

Time for a close look at daycare system ^[1]

Life, The Gazette

Author: The Gazette

Source: The Gazette

Format: Article

Publication Date: 2 May 2010

AVAILABILITY

See text below

EXCERPTS

Daycare is big business in Quebec. It has been political gold ever since \$5-a-day daycare was introduced more than a decade ago by the Parti Quebecois.

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Daycare has become a \$2-billion monster no party dare touch. Even in these hard times, the latest Quebec budget found money for a few more places. But for months now, black clouds have been gathering, in the form of allegations of payoffs and irregularities.

A service that is meant to provide small children with a head start on their education, and parents a helping hand, has become a "racket," the PQ has charged. That's political hyperbole, so far at least. Family Minister Tony Tomassi has rejected all allegations as false.

But it is certainly good news that Auditor-General Renaud Lachance has announced plans for "preliminary work" toward opening an inquiry into how daycare is funded, operated, inspected, and allocated. It has been more than 10 years, Lachance pointed out, since his office has had a look at how the system is run.

In March Ezio Carosielli, owner of 10 Montreal daycares, told La Presse that he knew of people who, having been awarded a daycare permit, immediately resold it. Carosielli estimated the permits were worth between \$250,000 and \$500,000.

The PQ, meanwhile, claims that Liberal Party donors seem to have an inside track on buying permits. The PQ found that a family of Liberal donors was able to buy a daycare permit for 60 spaces, after the permit was awarded to another Liberal backer.

There's a lot at stake here. If permits are being awarded to a bidder who seems unlikely to ever set up a daycare centre, as alleged, then the public needs to know about it.

Last month, the Charest government hastily cobbled together a series of safeguards it insists will do the job. They include requiring a daycare owner to make public all shareholders or partners. An owner must give the government 90 days' notice before selling a permit. Regional authorities will take over from the minister in allocating permits. Publicly-funded private daycare centres will not be allowed to charge more than \$7-a-day. If they do, they'll lose their subsidies. Three times as many daycare-centre inspectors - a jump from 18 to 58 - will enforce compliance with health and safety standards.

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- reprinted from The Gazette

Region: Quebec ^[2]

Tags: public management ^[3]

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