

Good news for child-care costs in St. John's? Not so fast, say daycare owner, parent ^[1]

A St. John's daycare owner is curbing Kirby's enthusiasm about new child-care fee numbers

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EXCERPTS

Government was quick to congratulate itself on the results of a national study on child-care costs issued Tuesday, but parents and daycare operators are holding the applause.

A release from Education Minister Dale Kirby lauded the results for St. John's in the Canadian Child Care Fees Report, which looks at median monthly fees charged per month in major Canadian cities.

According to the report, the median monthly cost for St. John's preschools in 2017 is \$868 — much lower than in cities in Ontario, where the bill is more than \$1,000, and much higher than in cities in Quebec, where parents pay less than \$200.

That \$868 figure is 2.4 per cent lower than it was in 2016, the biggest one-year price drop in the country, the study says, and wait lists for St. John's child-care centres were the second shortest in the country.

Fees for infant care were also down.

"We are pleased to see improvements with the province's ranking associated with the cost of child-care fees and continue to work to make further improvements," Kirby said in the release.

But Gail Sullivan, owner and operator of Happy Times preschool, said those numbers reflect government missteps and a struggling industry — not an improvement at all.

Operating grant not enough

Sullivan suspects the drop in fees are due to a newly introduced operating grant for daycare centres, aimed at making child care more affordable for parents.

A centre using the grant would charge parents of preschoolers \$30 a day per kid. In return, government would pay the centre \$3 a day for that child, putting a total of \$33 per day per kid in the daycare centre's bank account.

But that's not enough money to keep a centre afloat, said Sullivan.

"I would not be able to provide the child care that I have worked 37 years to provide for that amount of money. The quality would suffer," she said.

Daycares would love to give parents a break, she said, but they need more money than that. Sullivan estimates she needs about \$42 per child per day to care for and feed kids at Happy Times well and to pay her staff a reasonable salary.

"It's just not enough money."

'Many centres have closed in the past year'

The operating grant is even less help against the backdrop of the struggling industry right now, she said.

The lack of wait times touted by Kirby reflects an environment in which daycares — even those using the grant and offering reduced fees — are just scraping by, said Sullivan.

"There's a flood of spaces on the market," she said.

Those spaces were created, she said, when the province introduced full-day kindergarten to schools.

"There really wasn't a lot of planning in place for centres to deal with the fallout," she said. "Many centres have closed in the past year."

The economy isn't much help either, she said.

Child-care costs still "prohibitive"

Hayley Alloway agrees.

A PhD student at Memorial University and mother of five kids between the ages of five and 12, Alloway said child-care costs in St. John's are "prohibitive," whether there has been a 2.4 per cent reduction or not.

Especially as the price of gas and heat goes up.

"When the gas perks at Sobeys ended, that changed my budget," she said. "When you have children in the mix and you're paying child care, you have no room to spare."

Alloway said the high cost of child care in the city can be prohibitive for potential graduate students and faculty at MUN.

People with young families looking around for graduate schools ask around, she said.

"It's not unheard of for people to mention to prospective students or faculty members about expensive child care," she said.

"If you have a situation where your population is dwindling and your population is aging and you need an influx of young people, it does seem like a good strategy to make it affordable to have kids here, and to have a family here."

-reprinted from CBC News

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