

'The math doesn't make sense': daycares anxious on eve of NDP childcare rollout ^[1]

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As the B.C. government prepares to roll out its ambitious billion-dollar childcare program, some in the industry are warning that there could be rough waters ahead.

For Amanda Worms, owner of Little Owl Academy daycare, the big concern is the \$350-a-month fee break that the 2018 budget promised parents. Worms says she's not sure her facility can actually afford to cut fees — even with provincial help — but also doesn't want to drive away parents.

"The administration part of it is a struggle to get this done for April 1. There's a lot more questions that have come up now that the contracts are out. The math doesn't make sense," she told Global News.

Child care facilities have until March 27 to opt-in, and if they do sign on they must agree not to raise fees for the rest of the year. That has operators worried that they'll be left holding the bag if they are met with an unexpected surge in costs.

Minister of State Responsible for Child Care Katrina Chen says the province believes it's a fair package.

"When they opt-in to our plan for this year we're going to give them a 10 per cent funding increase for their childcare operating fund, which is an increase that has not happened in 10 years," she said. "We're also looking at increasing that in the coming years to support providers' operations."

But other operators are warning of another problem: a looming staff shortage.

Pat Frouws is the executive director of Simon Fraser University's 300-space child care centre, and says they're having a tough time recruiting — and retaining — quality candidates.

"The lack of educators is a crisis right now," Frouws told Global News. "We're trying to retain who we can, so the money is an issue."

Frouws says the pay being offered to early childhood educators (ECEs) isn't high enough, meaning many are going back to school and upgrading to be teachers.

And she said the people that are applying for positions tend to come from private schools with lower standards, and who don't have a full grasp of the early childhood learning curriculum.

“They don’t have a context of the Early Learning Framework,” she said. “They might be able to say the words, but there’s no understanding when you talk to them about it.”

While the 2018 budget did include \$7 million to train new ECEs, Frouws said she’d hoped there would be money to top up salaries.

For child care advocate Lynell Anderson, the growing pains are to be expected, as the province embarks on a fundamental shift.

“It’s been a long time since we’ve had any significant changes to B.C. and B.C. has to catch up to other provinces and other countries that are much further ahead,” she said.

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