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CHALLENGES IN EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE FOR QUEBEC'S ENGLISH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY

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Early childhood education and care (ECEC). Early learning and child care. Nursery school. Preschool. Daycare. *Centres de la petite enfance* (CPE). There are many names and acronyms, but they all refer to the care and, ideally, *educative* care of young children in the years before compulsory elementary schooling.

Modern wisdom views such programs as essential, and yet, in Quebec, English-speaking families face unique challenges in accessing them. This research brief explores these barriers, current efforts being made to address them, and potential solutions.

Care and Education for the Youngest: What and Why?

The outsourcing of care for children under school age gained traction as more women began working outside the home in the 20th century. It ultimately led to the creation of a mix of public and private centres designed to offer both care and developmental programs.

Until the late 1980s, the Canadian understanding of such services was fragmented. Child care was seen as a service for parents occupied with work or study. Early years education was seen as either an elective enrichment opportunity for an advantaged child, or a compensatory educational program for a disadvantaged child or one with special needs.¹

¹ Martha Friendly, "Child Care and Canadian Federalism in the 1990s: Canary in a Coal Mine" (Childcare Resource and Research Unit: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto, August 2000), 7, <https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/canaryMFv.pdf>.

By the end of the 1990s, this understanding had evolved into today's prevailing model, now most commonly referred to as "early learning and child care." **This model views child care and early years education as one inclusive service, and as a best practice for early development of all children.** This applies regardless of whether a child is considered at-risk or disadvantaged. By definition, early learning and child care is unrelated to parental activities.²

Early Learning and Child Care in Quebec Today

The Quebec public offer of early learning and child care is designed for children ages 0-5. It covers the period from birth to when compulsory education begins, which is the start of the school year following the child's sixth birthday (Elementary 1). Helmed by the province's network of low-cost, non-profit *centres de la petite enfance*, or CPEs, the system also includes regulated for-profit child care centres, home-based daycares (*milieux familiaux reconnus*), and school-based kindergarten for ages four and five, as well as the latter's before- and after-school care, or *service de garde en milieu scolaire*.³

Established in 1997, the CPE network is funded by the province and regulated by the Ministère de la Famille (MFA). Governed by strong pedagogical standards, CPEs are generally considered the best quality educational experience in the province for children under five.⁴ They are also the most affordable, at a flat rate of \$9.10/day (as of 2024), regardless of parental income.⁵ **However, spaces are limited, and more than 37,000 children sat on waiting lists in 2023.**⁶ To help mitigate this, the government "rents" spaces in private, for-profit and home-based daycares and makes them available at the CPE rate, and provides tax credits based on income for other spaces. However, not falling under the direct purview of government regulation, the educative care in these private centres and homes is of varying quality. And, as mentioned above, thousands of families remain on waiting lists for a place in a CPE, frequenting a private or home-based child care centre in the meantime, while others have no access to child care at all. Yet, despite its flaws, the CPE system remains a model for early years education, with the federal government aiming to create a Canada-wide system based on it.⁷

² Friendly, 7.

³ Jane Beach et al., "Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2021" (Childcare Resource and Research Unit, April 2023), 86, <https://childcarecanada.org/sites/default/files/Early-childhood-education-and-care-2021-REV-Full-publication.pdf>.

⁴ Gordon Cleveland, Sophie Mathieu, and Christa Japel, "What Is 'The Quebec Model' of Early Learning and Child Care?," *Policy Options*, Institute for Research on Public Policy, February 18, 2021, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/february-2021/what-is-the-quebec-model-of-early-learning-and-child-care/>.

⁵ Quebec, Ministère de la famille, "Types de services de garde au Québec," December 31, 2023, <https://www.quebec.ca/famille-et-soutien-aux-personnes/enfance/gardereries-et-services-de-garde/types-services-garde>.

⁶ The Canadian Press, "New One-Stop Shop for Quebec Daycares Won't Be in Place Until June 2024," *CityNews*, September 21, 2023, <https://montreal.citynews.ca/2023/09/21/one-stop-shop-quebec-daycares-not-until-2024/>.

⁷ Cleveland, Mathieu, and Japel, "What Is 'The Quebec Model' of Early Learning and Child Care?."

Kindergarten falls under the purview of the Ministère de l'Éducation (MEQ). It is a non-compulsory legislated entitlement for four- and five-year-olds, and there has been an increase in the offer for four-year olds (K4) in recent years.⁸ K4 was first implemented in the 1970s and has been expanded in the decades since as a program to provide additional early learning support in disadvantaged communities.⁹ The current provincial government has committed to universal K4, to provide early intervention for learning disabilities, and free up CPE and child care centre spaces.¹⁰ The deadline for this goal, however, has been pushed back, and the scope diminished somewhat due to a shortage of teachers.¹¹ The plan for the 2022-2023 academic year was to have opened 1,610 classes, of which 1,586 were rolled out. The current objective is 2,600 K4 classes by 2029-2030, pushed back from the original plan of 5,000 within five years.¹²

The public educational framework also includes access to developmental support professionals such as speech therapists, remedial teachers, and school psychologists.¹³ However, with waiting lists very long, particularly for speech therapy,¹⁴ CPEs and schools have in some cases referred families to the private sector to obtain these services. The province does not reimburse the private sector costs, even when these services are essential for child development. This could create a disparity in access depending on family resources.

Shortages of qualified personnel, and decisions to change standards to allow for the recruitment of less qualified personnel, are other issues that have reverberating effects throughout the system. They have been examined in other studies¹⁵ and are beyond the scope of the current brief.

⁸ Beach et al., "Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2021," 91.

⁹ Christa Japel et al., "Junior Kindergarten for 4-Year-Olds: The Quality of the Educational Environment and Its Association With School Readiness Among Children From Disadvantaged Backgrounds" (Université du Québec à Montréal, March 2017), 2, <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/18/01/junior-kindergarten-4-year-olds>.

¹⁰ Coalition Avenir Québec, "La maternelle 4 ans universelle : Un projet de société pour le Québec," September 3, 2018, <https://coalitionavenirquebec.org/fr/blog/2018/09/03/la-maternelle-4-ans-universelle-un-projet-de-societe-pour-le-quebec/>.

¹¹ The Canadian Press, "Quebec Premier Legault Won't Meet Election Promise to Offer Pre-Kindergarten," February 22, 2023, <https://montreal.ctvnews.ca/quebec-premier-legault-won-t-meet-election-promise-to-offer-pre-kindergarten-1.6284727>.

¹² Hugo Pilon-Larose, "Québec rate sa cible pour l'année 2022-2023," La Presse, November 2, 2023, <https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/education/2023-11-02/ouverture-des-maternelles-4-ans/quebec-rate-sa-cible-pour-l-annee-2022-2023.php>.

¹³ Radio-Canada, "En dernier recours, faites appel au privé, dit Québec aux écoles publiques," *Radio-Canada*, October 5, 2021, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1829308/education-orthopedagogie-orthophonie-psychologie-privé>.

¹⁴ Marie-Eve Cousineau, "Plus de 11 400 enfants en attente d'un service en orthophonie," *Le Devoir*, June 12, 2021, <https://www.ledevoir.com/societe/sante/610392/plus-de-11-400-enfants-en-attente-d-un-service-en-orthophonie>.

¹⁵ For further information, see Nina Howe, Kathleen Flanagan, and Michal Perlman, "Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada," in *International Handbook of Early Childhood Education* (Springer, 2018), 721–43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-0927-7>; Myriam Lavallée, Justine Chaput, and Simon Gagné-Carrier, "Labour Shortage: Revised Ratios of Qualified Staff Members in Child Care Centres" (Lavery, March 5, 2024), <https://www.lavery.ca/en/publications/our-publications/5363-labour-shortage-revised-ratios-of-qualified-staff-members-in-child-care-centres.html>; Quebec, Ministère de la Famille, "A Sufficient Number of Qualified Staff," April 9, 2020, <https://www.mfa.gouv.qc.ca/en/services-de-garde/legal-illegal-reconnu/services-garde-reconnus/Pages/personnel-en-nombre-suffisant-et-qualifie.aspx>.

The System and English-Speaking Families: Layers of Limitations

Overall, English speakers have some unique experiences of Quebec's 0-5 system.

Specifically, they are affected by the above-mentioned issues to a greater degree. In a system with long waiting lists for everyone, adding criteria such as language preference further limits what is available. Furthermore, some parents and children may face challenges interacting with centres where all staff are unilingual French speakers. **Studies have also shown that English-speaking Quebecers are more likely than francophones to grapple with socioeconomic difficulties such as unemployment and low income,¹⁶ which affect families' experiences of the early learning and child care system.** When a parent is unable to work outside the home because of the lack of affordable child care, it takes a toll on the family budget. Research indicates that children from poor families are more likely to experience developmental challenges in their early years.¹⁷

Finding child care in English

The Charter of the French Language (Bills 101 and 96) dictates which “rights holders” can receive kindergarten, elementary, and secondary education in English in Quebec. However, it does not have provisions related to early learning and child care programs outside the public school network.¹⁸ All Quebec children can, in theory, attend English or bilingual CPEs, for-profit daycares, and nursery schools.

The access barrier is not laws, it is finding centres that offer such services in English. *La Place 0-5* is a provincially sponsored web registry, available in French and English, of public (non-profit) and private (for-profit) child care and preschool centres in the province. It defines itself as a “one-stop shop” for such services. Nonetheless, nearly 50% of parents seeking a first-time placement for their child found the search process difficult, and 54% reported that the service they were able to find did not meet all their criteria.¹⁹ This suggests a fair amount of “settling” for all Quebec parents, regardless of language. The MFA does not appear to keep data on its early learning and child care programs by linguistic criteria.²⁰ **A recent study showed that, in families where English is spoken most often at home, parents were more likely to have difficulty finding daycare services on their first attempt** (Figure 1). The same study also found that parents who mostly spoke English at home were more likely to be unfamiliar with *La Place 0-5* and means of accessing the waiting lists for early learning programs.²¹

¹⁶ Morgan Gagnon and Sithandazile Kuzviwanza, “A Snapshot of Poverty Among Québec's English-Speaking Communities,” Provincial Employment Roundtable (PERT), September 2023, 2, <https://pertquebec.ca/reports/a-snapshot-of-poverty-among-quebecs-english-speaking-communities/>.

¹⁷ Lawrence Berger, Christina Paxson, and Jane Waldfogel, “Income and Child Development,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 31, no. 9 (September 2009): 978–89, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2009.04.013>.

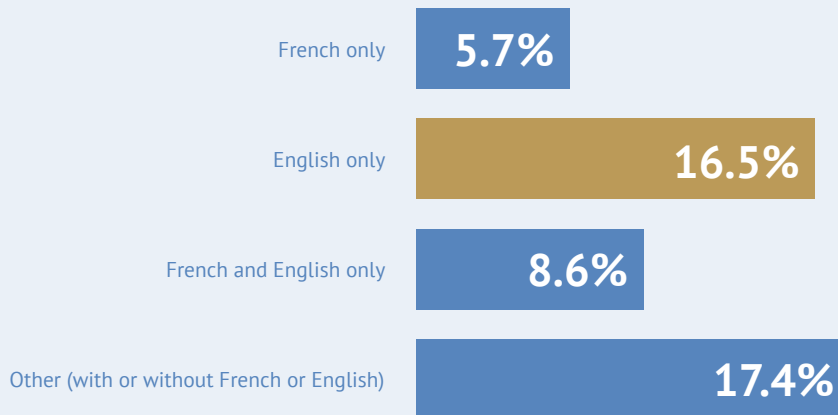
¹⁸ Note that some private (for-profit) K4 programs that fall outside Charter provisions are located within English-language public schools. Québec, “Charte de La Langue Française” (C-11, Chapter VIII, n.d.), <https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/document/cs/C-11?langCont=en>.

¹⁹ Institut de la statistique du Québec, “Enquête québécoise sur l'accessibilité et l'utilisation des services de garde 2021” (Québec, 2021), 135, <https://statistique.quebec.ca/fr/document/enquete-quebecoise-accessibilite-utilisation-services-garde-2021>.

²⁰ Phone communication with MFA Centre des services à la clientèle, January 29, 2024.

²¹ Institut de la statistique du Québec, “Enquête québécoise sur l'accessibilité et l'utilisation des services de garde 2021,” 74, 95.

Figure 1:
Proportion of preschoolers whose parents are unfamiliar with *La Place 0-5*,
by language spoken most often at home, Quebec, 2021



Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Enquête québécoise sur le développement des enfants à la maternelle 2022*, 95.

***La Place 0-5* does not label or sort centres by linguistic instruction.** Parents seeking services by this criterion can apply keyword filters to a search, but results are pooled from descriptions the centres themselves provide. Linguistic information is elective and not standardized. A “multilingual group” filter option is also available, categorized under the “Other” heading in a long list that also includes whether the centre offers “cloth diapers” and “sporting activities.” Details about the languages indicated by “multilingual” are not provided.

Finding speech therapists and psychoeducation services in English

Specialized services such as speech-language therapy, counselling and remedial/ resource are in short supply generally in Quebec public schools²² and more so for the English-speaking minority in many regions,²³ due to, at least in part, a lack of personnel entering the workforce who offer service in English. Part of the shortage may be linked to the fact that of the four Quebec universities offering degrees in speech-language pathology, only one, McGill University, offers instruction in English.²⁴ McGill’s program admits and graduates about 30 students each year.²⁵ The primary method of finding a private speech language

²² Marco Fortier, “Plus de 500 professionnels manquent au réseau scolaire,” *Le Devoir*, September 30, 2021, <https://www.ledevoir.com/societe/education/636519/500-professionnels-manquants-en-education>.

²³ Nadine Ciamarra et al., “Provision of Services to Special Needs Students in Quebec’s English-Language Public Schools” *QUESCREEN*, 2023), https://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/artsci/scpa/quescreen/docs/Brief_4_2024_EN.pdf.

²⁴ Québec, “Audiologists and Speech Therapists,” *Quebec.ca, Exploring Trades and Occupations*, February 14, 2024, <https://www.quebec.ca/en/employment/learn-trade-occupation/exploring-trades-occupations/31112-audiologists-and-speech-therapists>.

²⁵ Antoinette Sommer, Administrative Student Affairs Coordinator, School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, McGill University, email message to the author, March 2024.

pathologist is by searching the online directory of the professional order, *l'Ordre des orthophonistes et audiologistes du Québec*. This is available exclusively in French, which represents another access barrier (though a filter exists for those providing services in English.) Most graduates of McGill's program, or any other English-language university program outside of Quebec, must pass a French exam to join the order. English exams are not required to work in this field in Quebec.²⁶

While research on the availability of specialized services focuses on school-age English-speaking children, evidence suggests that the same challenges are faced by English-speaking families with children aged 0-5.²⁷ **A 2021 survey of English-speaking parents in the province showed that 80% found it very or somewhat difficult to find specialized services in English for their young children, such as for language development, emotional difficulties, and neurological challenges (autism, ADD).**²⁸

Consequences of the Lack of Services

English-speaking children starting kindergarten in Quebec score lower than their French-speaking counterparts in five key developmental areas,²⁹ with a higher proportion experiencing vulnerability in at least one of these domains (Figure 2).³⁰ Whether this is due to socioeconomic difficulties, a lack of services, or a combination of both factors remains to be determined. More research is needed.

²⁶ McGill University, School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, "Speech-Language Pathology Program FAQs," McGill University, Retrieved March 2024, <https://www.mcgill.ca/scsd/programs/slp/slpprogramfaqs>.

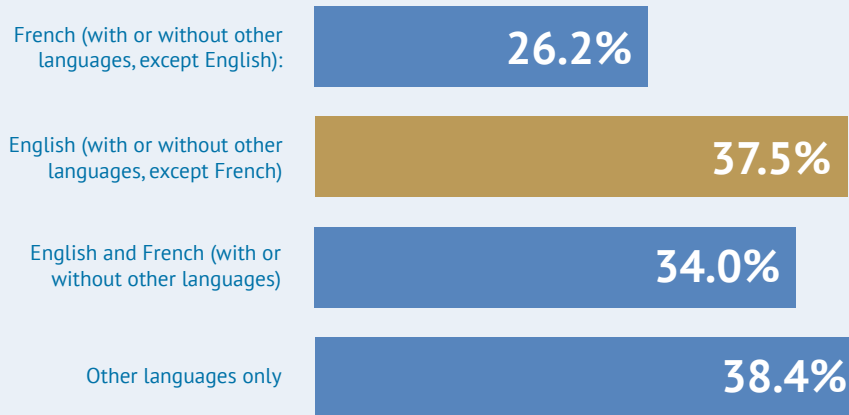
²⁷ Taylor McClure, "Speech-Language Pathologists Attempt to Fill the Gap in Services for English-Speakers," *Canada-Info.ca*, May 19, 2023, <https://canada-info.ca/en/speech-language-pathologists-attempt-to-fill-the-gap-in-services-for-english-speakers/>.

²⁸ Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN), "English Language Early Childhood Services: Opinion Survey Among English-Speaking Parents in Quebec," November 18, 2021, <https://chssn.org/documents/early-childhood-services-regional-reports-provincial/>.

²⁹ The five key development areas measured are physical health and well-being, social skills, emotional maturity, cognitive and language development, and communication skills and general knowledge. Institut de la statistique du Québec, "Enquête québécoise sur le développement des enfants à la maternelle 2022" (Quebec, 2022), 12.

³⁰ Institut de la statistique du Québec, "Enquête québécoise sur le développement des enfants à la maternelle 2022," 79.

Figure 2:
Proportion of five-year-old kindergarteners vulnerable in at least one developmental area, by mother tongue, Quebec, 2022



Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, *Enquête québécoise sur le développement des enfants à la maternelle 2022*, 79.

Bridging Gaps: Community and Non-profit Organization Initiatives

The challenges of English-speaking families have been noticed by the community and its leaders.³¹ The Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN), a government-funded umbrella group of nearly 70 provincial community organizations, leads programs and initiatives to address access gaps between English speakers and health and social services, including those for families with children ages 0-5. Through federal and provincial support, it funds community-led projects through Healthy Early Years (HEY) (federal) and Bright Beginnings (provincial) programs. These programs cover a range of activities, from postnatal and parental health to preschool curricula designed to enhance school readiness for English-speaking children. The projects also develop skills for parents and community workers and include parent-child activities. While helping linguistic minorities with access limitations, they do not substitute for or aim to adapt government-provided healthcare services, according to Anne-Marie Cech, Program Manager for Early Childhood, Youth and Families, CHSSN.

³¹ Jennifer Johnson and Elise Bonneville, "Opinion: Early-Childhood Services in English in Quebec Fall Short," *Montreal Gazette*, November 18, 2021, <https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/opinion-early-childhood-services-in-english-in-quebec-fall-short>.

There may be a disparity between services available in English, including community-led programs, and parental perception of availability. As mentioned above, many English-speaking parents are unfamiliar with the most popular way to locate daycare programs. Another survey of English-speaking parents in Quebec³² showed that 38% of respondents reported either not knowing what services were out there or a belief that services were inadequately adapted to their needs. **Thus, beyond scarcities of services themselves, obstacles to obtaining services also include language and knowledge barriers and shortages of resources available to community groups for their efforts to reach isolated or unaware community members.**

Conclusion

Early learning and child care in Quebec has shifted toward a unified approach that integrates care and education. While the CPE network stands as a shining example of affordability and quality, challenges such as limited availability and disparities in access to support services continue to characterize the system.

In Quebec, English-speaking children are more vulnerable than French-speaking children in many areas, including key developmental categories. This creates a poor trajectory for the children and indicates a need for further resources and research. Studies throughout Canada and other nations demonstrate that poor development at a young age can have long-term consequences. These consequences include high dropout rates and dim economic futures, the effects of which can be felt throughout the larger economic system.³³

While support programs have been initiated at the community level, quality services for early learning and child care in English remain both scarce and difficult to find in many regions of Quebec. **Several measures could be taken, from adding linguistic identifiers to the search engine for CPEs and child care centres, to further developing and funding the postsecondary training programs that feed the English-language pool of early childhood educators and support professionals.** Community organizations serving this minority population could also benefit from further support in their efforts to obtain more funding.

³² Community Health and Social Services Network (CHSSN), "English Language Early Childhood Services: Opinion Survey Among English-Speaking Parents in Quebec."

³³ Marilyn Flear and Bert van Oers, *International Handbook of Early Childhood Education* (Springer, 2018), 27, 63.

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