

Lack of trained early childhood educators forcing Whycomomagh daycare to 'temporarily' cancel program ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

WHYCOCOMAGH, N.S. — Thom Oommen will be welcoming his four-year-old daughter to his workplace each afternoon for the foreseeable future.

It's the result of a shortage of trained staff at the local daycare, which means a temporary end to a program that assisted working parents.

The Whycomomagh Child Development Centre informed parents on Saturday that it would be changing its hours of operation – opening an hour later at 8 a.m. and closing a half-hour earlier at 5 p.m. — along with “temporarily cancelling” Tuesday of the pre-primary wraparound program because a trained staff member left to go work for the government-run pre-primary program. It has left the daycare with not enough trained personnel to function as it once did.

According to provincial regulations, two-thirds of early childcare educators (ECEs) must be designated as Level 1, Level 2 or Level 3, having graduated from a two-year program at either the Nova Scotia Community College or a private career college offering the program.

Oommen would drop his daughter off each morning at the pre-primary program that's located at the Whycomomagh Education Centre. His eight-year-old son attends the elementary school.

She would normally stay at the pre-primary wraparound program until 5 p.m., added Oommen.

Now, his daughter will take the bus to nearby L'Arche Cape Breton in Iron Mines, where Oommen works as a leader in the garden program for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

“I meet her at the road and bring her back (to L'Arche). She'll get there around 2:30 and my work ends at 3:30, so at least I don't have to work until 5,” he said.

“We're going to make it work because that's what parents are all doing when this kind of thing happens, and my employer is supportive, but it's not ideal.”

Monica Boyd, director of the Whycomomagh Child Development Centre, said the cancellation of the wraparound program affects 12 children. Another after school program for children ages five to 12 will be cancelled two days next week on Oct. 1 and Oct. 3 because the ratio of employees — two trained to one untrained — is not possible because of the loss of the one staff member to the provincial pre-primary program, she said.

It could end in last-minute cancellations depending if the 2:1 ratio of trained to untrained employees is in place or not.

“It creates a lot of chaos, like, what are parents going to do for childcare?”

Boyd said mere hours after being told of her employee's resignation she had a job posting for a trained ECE advertised online.

But because it's a rural daycare in an already tight labour market for trained early childhood educators, it could be some time before she hires an applicant that meets the criteria.

Before last week, the Whycomomagh Child Development Centre had five employees, three of whom have formal training.

In the past, a temporary staffing plan was put in place where an untrained employee could be treated as a staff member with Level 1 training but only if that person was in the midst of receiving that formal education, Boyd said.

“But the only problem with that is you have to wait until you're in a crisis situation before you actually apply (for the temporary staffing plan).”

The problem of retaining early childhood educators at privately run daycares that offer pre-school programs can be boiled down to pay and benefits.

Boyd said her daycare has lost three employees to the government's pre-primary program that was unveiled in September 2017.

A study by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, released in January, found Nova Scotia early childhood educators gravitated away from low pay work at daycares to the government-run public sector.

It found only 22 per cent of ECEs felt their pay was fair, considering their background and skills, and that 67 per cent believed their salary did not adequately reflect the work that they do.

"In light of what we know about the need for adequate compensation for the health of the sector ... further analysis of the provincial wage regulation is warranted," the study read.

The report indicated the outdated 2012 government benchmark salary of \$16.55 was not high enough and recommended either \$18.10, which was the national median hourly wage for 2016, or \$19.52, which would bring wages to 60 per cent of the median hourly wages of Nova Scotia teachers.

Pre-primary early childhood educator leads make approximately \$23 to \$24 an hour.

The province is expected to offer the pre-primary program to all four-year-olds by next year.

The co-director of a licensed daycare in Sydney will be meeting with Education and Early Childhood Development Minister Zach Churchill on Thursday to discuss the plight of early childhood centres in the province.

Patricia Landry Martin will be looking for pay equity and improved benefits from the province.

Her daycare has lost five employees to the pre-primary program.

She believes the government can create a level playing field between privately run centres and the public sector pre-primary program.

"We're not dissing the (pre-primary) program. The program has great assets to it. However, in doing so, the (provincial government) has divided the ECE community to a point it is so blatant and so unfair," Landry Martin said.

"We've got students who are doing placements (at the daycare) who are saying, 'We can't wait to get into the schools (pre-primary program).' That's not a great way to start."

In an interview Tuesday afternoon, Churchill said the province made the pre-primary educator labour market more competitive but he makes no apologies for that.

"We have to transition that sector. We had only one-in-four families four short years ago who were able to access regular childcare and early learning in Nova Scotia and that's not acceptable," he said.

"We're going to be looking at a landscape where every single Nova Scotia community and family has access to early learning and regulated childcare."

He considers ECEs working in the private sector to have pay equity, saying daycare centre early childhood educators make \$4,000 more than their public sector counterparts because they work the summer months while pre-primary ECEs don't.

It's also the job of daycare operators to make business decisions that make sense to them, said Churchill.

"There's a more competitive labour market for early childhood educators. I believe this will force those in the private sector to start looking at compensation and benefit packages, which is a good thing for early childhood educators."

The province currently provides the regulated childcare sector with a subsidy of \$70 million a year.

Landry Martin said she thinks a province-wide walkout of early childhood educators might be necessary sometime before the federal election on Oct. 21.

A meeting with parents from her daycare is planned for Oct. 3, and she said those she's spoken with are "backing" the early childhood educators.

While a walkout might attract a lot of attention, Boyd said meaningful change will only happen when the issue is pushed by the parents.

"If they can make a change, that would be great. Hopefully somebody will listen. But I think parents together as a group, when they voice their concerns or outrage, then change would hopefully happen."

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