

Union concerned wage disparity will be overlooked amid childcare funding announcement ^[1]

A new announcement by Education Minister Zach Churchill this week will see \$4.4 million dollars allocated to help create 403 new childcare centres across the province

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EXCERPTS

A new announcement by Education Minister Zach Churchill this week will see \$4.4 million dollars allocated to help create 403 new childcare centres across the province.

The announcement is part of a \$35 million agreement with the federal government, and at least 108 existing non-profit childcare centres will receive program and infrastructure funding.

But despite the positive announcement, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) is critical of what it means for childcare workers living paycheck to paycheck.

"In the childcare sector there are no benefits and no pensions," says Nan McFadgen, president of CUPE Nova Scotia.

The government says the resulting increase in demand for early childhood educators (ECEs) will be a positive. But McFadgen doesn't see it that way.

"Labour market pressure between not-for-profit childcare centres and our school systems is not a good thing," she tells NEWS 95.7's The Todd Veinotte Show.

McFadgen says this creates competition between non-profit childcare centres, for-profit centres, and the public school system.

"The wages differ throughout the province, throughout the school system, and throughout the child care sector," she explains. "We're not able to give you a side-by-side comparison because there's so much disparity."

This means ECEs who are looking for work will have a tough time staying in rural communities at low-paying private-sector jobs.

"If you're a new early childhood educator and you're just graduating, are you going to look at the childcare sector where you're going to pay \$200 a pay for benefits because there are no benefits? And when you retire you'll have no pension?" McFadgen says. "Or are you picking the school system where you have benefits, where you have a pension so you can retire at the end of your career after teaching our children?"

The union president says in a perfect world, all childcare would be public. But in the short-term, CUPE is advocating for the sector to look at long-term care industry as a model.

"If you're a continuing care assistant in Meat Cove, you're making the same money and you have the same benefits as if you're working in Yarmouth," McFadgen says.

Because a similar system is already in place for long-term care workers, it wouldn't be totally foreign to government.

"It's something that can be done, it's something that can happen," she adds.

McFadgen says the recent addition of the pre-primary program in Nova Scotia show that childcare is already changing.

"Where there's a will there's a way. [The government] said to the schools, 'Make it so,' and they did," McFadgen says.

CUPE represents over 500 ECEs in public schools across NS, and another 100 ECEs who work in private childcare centres.

McFadgen says the government needs to show they value early childhood educators by improving working conditions.

"If, as a society, we are saying that we can't afford to pay early childhood educators across the province a living wage, and a pension and benefits, then what are we saying about the value of childcare in our society?" she asks.

While the union says the recent announcement is a positive overall, McFadgen hopes the government will sit down with stakeholders, including ECEs, parents, and schools, to create a plan for minimizing wage disparity in the industry.

"Childcare is often a forgotten sector," McFadgen says. "But if you ask parents who have their children attend childcare centres, the value of that work, and they'll tell you the value of that work."

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