there were more than 745,000 regulated daycare spaces across the country. Nearly half — just over 321,000 — of them were in Quebec. Almost 30 per cent of Quebec kids under the age of 12 had access to these spaces. That was almost twice the national average. The numbers were double what they were in 1992, when there were just over 370,000 regulated daycare spaces in the country. Between 1992 and 2004, the number of regulated spaces increased in every province and territory except Alberta. Provinces: Number of regulated childcare spaces/ Children receiving fee subsidies Alberta: 71,177 / 11,459 British Columbia: 82,386/ 13,333 Manitoba: 26,375/ 10,677 New Brunswick: 14,170/ 3,530 Newfoundland and Labrador: 5,868/ 1,952 Northwest Territories: 1,703/ Information not available Nova Scotia: 13,247/ 2,798 Nunavut: 970/ Approximately 80 families Ontario: 243,488/ 76,959 Prince Edward Island: 4,824/ 1,547 Quebec: 364,572/ All spaces are subsidized Saskatchewan: 8,850/ 3,718 Yukon: 1,293/ 568 Source: Child Care Space Statistics 2007, Childcare Resource and Research Unit (PDF document) More money, more spaces? As successive governments ran up surplus after surplus, the call for more money for daycare began to be heard again. In the lead-up to the 2004 election, the Liberals promised \$5 billion to create 250,000 child care spaces by 2009. The plan pointed to Quebec's now \$7-a-day daycare plan as a model. The government signed deals with each province before the government fell in the fall of 2005. In the election that ensued, the Conservatives unveiled their child care plan. Dubbed the "Choice in Child Care Plan," it provided cheques of \$100 a month to parents for each child under six. Parents could spend the money as they saw fit. It would also be treated as income (attributed to the parent with the lower income) and taxed as such. When the Conservatives won the election, they announced the child care benefit would go into effect July 1, 2006, and quickly moved to cancel the Liberal plan. Daycare activists warned that the cut in funding would be a serious blow to "Canada's daycare system." But to call daycare in Canada a "system" might be a stretch. In October 2004, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development released a report that described Canada's child care system as a chronically underfunded patchwork of programs with no overarching goals. It found that many centres were shabby and many workers were poorly trained. As well, staff turnover at many centres was very high. The report ranked Canada last among developed countries in terms of access to early learning and child care spaces — and last in terms of public investment. The report also found a shortage of available regulated child care spaces — enough for fewer than 20 per cent of children age six and younger with working parents. In the U.K., 60 per cent of children find regulated child care; in Belgium, 63 per cent; in France, 69 per cent; in Denmark, 78 per cent. The OECD recommended that Canada boost its child care spending to the OECD average of about 0.4 per cent of Gross Domestic Product — or about twice what the government currently spends on daycare. It also recommended integrating child care with kindergarten and improving the training and recruitment of workers. A 'modest and minimum' investment There are calls for even more. The Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada issued a report of its own on the heels of the OECD report. It, too, called for more money. The association wants Ottawa to commit at least one per cent of GDP — or about \$10 billion — for daycare within 15 years. The report argues: "The amount is a 'modest and minimum' investment for the one-third of Canadian youngsters under six, compared to the six per cent of GDP now devoted to educating older children." But the report also warns that devoting so much public money to child care would likely attract foreign corporate daycare chains, eager to be part of a growing market. The report recommends Ottawa ensure that the money it spends on daycare be earmarked for the public/non-profit system. It wants the federal government to pass legislation that protects provinces and territories that wish to expand services in the public/non-profit sector from being challenged by foreign for-profit chains that want to get in on the act. Those concerns are echoed in yet another report. This one — by two economists from the University

of Toronto — found that the quality of care at non-profit centres averaged 10 per cent better than daycare centres established to make money. Gordon Cleveland and Michael Krashinsky looked at 325 daycare centres across the country. They examined 42 different components of child care on a scale of one to seven. Components included personal care such as diaper changes, the educational character of toys, and how well information is exchanged with parents. While most centres got mediocre rankings, the top-ranked ones were mostly non-profits and the bottom-ranked ones were commercial. ... "I'm not a politician, and I don't know all the ins and outs of policy, but what I do know is that quality matters," Cleveland told CBC News. "It's hard to get quality in for-profits. A 10 per cent increase in quality at non-profits is very substantial." Debate over the number of new spaces On Jan. 27, 2009, the federal government introduced a budget that provided a \$40 billion stimulus to the economy. There was temporary new spending for infrastructure, tax cuts for individuals and corporations and more money for Employment Insurance benefits and retraining. But there was nothing new for child care. ... The association also challenged a claim made by Human Resources Minister Diane Finley on Feb. 4, 2009, that the government's child care strategy created more than 60,000 child care spaces in 2008. The association cited figures from the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, which said that 26,661 spaces were created in the previous year, representing the smallest increase since 2001. "The few spaces that were created across the country can be attributed to the provinces using their own investment dollars; Quebec is the best example of this," the association's Jody Dallaire said in a news release. "The federal government has simply failed to meet the child care needs of Canadian families." The association argues that the government's child care program hasn't created a single daycare space across the country. Daycare advocates in Ontario fear that the province could lose 15,000 subsidized spaces in the province within a year, as the final installment of the old federal subsidy program runs out in March 2010. ... Daycare — when you can find it — is getting more and more expensive. Except for 2005, the cost of daycare has risen much more than the overall rate of inflation every year since 2003. Stats Canada says that in 2008, the Consumer Price Index rose by 2.3 per cent over 2007. The average cost of daycare across the country was up by 6.1 per cent. - reprinted from CBC News

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