

Nova Scotia child-care centres facing layoffs to stay afloat until September ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child-care centres across Nova Scotia have taken a hit during the coronavirus pandemic. Even with provincial funding, which helped facilities reopen on June 15, directors now worry they won't stay viable until September.

Margot Nickerson, an early childhood educator at St. Joseph Child Care Centre in Halifax and Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) member, says she was happy to hear the government's initial commitment to child-care centres during COVID-19.

"We felt that they were acknowledging that we were an essential service, that the economy couldn't start functioning if families didn't have child care," Nickerson says.

According to an emailed statement from Gary Andrea, a spokesperson for Nova Scotia's education department, "the government has provided almost \$40 million in provincial funding to the sector to ensure they were ready to welcome families back when they reopened in June. This includes regular grant and subsidy funding and \$25 million in additional funding due to COVID-19."

Centres were initially able to reopen at 50 per cent of their capacity with the promise that the province would subsidize up to a maximum of 50 per cent of their seats to ensure they were working with their full pre-pandemic revenue.

The province says if centres are meeting public health guidelines they can now welcome back all their children. Government funding is on a sliding scale, so centres that have 60 per cent of their spaces filled will see their government subsidy drop back to 40 per cent.

But many child care centre operators say they're seeing far fewer than 50 per cent of their children return and that has left a gap in funding.

CUPE sent a survey to several child-care centres, and as of Wednesday, Nickerson says almost half of the respondents said there was discussion at their centres about layoffs and closures.

She also says child-care centre directors have made attempts to voice these concerns to the government.

"They've clearly communicated to the Department of Education that they don't have enough funding to make it through to September," she says.

Nickerson says her director "was told emphatically from the government that 'you need to lay people off and start recruiting heavily from the public to fill the other 50 per cent of your spots.'"

Andrea said the education department was "not aware of any mass layoffs or closures."

St. Joseph Child Care Centre has had nine layoffs this week, and Nickerson says she has never seen layoffs like these in the 52 years of the centre being open.

Heather Hansen, director of Kids R Kids child-care centre, also says there's a lot of miscommunication with the government.

"One lady told many directors repeatedly last week, 'Lay off your staff, lay off your staff, lay off your staff,' and that is such a contradiction to what we've been hearing for months," Hansen said.

Since publication of this story, a spokesperson for the provincial government told Global News that it is not not telling daycare centres to lay off their staff.

Directors are devastated, Hansen says. "It's no funding and it's no answers."

Hansen also says the 50 per cent capacity is not working for child-care centres.

Not only did it cut their subsidy funding for held spots in half, but "parents made the assumption that the government was going to pay for those spaces," Hansen says.

"People started to email to say, 'We're going to come back Sept. 1,'" but Hansen worries that many centres won't even be viable until then.

NDP MLA Claudia Chender says the government should be talking to child-care centres individually.

"Figure out what their actual operating deficit is, based on their capacity versus the number of children enrolled... If the child-care centre normally has the capacity to have 85 children and they have 20, then we're looking for government to subsidize the fees for those 65 missing parents," said Chender.

Nickerson also says the spot-holding subsidies do not help child-care centres.

"Even though we are getting phone calls at different centres asking to enroll, there's only so much that people can do because they have to wait for the held spots to come back," she says.

"Centres realized very quickly when that statement came out that they weren't going to be able to stay afloat financially if they didn't have full enrolment pretty fast."

On top of that, fewer than 10 centres in the province have close to 50 per cent capacity, Hansen says.

"I don't think we'll be at 100 per cent in September because we're struggling to be at 50 per cent (now)," she says.

Hansen says she wants to keep all of her staff, but if her centre is "bleeding" right now, it'll soon be "hemorrhaging."

She says centres appreciate the province's help prior to reopening, but it won't help them stay open till September.

She wants to see the government pay for the salaries that aren't being covered by parent fees throughout the summer.

"It's a very difficult situation," she says. "You want to be grateful that they were there for us, but now it just feels like we're on a sinking ship."

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