

# Editorial: Maintaining quality daycare in Quebec <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

It seems everybody is talking about Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's taxpayer-funded nannies. But a different childcare controversy is brewing in Quebec, one involving much more public money and many more parents. It's time it received more attention.

The Quebec government has told the province's public daycares and subsidized private ones that it wants to cut \$120 million from their budgets over the next two years. That's on top of \$74 million in cuts they've had to absorb this year. The measures are part of the Liberal government's efforts to rein in public spending.

Daycare operators say staff will be let go, the quality of care will suffer, and some fear they will have to close altogether.

The government argues none of this will be necessary. It insists the cuts can be accommodated through better management. Some daycares perform better than others, it says, and all it is asking is for the laggards to catch up.

To that end, the government has established new budgetary benchmarks based on the best performers. Specifically, it looked at one-third of all subsidized daycares – the ones that spend the least amount of money – and used the average cost among those to determine the new funding for all the others.

The goal, Premier Philippe Couillard said, is to "offer the best services at the best costs." It's hard to argue with that objective.

But the manner in which the government arrived at its calculations is problematic. Different daycares face different realities, and higher costs do not necessarily indicate inferior management.

For example, rents vary widely according to location. Utility bills are higher in older buildings than in newer ones. Daycares in or near workplaces might have shorter operating hours, and therefore fewer working hours for educators. Daycares with less experienced educators might need to spend more time training them.

Then there is the question of quality. For example, under the new measures, some daycares will be forced to spend fewer hours on food preparation, and they fear nutrition will suffer. Some wonder whether the benchmark daycares followed the mandated educator-to-child ratios at all times. The Family Ministry received 230 complaints of non-compliance in 2014-2015.

Quebec pours more than \$2 billion every year into subsidized daycare. The program has been acclaimed not only for offering affordable childcare – starting at at \$7.30 per day – but also for its collateral benefits: improving the prospects of women and the poor, and building a better workforce. Of course it's important to ensure that the money is being spent efficiently, but the government should be able to accomplish that without compromising the integrity of the services offered.

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**Region:** Quebec <sup>[3]</sup>

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