

Action needed on staffing shortages, say P.E.I. child-care centres

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Federal budget includes funding for 100 flexible spaces and additional 200 infant and preschool spaces

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Ottawa gave more specifics in its budget Tuesday on just what P.E.I. can expect to see from its \$10.5 million in federal child-care funding announced last year.

In August, the federal government announced the funding, spread out over three years. It will go toward creating up to 100 new flexible spaces, aimed at parents who work non-standard hours, and 200 additional infant and preschool spaces in an effort to reduce the long waiting lists on the Island. There's also allocations for training early childhood educators and support for children with unique needs.

Funding is available to daycare centres to expand spaces and programming, said Sonya Hooper, the executive director of the Early Childhood Development Association of P.E.I.

But the missing piece from the funding, according to Hooper and daycare providers, is an investment in the workforce, including addressing recruitment and low wages.

"It's great to expand spaces because it's definitely needed," she said. "But in the absence of an investment in a workforce strategy, it makes it difficult to guarantee those services in the future."

Recruiting and retaining trained staff is difficult for daycare centres, with some experiencing high staff turnover and staff leaving to schools, where the pay is higher.

"We have centres that report to us that they take a lower number of children, because they can't hire qualified staff to offer those extra spaces to children," Hooper said.

Darla Farquharson, director of the Tiny Tot Early Years Centre in Charlottetown, said her centre is full with no room to grow and the funding for capital improvements the government is offering isn't the right fit for them.

"We don't feel that it's probably to our advantage because we're completely maxed out on space and we'd have to add onto our building," Farquharson said. "We looked into it. But for us, for architecture costs, for building on, the \$10,000 wouldn't go very far."

She, too, believes the staffing problem is the biggest issue in creating more and better spaces for young children.

"We are really struggling to find certified quality educators staying in the field... retention is another issue," she said. "There might be

centres out there that are not full, but they don't have the educators that are needed to fill them."

Offering longer hours during the week and weekends for children would also need an investment in staff, who already work 40 hours a week.

"Our educators all work 40 hours a week, Monday to Friday," she said. "So we'd need more educators to fill those positions to work more hours, to work weekends."

Carolyn Simpson, director of early childhood development with the provincial government, said she's confident the government will be able to meet its targets in expanding child-care spaces over the three years of the funding.

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— Sonya Hooper

She acknowledges there are challenges in staffing but they're working to help daycare centres, noting it's a Canada-wide problem.

"We are certainly aware of the concerns and the realities of the early childhood workforce," Simpson said. "It's about wages to some degree, but it's about access to other sorts of things, such as training, other flexibility in their workspaces."

The expansion of spaces is progressing in spite of the staffing concerns, Hooper said, but she predicts future problems if issues such as training and wages aren't addressed.

"I would say that the expansion progress is moving along quite nicely," she said. "But if we don't get on a workforce strategy immediately, I do foresee there will be some gaps in the future for sure."

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