

# Association head says it's up to individual daycares to decide whether to charge fees <sup>[1]</sup>

Province will cover fees for parents who "lost income" because of COVID-19 pandemic

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## AVAILABILITY

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

## EXCERPTS

Some parents who have signed contracts with daycare providers won't have to continue paying, but others might still be charged.

In a memo sent to daycare providers, Minister of Education Dominic Cardy ordered all daycare operators who have had to lay off staff to stop charging parents.

But he said if a daycare hasn't laid off its staff, parents may still have to honour the contract they signed and pay the fees - if that daycare asks for payment.

If those parents have "lost income" because of the disruptions caused by the novel coronavirus, the provincial government will step in and cover their fees, the memo says.

On Twitter, Cardy said the daycares who still have staff "can charge to keep a spot for your child." If a daycare is still functioning but temporarily closed, it's still paying staff and needs the income, he said.

Cardy said the rationale behind letting closed daycares charge parents is "to keep as many businesses going as possible and to preserve what had been a growing pool of high quality educators for when this all ends."

### Who will have to pay

The memo says parents who haven't "lost income" can still be charged by the daycares.

When asked for clarification on Twitter, Cardy said "If you can afford to pay, you'll be helping to keep a small business alive. If you can't, there'll be no judgment."

In terms of a timeline on how long parents may continue to pay, Cardy said "We'll be looking at medium and long term plans as we move ahead."

### Mixed messages

On Wednesday Premier Blaine Higgs said parents "will not be charged while daycares are closed."

But Cardy's memo contradicts this.

Higgs also said the province is asking daycare operators not to increase their usual rates at this time.

Jean Robinson, with the daycare group Early Childhood Care and Education of New Brunswick, said this new memo answers question daycare providers had since the Chief Medical Officer recommended childcare facilities close on Monday. It also clarifies Higgs' statement from Wednesday.

She said she doesn't know how many daycares have laid off staff — although she knows many were holding off on layoffs to get clarity.

"There's still people that are online for two or three hours with Service Canada just trying to have support," she said. "I would say probably 50 percent of the centres are still holding off because there's new information coming every day."

She also doesn't know how many will continue charging parents, and if any of them will be charging discounted fees.

That decision is really up to each individual facility.

"Some owner-operators have more experience in the business field," she said. "Some think with their heart and not that they still have bills to pay. And an owner-operator would have to really follow what is in their parent handbook."

### 'Transparency' needed

Tracy Engstrom, who has a four-year-old and a three-year-old, and pays \$2,000 a month for both of them to go to a Moncton-area daycare. She says she understands daycares still have to pay their staff. But if the daycare doesn't have to pay for food and other supplies, she wants to know why they're still charging her full price

"When they're not going to be purchasing those things to take care of our children they stand to make quite a large profit if they're going to continue to charge us tuition," she said.

She's a remote worker, so her income hasn't been affected by the COVID-19 measures. However, she said she now has to pay for educational materials to keep her children occupied, on top of paying full daycare fees.

"I would ask for more transparency if the situation doesn't change in one or two weeks," she said. "More transparency with how our tuition is being applied."

Her only other option is to not have her children enrolled in that daycare, she said, and find another daycare or go back on the waitlist once daycares reopen.

She said she hopes she sees no repercussions from speaking out as far as her children "not being welcomed," when COVID-19 measures are no longer necessary.

### Essential workers' childcare

In the memo, Cardy said childcare operators that are staying open to care for children of essential workers can still charge regular fees to their current families who are not using the service right now. If those families have lost income because of COVID-19, the government will cover those fees.

This means daycares that remain open will receive fees from the essential service workers who send their children there, as well as families staying home.

"Yes, they'll get some extra revenue. They deserve it. They're stepping up in a crisis. No apologies for that," Cardy said on Twitter.

Cardy said essential workers using those daycares will only be asked to pay one fee, not one for their old daycare and one for their new one.

The memo said if a daycare continues to charge parents even after laying off staff, it will "be subject to further measures by the department."

The memo also said all the facilities that closed will still receive grants and subsidies.

The memo points to the federal government's announcement of \$27 billion to Canadian workers and businesses. That plan introduces \$2 billion addition to the Child Tax Benefit.

It also introduces funding of up to \$900 every two weeks for up to 15 weeks "to provide income support to workers who must stay home and do not have access to paid sick leave," but don't qualify for EI, or for parents who do qualify for EI but had to care for sick children.

That plan also includes a 10 per cent wage subsidy for the next 90 days for small businesses, up to a maximum of \$1,375 per employee and \$25,000 per employer.

On Wednesday, Higgs said the province is trying to determine how this new funding applies to daycares.

Cardy did not respond to a request for an interview by Thursday afternoon.

Health Department spokesperson Bruce Macfarlane said there will be a technical briefing on this issue Friday.

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