

Government failed at communicating re-opening of childcare sector: union ^[1]

Pre-schools and daycares are set to re-open tomorrow, June 15

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EXCERPTS

Pre-schools and daycares are set to re-open tomorrow, June 15, but some childcare centres say the opening guidelines haven't been made as clear as they'd like by the provincial government.

"We were severely disappointed with the serious occupational health and safety considerations that were not included," says Margot Nickerson, who represents CUPE Local 4745 in Halifax and Local 3688 in Bridgewater.

Nickerson tells NEWS 95.7's The Todd Veinotte Show that she was pleased when she first heard the government was working with the sector to create re-opening guidelines.

"We expected that the government would take a leadership role in setting standards and not leaving us with the limited policy-making capacity of the directors of the centres. Not that they're not able to do it but just don't have the resources, and it's frankly not their job," she explains.

But with re-opening day coming just a few weeks after the original announcement, she says it's been a lot of work for childcare centre directors.

"[Regulations] were left up to the employers who don't have enough time, didn't have enough time in order to establish some policies, acquire some supplies like PPEs and to make the physical changes in the spaces that would be required," Nickerson says.

The CUPE representative says she was especially disappointed with the lack of PPE in the original guidelines.

"There was not going to be PPE available for the early childhood educators unless somebody presented with symptoms," she says. And as we understand from occupational health and safety that would've been too late by that point."

Since then, she says the government has verbally allowed childcare centres to purchase 12 weeks of PPE, mainly face masks.

"There's an assumption that they can be ordered after the 12 week period, but we don't have that in writing anywhere so we don't know," Nickerson says.

Nickerson says this PPE is crucially important because children aren't able to socially distance the same as adults are.

"We all know that young children, it would be impossible for them to social distance at all times. There's going to be times when it just wouldn't work. When you need a hug, for example," she says.

On top of that, many of the childcare centres in the province operate out of larger buildings that can't limit traffic.

"For example, my workplace is within Scotia Square, so in order to get to the centre with the child, you're exposed to all of those people," Nickerson says.

Nickerson says the guidelines aren't even clear on what to do if a child gets sick, and many of the guidelines have been left up to interpretation by early childhood educators.

"There was a lack of clarity, and inconsistency in the guidance document regarding what would happen if a child did present with COVID symptoms, exactly the protocol to follow. And there was a lack of clarity for cleaning the children's equipment," she says.

With all of the uncertainty, Nickerson says many families are choosing to keep their children home for the time being.

"We're seeing that families aren't confident at this point about coming back so early. They're indicating to the centres that they would like to wait and see the epidemiology," she says.

And with even less than the mandated 50 per cent capacity, Nickerson says that means centres are at risk of losing federal funding.

“We have questions and concerns about what would happen to centres and the early childhood educators if centres aren’t able to reach enrolment at the level their pre-COVID capacity by September,” says Nickerson. “We’re really worried that the early childhood educators would lose their jobs.”

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