Eight Lessons from Quebec on Designing Universal Early Care and Learning in the U.S.

In 1997, the Canadian province of Quebec invested in creating a universal child care system, promising a spot for every child who needed one for $5 CAD a day. Now, the Canadian government plans to invest $30 billion CAD over the next five years (~$240 billion USD in population adjusted dollars) to build on the Quebec model in order to offer universal child care across the country for $10 CAD ($8.03 USD) a day.

Critics of Quebec’s system say the model is a “bad deal” for kids. Is that true? As Congress considers President Biden’s proposals for major investment in child care infrastructure and raising caregiver wages for the first time ever, New America’s Better Life Lab and Early and Elementary Education Policy programs co-hosted a panel of experts in late July from Quebec and the U.S. to separate fact from fiction and break down what the real lessons are that the U.S. can and should learn from Quebec. (A recording of the event is available [here](#).) Here are the top eight takeaways:

1. **High-quality universal child care is a public good; the private market doesn’t work.**
   At the height of the Cold War, President Nixon vetoed a bipartisan bill that would have created a universal child care system in the 1970s, claiming it would overly involve the government in the domain of families. Since then, American families have been on their own. In the current market-based child care system, parents bear the brunt of the costs: infant care costs more than in-state college tuition in many states. U.S. public investment in child care is among the lowest of all advanced economies. Parents have trouble finding care: about half live in child care deserts. Providers, early educators, and child care workers earn poverty wages. And quality care, which leads to lasting, long-term benefits for children and families, is all over the map.

2. **Quebec’s child care system is not a bad deal for kids, but it could be better.**
   Based on data from the first 10 years of the program, the outcomes for children have been mixed. Children in high-quality, nonprofit early childhood education centers, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, showed improvements to school readiness and high school completion rates. Children in lower-quality for-profit settings, or from higher socioeconomic backgrounds didn’t benefit as much (although it is very popular among families of all income levels). Some critics say the system led to increased criminality. But that notion is based on misleading studies. The truth is Quebec’s crime rate has always been lower than that of other provinces. At a time when reforms brought crime rates down in other provinces, Quebec’s remained largely constant. It is still lower than in other provinces.

3. **Plan. Go Slow. And focus on quality and equity.**
   Quebec initially planned to invest in a system of high-quality nonprofit early childhood education centers. But demand for child care exploded so quickly that lawmakers opened options for low-cost slots in for-profit settings. Although research has found that the quality in for-profit centers is lower, they now account for nearly 40 percent of all the spaces. Waiting lists are long for the high-quality nonprofit settings, which account for only about one-third of all spaces. And children from low-income backgrounds tend to, disproportionately, be in lower-quality for-profit settings. (About 29 percent of children are in family child care settings.) Long-range planning must not only focus on providing universal high-quality care, but on ensuring that those most in need receive it first.

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4. **High-quality family child care is a critical part of the solution.**
   Family child care is often the only care available for low-income and rural families, parents of infants, and those who work unpredictable or shift hours. Quebec’s rapid expansion failed to adequately invest in family child care. In the U.S., investing public funding in training, quality, and support for family child care educators and providers, many of whom are women of color and immigrants, will not only stabilize the sector, but provide families with the flexibility they need, all while building on the already strong long-term relationships many of these providers and caregivers have with the children and families they serve.

5. **Paying, training, and supporting early educators is key to high quality.**
   In Quebec, one reason why nonprofit centers consistently show better outcomes for children is because early educators are more likely to be unionized, receive training, and have better-paying jobs—up to $20 USD an hour—with benefits than those at for-profit centers. With low wages, caregiver stress and turnover rates are high, which impacts the quality of the care children receive.

6. **The investment is worth it, and the system pays for itself.**
   Quebec had two goals when it created its universal child care system: improve school readiness for children and increase women’s participation in the workforce, furthering gender equality. Once affordable, accessible child care became available, women’s labor force participation increased a striking 12 percent, particularly among single mothers and women from lower socioeconomic families. It is now over 80 percent, much higher than in the rest of Canada. In the U.S., women’s labor force participation is at the lowest rate since 1988. Research has established the long-term economic benefits of high-quality child care, with Quebec actually recouping more benefits than it spends.

7. **Paid family and medical leave is infant care.**
   Quebec, like other Canadian provinces, has a generous paid family and medical leave system of up to one year. In 2006, Quebec was the first province to ensure men had an individual entitlement, or “Daddy quota,” and now 80 percent of the fathers in Quebec take paid leave. The universal child care system is designed to help families once they’ve spent the time they need caring for their infants.

8. **Families, educators, and providers must demand choices.**
   Parents, early educators, and providers in Quebec began working together in the 1970s to advocate for a high-quality universal child care system. That work paid off when legislation was passed in 1997. Advocacy in other provinces such as British Columbia helped build momentum for a Canada-wide system. People coming together to reimagine what’s possible, setting a clear vision of what’s most valuable in society—supporting our children and families—and persistently advocating for that vision can lead to real change.

**Resources**

- The Atlantic, *When 'Universal' Child Care Isn't Universally High-Quality*
- Bloomberg, *In Quebec, Child Care Is Infrastructure*
- Early Learning Nation, *“You Can't Compare Apples and Pears:” Setting the Record Straight on Quebec's Child Care System*

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