

Three myths about Quebec's child care model ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Quebec looms large in current discussions on how to increase child care services in Canada. Its unique experience with child care over the last 20 years has been the benchmark for evaluating different child care proposals. However, the nature of Quebec's approach to child care is often misunderstood. As a result, the lessons that might be learned from the Quebec experience are not always accurate. Put simply, three myths have emerged in the discussions on Quebec's approach to child care.

The first myth is that the so-called \$7-a-day program is provided by the government exclusively. This is not the case. The Centres de la petite enfance (CPE), which provides centre-based care, are not-for-profit entities governed by a board composed mostly of parents. Moreover, CPEs are only responsible for a third of all spaces in Quebec. The remaining children are in either home-based child care or for-profit child care centres. In short, the Quebec approach is not a one-size-fits-all model.

The second myth is that there is in fact a singular Quebec model of child care. It is more accurate to refer to two models. In addition to the \$7-a-day child care program, there is a "non-subsidised" child care system. That system, however, did not appear spontaneously. Thanks to a major provincial budgetary change in 2009, parents can now receive a substantial tax credit that reduces their costs if they choose to send their children to a non-subsidised for-profit centre. The expansion of non-subsidised spaces has been extraordinary. In 2003, they represented less than 1% of spaces. Today, they represent 17% of spaces and are the fastest growing type of spaces in the province.

Government data suggest that the rapid expansion of for-profit centres has come with its own set of challenges. While for-profit centres, whether subsidized or non-subsidized, only account for a third of spaces, last year they were responsible for 70% of complaints to the Ministry responsible for child care, including 89% of complaints related to health and safety.

The third myth pertains to the benefits of Quebec's approach to child care. While Quebec has stressed that a key objective of its program is child development, its record on this front has been questionable. A number of studies have demonstrated that Quebec's investment in child care has done little to improve child outcomes. The province has been much more successful when it comes to the other major objective of its child care reform- increasing the participation of women in the labour force.

The potential benefit of early childhood education for children, however, should not be dismissed because of the Quebec experience. In truth, Quebec's system was never structured towards achieving significant improvements in child development outcomes. Quebec had and continues to have some of the worst staff-to-child ratios in the country. Experts agree, however, that good staff-to-child ratios are a key determinant of quality child care, furthering better academic and social outcomes.

There are valuable lessons to be learned from the Quebec experience. One place to start would be to enlarge the discussion beyond the \$7-a-day program to examine the recent rapid expansion of the for-profit sector. Moreover, when discussing the impact of the "Quebec model", whether in terms of accessibility or quality, we should distinguish not only between what the different providers of care offer, but also between what the subsidised and non-subsidised systems achieve.

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