

Report on circus arts



November 2025

Presented by En Piste, National Circus Arts Alliance

RECOMMENDATIONS

For an immediate and sustainable rebalancing

The circus arts make a powerful contribution to the cultural, economic and social vitality of Québec and Canada. However, in 2025, they receive only a fraction of the support granted to other disciplines: 4.4% of grants from the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ), compared to 4.5% in 2024¹ and 2.4% of grants from the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA), compared to 2.3% over the same period¹. This structural inequality undermines the sustainability of a sector admired around the world, recognized for its artistic excellence and its contribution to Québec and Canadian identity. There is an urgent need to correct this imbalance.

En Piste calls for the adoption of four priority measures, concrete and coordinated between the three levels of government, in order to ensure:

- equitable funding;
- dignified working conditions;
- adapted infrastructure;
- and institutional recognition commensurate with the contribution of the circus.

1. Immediately correct the underfunding of circus arts

- increase the share of circus funding to 10% of the performing arts budget, a proportion aligned with its real weight.²
- implement a multi-year catch-up plan to address the historic backlog at all three levels of government.

2. Support the sector's structuring and infrastructure

- create a national fund for creation, training and rehearsal spaces, covering their fixed costs and ensuring their accessibility.
- support the consolidation of the network of circus presenters and festivals, which is essential to regional vitality and the circulation of works across Canada.
- recognize the specificity of circus as an artistic, physical and technical discipline, requiring adapted training and creation conditions.
- support shared-service initiatives among sector organizations to strengthen professionalization within the field.

3. Safeguard training, emerging talents, and artist mobility

- recognize circus professions as priority occupations in immigration, training and education programs.
- support continuing education, applied research and partnerships between schools, companies and institutions, to strengthen the next generation and maintain the internationally recognized level of excellence.

1 According to data collected by AppEco in its report entitled *Le cirque au Québec en 2024 : situation économique, financement public et échos du terrain*, Novembre 2024 page 11

2 Data calculated from statistics from the CALQ, the CAC and En Piste, in particular via activity reports and economic analyses.

4. Improving working conditions and strengthen international presence

- create a social safety net adapted to artists, technicians and self-employed circus workers, including access to employment insurance, parental leave and flexible pension plans.
- strengthen touring, presentation and export assistance programs to renew the international presence of Québec and Canadian circus, and counter the 30% drop in performances observed since the pandemic.³
- ensure that the circus is represented in major cultural and diplomatic policies, in particular through the International Market of Contemporary Circus (MICC) and international touring networks.

En Piste demands immediate political action

Governments must recognize circus as a cultural pillar in its own right, provide the means to carry out its mission, and stop treating it as a marginal discipline.

Every dollar invested in circus is a dollar invested in creativity, employment, health and the cultural influence of Québec and Canada. The time for symbolic recognition is over. What is needed now is concrete, sustainable, and equitable action.

³ Percentage taken from the results of a survey conducted by En Piste in 2024 among members to assess the needs and potential impacts of the stagnation of financial support in the circus arts sector.

FOREWORD

Submitted by En Piste, National Circus Arts Alliance, this document is part of the organization's ongoing mandate to represent and advocate for an artistic sector that is unique in the world. With nearly 600 members—artists, collectives, companies, presenters, schools and partners—our organization has been working for more than 25 years to fund, recognize and develop the circus arts in Québec and Canada.

This brief is based on the rigorous economic and cultural analyses of the firm AppEco, whose work in 2024 highlights the disparities in funding and structural precariousness of the circus arts. These findings are included to demonstrate the need for concrete and urgent action to ensure the viability of an ecosystem that is recognized worldwide.

A flagship sector of artistic creation

Canada, and particularly Québec, are recognized worldwide as hubs of circus creation. Emblematic companies, such as Cirque du Soleil, Les 7 Doigts, Machine de Cirque and Flip Fabrique, rub shoulders with a new generation of innovative artists and collectives, who are constantly renewing the language of contemporary circus.

In 2025, this dynamism has translated into an exceptional presence across the country with more than 85 companies, festivals and events have testified to the vitality of the circus in nearly 200 Canadian cities during the summer alone.⁴ The shows presented — under the big top, indoors, in public spaces or in arenas — bear witness to the vitality and diversity of circus forms. The circus is now accessible to hundreds of thousands of spectators from coast to coast.

A persistent imbalance

In 2024, funding for the circus represented barely 4.5% of the total performing arts envelope in Québec. In 2025, this share drops to 4.4%, despite the growth in the number of artists, companies and activities in the province. This decline is all the more unacceptable given that the circus generates 11% of box office revenues and attracts 7.7% of the total performing arts attendance in Québec.⁵

The imbalance between the artistic disciplines is obvious:

- Music : 32,6 M\$
- Theatre : 30,1 M\$
- Dance : 15,4 M\$
- Visual Arts : 11,8 M\$
- Circus : 5,28 M\$

Despite its reach and popularity, circus remains the poor cousin of cultural policies. This chronic underfunding compromises not only creation and dissemination, but also the recognition of the circus as a cultural and economic pillar of Québec and Canada.

A sector under pressure

⁴ Data from En Piste's *The Circus Agenda, An Extraordinary Summer Ahead*, June-September 2025

⁵ According to data collected by AppEco in its report entitled *Le cirque au Québec en 2024 : situation économique, financement public et échos du terrain*, November 2024, page 11.

The year 2024-2025 was certainly marked by significant progress, the result of the mobilization of the Common Front for the Arts and the constant efforts of En Piste. Thanks to concerted actions, the CALQ's budget has been increased to \$200 million per year, and individual grants to artists will reach \$29 million in 2025-2026.

But this progress, although real, is not enough to make up for the historical delay that has penalized circus for too long.

To date, only four creation companies receive core funding by the CALQ. This situation is untenable. It weakens the structuring of the milieu, accentuates the precariousness of artists and prevents long-term planning.

Companies are struggling to create new works — especially large-scale productions— due to a lack of adequate funding. The CAC's repeated negative responses to their requests for support of national and international tours discourage the process. Small companies, on the other hand, often take on heavy debt to complete projects whose touring prospects remain uncertain.

Precariousness also affects independent artists, who must deal with an explosion of short-term contracts (+127% between 2020 and 2024),⁶ a glaring lack of places to train and create, and the absence of a social safety net adapted to their reality.

Circus schools are also in danger: the new restrictions on temporary immigration threaten their viability, while 60% of students come from abroad.⁷

Companies that provide training spaces, often at their own expense, now have to reduce their hours of accessibility. Circus is the only artistic discipline whose spaces receive no public funding for creation, training, or rehearsal.

PRIORITY ISSUES

1. Chronic and structural underfunding

For decades, the circus arts have suffered from a historic shortfall in public funding, hindering their development and threatening their sustainability. While the contribution of circus arts to expanding performing arts audiences and generating box office revenue far exceeds their share of public funding, budgets have stagnated, and disparities continue to grow.

- In 2024, the circus received, as mentioned, only 4.4% of the performing arts envelope (\$5.28 million), compared to \$30 million for theatre and \$32.6 million for music.
- This imbalance denies the sector the resources required to sustain creation, research, dissemination, and the next generation of artists.

This situation undermines the ability of companies to plan for the long term, to hire sustainably and to innovate.

⁶ Percentage taken from the results of a survey conducted by En Piste in 2024 among members to assess the needs and potential impacts of the stagnation of financial support in the circus arts sector.

⁷ According to the data found in the ADÉSAQ brief, submitted on November 14, 2024 at the Commission des relations avec les citoyens.

An immediate rebalancing is essential to bring the financing of circus to 10% of all the performing arts, a proportion corresponding to its real economic and cultural weight.

If nothing is done, company closures will occur in the short term; the production of large-scale works will decline, and original creation will give way to revivals — as is already happening today.

Fewer productions equal less employment. Inevitably, creators will turn to other disciplines or leave the country.

Québec and Canada risk losing their status as world leaders in contemporary circus to better-supported and more attractive markets such as Europe and Asia.

2. Structuring of the sector and the fragility of infrastructure

The practice of circus is based on access to specialized facilities: safe spaces dedicated to creation, training and rehearsal. These infrastructures are at the heart of artistic development and the physical safety of artists. Yet, they remain largely underfunded.

- Artists want to devote an average of 18.7 hours per week to training but only do 10.7 hours due to a lack of access and means.
- Drop-in studios incur fixed costs of approximately \$6,000 per month (supervision, maintenance, management), without adequate public support.
- Several spaces, particularly in Montréal, Québec City and Sherbrooke, are threatened with closure, which would jeopardize the next generation and the safety of practitioners.

Circus is the only discipline whose places of creation and training are not subsidized for their operation.

The creation of a national fund dedicated to circus infrastructures is therefore essential to guarantee the safety, accessibility and vitality of the practice.

If nothing is done, the closure of these training facilities will lead to a complete disorganization of the environment: loss of expertise, drain of talent, multiplication of accidents, and weakening of regional creative networks.

Without infrastructure, there is no succession, no innovation, no safety — only a slow decline of the practice.

3. Training, succession and transmission of know-how

The international success of Québec circus arts is rooted in a world-class training system, notably through the École nationale de cirque (ÉNC) and the École de cirque de

Québec (ECQ). These institutions train the majority of artists who go on to work with Canadian companies.

However, their mission is seriously weakened:

- International students represent up to 60% of the cohorts.
- The measures of Bill 74 and Bill 96 restrict access to study permits and threaten the ability to recruit.
- The arts are excluded from priority sectors for obtaining post-graduation work permit extensions.
- Without financial compensation, these constraints risk leading to a drop in registrations, a loss of expertise and a weakening of the professional network.

Circus schools must be exempted from these restrictions and/or receive compensatory funding.

Supporting training and the next generation of circus professionals means preserving the expertise and international recognition of the Québec and Canadian circus.

If nothing is done, schools will have to reduce their cohorts or even abolish certain programs. This situation is already rampant.

The pool of emerging artists will shrink dramatically, leading to a generational gap in creation and presentation.

Québec and Canadian circus arts will cease to enrich the global stage — a loss that would significantly weaken Canada's cultural diplomacy.

4. Dissemination, export and international influence

Exports are the main economic driver of the sector, accounting for nearly 90% of company revenues. Québec and Canadian circus arts are recognized worldwide for their originality and artistic excellence.⁸

But since the pandemic, international touring and distribution mechanisms have literally collapsed, weakening the entire ecosystem.

- The number of performances abroad have dropped by one-third since 2020.
- Cultural protectionism in some markets, rising transportation costs and administrative complexity limit touring opportunities.
- Existing touring and export support programs are insufficient to revive the international presence of Québec and Canadian circus arts.

Without increased support for the touring of works and the internationalization of the sector, many companies will have to reduce their activities, confine their touring to local

⁸ The statement comes from several sources that describe the success of the Québec circus, including the article in the Encyclopedia of French Cultural Heritage in North America.

circuits and resort to revivals, ultimately undermining innovation and weakening the global reach of Québec and Canadian circus arts.

If nothing is done, the circus will lose its position as an international showcase for Québec and Canada.

The reduction in touring activity will result in decreased export revenues, the loss of cultural jobs, and the gradual fading of Québec's circus presence on the global stage.

In short

The circus is a globally recognized sector but structurally weakened. Its underfunding, the lack of adequate and safe spaces, the threats to training and the decline in international influence are major obstacles to its medium-term survival

Without a rapid, coordinated and sustainable intervention, Québec and Canada risk seeing an entire section of their living heritage collapse—an art form that, for half a century, has made our creativity, our diversity and our identity shine on a global scale.

CONCLUSION

The circus arts are now at a crossroads. Chronic underfunding, fragile infrastructure, growing precariousness and loss of international influence: the warning signs are clear. Without rapid and concerted action, an entire section of Québec and Canadian culture is in danger of being irreversibly weakened.

Yet, contemporary circus embodies the creativity, audacity and resilience of Québec and Canada. Born here, it has established itself as a signature art, a symbol of our excellence and our openness to the world. Thousands of artists, artisans, technicians, presenters and educators dedicate their lives to it, nurturing an ecosystem that is as vibrant as it is essential to the country's cultural and economic vitality.

This brief offers a historic opportunity to act

It offers a clear vision and concrete solutions to correct decades of inequality and build equitable, sustainable and structuring cultural policies. En Piste and its partners are calling for immediate, concerted and coherent political action between the three levels of government.

Concerted action expected at all levels

- At the municipal level, we propose that incoming administrations, as part of their upcoming budget planning, increase overall arts funding to \$30 million and mandate the Conseil des arts de Montréal (CAM) to prioritize circus arts in the

allocation of new funds — within an equitable yet differentiated framework aimed at targeted catch-up

This measure would aim to correct the historic funding gap for the circus sector and ensure that the new investments directly benefit circus companies, artists and venues, while rebalancing overall support for the performing arts.

- At the City of Québec, we recommend that any infrastructure or development project in the circus sector be based on the results of the recommendations of the Table cirque du Conseil de la culture des régions de la Capitale-Nationale et de Chaudière-Appalaches (CCNCA) in order to prioritize infrastructure, training and dissemination in 2026-2028, and to anchor a regional circus hub in the long term.
- We ask the Québec Minister of Culture and Communications to return to the working table with representatives of the circus sector in order to agree on a way out of the current crisis.

The warnings have been multiplying for years. We dreaded the storm; We are now in the midst of it. It is time to take concrete action to stabilize companies, support artists and ensure the survival of the discipline.

- We ask the Québec Minister of Education to support the development of the circus sector by giving a clear mandate to his deputy ministers to explore the implementation of a circus-study program in Québec.

This model, which has already been tried and tested elsewhere, would promote school perseverance, the training of the next generation and the recognition of the circus as a path to academic and artistic excellence.

- To the arts councils of the other Canadian provinces, we recommend that the circus be officially recognized as an artistic discipline in its own right and that its development be actively supported, particularly through programs adapted to creation, touring and interprovincial mobility. Such recognition is essential for the circus to be supported equitably throughout the country and for it to shine as a strong and unifying national art.
- At the federal level, we are requesting an official meeting with the Minister of Canadian Identity and Culture, Mr. Steven Guilbeault, to present the realities of the circus sector in Québec and across Canada, as well as the structural challenges it is currently facing.

This meeting will serve to highlight the scope of the circus arts network, its economic and cultural significance, and raise our growing concerns about a potential systemic underfunding affecting both our discipline and our provinces.

We believe that an open and constructive dialogue with the ministry is an essential step toward building a shared understanding and laying the groundwork for support that is better aligned with the realities of contemporary circus.

The circus arts are an identity, social and economic jewel. They deserve the same respect, attention and resources as other major performing arts disciplines.

The future of the circus is not only a question of funding: it is a question of cultural vision and political will.

Investing in circus means investing in the future, in youth, in health, in creativity and in the influence of Québec and Canada.

It is no longer time to wait.

We must act — now.

Circus needs you.

Les sources primaires qu'AppEco / En Piste citent et/ou compilent sont notamment les listes des artistes et des organismes soutenus du CALQ et les tableaux de données ouvertes du CAC et de l'Observatoire de la culture et des communications du Québec.