

Course freeze at community college leaves students, daycares in limbo^[1]

Provincial subsidy ran out as demand soared for early childhood education, education assistant

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EXCERPTS

An early childhood education student who is one step away from graduation says a sudden freeze on her courses at a Brandon college due to a provincial subsidy running out feels like a "slap in the face."

Sondra Marsh, 29, found out by email last Tuesday that she wasn't able to register this month with Assiniboine Community College to do her practicum, the last requirement for her diploma.

"I cried because I've worked my butt off," she said, adding that the professional early childhood educator (ECE II) diploma would result in a nearly \$5 pay raise to \$17 an hour from \$12.75.

"I just don't know what to do. And this field is already hard and frustrating and I was one of the ones that stuck it out," said Marsh. "It just sort of felt like a slap in the face."

The college said the pause on registration happened because a subsidy provided by the province for distance education courses has been used up, after enrolment numbers swelled for several distance programs.

"We've exhausted the funds right now," said Karen Hargreaves, dean of health and human services at Assiniboine Community College.

Students enrolled in distance education for early childhood education, educational assistant (EA) and early childhood program management must now wait until July to register for new courses. It affects 331 students.

Unlike the full-time programs where enrolment numbers are fixed, the part-time distance programs allow for continuous registrations and applications and more time for students to complete each course.

"This is temporary. The program will continue, they'll be able to finish their program, but when you're in a high-demand program sometimes you have to wait to get into it," she said.

The province is aware of the high demand for the programs, she said, adding that a funding increase would help the school increase capacity.

The province did not respond to the CBC's request for comment in time for publication.

'Hard to get them through': Daycare

The distance-course freeze also affects the rural daycare in southern Manitoba where Marsh works, said Teresa Guillas, director of the daycare.

Government regulations require two-thirds of a centre's staff to have the early childhood education designation – which trains people how to teach young children – in order to be licenced.

Guillas said her daycare currently only holds a provisional licence, which she believes negatively impacts whether parents enrol with the centre and could impact funding.

She wants to meet the requirements but says three staff at her daycare are held up by freeze.

"I know staff here are more than capable of doing their jobs and if they could get into courses they would pass them with flying colours. It's just really hard to get them through," she said.

Given the increased demands for qualified and educated workers in Manitoba, a child care advocate calls the failure of government to prioritize childcare "problematic," especially since research shows ECE's are instrumental in a child's social and physical development.

"They are caring for our children," said Brianne Goertzen, with the Childcare Coalition of Manitoba and a board member for Child Care

Now. "These folks are highly trained and they're taking care of the next generation of Manitobans and also allowing for parents of today to be able to fully participate in the workforce." A provincial funding freeze since 2016 on operational grants for daycares also puts childcare centres in an "impossible situation" where they can't pay ECE's enough to retain or recruit them, she said. Marsh agrees that the compensation is not enough, noting she has thousands of dollars in student loans to pay off.

"They need to see ECE's as professionals. We're not babysitters," said Marsh.

Assiniboine Community College is undergoing a program review, which includes reaching out to each student to see what they need to graduate, said Hargreaves. More information will be available March 31.

Students enrolled in courses now or beginning in March will be able to complete those. No new registrations are currently allowed.

Marsh notes that some of her peers have already left the field or picked up a side job to make ends meet.

She plans to wait but her graduation can't come soon enough.

"I have a natural passion for children but I also want to be a contributing person to my family and not live paycheque to paycheque when I'm almost 30 years old."

Region: Manitoba [3]

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