

Nova Scotia's new pre-primary program 'unrealistic,' early childhood educators say ^[1]

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Some early childhood educators are calling on the Nova Scotia government to press pause on the pre-primary program until more consultation is done.

"It happened way too fast, and there hasn't been given enough thought to how it's going to be rolled out," said Michelle Lohnes, who has been an early childhood educator at St. Joseph's Children's Centre in Halifax for more than two decades.

Lohnes is a member of the executive for CUPE local 4745, which represents early childhood educators at six centres in Halifax and Bridgewater. The union says there are too many unanswered questions about the rollout of the new program.

"Safety for the children is a huge concern. I think the wages are a big," Lohnes said.

The education minister says the province has consulted with "many" childcare providers, but that full consultation will begin in August.

The province has handed over the responsibility for staffing pre-primary sites to the school boards, who will hire early childhood educators and make their own decisions about salaries and benefits, according to the education department.

"These will be employees of our school boards. They will work under a co-ordinator in our school boards," Education Minister Zach Churchill said during Tuesday's news conference.

There are 20 early years centres and four-year-old programs already in place across the province that will become part of the pre-primary program this fall. Those are already fully staffed, according to the province.

The remaining 30 pre-primary sites that are expected to be up and running by September will require up to three early childhood educators per site, so school boards may be responsible for hiring as many as 90 people.

"This is very exciting," Minister Churchill said Tuesday. "I think early childhood educators that have gone to school to do this and that hope to go to school to do this in the future see great potential now."

But Lohnes says existing childcare centres struggle to find qualified staff.

"I think it's going to take them a long time. We have a hard time finding substitutes, much less teachers," she said.

"I think they're going to be very shocked when they realize how difficult it's going to be."

Lohnes says she also worries qualified educators may be lured from childcare centres to the school boards by higher wages

"The fact that there's a possibility that these teachers may get pensions, and there's some people who have given their entire life to childcare and are going to retire and live in poverty because there is no pension," Lohnes said.

Currently, early childhood educators are paid between \$15 and \$19 an hour at childcare centres, according to provincial minimums.

The Halifax Regional School Board says its human resources department is actively working on hiring early childhood educators, and job postings may be online as early as Monday. The Department of Education says some boards will be initiating hiring processes this week.

Meanwhile, more than 540 parents have already pre-registered their children for the program as of Thursday afternoon.

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