

Lessons from Quebec

Quality in Child Care – the non profit factor

Quebec's child care services have undergone a rapid expansion since 1998, increasing from 73,000 to over 360,000 spaces over the past decade. In 2003, when service supply couldn't keep up with the high demand from parents, the government turned to commercial operators. Today 534 for-profit providers or *garderies* offer reduced fee care under the program. The for-profit owners argued they were unable to meet provincial regulations under the flat parent fee and succeeded in their lobby to reduce the minimum numbers of qualified staff (Japel *et al.*, 2005; Prentice, 2005). As a result, commercial child care facilities worked under asymmetric regulations until uniform policies were introduced in 2007.

For profit operators have continued to challenge government policy. In question the hours of operation of commercial centres, which in this case run from 6 a.m. to 4 p.m. Parents who need an additional two hours -

In March 2008, a Quebec Superior Court Justice ruled in favour of for profit operators who levy surcharges on parents in addition to the \$7 a day fee set by the government.

are

to 6

p.m. - are charged \$12 extra; additional billing the court allowed. Government lawyers argued the additional fees undermine equity. Michelle Courchesne, the Quebec cabinet

minister responsible for family and child care, served notice that the government will appeal the ruling¹.

Studies indicate a substantial quality differences between non-profit and for profit providers, and regulated and unlicensed care. The Étude Longitudinale de développement des Enfants du Québec (ELDEQ) began in 1998, to collect data on a representative sample of Quebec infants. The study included an evaluation of child care settings attended by the children at 2.5 years. Using established quality tools researchers assessed 728 centre-based CPEs, 337 family homes, 296 for-profit centres and 179 unregulated in-home arrangements.

Extensive quality concerns were exposed. Japel et al (2004) found only 5% of programs were high quality; scoring between 6 and 7 on the rating scales (out of 7). The majority of arrangements scored below the mid range. Slightly over 10% were classified at below minimal quality. The study concluded that while the majority of arrangements were not harmful to children, neither did they provide the stimulation necessary to promote children's development.

The poorest ratings occurred most often in for-profit centres and unregulated family homes. 5% of CPEs (non-profit centres) and licensed family home homes performed poorly, compared to 25% of for-profit centres and unlicensed homes.

For profit and unregulated arrangements were less likely to be found in the good quality group. Only 15% of for-profit centres and about 10% of unregulated family homes were found to provide good care.

Quality also varied among the different types of service delivery. The average score for non profit centres (CPEs) was 4.53 (out of 7), followed by licensed family care at 4.32; commercial centres at 3.65, and unregulated home care averaged an almost identical 3.64.

¹ Kathryn Leger. "Levy scores big victory against Quebec on private daycare issue; Additional charges ruled legal, but province indicates it will appeal decision," *The Gazette*. Montreal. February, 29, 2008

Another large quality study by the Institut de la statistique du Québec collected from a large sample of 450 profit and non profit centres and 200 family child care homes. Researchers used the “Echelle d’observation de la qualité éducative” (Bourgon and Lavallée, 2003), an evaluation tool developed specifically to assess quality in Quebec’s regulated child programs. In addition they assessed the performance of the lead early childhood educator in the classroom, the centre’s director, its operations (including finances) and the characteristics of the local population.

Again substantial differences were found between the non profit CPEs and the commercial operators. Measured on a scale of 1 to 4, preschool classrooms in CPEs averaged a score of 2.93. In for-profit garderies the average was 2.58. Only a small number of commercial preschool classes scored in the good or very good range, compared to a substantial number of CPEs which scored in the good level or above.

One of the clearest patterns that appear between for-profit and non-profit providers was the priority placed on staff. For instance, on average wages for trained educators accounted for 47% of the budget of commercial centres, whereas, in non-profit centres, 70% of the annual operating budget went towards wages for qualified teacher. Differences in wages levels were also found - the average wage for educators in a commercial centre was \$12.72 compared to \$15.81 in non-profit CPEs (in 2003).

Training differences between the two delivery agents were also apparent. 27% of classroom staff in commercial centres had only a high school diploma, compared to 7% of staff in non-profit centres. About 55% of staff in garderies took part in professional development training in the preceding 12 months, compared to 85% of CPE staff.

Quality is important in child care. Variations in quality of care are associated with child outcomes. Low quality has a negative impact on children’s social, emotional and cognitive development; high quality has beneficial effects, particularly for at-risk children.