

# Nova Scotia to fund expansion of early childhood educator training program <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

The provincial government is helping Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) expand its early childhood education diploma program — a project that Education Minister Zach Churchill says will ease staffing challenges being felt across the early child-care sector.

The college will open 60 new seats at its Akerley campus in January — a one-time top-up to the Dartmouth campus's existing 55 seats for the two-year early childhood education diploma.

Churchill said it will help reduce a wait list for the program and address a province-wide demand for early childhood educators (ECEs) that has been growing for the past two years.

His department is funding the expansion with \$283,000, which comes out of a \$35-million federal funding agreement for early learning, signed in January 2018.

Until two years ago, ECEs were found mostly in the regulated child-care sector, which is made up of private businesses and not-for-profit organizations. But demand for qualified workers has been growing since the Liberal government started rolling out a pre-primary program for four-year-olds in September 2017.

The government is promising to make pre-primary universally available by September 2020 — and when announcing the expansion at the community college on Thursday, Churchill said his department needed to hire at least 250 more ECEs by next September to fulfil that promise.

He estimated another 100 ECEs were needed to satisfy staffing needs in the regulated sector.

ECEs and union leaders from the regulated sector have been critical of the province's pre-primary delivery, saying it's gutted their workforce and created inequity in the profession. The minister has acknowledged "challenges" and "labour pressure" in the sector, and two weeks ago he said his department would strike a working group to address those concerns.

Still, Churchill said he believed his department was responding "really effectively" to the demand for ECEs across the sector, pointing to a dedicated immigration stream, cross-country recruitment and investments in training — like the NSCC expansion.

Just a day before the announcement, Progressive Conservative education critic Tim Halman pressed Churchill about the ECE "shortage" during question period at the legislature, and Churchill denied that a shortage existed.

When asked about that response following Thursday's announcement, Churchill said there are about 2,000 trained ECEs who aren't working in the sector, meaning "technically, we do have a lot more ECEs than we need."

He said many ECEs had abandoned the profession in "previous years" for lack of opportunity and competitive wages. Churchill believed he'd corrected that by introducing a wage floor and creating demand with the introduction of pre-primary.

Despite the difference of opinion on whether a shortage exists, Halman said Thursday's announcement showed the government was "trying to respond."

"I get the sense it's a step in the right direction," he told reporters after Churchill's announcement.

But, Halman said, he believed child-care centres were facing "such a big shortage, an extreme shortage from their perspective, it has to be perhaps more of an aggressive launch of these programs to get more (ECEs) into the workforce."

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