

Early childhood educator says province's reopening plan lacks clarity, consistency ^[1]

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Source: The Chronicle Herald

Format: Article

Publication Date: 4 Jun 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

The plan to reopen the province's licensed child-care centres and family daycare homes in less than two weeks is inconsistent and lacks clarity, an early childhood educator says.

"We appreciate the fact that we continue to be paid and that we've retained our jobs and we totally understand the need to have child care, it's essential if we are going to open our economy, but we are really disappointed in the way that it's being done," Margot Nickerson said.

"We don't feel that the government has taken steps to ensure that it's going to be as safe as possible for the people who are going to be working in the centres."

Nickerson is one of nine early childhood educators who work with 70 toddlers and preschool children at St. Joseph's Children's Centre at Scotia Square in downtown Halifax. She is also president of CUPE Local 4745 that represents 200 early childhood educators at six government-funded non-profit centres around Halifax.

A directive from the Education and Early Childhood Development Department said licensed child-care centres and family daycare centres across the province, closed since March 17 because of the health crisis, will reopen June 15.

The department released a set of public health guidelines Tuesday for reopening, a document created with input from pediatrics at the IWK Health Centre and the feedback from consultation with more than 2,500 sector stakeholders.

"We are really concerned about the lack of protective equipment," Nickerson said. "We are worried about the quality and the quantity that will be provided by the government to the centres.

"We feel that we should be provided in child care with the same usages as is provided in long-term care. We all know that it is impossible to social distance with young children."

Nickerson said she has been told by a centre director that the province will provide 80 facemasks for 25 staff for a week, whereas long-term care employees are provided two masks each day.

Nickerson said the government allotment of masks covers little more than emergency situations at child-care centres.

The department directives say that children will not be required to wear facemasks and that "staff should maintain current practices for the use of PPE with respect to the hazards normally encountered in their work, with one exception of wearing a medical mask when unable to maintain a distance of two metres from a child who is exhibiting signs or symptoms suggestive of COVID-19."

Nickerson said that is not acceptable.

"If you wait until someone shows symptoms of COVID, they've already begun transmitting it. That's way too late," she said.

"We are providing very close contact care on a daily basis, all day long. ... We are very fearful. I heard someone say to me that we might have a mini-Northwood in the making if we don't have more protection."

Nickerson said the guidelines for cleaning are inconsistent, as is a directive that a child presenting persistent symptoms of a runny nose, cough or sniffles can remain in the centre while a staff member showing the same symptoms should be removed immediately.

"It just seems inconsistent, hurried, and not very well put together," Nickerson said.

Funding for centres like the one Nickerson works at comes primarily from government, along with parental fees.

The government's directive is that all licensed child-care centres and family daycare centres should open with at least 50 per cent capacity next week.

Nickerson said that looks different depending on the size of the centre and would mean that about 80 people would be in the Dalhousie University centre on the first day it opens.

“Our government should have provided a directive like P.E.I., where they open up very slowly with a smaller number for the first two weeks and then evaluate how it’s going,” Nickerson said.

She said the Nova Scotia directive could put pressure on some directors to increase their numbers too quickly to make sure they maintain funding.

“We already know that a lot of our directors have been canvassing parents over the last few days and they are not willing to send their children yet,” Nickerson said. “They want to see how it goes first.

“We have a number of centres that won’t open at 50 per cent and that will require the centres to do some negotiating with the Department of Education. I assume that they (department) are

going to be supportive but we don’t know. That’s a question mark.”

Nickerson said the department has made it clear that all centres must get back up to 100 per cent capacity by September or face having their funding affected.

Nickerson said many of her local members fear returning to the job but need the paycheque.

“The members that I’ve been talking to feel very undervalued and unappreciated and they feel like the government is almost throwing us out there to develop herd immunity or something,” she said.

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