

# Working group will examine early childhood educators' concerns<sup>[1]</sup>

Education minister says group will consider issues such as pensions and benefits

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**Source:** CBC News

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 17 Oct 2019

## AVAILABILITY

Access online<sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

As private sector early childhood educators continue their push for pay equity with their colleagues in the pre-primary program, Nova Scotia's education minister is forming a working group to examine the issue.

Zach Churchill told reporters at Province House on Friday the group, which is taking applications now, would include business owners and early childhood educators who work in pre-primary and in the private and not-for-profit sectors. The focus will include finding ways to address concerns about pensions and benefits.

"We think that there might be opportunities for them to look at that, particularly if they work together," said Churchill.

Early childhood educators around the province have repeatedly drawn attention to the fact they do not make as much money or have access to the same benefits as their counterparts who work for the province in pre-primary, a play-based program for four-year-olds.

Margot Nickerson, an early childhood educator and president of a CUPE local for six non-profit centres in Halifax, was part of a group of people at Province House Friday highlighting the issue.

Nickerson said even with employers often covering the bulk of the costs for benefits, they remain out of reach for many people because of how expensive they are.

She said all early childhood educators should be treated the same way in the province, similar to the way nurses in the long-term care sector all have the same pay scale regardless of whether they work in the public or private sector.

"We're regulated under the same Department of Education, we have the same credentials to practise, we do the same work," she told reporters.

Nickerson said she hopes the working group, which she would be willing to be a part of, can find a way to achieve a consistent approach within the sector, so child-care centres aren't competing with each other or the pre-primary program.

"It should not be treated as a market," she said.

'A crucial role to play'

Churchill said about half of the funding the government puts into the early learning sector goes to wages, but he acknowledged some daycares are feeling the strain as the pre-primary program develops and becomes fully available across the province beginning next school year.

The minister said the working group will look at the challenges some of the private businesses are facing. That could mean trying to help with recruitment and retention or adapting to the changes that have come since the introduction of pre-primary

The government recommends 80 per cent of funding should go to wages, although Churchill said he knows that isn't happening in all cases.

One thing the government cannot do, he said, is bring non-government employees into a government pension. It can, however, help them work together to increase buying power for benefits, said Churchill.

"We want to make sure that they have access to business expertise to help them navigate this changing landscape, because they have a crucial role to play in this."

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