

The Gazette

Opinion: Daycare policy might not reflect Quebecers' preferences

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By Andrea Mrozek

For 16 years, the Quebec government has been providing highly subsidized daycare. 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 recent poll about Canadians' daycare desires shows some interesting results in Quebec (www.imfcanada.org/daycaresdesires/Quebec). When asked what Quebecers ideally prefer for children under age 6, a competent caregiver or a parent, 70 per cent of Quebecers say a parent.

In short, a clear majority of Quebecers believe that the best place for children under 6 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 per cent) 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 per cent 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 regard to how governments enact childcare policy. Seven in 10 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.

In fact, when the government introduced its 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.

Some may think the Quebec program is very popular simply because so many parents use it. That may not be the case. Anytime a government provides a service at lower-than-market costs, it provides an incentive to use that service. The reality is that child care is actually very expensive, regardless of who provides it. When the government provides it, we are all paying for it through increased taxes.

In our poll, we asked simple and somewhat idealistic questions as to where children under 6 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, of course. 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. The Quebec model does not appear to be a system that is overwhelmingly supported by Quebecers themselves.

1912 – 130 rue Albert Street, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1P 5G4

T 613.565.3832 f 613.565.3803 1.866.373.4632

www.imfcanada.org