

P.E.I. delays promised daycare plan ^[1]

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Source: Journal Pioneer

Format: Article

Publication Date: 25 Jun 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

CHARLOTTETOWN, P.E.I. – The province's minister of education and lifelong learning has confirmed plans to implement a universal daycare program for all four-year-olds will not be implemented this fall.

In an interview with media on Thursday, Brad Trivers said his department had not requested funding for introducing the program this fall during recent budget consultations.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Trivers had pledged to implement the universal half-day preschool program for all four-year-olds this fall. The Progressive Conservatives included a pledge for the implementation of the program in its 2019 election platform, costed at \$5 million.

"We just felt that with the uncertainty coming into this fall, it just was not the right time to push out a new program," Trivers said of the decision.

Trivers added that concerns around the implementation of the program had been expressed by the Opposition MLAs and by some within the childcare sector.

"We were doing some pilots that we were unable to complete. We had consultations that we were unable to complete. Really, the focus of the sector was on trying to provide emergency childcare during COVID and then, of course, childcare as workers start going back to work," Trivers said.

Since reopening on May 22, the province's early years centres have been operating at a reduced capacity due to public health guidelines. The number of children allowed in each centre has been limited but will expand to 42 as June 26.

Trivers has said the early years centres will be operating at around 76 per cent on that date.

Currently, 121 early years centres have reopened with a current capacity of 2,223 childcare spaces. As of Wednesday, 1,783 have been filled and 440 remain vacant.

Prior to the pandemic, there were 6,150 children enrolled in daycare in the province's early years centres.

The province does not have data on the number of spaces available in unlicensed childcare spaces across the province. Prior to May 22, when childcare was offered only for essential workers, officials in the Department of Education have said that about 90 per cent of the childcare accessed by these workers was in unlicensed, private childcare spaces.

As of Wednesday, 500 families have accessed a \$75 per day childcare allowance from the province. This allowance will expire June 26.

Recent data from Statistics Canada has shown that women in P.E.I., who are often the main caregiver for children, have experienced the most drastic increases in unemployment since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some economists have said that ensuring there is accessible, affordable childcare will be crucial for allowing many of these parents to return to work.

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