

OPINION: More daycare spots, not rules ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

MONTREAL - The Parti Québécois government might be backpedalling on the idea of expanding Bill 101 language restrictions to public daycares, but I think Family Minister Nicole Léger's proposal has at least one merit.

Requiring immigrants to send their kids to French-language public daycare could be the political catalyst that is needed to finally push the government in this province to create enough \$7-a-day daycare spots to meet the needs of all Quebec children.

While Léger seems to think the state must "legislate" certain immigrants into sending their kids to a French-language public daycare, I believe that all she needs to do is open up new spots - and immigrant children will come.

Other than certain francophone parents who want their children to attend English-language daycare in order to become bilingual, I have yet to meet one Montreal parent who says they would refuse a spot in a convenient, well-run French-language centre de la petite enfance, or CPE.

Not one.

In my own downtown Montreal neighbourhood - a part of the city that keeps many nationalists awake at night for being too anglicized - a French-language, \$7-a-day CPE spot is considered to be the holy grail of child care.

While certain PQ politicians fret about downtown salespeople greeting customers with a mix of "Hi" and "Bonjour," the anglophone and allophone parents in my circle of friends and acquaintances spend years trying to get their kids into a French-language CPE.

We place our children on waiting lists even before they are born. We call over and over again until we get through to the daycare director for fear that any message we leave on the CPE's answering machine will be erased. Many of us have contemplated sending daycare directors bottles of wine, flowers, or envelopes full of cash, but we restrain ourselves - lest we end up as witnesses at the Charbonneau commission.

Some parents are so eager for their preschool children to learn French that choose to pay for it out of pocket.

My friends, Juliet and Ben, both American-born university professors, switched their 3-year-old daughter from an excellent English-language CPE to a private, \$45-a-day French-language daycare.

In my own case, my daughter was accepted into a wonderful, French-language CPE when she was almost 3½. As crazy as it sounds, one of my friends got her son into a French-language preschool in San Francisco before I could get my daughter into one in downtown Montreal.

Before getting into her French-language CPE, my daughter spent two years in English private and public daycare. Two years! I shudder to think how Montreal's already overloaded French-language CPEs would function if Bill 101 were to apply to daycares without major new spending for network expansion.

Since there are no statistics available for the languages used in downtown Montreal daycares, I did my own analysis. On the provincial family ministry's website, I found 49 public and private daycares within five kilometres of my home.

But 18 of these centres aren't accessible for me because they are workplace-based CPEs whose priority is the children of employees - of hospitals, universities, corporations in the private sector, for example. Of the remaining 31 public and private daycares, 16 offer instruction in French, while the rest are either English-language, or bilingual - in some cases because that's what francophone parents say they want.

Léger and her supporters seem to think Bill 101 is needed in order to expose immigrant children to French at a younger age. In part, wrote one French-language adult educator in *La Presse* this week, that's because "many" children from immigrant backgrounds attend daycares with multiple languages - instead of CPEs where the common language is exclusively French.

But they are not a large cohort. Only about five per cent of all CPEs in Greater Montreal in 2008 operated in multiple languages, according to figures from Léger's own department. As it is, without Bill 101, French is used exclusively as the spoken language at nearly 69 per cent of CPEs in Greater Montreal and at 85 per cent of public daycares in Quebec.

If Léger's real goal is to get more immigrants to send their children to French daycares, then the last thing she needs to do is expand Bill 101.

Immigrants don't need a law to send their kids to public, French-language daycares.

They just need more spots.

-reprinted from the Montreal Gazette

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