

The Lessons from Quebec Child Care

It's worth figuring out what are the correct lessons to draw from Quebec's child care experience ("Ontario is poised to repeat Quebec's daycare mistakes" Andrea Mrozek, CBC News Opinion, April 3, 2018). Andrea Mrozek says the lesson to learn is that universal child care is bad and child care assistance targeted only at low-income families is good. Of course, we already have a child care subsidy system which is targeted at low-income families, so, implicitly, she ends up favouring no additional funding to help parents with the crisis in child care affordability.

I wrote the very comprehensive 315-page report whose recommendations led to the Ontario Government's policy announcement for free child care for preschool children. It features a very substantial discussion of the lessons to learn from Quebec's child care policy reforms that began in 1997 – lessons that diverge from the ones Ms. Mrozek has drawn.

In a nutshell, Quebec started with a plan to make child care affordable at \$5 a day and deliver it through designated high quality not-for-profit early childhood centres (CPEs) with these CPEs also serving as hubs for the monitoring and mentoring of regulated family home child care. The primary mistake Quebec made was to move too quickly on affordability, it had nowhere near enough supply to meet the unexpected flood of demand.

So, several things happened. Quebec dramatically increased regulated home child care, which was quick to establish, and also rented spaces from existing for-profit centres. Studies in Quebec have shown that both of these types of care were of considerably lower average quality than the not-for-profit CPEs. More affluent families got many of the scarce good quality spaces in CPEs; many lower-income families also got served but got home child care spaces (caregivers with almost no training) or in for-profit child care centres. Even with all the family child care and the rented for-profit care, there still weren't enough spaces. So, Quebec developed a tax credit scheme to funnel money to parents using any kind of paid child care, whether informal or formal. This eventually eliminated child care shortages, but at a considerable sacrifice of the average quality of care.

Child care in Quebec is very affordable, and is very popular with parents. Its affordability has had dramatic positive impacts on women's employment, family incomes, and child poverty. Reputable economists claim that these effects are so positive that funding child care affordability can completely or nearly completely pay for itself. However, as Ontario develops its child care policies, it is important to imitate Quebec's successes and avoid Quebec's mistakes.

Imitating Quebec's successes means making child care very affordable for Ontario families. Making preschool child care free does that for children in the year or two before kindergarten. For families eligible for maternity/parental leave and benefits for the first year or so of the

child's life, it leaves them with, perhaps, a year and a half of child care costs to cover before free preschool is available. Ontario's child care system has a strong reputation for quality, and a wide range of international studies find positive effects of good quality child care for children at preschool age.

Avoiding Quebec's mistakes means phasing in affordable child care over time and not trying to do it all at once. And starting with an age group where the maximum number of Ontario families will benefit from improved affordability, and supply of good quality spaces can be ramped up quickly to meet demand. With preschool age children, there is already a substantial amount of licensed capacity in Ontario – 110,000 spaces. And the total number of preschool children as of September each year is only about 160,000 children. The number of preschool children does rise as the year goes on, but the supply is already substantial relative to expected demand, even when child care is free. So, with capacity expansion over the next two years or so, Ontario can make child care free for this age group, providing adequate supply of good quality spaces to meet demand.

Of course, the premise of Ms. Mrozek's argument was pretty shaky to begin with. Kindergarten is universal, elementary education is universal, health care is universal. It might be true that children from lower-income families benefit especially much from these services. But that doesn't mean that we should only deliver targeted kindergarten, elementary education, and health care to low-income families. All children benefit, and society benefits when all children receive these universal services.