

'Significant' turnover, low wages among daycare staffing challenges, report finds ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Over the past two years, nearly 200 permanent staff left their jobs at Island child-care centres.

That's according to a report commissioned by P.E.I.'s previous Liberal government, which was just published online by the province.

"The turnover is significant," said Kathleen Flanagan, the early childhood education consultant who authored the report.

Flanagan examined just how challenging retention and recruitment are for child-care centres, and offered a long list of recommendations to the province on how to address the problem.

As part of that, Flanagan surveyed staff and directors at 90 per cent of P.E.I.'s licensed child-care centres across the province.

In total, directors reported that over the previous two years, 191 staff had left their jobs. That's more than 30 per cent of the entire workforce at Island child-care centres.

'There's no one coming in to staff new programs'

While those centres hired about the same number — 193 — Flanagan said the stats point to a major obstacle for the province.

"If the new people coming in are [only] to replace people leaving, there's no one coming in to staff new programs, or new spaces," she said.

"Every government across the country is trying to expand spaces and make it more accessible to parents. But without having that bank of qualified people to draw on, that's just not going to be able to happen."

That's the challenge the P.E.I. government is facing right now, as it looks to roll out a publicly funded, half-day pre-kindergarten program for all four-year-olds next September.

The province estimates it will need another 30 certified educators to open the program up to the 300 kids who aren't already enrolled at licensed daycares.

P.E.I.'s Education Minister Brad Trivers said last month his government may not be able to recruit that many additional staff in time.

Flanagan says it may be doable within two years, if the province gets to work on her long list of recommendations.

Higher wages and more flexible training

Just ahead of last spring's election, the previous government did raise wages for educators in provincially-regulated early years centres by one to three dollars per hour, depending on their level of certification.

But Flanagan said the province needs to go much further, particularly to stop the trend of child-care workers moving into jobs as educational assistants in the school system.

EAs require the same education as certified child-care workers, said Flanagan, but typically earn about 30 per cent more. They also have access to more benefits and a shared pension plan.

She's recommending government bring in a shared pension for certified child-care workers in the next year and a half, and match EA's wages by 2024.

"Job satisfaction levels were very, very high in the survey I did. The only thing not satisfactory were wages and benefits," she said.

Flanagan's report also calls on government to work with "marketing experts" on a new recruitment campaign, and to attract more workers through immigration and trade missions.

On top of that, she's calling for changes to the early childhood education programs at Holland College and Collège de l'île to make them more accessible, such as bringing in online courses, and the option of classes just two days per week.

"People need to work together a little bit more to really put something in place that's creative, a little more modern perhaps, somewhat flexible, that meet the needs of the student in terms of their work-life balance, and being able to be employed and to study at the same time," she said.

Plans in the works

In an email to CBC, a spokesperson for the PC government said while it hasn't adopted any of Flanagan's recommendations yet, her report "will inform our direction going forward."

"There is still some important work to be done such as consulting with partners and costing options," the email said.

The province said it has made it a priority to grow the early childhood workforce, to review its wage grid for staff, and to work with Holland College and Collège de l'île to make their programming more accessible.

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