

Demand for daycare workers in Saskatchewan a growing concern ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The deficit isn't the only issue the Saskatchewan government will wrestle with in 2017.

The ongoing issues surrounding funding and staffing for licensed daycares in the province are not going anywhere.

In fact, there is a growing concern there won't be enough staff to operate all the new centres opening up this fall.

"You can't just mass produce the spaces and expect that there won't be an impact on your existing spaces," argued Colleen Schmidt, former board member at Cathedral Area Co-operative Daycare. "Make sure you don't forget about the current spaces you have that still need support."

Nine joint-use schools open their doors across the province this September and each will house a licensed daycare. Those daycares require 30 early childhood educators (ECE). The licensing agreement even dictates the number of ECE levels required.

That leaves an additional 270 ECE positions that need to be filled.

The problem is that there is only a limited number of ECE's graduating from Saskatchewan Polytechnic every year to fill those new positions.

"We had 92 students graduate out of the full-time certificate programs in Prince Albert, Regina and Saskatoon and likely they would be considered brand new into the employment market," explained Nancy Dill, who oversees the ECE program at the Polytechnic. "But this year we have a higher registration than we did for 2015, about 110."

That number grows when you included the students studying each year toward an ECE level on a part-time basis while at the same time working in an existing daycare.

The Saskatchewan Polytechnic works with the government when the demand for a particular skill set is needed.

"Specifically around the joint-use schools, we started talking to the Ministry of Education about two years ago and tried to ramp up our delivery in anticipation of that," Dill said. "I think there is a lot of graduates coming out, I think the issue will be retention."

That retention problem will be faced by the managers and boards of existing daycares struggling not only to keep staff but doing so while under significant financial pressure.

"Daycare work most of the time is not very high paying and it's hard to attract people to a field where maybe they can't earn a living wage," Schmidt explained. "Staff salaries are enormously important, daycares are struggling, they're in a position where they've got to balance their budget, they have to keep parent fees reasonable and affordable and yet, it's got to pay its workers."

ONGOING ISSUES

This issue just adds to the financial headache many daycares were facing by the end of 2016.

Daycares in Regina were facing double - and in some cases - triple the property tax increase.

That's because daycares in Saskatchewan are taxed depending on the category: while some are taxed as residential or commercial, those located in schools aren't taxed at all.

There are 550 daycares operating in the province of Saskatchewan, 314 child care centres and 236 licensed child care homes.

The government says this is a Regina issue and it is up to the municipalities to sort it out.

"There has been an issue here in Regina and they should legitimately take that to their city council," Minister Donna Harpauer contended.

Regina Mayor Michael Fougere took issue with that characterization.

"It is provincial regulation that dictates that daycares are to be taxed at commercial rate, not at a residential, so if you want to begin to deal with the issue either give exemptions out provincially right across the province, or say they are taxed at a residential rate if they are in a home," Fougere argued. "They are sidestepping the issue."

It appeared to be a provincial issue as the NDP repeatedly raised the issue during the fall session.

Roughly 3000 people from across the province had signed the document asking the government to "exempt all licensed non-profit child care centres in Saskatchewan from property tax through changes to the appropriate legislation".

The impact this issue will have on fees or the availability of spaces is concerning for parents with children in daycares.

"These daycares require ECE-educated, qualified staff to care for our children, so I don't know why the province isn't getting involved in this," mother-of-three Julie Eisler said. "You can see by the number of communities that signed the petition that this is absolutely a province-wide issue."

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