WHAT HAPPENED TO QUALITY?

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As Canada rushes to $10 per day child care an unsettling finding emerged out of a study on the Ontario early childhood workforce. When describing conditions in their workplace, a number of educators said they wouldn't recommend their centre to a friend or family member looking for child care.

Results varied by region, yet on average 6 per cent of educators said 'no' when asked if they would recommend their own program. Another 8 per cent said they were unsure. The percentage of concerned staff is thankfully small, but it still represents hundreds of educators working in hundreds of child care centres across the province.

Educator perceptions are kind compared to expert evaluations. In Quebec, a province with considerable experience creating low-cost child care, 21 per cent of its publicly-managed centres and a shocking 59 per cent of its private centres failed the government's quality evaluation. The described "inappropriate attitudes or practices," which led to Quebec's low scores mirror those found in the Ontario study.

Quebec can be credited with regularly evaluating its programs and publishing the results; most provinces and territories don't. With billions in public funding funnelling through the Canada-wide plan to create more child care at affordable costs for parents, why is quality getting left behind?

The answer is money and educators. Halfway through the CWELCC agreements, only 15 per cent of the $30 billion allocation had been budgeted. Most new spending now goes to reducing parent costs. What hasn't kept pace is expansion to meet the demand created by lowered fees or finding the educators to staff the new spots. Unfortunately, expansion can happen without qualified educators; quality can't. The Quebec report found a correlation between failure rates and the portion of untrained staff in a centre.

This isn't the story everywhere. Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia are addressing staffing shortages as they lower parent fees. Their federal dollars are being routed into higher wages and good benefits to keep qualified educators working, along with innovative recruitment strategies to grow the workforce.

The CWELCC sunset in March 2026 is fast approaching. This is when it morphs into a $9.2 billion annual payment spread from coast to coast. Both right- and left-wing economists agree the net public costs of maintaining child care post-CWELCC is more like $20–$25 billion.

More money is absolutely needed to complete the project. In the interim, existing funds could be used judiciously to balance lowering fees with growing access to better quality child care. But we won't know if quality is present unless robust monitoring and enforcement systems are active. With those in place educators could work in programs where they would happily enrol their own children.