

How France is providing child care to a nation ^[1]

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Description:

The following article, originally published on November 9, 1989, was re-published in the New York Times on November 11 2009. It describes the results of a study tour of American ECEC experts to observe France's extensive ECEC. The sponsoring organization, the French American Foundation published an initial report. A welcome for every child: How France achieves quality in child care-- Practical ideas for the United States and several reports on follow up work in subsequent years. See links below for reports available online and in print.

Excerpts from article:

As the debate on how to meet the growing need for child care intensifies in Congress, corporate headquarters and communities across the nation, a panel of experts says the United States should look to France for ideas.

"Coming from a country mired in turmoil over child care, it was striking to see in France a shared consensus about the importance of children and the willingness to put the necessary financial resources behind it," said Faith Wohl, director of work and family programs for E. I. du Pont de Nemours & Company.

Ms. Wohl was a member of a delegation that spent two weeks in France this year studying that country's extensive child-care system. Sponsored by the French-American Foundation, which promotes understanding of issues of common concern to the two countries, the group was made up of 14 professionals in economics, medicine, business, education, labor, law and other diverse fields.

It [report] concludes that France is "a country at a level of economic development similar to that of the United States, but far ahead of us in insuring that its young children are well and safely cared for."

The report describes a system largely financed by tax revenue: a blend of child care, education and health services based on free full-day preschool programs, subsidized day-care centers and licensed care in private homes for infants and toddlers. The noncompulsory preschool programs, which serve nearly 90 percent of French children 3 to 5 years old, offer language arts, exercise, crafts and play.

The report says the system also features intensive training and fair compensation for preschool teachers and others who take care of younger children, a free preventive health program for all young children, and attention to the architecture and safety of day-care centers.

"It all adds up to a systematic approach to young children," said Hillary Rodham Clinton, a delegation member who is a lawyer and chairwoman of the Children's Defense Fund, an advocacy group. "The problem in the United States is that we have no approach."

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It also points out that a comprehensive child-care system does not develop overnight. The French system has roots that go back 175 years, to shelters that were created for children of the working poor.

Nearly 80 percent of the cost of French child-care services are covered by public funds. Parents provide the rest. The French manage to finance their child-care system "because of their priorities and political leadership," said Barbara R. Bergmann, a panel member who is Distinguished Professor of Economics at American University in Washington.

The report says the French spend 49 percent of their per-capita income in taxes, compared with 31 percent in the United States. France spends the equivalent of 7.1 percent of its gross national product on public education, including preschool programs, compared with 5.5 percent for the United States.

Delegation members said they found in France that child care was not a subject for political debate, as it is in the United States.

"I was surprised that the commitment to child care has support across the political spectrum," Mrs. Clinton said.

The observers also found that unlike child-care services in United States, those in France are intended for children in all strata of society. "We tend to target programs for poor children, for children at risk," said Barbara Reisman, another panel member who is also executive director of the Child Care Action Campaign, a national advocacy organization based in New York City.

Members of the panel said they were particularly struck by the quality of workers who teach or care for young children. "In France," their report says, "staff training and experience are considered the foundation of quality care."

French preschool teachers are required to have the equivalent of a master's degree in early-childhood education. The directors of infant-toddler programs are pediatric nurses or midwives who have additional training in public health and child development. Staff members must have a degree equivalent to two years of college in the United States and two additional years of training in early childhood education and child development. The salaries are competitive with those for other jobs in France requiring similar credentials, like elementary-school teachers or nurses.

The report concludes that the level of staff training and compensation has enabled France to create a stable child-care system. It says that in the United States, by contrast, "trained caregivers are in short supply and their wages are low," and that "child-care centers lose, and must replace, 40 percent of their staff each year."

One member of the delegation, David Edie, said that while he was impressed by the "comprehensive" nature of the French system, he objected to its centralized control by the Government. "I did not like the lack of parental involvement, the sense that the professionals know how to do everything and parents should stay out of it," said Mr. Edie, day-care coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services.

There was also criticism of the ratio of preschool teachers and child-care workers to children. Each preschool teacher is assigned an average of 22 students. In infant-toddler centers, each worker tends to eight toddlers or five infants.

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One problem France shares with the United States is a shortage of child care for infants and toddlers now that more mothers are entering the work force. "But they have a plan to fix it," Ms. Wohl of the panel said.

In Paris, new infant-toddler centers are being opened at the rate of two a month, and the French Government is giving municipalities money to expand the availability of centers and family day care.

France also has a widespread system of adults who care for infants and toddlers in their homes. The report says that about 75 percent of these family day-care providers are licensed, compared with 10 percent in the United States. France also offers incentives for providers to become licensed; these include retirement benefits, disability insurance and a minimum wage.

Parents pay for care at infant-toddler centers on a sliding scale, depending on income and where they live. In Paris, parents typically pay annual fees ranging from \$1,750 to \$4,000 per child, or about 14 percent of their annual income. The poorest families pay \$195.

Licensed family day care costs parents from \$11 to \$18 a day per child. Parents receive a special tax deduction for using licensed rather than unlicensed family day care.

To meet the needs of working parents, preschool programs offer additional care before and after school and during vacations. While most of the schools are free, parents pay \$210 a year for these special services.

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"We have seen the future," Mr. Edie said, "and we're behind."

- excerpts reprinted from the New York Times

Online follow-up reports and projects sponsored by the French-American Foundation or resulting from the trip -- observing France's early childhood system to inform US practice:

Equal from the start: Promoting educational opportunity for all preschool children-- Learning from the French experience [2]

Neuman, Michelle J.

Findings on a study examining how the French priority education policy (known as ZEP policy for zone de education prioritaire), an investment of additional resources in schools serving disadvantaged student populations, is applied to pre-kindergarten education in France.

A welcome for every child III: Ready to learn-- The French system of early education and care offers lessons for the United States [3]

French-American Foundation

Findings from a study tour to France in January 1999 observing French preschools in various settings.

A welcome for every child: Care, education, and family support for infants and toddlers in Europe [4]

Kammerman, Sheila B.

The report focuses on Denmark, England, Finland, France, Italy whose experiences are most relevant to the United States, and provides an overview of child care coverage and options, administration, costs, educational philosophy, staffing, and family support services.

A welcome for every child II: How France protects maternal and child health-- A new frame of reference for the United States [5]

The French-American Foundation

Findings of a study tour for United States' health care professionals to examine and interpret the nearly 50-year-old French maternal and child health care system, Protection maternelle et infantile (PMI).

Raising questions about improving the quality of child care: Child care in the United States and France (not available online)

Howes, Carollee

Describes and contrasts aspects of child care systems in France and the United States to stimulate discussion of child care standards.

A welcome for every child: How France achieves quality in child care. Practical ideas for the United States (not available online)

Richardson, Gail

Findings of a study tour for United States professionals to France. This report discusses seven principles underlying the impressive achievements of the French child care system that are especially relevant to concerns and issues in the United States.

Region: Europe [6]

Tags: full-day early learning [7]

public management [8]

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