



Are Quebecers frustrated with their daycare system?

Last week the IMFC released a new report based on their national childcare poll: [*Canadian daycare desires, Part II: Attitudes toward daycare in Quebec*](#)

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For sixteen years, the Quebec government has funded a daycare system at a highly subsidized cost. Canada-wide and indeed internationally, this \$7-a-day system is praised as a leading example and the path to follow.

The question is whether Quebecers actually feel that way.

Our poll about Canadians' daycare desires shows some interesting results in Quebec.

When asked what Quebecers ideally prefer for children under six, a competent caregiver or a parent, 70% of Quebecers say a parent. Sixty-one percent of Quebecers who have children under six right now say the same.

In short, a clear majority of Quebecers believe that ideally, the best place for children under six is with a parent in spite of having a provincially-funded system that gives preference to daycare centres.

A second surprising result also emerged. When given options about how governments should help parents with child care, almost half of Quebecers polled (45%) said money should go directly to parents. This option was placed next to other options like subsidies to childcare centres, child tax deductions or providing funding exclusively for families in need, among others.

Surprisingly, more Quebecers believed that money should go directly to parents. By way of contrast, 25% of Canadians outside Quebec said governments should provide cash payments directly to parents.

These poll results leave us with a lot to think about with regards to how governments enact childcare policy. Seven in ten Quebecers believe the best place for a child under six is with a parent. Yet the government's public policy on that point does not remotely reflect this desire.

A monopoly on child care

In fact, when the government introduced the policy of subsidized daycare, other family funding and programs were cut. Scholars have shown how other family benefits were cancelled as Quebec ramped up spending on institutional daycare. This is not surprising, since provincial daycare plans are very expensive and government funds are at least somewhat limited.

Some may think the Quebec program is very popular simply because so many parents use it. That may not be the case. When the government provides a service at lower than market costs it provides an incentive to use it.

We are often told that government funding for provincial daycare plans offers Canadians just another choice on top of those choices we already have. The reality in Quebec speaks to a different outcome. It is that when government heavily funds one sector, it wipes out other options. Families are stretched for cash, and so when a service is offered at much below the market rate, they turn to the less expensive government service. The government in effect then holds a monopoly on that childcare service, having wiped out other options by preferentially funding only one.

Paying for something you may not want

The reality is that child care is actually very expensive, regardless of who provides it. Doing child care well costs—and so when the government provides it, we are all paying that cost through increased taxes. These are the hidden costs that parents may not immediately feel, but which create a difficult environment for families to prosper.

These are details not addressed in the poll. We asked simple and somewhat idealistic questions as to where children under six are better off. “What is best for children” is not necessarily the same as asking about what is possible for families. The two ought not be confused.

There might be many parents who think their presence would be better for their kids, but they simply cannot afford to stay home. Personal circumstances are just that, personal, and they vary from family to family.

Still, there should still be a place for idealism. For a blue-sky view of how we would like things to go. And public policy should assess opportunity costs and unintended consequences. Where public policy is divorced from citizens’ desires, it does taxpayers a disservice. In effect, it means taxpayers are paying for something they would rather not use.

There is a room for a lot more research and polling specifically examining how Quebecers feel about their current system. What is true in the meantime is that there is no quick fix by government for parental childcare woes and the rest of Canada ought to be very careful before following Quebec’s example in this regard. It does not appear to be a system that is overwhelmingly supported by Quebecers themselves.

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