

# Quebec to introduce kindergarten for disadvantaged 4-year-olds<sup>[1]</sup>

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**Source:** Montreal Gazette

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 15 Mar 2013

## EXCERPTS:

QUEBEC - A new program will give children living in disadvantaged areas - whose economic and social circumstances make them susceptible to dropping out of school later - the chance to start kindergarten at age 4.

"They don't have what they need to succeed," Education Minister Marie Malavoy said Thursday, announcing Bill 23 to create the program in time for the new school term in September.

Initially 1,200 4-year-olds from areas where parents have low incomes - and often have not finished their schooling themselves - will be admitted to the program, with 1,200 a year added until about 8,000 disadvantaged children across the province are in the program.

In the first batch, one classroom, with 18 children and a teacher specializing in early education, will be available at 70 schools across Quebec.

The Education Department will pay the \$8.1-million cost of the first year and about \$20 million a year when the program is in full operation.

The program will be voluntary.

But Gina Gasparini, a spokesperson for the Association québécoise des centres de la petite enfance, representing publicly funded daycare centres, said the \$8.1 million would be better spent creating more daycare spaces, adding that Malavoy is setting up a two-tier system that will "ghettoize" children in the kindergarten-at-4 program.

She explained that in daycare, the ratio is one educator for 10 children, and daycare educators are "100 per cent trained" to deal with preschoolers.

At present, 27 per cent of children in disadvantaged areas do not attend daycare, Gasparini said, and the focus should be on streaming them into Quebec's subsidized daycare network.

"We are trying to find out the solution before we know what the problem is," she added, noting that Malavoy said an evaluation could be carried out after the program has been operating for a while.

"We are not talking about cans of soup on the shelf," Gasparini said. "We are talking about children."

The kindergarten-at-4 plan offers no help for parents, she added, noting that with daycare, parents come to the centre with the child.

For disadvantaged parents, a daycare centre can offer parenting advice as part of its service, she said, an aspect lacking in Malavoy's approach.

Gasparini noted that in Finland, where preschool lasts until school begins at age 7, students are among the world's top in testing. Their success rate is higher than in France, where kindergarten starts at age 3, which Gasparini says suggests Quebec is going the wrong way in putting children in school sooner.

"We have the trained staff. We have the appropriate buildings and facilities. Why do they need to put these 4-year-olds in the school system?" Gasparini said. "It makes no sense."

The Malavoy plan is designed for children whose parents do not send them to daycare, even though the \$7 daily charge may be waived for low-income parents.

Seven pilot projects testing the approach are underway, Malavoy said, and parents who do not choose daycare are open to the idea.

"They see it as something good for their children," the minister said.

Malavoy said the program will not be extended to children from better-off families.

She said she does not think children participating in the program will be stigmatized, explaining they are already marked when they start kindergarten at 5 or enter Grade 1 because they lack communication and social skills and cannot keep up with the other children.

Malavoy said 35 per cent of 5-year-olds arriving in Montreal schools have difficulties learning and are vulnerable.

Correspondingly, 36 per cent of Quebec students do not complete their primary and secondary schooling in the prescribed time. Even considering dropouts who go back to school, about 24 per cent of Quebecers have no high-school diploma.

The government has determined that the best time to deal with the high dropout rate is before children begin their formal schooling, Malavoy said.

Mike Cohen, spokesman for the English Montreal School Board, said any measure that will fill the board's empty classrooms is welcome. "That wouldn't be a problem," he said.

But Malavoy stressed that the program is limited, with the equivalent of one class per school board.

-reprinted from the Montreal Gazette

**Region:** Quebec <sup>[2]</sup>

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