

Biggest dilemma finding quality child care in Muskoka ^[1]

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Corrie Patton of Gravenhurst said her biggest dilemma when she went back to work was finding child care of quality.

Facing a lengthy wait list at the only licensed daycare facility in Gravenhurst, Patton said she was forced to seek home-based providers.

"I didn't feel comfortable with many of them," she said, noting she interviewed several prospects. "I went into homes where there were way too many kids or the food options weren't great."

Patton said many of the interviewees had very limited experience in child care, if any at all.

As a resource teacher working with preschoolers with special needs, Patton said staying home with her kids instead wasn't an option.

"That little piece of my paycheck that goes home with me – I need it," she said.

Because her children have a few years between them, Patton said there were only brief periods they were in full-time care together. But those periods were an eye-opener to the struggle of many families.

"The cost was ludicrous. There would be no point in going to work," she said. "But it's a catch-22 because it costs money to provide quality care."

Patton said she has had the same experience finding before and after-school care for her kids now that they're older.

Finding the perfect fit when it comes to cost, location and programming is challenging for today's parents. Experts attribute that to a system that fails to deliver.

Ontario's child care model is so far behind, according to Professor Yvonne Bohr of La Marsh Centre for Child and Youth Research at York University. With the mountains of research data showing the importance of providing quality care for children from 0 to 4 years of age, it leaves her wondering why the government hasn't until this year, taken steps toward a universal child-care model.

"What we have is not in line with what we know," she added. "Those early years are just as important as Kindergarten so daycare should be an extension of the school system, absolutely."

The current child-care model isn't working because it's not affordable for all families, low wages make it difficult to attract and retain professional child care employees and the sector lacks regulation.

Cognitive and emotional learning go hand-in-hand in the early years meaning stable social interactions with a trusted adult encourages learning and professionally trained staff can help guide and prepare children for the school years.

But some children miss out on the nurturing of that early development because there isn't available, affordable space at licensed daycares. If quality of care isn't defined or regulated or professional development isn't offered to staff to keep up with current best practices, children head into school on an uneven playing field.

"There is actual evidence and economic research that shows child care is worth the investment," Bohr said. "Children who are professionally cared for in the early years have better mental health, lower incarceration rates, require less poverty support and contribute more to the economy."

In June, Child Care Minister Indira Naidoo-Harris unveiled a seven pillar plan including 100,000 more licensed child-care spaces, subsidy funds and no parent paying more than 20 per cent of their income on care. The plan would also offer 20,000 more early childhood educators, wage increases and professional development opportunities, defining of quality child care, inclusion plan, annual tracking of system performance and public education on available child-care options.

But experts say it's not enough and that the five-year plan could potentially be abolished should the Liberal government not be re-elected next year.

The daycare sector is currently facing a recruitment and retention crisis, according to Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario's

Lyndsay Macdonald. The child-care sector has become one that is difficult to afford to remain working in.

“Many of these early childhood educators go to work and can’t afford child care for their own children,” she added, pointing out that the AECEO’s current campaign is advocating for fair wages.

The median pay for Ontario ECEs is \$17.20 per hour but 24 per cent are below that at \$15 per hour. Those who have managed to obtain employment with a school board are making \$26 per hour, full benefits, a pension, work fewer hours in a day and get summers off.

“This disparity makes it difficult to recruit and retain educated child-care workers and when turnover is high, the quality of care decreases,” she said. “Learning happens through care and consistent relationships. If there is turnover, there is no consistency.”

While she applauds the government for releasing a five-year action plan for child care, she says it falls short. More funding is needed to fill the gaps that have grown so large because 100,000 new licensed child-care spaces are moot without trained staff and parents who can afford those spaces.

“You know the system is broken when parents are forced to choose between work and staying home to care for their children,” she added. “The funding announcements are a step in the right direction but much, much more is needed. Parents, children and the child-care sector deserve better.”

-reprinted from Muskoka Region

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