

Cape Breton child-care providers will get close to \$600,000 in provincial funding ^[1]

Grants awarded to centres expanding to add infant, toddler spots

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Six child-care providers in Cape Breton are getting \$591,004 of provincial funding to help renovate their floor space to accommodate more infants and toddlers as pre-primary expansion continues.

The Spatial Conversion Grant, offered by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, is giving more than \$2.7 million to 51 licensed child-care facilities across the province.

The Frank Rudderham YMCA Early Learning Centre received the largest amount of funding in Cape Breton, \$262,000, which they will use to convert their space to add infants, ages six months to 18 months. It was the second largest amount awarded to a facility.

The highest amount, \$365,000, was awarded to Giant Steps Children's Centre in Halifax. The third-highest amount, \$191,000, went to Playschool Day Care in New Waterford.

"We're very excited about this. It gives us a chance to provide a service that is in demand and we haven't been able to offer before now," said YMCA CEO Andre Gallant.

Licensed for 65 children, Gallant said they currently have about 50 enrolled and have seen a steady drop in preschooler numbers over the past couple of years. This, plus regular inquiries from families about infant spots, is what instigated the YMCA Early Learning Centre to apply for the grant, which will allow them to add a crib room and infant play area.

"Even though we haven't had infant care previously, we have had, for quite some time, accepted names for a wait list in the event we ever add it," Gallant explained.

"That's how desperate it's been for families looking for infant care ... so we already have a wait list with about 38 people."

After renovations, the daycare will have 16 infant care spots available. Gallant encouraged people interested in the spots to call and put themselves on the wait list because some of the children on the list will be over 18 months when the renovations are completed.

"This grant from the province answers two things — a need in the community and an ability to sustain our business model," Gallant enthused.

Minister of Education Zach Churchill announced the grant recipients Thursday in Halifax. Originally the province allotted \$2 million for

the Spatial Conversion Grant but expanded it to more than \$2.7 million to give funding to every eligible applicant. More than 80 child-care facilities applied and 29 were deemed ineligible.

“(Applicants were ineligible) if a centre applied for, kind of, general renovations that are not converting spaces to meet the needs of infants, toddlers or a new market or the needs of those communities ... general renovations are not eligible,” Churchill said during a phone interview.

“It also has to be financially feasible (for the centre) as well. It needs to make sense financially in terms of expanding the level of service.”

More than half of the funding, 51 per cent, went to centres in Halifax County, something Churchill said reflects the population split in Nova Scotia, which is 50 per cent urban and 50 per cent rural.

The minister of education also pointed out the grants awarded will help the centres create 144 new infant spots and 346 spaces for toddlers in daycares across the province.

Gail Fraser, owner and operator of Mini Miners Daycare and Preschool in New Waterford, applied for the grant to add more toddler spaces but didn't get it.

“I've very disappointed but we're not giving up,” she told the Post.

Fraser will start looking at other funding options and is considering remortgaging her property to fund the renovations so she can change her licence to accommodate a higher level of toddlers. Right now, her licence is for 22 children – 16 preschoolers and six toddlers. She anticipates preschool enrollment will drop dramatically once the province's free pre-primary program starts at Breton Education Centre in New Waterford in September.

“It's going to be like I am starting my business all over again,” said Fraser, who has been an early childhood educator for 20 years and opened her centre 14 years ago.

“After all these years to have to go back to the beginning ... it's really heartbreaking, actually.”

Churchill said the province is still dedicated to helping child-care providers across the province, which he acknowledged are being affected as the pre-primary expansion continues.

“We work with every single centre. We have a lot of funding that's available for the regular child-care sector.”

-reprinted from Cape Breton Post

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