

CONSEIL SUPÉRIEUR DE L'ÉDUCATION

**IMPROVING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION  
AND CHILDCARE FOR PRESCHOOL-AGED  
CHILDREN: ISSUES OF ACCESS, QUALITY AND  
CONTINUITY OF SERVICES**

BRIEF TO THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION, RECREATION AND SPORTS

August 2012

**SUMMARY**

Québec 

# Summary

## IMPROVING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CHILDCARE FOR PRESCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN: ISSUES OF ACCESS, QUALITY AND CONTINUITY OF SERVICES

Brief to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports

### Overview

In this brief,<sup>1</sup> the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation examines three key issues related to early childhood education and childcare services for preschool-aged children in Québec: 1) accessibility to services; 2) the quality of these services and teaching approaches; and 3) the continuity of the educational experience. Simply put, how does Québec society currently meet the needs for early childhood education and childcare services for children aged 4-5, and what could it be doing to better promote early learning and development? In an attempt to answer this question, the Conseil reviewed literature in the field, studied and compared three early childhood education models outside Québec, consulted experts and carried out a survey of preschool teachers.

The Brief is divided into five chapters. The first provides an overview of early childhood education and childcare services in Québec, as well as the issue of their accessibility. Chapter two is an extensive discussion on the quality of these services, their influence on child development, and factors associated with quality such as teaching approaches, education programs and adult/child relationships and interactions. The third chapter covers the different transitions in the passage from early childhood education to elementary school and how these changes impact young children and their parents. Chapter four includes a comparison of three different early childhood education systems adopted in France, Sweden and Ontario. In the fifth and final chapter, the Conseil formulates three guidelines with recommendations intended to address the three above-mentioned issues.

In the past 15 years, Québec has made remarkable strides in the area of family-friendly measures and early childhood education and childcare services: educational childcare programs with a reduced contribution for parents of children aged 0-5, full-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds, \$7-a-day childcare services in schools, paid parental leave and financial support to families. Any educational childcare program for children aged 4-5 falls under the authority of either the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) or the Ministère de la Famille (MF). Programs governed by the MELS encompass full-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds, part-time kindergarten for 4-year-olds (intended for either handicapped children or those in socioeconomically-disadvantaged areas), the *Passe-Partout* program (with special activities for certain 4-year-olds

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<sup>1</sup> For the complete text (in French), see *Mieux accueillir et éduquer les enfants d'âge préscolaire: une triple question d'accès, de qualité et de continuité des services*.

and their parents), and after-school childcare services offered in many elementary schools throughout Québec. For its part, the Ministère de la Famille oversees educational childcare programs for young children in daycare centres (*centres de la petite enfance* or CPEs) as well as private and home daycare centres. These different centres provide services primarily to children from birth to 5 years of age. (Providers offering services to less than six children do not fall under the jurisdiction of either ministry.)

Yet, despite being recognized in North America as a leader in the field of early childhood education and childcare services, Québec faces issues related to their access, quality and continuity. For this brief, the Conseil examined these issues in depth and presents recommendations to improve these services, particularly those offered to children aged 4-5 in the two years preceding elementary school.

The Conseil believes that in order to promote the optimal well-being, learning and development of preschool-aged children, any offer of early childhood education and childcare services must rest on the following principles: 1) universal access; 2) equality of opportunity (while prioritizing the expansion of services for children from disadvantaged backgrounds); 3) the ongoing quest for higher quality, better services; and 4) the harmonization of initiatives to ensure a seamless continuity in the educational experience of young children.

Mutually dependent and equally important, these pillars form the foundation for the guidelines and recommendations presented by the Conseil in this brief.

### **Guideline 1: Toward Universal Access to Early Childhood Education and Childcare Services for Children Aged 4-5 and Their Parents**

Research on the subject has shown that early childhood education and childcare services can have a positive effect on child development, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in socioeconomically-disadvantaged areas. These services not only promote learning and development, but also help parents better balance work and/or studies with family. The Conseil notes, however, the current offer of licensed childcare services does not meet global demand in terms of ensuring quality early childhood education and childcare for all 4-year-old children and equitable access to childcare services in schools.

Today in Québec, less than 73% of 4-year-old children are enrolled in either a licensed childcare service or one offered in school. The Conseil recommends that the Government of Québec set an enrolment target of 90% in these state-regulated services within the next five years. It therefore calls for measures to this end, while focusing on the importance of reaching children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Offering free and universal services could be one such means of ensuring both a higher enrolment of this latter group of children and positive outcomes in child development overall.

The Conseil noted that not all kindergarten children aged 4-5 have access to on-site, after-school childcare services. Problems accessing these services appear to

be more pronounced in sparsely-populated regions, where it is particularly acute for 4-year-olds in part-time kindergarten. To remedy this situation, some communities are resorting to services outside schools which do not always meet ministerial guidelines. In this regard, the Conseil deems that all school children have access to childcare services in schools or equivalent services offered in partnership with other sectors.

As a child's first experiences are at home, the family forms the cradle for learning and development. It thus follows that any initiatives proposed for children and parents together can only have positive effects on both. These are typically led by community organizations, which often have to overcome financial challenges that limit their offer of services, a shortfall that could be addressed through appropriate funding. One initiative administered by school boards, the *Passe-Partout* program, is designed to enhance the skills of parents whose 4-year-olds entering full-day kindergarten the following year, and to foster the development of the latter while preparing them for elementary school. Approximately 13% of 4-year-old children in Québec participate in this program today. The Conseil believes that *Passe-Partout*—initially intended for disadvantaged families—should be expanded across Québec.

## **Guideline 2: Toward Quality Services and an Effective Approach to Child Development**

In addition to universal access, the quality of early childhood education and childcare services is just as important. Ensuring this quality entails maintaining and improving the quality of all educational services offered to children aged 4-5, by simultaneously leveraging both structural aspects (ratio and size of groups, training for early childhood professionals, quality of physical environments, structured education programs, etc.) and the quality of the process itself (high-quality educational activities, good adult/child relationships and interactions, etc.). Structural initiatives generally require government regulations which, in the Conseil's opinion, should be amended to lower the ratios for kindergarten and childcare services in schools. The process itself is more dynamic, as its quality rests on—among other things—upgrading initial training programs for educators to include the unique characteristics of preschool education, more rigorous training for home childcare providers, and the need for all new CPE or daycare educators be duly qualified. The quality of the process also depends on an ongoing collaborative effort on the part of all early childhood stakeholders in training the various service providers and in diversifying measures for professional support.

Given the importance of a child-centred approach to overall development and engagement in learning and the relevance of supporting effective teaching in this regard, the Conseil recommends actions be taken to address the quality of early childhood education and childcare services. To this end, it proposes creating a guide to accompany the preschool education program. Lastly, the Conseil believes that further research on the quality of services in this field should be undertaken in Québec.

### **Guideline 3: Toward Smooth Transitions to Kindergarten and Elementary School for Both Young Children and Their Parents**

Important changes usually accompany the passage to kindergarten and from kindergarten to Cycle 1 in elementary school. Making these transitions successful not only depends on the child adapting to new environments, but also on the school playing a pivotal role. The Conseil therefore recommends an ecosystemic view of preschool transitions and adopting measures that would ensure the seamless continuity of the child's educational experience during the transitions to kindergarten and the first year of school. Rather than focusing exclusively on preparing the child for elementary school, the various life and learning environments should be aligned to ensure smooth transitions, by considering the needs of parents as well as the child, and paying particular attention to those unfamiliar with the school culture or language of instruction. Appropriate measures should also be adopted to improve support for preschool-aged children who have difficulties with learning, language or adapting. Lastly, strengthening the links between preschool and elementary teaching approaches is recommended as well.

Moreover, the Conseil notes that the continuity of the child's educational experience during these transitional periods extends beyond the scope of preschool education and local collaboration, posing a challenge to coordinating services. Given the number of ministries and stakeholder organizations involved and the importance of a systematic and concerted effort to promote children throughout Québec, the Conseil calls on all Ministers and their civil society partners to consider the need for a seamless continuity of education from birth until age 8, and work together to better coordinate their initiatives in this regard.

The importance of childhood as a crucial developmental stage is universally recognized, as is the need for quality early childhood education and childcare services. These services promote not only the development of all children and help parents balance work and family, but encourage equality of opportunity as well, for educational inequality does not begin at school—it is present at birth and perpetuated when no steps are taken to address it. Indeed, it has been shown that quality early childhood education and childcare services can only contribute to reducing this disparity.

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The full brief *Mieux accueillir et éduquer les enfants d'âge préscolaire: une triple question d'accès, de qualité et de continuité des services* (in French) is available on the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation's website at [www.cse.gouv.qc.ca](http://www.cse.gouv.qc.ca). Printed copies can be ordered by calling (418) 643-3850.