

Early Childhood Education students sound the alarm about crippling low wages ^[1]

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Twenty-two-year-old Michelle Jones is young, highly qualified, and ready to work.

But she's not optimistic she'll ever be able to earn a living at what she spent years training to do.

"I think that I have a lot to bring to the field in working with children in the classroom, but I just can't afford to go back," said Jones, a master's student in early childhood studies at Ryerson.

Armed with a college diploma, Jones spent the last two summers working for around minimum wage at a daycare as she finished her bachelor's degree. Convinced she'd never make it on what the job paid, she's now back in school with hopes of one day becoming a teacher.

Jones and a group of fellow students are leading a campaign to draw attention to the other side of Toronto's daycare crisis — young, well-trained people walking away from jobs they're needed for because wages are too low.

According to one 2014 survey from the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council, the median hourly wage in Ontario for childcare staff is \$17.29.

Jones estimates only one or two of the 200 people in her undergraduate class have actually become childcare workers because they just can't make "a living wage."

The province needs to step up and invest more in childcare so wages can increase without parents footing an even steeper bill, said third-year student Alana Powell.

Powell, considers herself "privileged" to have made \$30,000 a year at a Toronto daycare with a college diploma.

Instead of simply creating 10,000 new licensed childcare spots, a promise the Ontario government made this fall, Powell says it would be better to pump long-term sustainable funding into non-profit childcare centres, which typically offer higher wages.

The move would allow centres to reduce fees and increase pay, she said.

The Ministry of Education plans to meet with the Ryerson students "in the coming weeks," ministry spokeswoman Heather Irwin said in an email to Metro. She did not respond to a question about whether funding for the spots promised in September would go to non-profit or for-profit day cares.

For Powell, "something has to change" for early childhood educators or they're not going to be able to fill the jobs they're desperately needed for.

"I think we need to change that perspective so that we're seeing childcare as a public good as opposed to something you can purchase or a commodity," she said.

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