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## **Lessons To Be Learned From Québec's Child Care System**

**D**uring the 1990s, numerous industrialized nations restructured their social institutions, irrespective of the value placed on, or the effectiveness of, their social security systems. This wave of reorganization also hit Québec, where existing strategies up to that point had not led to decreases in poverty levels: the number of single-parent families was on the rise and children were experiencing inequalities related to the environments into which they were born, as well as concomitant repercussions on their development. In response, the Québec government formulated an action plan for family policy intended to fight poverty, increase the participation of mothers in the workforce and promote children's equality of opportunity (Denige, 1991; Hattin, 1991; Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec, 1996). The new family policy was announced in 1996 by Premier Lucien Bouchard at a summit on the economy and employment. That policy, which represented a significant departure from the 1987 policy framework, is by and large still in place today.

To implement its action plan, in particular its strategies vis-à-vis children and child care, the Québec government undertook a variety of measures. The needs of children had, until then, been provided for under the income security (welfare) program; in

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

September 1997, a family benefit calculated on the basis of family income was introduced. This benefit replaced universal family benefits, including the Allowance for Newborn Children, designed to promote population growth with grants of up to \$8,000 for the birth of a third child: a key — and popular — element of the 1987 policy.

Additionally, the government adopted a new policy for financing child care services to families. Previously, financial aid for child care had come through two sources: the refundable tax credit for child care expenses, and the Child Care Services Office, established in 1980 by Québec. This office issued operating and construction grants directly to non-profit daycares and had a program for the provision of financial assistance with child care fees to eligible low-income families. The new policy called for the gradual implementation, beginning on September 1, 1997, of \$5 a day child care services; parents would pay a fixed reduced rate of \$5 a day for child care, with the government assuming the remaining cost. The daycare spaces were initially made available to children who had reached the age of four by September 30 of that year, but the plan called for increasing the number of spaces and gradually (year by year) lowering the age of admission. Existing fee-waiving and financial aid programs would also be gradually discontinued in step with the new plan.

In 1997, Québec began to commit significant resources to the consolidation and development of its child care network. In July of that year, the new Ministry of Family and Children assumed the responsibilities of the former Family Secretariat and Office for Child Care Services and set out to build its network from existing services: namely non-profit daycares, regulated home-based daycares and for-profit daycares. For-profit daycares were given the option to convert their legal status and become non-profit or to sign agreements with the government to offer reduced-contribution child care spaces. In fact, the government reached agreements with most of the licensed for-profit daycares in operation in June 1997 to retain their for-profit status and to sign contracts to provide reduced-fee child care spaces. But the main thrust of the new child care policy was the development of early childhood centres (CPEs; *Centres de la petite enfance*) from the non-profit daycares and the daycare agencies that had formerly been responsible for home-based services. The CPEs,

non-profit organizations whose boards of directors are comprised of a majority of parent users, would oversee two branches of child care services: those offered in child care centres and those offered in home-based settings.

This change in policy represented a real commitment by the government to both early learning and child care programs. Both innovative and progressive, it represented a major change in how child care funding was allocated to families: the previous system of cash payments or refundable tax credits directed to families was largely replaced by one of direct funding of services, making regulated child care spaces more affordable for the vast majority of families. This led to a significant increase in demand that, in turn, stimulated the rapid growth of the sector. Over the past decade, available spaces in centre-based care settings (CPEs) doubled (from 36,606 in 1997 to 77,405 in 2008), while the network of spaces in home-based settings expanded even more (from 21,761 in 1997 to 91,253 in 2008). By 2008, more than half of Québec's families with preschool-age children had access to home- or centre-based child care that is regulated and affordable (currently, the parental contribution is \$7 a day) — an increase of over 50% since the implementation of the policy in 1997.

More than 10 years later, what lessons can be learned from the Québec experience? First, along with the sharp rise in the number of children in regulated child care in this province, there is evidence that this attendance is having beneficial effects on the behaviour and cognitive development of the children. These benefits are particularly evident among vulnerable children (Côté et al., 2007; Japel, 2008). Second, families have greatly benefited from Québec's child care model: the increased availability of spaces has facilitated mothers' attendance at an educational institution or return to work. In fact, provincial statistics indicate that labour force participation among mothers of preschool-age children has increased significantly over the past 10 years and has surpassed the percentage of mothers' labour force participation observed in the rest of Canada (Lefebvre & Merrigan, 2008). Finally, not only families benefit from the return of mothers to the workforce and subsequent increases in family income and spending power. There are also positive repercussions on the economy through the creation of child care jobs,

so that the government is able to recover through taxes some of the costs associated with early childhood education and care.

Québec is unique: It has the highest number of regulated child care spaces and it allocates the largest amount of government spending to early childhood education and care of any of the provinces. Despite the striking advantages of this for children, families and society,

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however, the Québec experience teaches us other lessons, and they aren't so rosy. Two recent large-scale studies have found that child care quality is minimal overall; in other words, Québec's child care network has not

attained the general level of quality needed to foster the social, emotional and cognitive development of the children (Japel et al., 2005; Drouin et al., 2004). Furthermore, quality levels vary significantly according to the type of child care setting: early childhood centres generally offer better quality services than for-profit daycares.

In the late 1990s, a moratorium was imposed on the creation of new for-profit daycares. When that moratorium was lifted in 2003 by the incoming government, the for-profit sector experienced a surge in growth, despite the fact that there is compelling and consistent evidence that this sector is generally of lower quality than the non-profit sector. Furthermore, almost half of the children attending child care in Québec are in home-based settings. Although regulated home-based care (accredited, supervised and coordinated by CPEs) is superior in quality to the unregulated home-based service — still used by a large number of parents because demand for regulated and subsidized spaces is far greater than supply — the proportionally large expansion of the home-based child care sector has had questionable repercussions. The required qualifications of staff are minimal, so there is no guarantee that home-care providers are well-equipped to offer the high-quality environment that stimulates children and responds adequately to their developmental needs.

Finally, and unfortunately, the most vulnerable children are the least likely to attend child care, a potential protective factor

in their lives. There are waiting lists for CPEs of one to two years. And because child care services are not sectorized as are schools, CPEs located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, which are generally of better quality than other types of child care, are not obliged to provide services for children living in the surrounding area — that is, to those who most need it. There is a clear need to set aside more spaces for these children.

In addition, although children of families receiving social assistance may attend a child care service free of charge on a part-time basis (up to a maximum of 23.5 hours a week), many child care services prefer full-time attendance for administrative reasons and therefore do not give priority to children from these families (Tougas, 2002). If more spaces were set aside for these children, and if schedules were made more flexible, more parents of at-risk children might be encouraged to use the services. Note, however, that since 2002 some Québécois living in disadvantaged areas have had free access to full-time child care. Because of intersectoral agreements and agreements between CLSCs (community health and social service centres) and CPEs, the parental contribution for a family receiving social assistance can be waived when an organization designated by the health and social services network recommends fulltime attendance. CPEs that have signed such an agreement are committed to setting aside five percent of their spaces for children who are being followed by a CLSC (Ministère de la Famille et de l'Enfance, 2002). However, though nearly half of the province's CPEs are party to such an agreement, about two thirds have reported that they do not accept all the children recommended by the CLSC because they lack sufficient daycare spaces (Ministère de la Famille et des Aînés, 2008). Information on the exact number of at-risk children who have benefited from this initiative is not currently available, but a lesson from this might be that CPEs using public money should be required to offer flexible part-time spaces in order to make their services more equitable.

The creation of this type of network of child care services has had significant repercussions with regard to interventions improving the lives of vulnerable children. Québec opted for a universal approach, one objective of which is to provide early childhood education and care services that promote the development of all children, independent of their parents' socio-econom-

ic background. However, the most vulnerable children are least likely to benefit from these services, and vulnerable children who use child care are more likely to attend settings of lower quality (Japel et al., 2005). It should be noted, however, that even though a larger proportion of such children come from disadvantaged

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backgrounds than from more favourable socio-economic backgrounds, a considerable number in the latter group are also at risk of having their educational trajectory compromised by behavioural problems or cognitive delays. Data from the Québec Longitudinal Study of Child Development reveal that the number of vulnerable chil-

dren in families with an adequate income (above the low-income cut-off) (206 families) is almost as high as the number in low-income families (230 families) (Japel, 2008). Therefore, a strategy comprised only of programs aimed at the disadvantaged segment of the population would cover a limited number of children in difficulty. We need targeted programs that are part of a universal approach — that is, a strategy that responds to the needs of children from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds while investing more heavily in those children who demonstrate the greatest need (Brownell et al., 2006; Doherty, 2007).

A recent study by UNICEF used 10 benchmarks to compare the early childhood policies of the 25 most affluent countries in the world. Canada, along with Ireland, ranked lowest among these nations; it met only one benchmark! Québec's significant differences in policy with respect to early childhood education and care meant that it fared better than the other provinces, yet it met less than half of the benchmarks. Although Québec has a more generous parental leave program, a child poverty rate of less than 10% and — compared to the rest of Canada — a fairly large number of subsidized and regulated child care services, it still does not spend the amount needed to meet the benchmark identified by UNICEF for spending on early childhood services — 1% of GDP. In 2007-08, Québec spent roughly \$1.6 billion on child

care, an amount much larger than invested in these services by any other province. As large as this amount may seem, it does not meet UNICEF's recommended benchmark. In addition, in order to meet further benchmarks, Québec would have to lower the staff-to-child ratios and increase the percentage of qualified staff in such settings — obviously an unacceptable “solution.”

The UNESCO report on Canada's performance with respect to early childhood services could not be more timely. It shows that as a nation we have not met a number of important criteria crucial to the provision of services that foster children's well-being. The report also clearly documents that child care is here to stay, given that women's workforce participation is a socio-demographic reality as well as a choice, and often a necessity in keeping families out of poverty. Finally, it provides convincing evidence that investing in early childhood education and care yields high economic and social returns. These results cannot be ignored, especially in the light of the current economic downturn and the ongoing clamour for significant increases in government spending to improve the future of our nation — and our children are our future. The need to devote more funds to our human capital has never been greater, and investments in a universal, subsidized and not-for profit ECEC system staffed by qualified workers would benefit not only children and families but also the economy, stimulating our economic recovery.

Québec has laid the groundwork for an important social structure that is beneficial to children and their families. Yet its child care system must be seen as a work in progress, and we must continue striving to improve its quality, notably by revising some of the regulations governing the system and increasing funding to the sector. Good child care is expensive. But there is ample evidence that child care is a worthwhile investment with positive results in improving society's human and social capital.

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## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

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**Carole Welp's** accumulated knowledge and experience with child care and early education in Québec spans more than 35 years. Her academic background includes a Masters of Education from Harvard and a solid base of intervention research and practice. Issues of access to quality child care have been central to her work experience in a variety of community settings, mostly as a director of a non-profit center in a low-income neighbourhood in Montreal. She presently works as a consultant for non-profit child care programs who are struggling with the challenge of delivering quality care to children and their families.

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