

The PQ's unexpected daycare battle ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

If everything goes as planned, parents who depend on private subsidized daycares to look after their children will have made other arrangements and the staff that would normally be looking after them will be on their way to Quebec City on Wednesday.

Sylvain Lévesque, president of the province's largest private subsidized daycare network, hopes at least 1,000 people, daycare workers along with a few parents, will show up to protest against \$15 million in cutbacks to their system. "A thousand to 1,500 protesters in Quebec City is big," he said. "It's not like Montreal, where we got 10,000 protesters two times running."

As a precaution, association daycare centres will be open. Hit last week with more than \$800,000 in fines for a May 22 protest, the association doesn't want to risk another financial hit.

The two-month battle between the daycare network and the Parti Québécois government has devolved into a cat-and-mouse game. The government is threatening to escalate its sanctions, including revoking operating permits, and the daycares are sailing as close to the edge as they think they can without triggering reprisals.

It's an unexpected battle for the PQ and Premier Pauline Marois. It was Marois who, as the province's minister responsible for the family in 1997, launched Quebec's system of low-cost public daycare. It turned Quebec into Canada's leader of subsidized childcare - home to fully one-third of all regulated childcare spaces in the country - and Marois into the champion of parents everywhere.

Five years ago, she boasted to a meeting in Toronto, "If you think your small children and your young families are a priority ... you pay the amount of money necessary. It's a choice you make."

Eight months ago, she promised her government would finally complete the publicly funded childcare network, with a \$7-a-day space for every child who needs one. The promise included 28,000 spaces (admittedly 13,000 of them had been pledged by the previous Liberal government) to be created over four years at a cost of \$260 million a year. That's in addition to the current \$2-billion annual cost of subsidized daycare for about 235,000 children.

Parents, especially those stuck paying \$35 or \$40 a day, were thrilled. Long waiting lists for \$7-a-day daycare have plagued the system from the beginning. Private subsidized daycare operators were furious. What about them? Why create new spaces when several thousand spaces were going begging in their centres, asked Lévesque, and centres were teetering on the edge of financial ruin?

The government replied it had no data on how many empty private subsidized spaces there were at any given time, and that it had decided that 85 per cent of the new spaces would be created in its network of early childhood education centres. These centres were set up in part to help make daycare affordable to women who wanted to join the paid workforce, which more than 70,000 did. Its other key aim was to help poor children be better prepared for school.

To make sure the CPEs could fulfill their educational mandate, the government required the CPEs have on staff two out of every three educators with formal training in early childhood education.

Lévesque, a daycare owner for 22 years, says that today private subsidized centres also have two out of three educators with qualifications. "We offer quality," he said. "There's no difference. There was a difference years ago because the PQ wanted it that way, but that's no longer the case." It is unfair, he said, that the fully subsidized CPEs will see cuts only in their surpluses and at just one in five centres.

Christa Japel, a professor of special education and training at the Université du Québec à Montréal, agrees with Lévesque that cutbacks are not helpful to maintaining quality in daycare services of any type. After that, they part ways. She does not agree that the private subsidized centres offer quality daycare. In fact, she said, with some exceptions the quality of daycare offered in general in Quebec, including by the CPEs, is "pretty mediocre." She doubts there are enough qualified educators to go around in either type of daycare.

"Quebec has always been cited as the example across Canada," Japel said. "I tell (people outside Quebec) yes, yes, we're making parents very happy by providing them with cheap childcare, but we are far from having a childcare system that is of good quality."

A good-quality centre would have a lower ratio of educators to babies and toddlers than required under government regulations, she said. It is virtually impossible with a ratio of one educator to eight toddlers, some in diapers, to maintain hygiene, she said.

Even if there are no recent studies examining quality in the public and semi-private systems, Japel says the CPEs try harder for quality.

"They've been open to research," she said, "they've been much more receptive when the research results came out and they've started a lot of initiatives to work on quality." Private centres won't let researchers in the door, Japel said.

"Parents are not good judges of quality," she added. "As a parent if your child seems to be happy and the educator is nice and talks to you, if they don't call you to come and pick up your kid, if there are no bruises at the end of the day, and the child is not too miserable when you drop them off, it's OK."

Good-quality care involves questions such as "What is actually happening all day long? What kind of activities are the children doing? Are they stimulated? Do they have access to activities outside? That's where a lot of the quality is."

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