

# Wanted: More childcare spaces, better pay for workers <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Parents of young children and the people who teach those little ones are likely paying close attention to the promises about childcare in this election, especially given the challenges of finding the right space and receiving the right pay.

The parties are coming out strong on the issue.

PC Leader Dennis King, who's made almost daily promises on a wide range of topics since the start of the election, calls his party's plan for a public preschool program "one of the things I've been most proud to announce."

Green Leader Peter Bevan-Baker is quick to point out that a promise to immediately spend \$3.5 million to boost wages for early childhood educators is "one of the biggest ticket items" in his party's platform.

Then there's Liberal Leader Wade MacLauchlan, who says of all the Liberal government's moves over the past decade, its focus on early learning "has probably made the biggest difference in the province."

### P.E.I. ranked best in country

P.E.I.'s childcare system has received its share of praise since 2010. That's when Robert Ghiz's Liberal government adopted a new kind of system, aimed at moving the focus from babysitting to educating.

Thirty-six private daycares became government-subsidized and regulated early years centres, which had to follow a play-based curriculum, taught by trained staff with diplomas in early childhood education.

Since the start, 12 more private centres have converted to early years centres.

A year ago, researchers at the University of Toronto ranked P.E.I. best in the country when it comes to early childhood education.

### Tackling the wait list

But along with that praise has come a lot of frustration from Island parents, stuck on the province's daycare wait list, unable to nab a spot in any centre — private or provincially regulated.

Hundreds are on the list at any given point but not all are necessarily looking for a spot right away.

It's been a particular struggle for parents looking for infant spaces, and for those who work seasonally, or outside regular nine to five hours.

The Liberals say they've started to tackle the problem. With the help of \$10.5 million in childcare funding from Ottawa, they say 465 childcare spaces have been added since 2017.

They're promising to spend another \$1.8 million of provincial funds to add 300 more spaces over the next three years.

"In particular, those will be available, or alert to the need to serve infants," said MacLauchlan. "Also, we'll adapt or be flexible with childcare spaces as they relate to the ability of parents to work."

### More educators needed

But P.E.I.'s Early Childhood Development Association said there's a problem.

While the number of spaces and children in daycares has jumped, the number of certified early childhood educators teaching them has not kept up.

Executive director Sonya Hooper said that means there are more children in private centres — which only require two staff to be fully certified — spending their days with uncertified staff.

"Early childhood educators bring with them a very specialized bank of knowledge around child development," said Hooper. "It's very

important we have well trained early childhood educators leading these programs and supporting children's early learning."

### **Broken Liberal promise**

Which brings us to the one childcare promise each from the Greens and NDPs — to immediately boost wages for early childhood educators.

Both parties say there aren't enough of them to meet the demand on P.E.I. because the Liberal government hasn't paid them enough.

In 2010, the Liberals committed to increase wages three percent a year for five years.

Instead, from 2010 to 2018, wages jumped just four percent in total — reaching \$16/hour for staff with the highest level of certification.

Then, on April 1st — just days after the election was called — the Liberals gave workers a significant pay raise: an extra \$1 to \$3/hour depending on their certification.

The Liberals say there will be more raises to come if they win the election, though it's not clear when that will happen or how much they'll increase.

"The Liberals have, at the last minute, almost literally, said they would increase wages," said Bevan-Baker. "We feel it needs to be done much more quickly. We have to retain the workers we have now, because any further attrition is just going to lead to more problems."

The Greens say they would immediately increase wages by roughly another \$3/hour to get early childhood educators to the same level as education assistants in schools, who have the same level of training.

The NDP say they'd boost wages by \$7/hour.

### **Public preschool by 2020**

The PCs have a different plan all together. The party says it's confident existing funding agreements between P.E.I. and Ottawa will lead to more childcare spaces and wage increases.

The PCs one big promise is to spend \$5 million, to start up a half-day public preschool program by September 2020.

The preschools would operate out of early years centres around the Island.

"All the experts, and all the science research will tell you that the earlier we can get a child on the right track, the better success they will have in the future," said King.

Hooper says that plan leaves her asking a lot of questions, among them — will \$5 million really build a public preschool system?

"I'd need to understand what they think that money would cover. But I'm not really sure \$5 million would cut it," said Hooper.

Hooper maintains that before government starts adding spaces or setting up preschool, it needs to figure out how many extra certified staff it will need, and how it plans to find and hold onto them for the long term.

"Wages is definitely a piece of that," said Hooper.

"But I do believe that whatever party takes power, we need to work together to develop a very comprehensive, long-term, workforce strategy that will address all aspects of recruitment and retention."

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**Region:** Prince Edward Island <sup>[3]</sup>

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