

Child Care in Québec: Where There's a Will, There's a Way

by Jocelyne Tougas.

A paper of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada*

Introduction

Each province and territory in Canada conceptualizes and delivers early childhood care and education in its own way. Therefore, funding of ECCE, its expansion or reduction, and child care policies and regulations, depend on the political will and commitment by governments to act on behalf of the well-being of children and their families.

For over a decade, federal/provincial/territorial governments have used deficit reduction and other economic priorities and “constraints” to justify doing very little for early childhood care and education.

However, one province stands out in its willingness to follow another path and make a significant difference in the lives of children and families. Over the past five years, Québec has been implementing an exciting early childhood care and education initiative, investing massively in the development of new regulated child care spaces and in their overall funding.

The questions and answers in this document attempt to describe the major features of Québec's ECCE initiative and draw out the key elements and experiences that could serve as lessons for child care advocates across the country.

What does Québec's new early childhood care and education system look like?

Three major components form the basis of Québec's early childhood care and education system:

1. Early Childhood Agencies – centres de la petite enfance (CPEs)

Centre-based child care services (group child care) for children 0 to 4, and family child care for children 0 to 12 fall under the aegis of the Ministère de la Famille et de l'Enfance, created in 1997. These two types of settings are overseen by a single organization known as a *Centre de la Petite Enfance (CPE)*. CPEs were created from non-profit child care centres and family child care agencies, which formed the cornerstone of the system until 1997. All CPEs are non-profit and run by a board of directors. Parent users form the majority on these boards. As of

* With appreciation for the support of the Child Care Resource and Research Unit, and Martha Friendly.

September 2001, Québec had 915 CPEs. Currently, there are 139,683 regulated spaces available (about 22,000 in the for-profit sector), compared to 78,000 in 1997. It should be noted that although Québec's child care system is often thought of as a public one, it is not state-run in the same way as schools, for example. Each CPE is independent, and has its own charter and regulations.

2. School-age child care programs

Québec's school-age child care programs are the second component of the system. They are not formally presented as part of Québec's family policy, but are nonetheless closely associated with it. It is estimated that there are 1,249 school-age programs in Québec's elementary schools, serving at least 150,000 children between the ages of 5 and 12. School-age child care comes under the Ministère de l'Éducation (MEQ) and is funded via school boards. Like the other forms of regulated child care in Québec, these programs have undergone spectacular growth since the implementation of ECCE reform.

3. Kindergarten

The third component of the government's ECCE strategy is full-day kindergarten, another MEQ program. As of September 1997, full-day kindergarten has been offered to all five-year-olds, and half-day kindergarten, combined with free early childhood education and care, to disadvantaged four-year-olds. This policy was based on research indicating a direct relationship between the length of time spent in kindergarten, success in elementary school and lower high school dropout rates. As well, the government took into consideration the positive role played by kindergarten in subsequent schooling, social integration, and personality development.

How is the system funded?

In concrete terms, the restructuring of Québec's early childhood care and education system has taken the form of:

- The gradual introduction of a universally accessible \$5-a-day child care program.
- An in-depth overhaul of child care funding terms.
- A massive increase in public funding.

\$5-a-day child care

The Ministère de la Famille et de l'Enfance uses the term "reduced rate spaces" to designate spaces available for \$5 a day in CPEs, in certain subsidized child care centres¹, and in school-age child care. This \$5-a-day system was introduced in stages, starting in September 1997 for four-year-olds and completed in Fall 2000 for all children from 0 to 12.

¹ "Subsidized" child care centres are either commercial child care centres or centres having a board of directors on which parent users do not form the majority which have signed an agreement with the Ministry to make spaces available at the reduced rate.

The program is not simply an employment support measure. Access to regulated child care (and hence to \$5-a-day spaces) is not restricted solely to parents in the paid workforce or enrolled in school; all families are eligible. Furthermore, children from low-income families may attend child care for 23 _ hours a week at no charge.

Base funding

The government allots capital funding to CPEs and subsidizes over 80 % of their operating expenses including rent, utilities, child care and educational expenses. This means child care fees paid by parents account for less than 20% of a CPE or school-age program’s operating budget—an important change. In the past, parent fees accounted for almost 50% of child care centres’ revenues. The new funding policy has provided programs with stable financing.

Massive Increase in Public Investment

The following table gives an overview of the Québec government’s spending in early childhood care and education since implementation of the reform.

	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002 *
ECCE	\$289,860M	\$494,059M	\$615,656M	\$843,600M	\$1,024,436,600
School-age	\$41,999,000	\$53,550,403	\$70,989,051	Not available	Not available

* estimated

How did the government plan for such a massive expansion?

Once the government decided to expand the system by adding some 96,000 new spaces, it needed to come up with a very sound and efficient development plan. There was a consensus that implementation had to be gradual for the ECCE initiative to succeed.

A strategic plan was adopted, with a goal of developing 12,000 new child care spaces a year over five years both in family day care and in centre-based settings. An annual child care budget was developed for each of Québec’s 16 administrative regions based on—among other things—population, number of children under 12 years of age and mothers’ employment rate. Regional development councils—with stakeholders from education, health, business, government departments and child care—were given a mandate to determine and recommend development priorities for their region. (The councils not only contribute to the coherent development of child care in a region, but also serve to promote ECCE issues and build consensus within sectors not traditionally associated and/or concerned with child care.)

In addition, it was decided that the \$5-a-day program would be implemented over four years, gradually by age group, beginning in the first year (97-98) with four-year-olds; the second year, three-year-olds and so on, until children 0 to 4 could all access regulated child care for \$5 a day. The goal was in fact achieved one year earlier than planned—in 2000—because of public response and pressure to gain access to the program.

Aside for the basic regulations, what ensures quality?

Core educational program

Both CPEs, including centre-based and family child care settings, and child care centres are subject to regulations governing the physical layout of the premises, children's health and safety, educational support and staff training (cf. *Regulation Respecting Child Care Centres*, ministère de la Famille et de l'Enfance).

In addition, concurrent with the global implementation of the child care reform, the government set forth a *core educational program* to assist child care programs in carrying out their mandate. All regulated child care services are required to implement this educational program. Its aim is to ensure:

- Well-rounded, harmonious development (i.e., full development of all aspects of children's personalities: socio-affective, moral, language, intellectual, physical and motor);
- Quality practice;
- Educational continuity among families, CPEs and other educational services facilitating children's transition to kindergarten and fostering scholastic success².

Catch-up wage increase

The unions representing child care workers succeeded in pressuring the government to put \$152 million into the wages of child care workers and the income of family child care providers over a four-year period, beginning in 1999-2000. The wage enhancement will help to recruit good candidates to study and work in child care, retain and encourage current child care providers to seek further training, and counterbalance the negative aspects of the occupation identified by those working in the sector. The parameters for the wage catch-up are:

- Application of pay scales by job categories over four years for regular, casual and substitute staff.
- Annual indexation over four years.
- Recognition of training and experience in the application of pay scales.
- Minimum and maximum thresholds for subsidies to regulated family child care providers.

² Ministère de la Famille et de l'Enfant (1997). Translation. Child Care Centre Educational Program. Éditeur officiel du Québec.

The average wage increase for workers in child care centres is about 38% to 40%. In concrete terms, a worker who earned \$12.49 per hour in 1998-1999 will receive \$17.30 in 2002-2003. For those working in family child care, the minimum subsidy is \$16 and the maximum is \$21.

Support for training and promotion of the ECCE profession

In recognition of the direct link between specialized training and quality child care³, the Québec government has imposed stricter regulations regarding training in early childhood care and education for CPE child care workers⁴. The government provides financial support to child care providers who are already actively working in the sector and enrol in college-level courses, making it easier for them to access professional development. Furthermore, CPEs receive compensation if they need to hire substitute staff.

The sector's massive growth and anticipated human resource requirements, in conjunction with the wage catch-up, prompted the government to launch a campaign promoting early childhood education as a career. The campaign was carried out in collaboration with the ECCE Teachers' Association. Its goal is *"to illustrate the key role early childhood educators have in child development and to inform high school graduates about career opportunities in this field."*⁵

How big is the demand for regulated child care services?

In 1999, two years after the implementation of Québec's new ECCE program, a study conducted by the ministère de la Famille et de l'Enfance and the Bureau de la statistique du Québec⁶ found that 50 % of families who had not been using child care on a regular basis were planning to use it. In addition, 52 % of the parents who were currently using unregulated child care services wanted access to a space in a CPE. These figures showed that when quality child care became available and affordable, parents recognized its value and tended to want to use it to complement and assist them in raising and educating their children.

³ Doherty et al. [You Bet I Care! Caring and Learning Environments Quality in Family Child Care Homes Across Canada](#) (2001). Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being, University of Guelph, Ontario, and Goelman et al. [You Bet I Care! Caring and Learning Environments: Quality in Child Care Centres Across Canada](#) (2001). Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being, University of Guelph, Ontario.

⁴ Two thirds of **child care teaching staff** must have a college diploma or undergraduate degree in ECCE, or three years experience plus a one-year College certificate (AEC) or a certificate in ECCE.

Family child care providers must obtain a first-aid certificate within the first six months following the opening of their child care, and complete 45 hours of training in ECCE during the 24 months following the opening of the family child care home. They must devote a minimum of six hours annually to professional development.

⁵ Government of Québec (2000). Translation [Communiqué 27 janvier 2000](#), on line: http://www.famille-enfance.gouv.qc.ca/5_communique/60_communique.html.

⁶ Bureau de la statistique du Québec (1999). [Enquête sur les besoins des familles en matière de services de garde : rapport d'analyse descriptive](#), page 31. Éditeur : auteur.

In a more recent study by the Ministry and the Bureau⁷, 67.8 % of families not using child care on a regular basis were inclined to have their child attend a CPE. Close to 85,000 children aged four and under were on a waiting list for a regulated, \$5-a-day space in a CPE. The government estimates that some of these children are already attending a CPE. Nevertheless, it has decided to increase and speed up development so that by 2005-2006, there will be at least 200,000 \$5-a-day spaces available for families with young children who want to use regulated quality ECCE services.

What conditions led to the new family policy?

Several conditions in the mid-1990s contributed to the changes. Among these were:

- A progressive government, influenced by strong women in Cabinet who believed that child care was a social and economic priority, and needed to be expanded.
- Growing public concern for the low percentage of young people in Québec graduating from high school, and for the consequences of this trend, both on a personal and societal level.
- Publication and circulation of numerous studies indicating:
 - the importance of early childhood care and education to the development of young children;
 - how quality child care can foster children's success in school, which leads to better jobs and better overall health;
 - how child care helps reduce poverty and the use of social assistance by allowing families to work; and
 - that overall, funding child care is a sound public investment.
- Widespread recognition of the difficulties many parents have trying to balance work and family responsibilities, and the consequences for workers and employers.
- Political will and a determination to act.

Where did the Government find the money?

Child care reform in Québec was undertaken at a time when the government was obsessively trying to reduce its deficit to zero by the year 2000, as many other provincial governments were also doing. To fund the first year of the new system, the government abolished certain child-related programs (family allowance, the allowance for young children and allowances for new-born children). It used the money from those budgets, repatriated Québec's part of the federal Child Benefit and recovered sums allotted for provincial child care income tax deductions.

⁷ Institut de la statistique du Québec (2001). Rapport d'enquête sur les besoins des familles en matière de services de garde éducatifs, page 35. Éditeur : auteur.

Furthermore, the introduction of full-day kindergarten and the enrolment of thousands of five-year-olds into the public school system freed up existing spaces, thus making it possible to increase the percentage of children 0 to 4 years old in child care without requiring increased investment. Given the overall public support for the program, and widespread pressure for increased child care development, the government was also able to justify the injection of new, additional funds by pointing to short-term savings in social assistance, early intervention programs and remedial services.

Why was there such strong public support for the initiative?

The government had to ensure that a majority of people from all walks of life and sectors supported the initiative since a commitment of significant additional resources was needed to speed up expansion to meet parent demand.

Child care: the corner stone of the family policy and important component of education

In 1997, the government put forward a comprehensive family policy with child care at the centre, next to an integrated child benefit for low income families and an improved maternity and parental insurance program. It also positioned child care as part of education, thus recognizing its important role in children's healthy development, success in school and social integration.

Responding to different stakeholders' needs

If the government had only focused on child care, public support might not have been as extensive. All the measures—integrated child benefit, \$5-a-day child care, full-day kindergarten, improved maternity and parental insurance program—come as a package. They are bound together within the family policy, and numerous stakeholders benefit from it.

From the perspective of the child care field: Government is expanding and diversifying Québec's early childhood care and education system. This means that more regulated child care options will be available to families and that leads to more job opportunities and stimulating challenges for child care workers. With the increased budgets, child care workers are finally getting better wages and working conditions. The importance of what they do is more broadly recognized, which has a direct impact on job satisfaction and self-esteem. A career in child care is changing from an anything-but scenario to a fulfilling professional choice.

From the perspective of parents: The massive and rapid expansion of the ECCE system means that soon all families who want to use regulated quality child care for their pre-schoolers and school aged children will be able to do so, no matter where they live, for as low as \$5 a day. Child care not only fosters the healthy

development of children; it has become a family support that helps parents balance their work and family responsibilities.

From the perspective of other key players: The broader community – be it community organizations, women’s groups, unions or business – realizes it will benefit from Québec’s ECCE strategy. That’s because the strategy addresses a number of issues organizations have been struggling with for years, including: poverty, equal opportunity, promoting success, supporting working families, and reducing absenteeism at work.

What challenges do Québec’s ECCE supporters and child advocates face today?

Quality vs. quantity: With the tremendous and rapid expansion of the ECCE system in Québec, there is a lot of pressure on caregivers and child care infrastructures from families, communities, the field, government agencies and the public to set up and deliver child care services. The balance between quality and quantity is more precarious than ever. CPEs have to work very hard at ensuring their child care staff is qualified—even more so now that the training regulation has been tightened and there is widespread recognition of the educational role of child care.

Human resources: CPEs have become mid-sized businesses—albeit not-for-profit—and parent boards manage budgets that reach well over \$2 million annually. Human resources, financial and management issues are pressing issues, and many of the current administrators lack the necessary training to deal with them adequately. The turnover rate of child care directors and their administrative staff, burn-out and emotional distress are real concerns.

Family child care and centre-based care: Integration of family child care and centre-based care is a slow and sometimes difficult process. These two sectors originally developed quite separately, with different focuses and approaches to training and support of caregivers. Family day care providers remain self-employed workers, while centre-based teachers are CPE employees. The challenge for CPEs is to learn to better deal with issues specific to each sector, while ensuring quality care.

Commercial sector: Pressure to speed up the development of new \$5-a-day spaces has opened up discussion around allowing further expansion of the commercial sector (for-profit day care centres). Currently, the government has imposed a moratorium on opening any new private commercial child care centres. Private owners argue they would be able to develop new spaces faster and cheaper than the not-for-profit agencies. The issues of quality, accountability for the use of public funds and child care as a public service need to be put at the forefront of this recurring debate.

Public support: It's important to make sure that support from parents, families and the general public for the ECCE initiative continues despite the long waiting lists for \$5-a-day spaces, the high overall cost of the system, some disenchantment with the current government and upcoming elections. It is also important to ensure that no future government, whatever the political party, can backtrack on the work already done.

What lessons can advocates from other provinces and territories learn from Québec's experience?

Each province has its own set of particular conditions that can be used to create the proper circumstances to move forward on an early childhood care and education agenda. Sometimes all that is needed is to frame the issues in such a way that various individuals and groups can't help but come together and pressure government to act on child care.

In 1995, the government of Québec held a Summit where a broad range of stakeholders—including government agencies, business, unions, education, health, and social justice, equity-seeking and community groups—sat at the same table to discuss and act on socio-economic development in the province. Child care was at the centre of numerous discussions because of its critical role in all sectors of socio-economic life.

Over the years, the child care field, inspired by research and front line experiences, had developed a coherent vision of what early childhood care and education should look like in Québec. The early childhood agency model (CPE) had been worked out on paper, possible funding options examined and implementation strategies considered. When the Summit sought feasible and realistic solutions to very real problems, potential courses of action were readily at hand.

Some general guidelines emerge from what ECCE supporters and advocates experienced in Québec during the process of implementing the new child care initiative. ECCE supporters and advocates need to:

- Identify a set of particular conditions in their respective provinces that are of public concern—and that are naturally linked to one another—upon which a general consensus can be built and where early childhood care and education can serve as a solution or as part of a solution.
- Join forces with other groups, associations and organizations around a common cause where child care is not necessarily the main focus, but is part of the proposed solution.

- Support numerous spokespersons in addressing the issue of early childhood care and education from different perspectives, but with a consistent basic message.
- Develop and be ready with a proposal that stands on its own, is flexible enough to ensure broad public support and can be realistically implemented.
- Think through mechanisms and processes for implementing the policies and the programs they are putting forth.
- Be willing to compromise and, in some instances, to be a part of some other stakeholder's social policy agenda.
- Be on the heels of public officials and politicians, focusing their energies and messages on those individuals who have a vested interest in child care, either because they are parents themselves using child care, are progressive individuals who recognize the value of ECCE for society as a whole, or represent a riding where child care access, cost or quality is a burning issue.
- Be ready to seize the window of opportunity when it appears, even if not all the components they were hoping for are in place (as long as the important parts are potentially there).
- Be openly supportive of public officials and politicians who move the ECCE agenda forward, even though advocates might have real issues with some aspects of the initiative. These can be debated out of the public eye.
- Keep the field, their partners, stakeholders and the general public aware of the benefits resulting from the initiative and promote successes, big or small, to counter inevitable criticism from opponents.