

Couillard and the PQ are both right on daycare ^[1]

Editorial

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EXCERPTS

This is a rare case where both the opposition and the government are right, in terms of financing proposals. The PQ was right to propose raising fees to \$9, and Couillard is right to see merit in the idea of a variable scheme. One thing is sure: Something needs to be done to help Quebec's Centres de la petite enfance keep up with growing operating costs, and to help Quebec expand the 220,000 existing subsidized spots in order to meet demand from families who want access.

Under former PQ leader and premier Pauline Marois, the plan to charge \$9 a day, outlined in her government's pre-election budget, would have brought in an additional \$125 million annually to finance a program that now costs taxpayers \$2.7 billion annually.

The fiscal experts whom the new Liberal government appointed to examine the government's books have urged Couillard to maintain the planned increase. But the premier says he is concerned with the impact on the poorest families. He points out that at \$9 a day, it would cost an extra \$1,000 a year to have two children in daycare.

This is a valid concern, but the premier shouldn't lose sight of the larger context. Even at a higher cost to parents, the Quebec model of subsidized early childhood centres would still be far more generous than anything else in North America, where costs are as high as \$2,000 a month.

On the other hand, Couillard's idea of some sort of differential fee structure deserves consideration, despite the progressive nature of personal income tax rates. Quebec isn't a rich province. It has to look at new financing options.

The parental portion of daycare funding has slipped to about 13.4 per cent of program costs from 20 per cent in 1997, when families paid \$5 a day. Today, the cost of a daycare is \$52 per child per day. It's not hard to imagine Quebecers embracing a system where parents pay \$10, and the wealthiest families pay another \$5 or so later on, when they fill out their income-tax returns.

Given that the general tax burden in Quebec is so high, the taxpayer is stretched to the limit. For social programs to be preserved and their quality maintained, those who benefit most are going to have to get used to the idea of contributing more.

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