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### **Lessons from Early Learning and Child Care in Quebec**

The Federal government has publicly signalled their support for a Canada-wide system of early learning and child care based on the Quebec experience. But what does this mean for Canada? And what lessons can we draw from this model as we build the best possible system for all Canadians?

#### **What is the Quebec Model?**

There are three main models of early learning and child care in Quebec:

1. Public schools are the biggest provider of early learning and child care. Full-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds is offered in all schools, and by 2023 all Quebec 4-years-olds will also be able to attend pre-kindergarten in their neighbourhood schools. Almost 100,000 children 4- and 5-years old are now enrolled in pre-k and kindergarten. Low-cost care during lunch and before- and after-school are offered in schools and over 370,000 children 4 to 12 years attend.
2. About 93,000 children currently participate in Centres de la Petite Enfance (CPE) which are operated by parent-dominated boards for children from infancy to school entry. CPE are known for having a low daily fee of \$8.35 and high-quality programming. Public funding covers most of the centre's operating costs, including the salaries of educators, who are paid well and receive a government funded pension and benefit plan.
3. Private child care is also offered in Quebec and comprises a mix of commercial and non-profit operators, and self-employed individuals delivering care out of their homes. All providers are regulated to serve children to kindergarten entry, and they can set their own fees and wages. Parents may claim a tax credit to recover most costs. A subgroup of home care providers and "subsidized centres" receive government funding in exchange for charging parents reduced fees. The fastest growing arm of the private operators are the unsubsidized centres, with now over 70,000 spaces.

#### **So what have we learned from Quebec?**

##### Cost matters but so does quality

The low-cost Centres de la Petite Enfance (CPE) provide quality experiences for children and were immediately popular with families when introduced in 1997. In response to strong parent demand, the government turned to private providers to address the need.

Subsequent evaluations have revealed mediocre quality in home child care and private facilities. Strong parent demand for CPE continues even when other low-cost but lower quality child care options are available.

### Rapid expansion and quality require good public infrastructure

The provincial government sets wages, fees, facility standards and programming in CPE, and parent-dominated boards provide input to programming. The publicly managed, non-profit CPE have maintained higher quality programs but have not expanded enough to meet strong parent demand.

Public education infrastructure in Quebec made it possible to implement full-day kindergarten and extend the school day in all schools in a short period. Pre-k expansion is underway with small classes led by a teacher with a preschool speciality, supported by an early childhood educator.

Public infrastructure is critical for building a quality, universal and publicly funded early learning and child care system. Public infrastructure provides accountability for public funds and ensures equitable access for all children. Public infrastructure is also needed for research and monitoring, system assessment and continuous quality improvements, safe facilities and learning and links to auxiliary professionals to support children with unique needs.

### Increased numbers of mothers are going to work

Quebec's introduction of low-cost child care and expanded kindergarten and school-age care led to a dramatic increase in mother's labour force participation – a positive outcome for families and communities alike.

The pandemic has dramatically reduced mothers' workforce participation demonstrating the essential contribution of public education and licensed child care to our social infrastructure. Canada needs public policy that views early learning and child care as early childhood education organized to support parents' work.

### The benefits outweigh the costs

High quality early learning and child care provides significant benefits to children and society when it's offered in a universal program. Universality also addresses issues such as gender bias, diversity and socioeconomic bias. Economists estimate that increased tax revenues and a decreased draw on social spending are providing a significant return on investment that more than covers the public cost of Quebec's model.

We know that a high quality, universal, publicly funded and supported early learning and child care system is a long-term commitment to Canada's future. Early learning and child care will ensure we have the social infrastructure essential for navigating the economic, environmental and social challenges resulting from the pandemic.

### **Want to learn more?**

- [Atkinson Center e-Newsletter, February 18, 2021](#)
- [Early Childhood Education Report 2020](#) - coming Spring 2021

Regards,



Hon. Margaret Norrie McCain