

Examining the toll of Quebec's daycare cuts ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

For thousands of toddlers who attend Quebec daycares, the annual trip to a cabane à sucre or apple orchard is among the highlights of the year. But those trips weren't on the agenda last year at CPE L'Éléphant Bleu in Montreal. The provincial government cut the daycare's budget by \$55,000 last year and is threatening to slash another \$110,000 from its budget in 2016-2017.

"We had to cancel 25 per cent of our outings, and if the cuts go ahead we will cancel 75 per cent of our outings," said Jacques Durand, director of the daycare on Sherbrooke St. E.

Durand said he doesn't want to charge parents for field trips because some will refuse to pay, which means some children would be left behind at the daycare. "Children that age develop autonomy and self-esteem when they go on outings without their parents," he said.

The daycare has also had to ration food. It has reduced the amount of meat it serves; it no longer serves fresh fish and can no longer afford to make sandwiches with croissants.

Taken individually, the cuts might not appear to be a big deal, but added up, they reduce the quality of services being offered in the CPEs, or publicly funded daycares, Durand said. "If I tell you you can't have a door on your room and then I take out the carpet, it's not nice."

What's on the chopping block

This month, thousands of educators, parents and children took to the streets in 18 cities across Quebec to voice their displeasure over plans to cut \$120 million from CPEs and the subsidized private daycare network, which could amount to about \$1,000 per child.

If the cuts go ahead, many daycares will have to slash science and music programs, no longer stay open late to help out parents and reduce the hours of staff members, said Gina Gasparrini, president of the Association québécoise des centres de la petite enfance (AQCPPE), which represents 600 publicly funded daycares across the province.

"All these things will be on the chopping block," she said.

Gasparrini, who runs the CPE St. Mary's in Côte-des-Neiges, said she could be facing \$60,000 in budget cuts this year. She said the cuts would affect the children because there would be less money for training and fewer assistant directors to help educators with difficult children.

The association estimates that \$120 million in cuts could mean the loss of the equivalent of 2,000 jobs.

When the Liberal government came to power in 2014, it announced new rules governing CPEs as part of its plan to rein in public spending. It required daycares to return their surpluses and to assume 50 per cent of the cost of any new construction or renovations. Quebec spends about \$2.2 billion each year on early childhood care.

The Liberals said they inherited a budget deficit of about \$2.5 billion in 2014. Strict belt-tightening allowed Quebec to post a balanced budget in 2015-2016, the first one in six years.

Following province-wide demonstrations this month, Premier Philippe Couillard said that Quebec's CPEs and subsidized private daycares should do their part in getting the province's books in order. Quebec had to rely on \$9 billion in equalizations payments from Ottawa to balance its \$100.2 billion budget this year.

But many daycare operators say the Liberals' austerity measures have gone too far. Now that the province has balanced its books, no further cuts are necessary, they say.

The question of efficiency

The province's new family minister says he believes subsidized daycares can be run more efficiently.

"We want to have less administration and more services," Sébastien Proulx told reporters in Quebec City recently. Proulx said the \$120

million in cuts will be spread out over two years. He said \$74 million was already cut in 2015-2016 and another \$46 million will be trimmed this year.

Jennifer Park, who runs a private daycare in Dorval, said questions need to be asked about how much money is being spent on administrative costs in subsidized CPEs. Park said her annual salary is about \$42,000 for running a private daycare with more than 100 children. However, she said, the salary of a director in a CPE can be as high as \$75,000 to \$80,000.

“There are CPEs that use the money wisely and correctly, and there are people who take advantage of it,” Park said. “If you are (buying) a toy shed every two years, what does that mean? They shouldn’t be cutting at the kids’ level and the education level.”

The directors’ salaries are set by the daycare’s board of directors and are in line with government guidelines, the AQCPE says. The average salary is about \$75,000, but the salary varies based on several factors, including the number of children, the level of responsibility and the daycare’s annual budget.

Daycare operators say that the provincial government began clawing back part of their surpluses in 2013 as a way to increase revenue. The Liberals continued the practice after being elected in 2014 and new rules now say that daycares can only carry surpluses of \$180,000. But daycare associations say that’s not enough money to cover the upkeep of their buildings and said there is no money to open new CPEs.

Serge Blais, who runs the CPE Rosemonde in Rosemont, said his daycare’s two centres had a \$1.8-million accumulated surplus dating back to 1978 that it was forced to return to Quebec last year. Now, the daycare is running a deficit to ensure that services to children are not cut.

But most CPEs in Montreal, faced with Liberal austerity cuts, have cancelled outings and reduced programs for children, said Brian Naud, director of the Regroupement des CPE de l’Île de Montréal, which represents 147 daycares.

There could be two to three job loses per CPE among kitchen staff, secretaries, educators and assistant directors, Naud predicted, adding that he’s worried that some CPEs will not be able to maintain services to disabled children because of staff cuts.

Marie-Carmelle Pierre has two children with autism and a third child with a global developmental delay. All three were given extra help at the CPE Petites Chenilles in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, where one-quarter of the 80 children are disabled.

“I was able to continue working and my children made a lot of progress,” Pierre said.

Now, she is worried that other children with special needs won’t get the help they require because the daycare may have to cut two or three of its 17 educators if the budget cuts proceed.

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