

# Uncertainty over schooling plans has working mothers mulling leaving workforce <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

Sarah Pretty is no stranger to complicated situations. The Toronto-based retail distributor has had to confront myriad supply chain issues during the COVID-19 pandemic, but she calls the current school and home life situation of Canadian families an "operational nightmare."

"It's the uncertainty that's eating away at people," says Pretty, adding that some of her retailer customers are relying on a skeleton staff of childless workers to keep physical locations running. "I can't make plans about how to grow my businesses. . . . I can't imagine what my revenue might be like."

After months of balancing childcare and online schooling with work responsibilities, anything short of complete school reopening presents a crucial challenge for families. Without children in school five days a week, someone has to care for them, and working full-time while simultaneously caring for children is simply not possible — even when working remotely is an option.

Schools in most of Quebec have been open since May, while those in B.C, Manitoba and P.E.I. have partially reopened. The remaining provinces and territories plan on having students return to the classroom in the fall, though details have not been finalized. School boards are mulling scenarios such as alternating days or weeks with smaller class sizes or continued at-home learning.

The result is a significant number of workers who feel they have little choice but to leave the workforce until a semblance of stability is restored.

According to Statistics Canada's June Labour Force Survey, the employment recovery has been "slowest for mothers with school-aged children," with employment rising 5.2 per cent for women and 6.4 per cent for men with children younger than six. For mothers of children ages six to 17, however, women's employment remains below pre-pandemic levels, and women with children are more likely to be working less than half their usual hours.

Pretty has kids of her own, but she says she can't take leave as people depend on her for their wages. She's considering enrolling her children in private school in Orillia, Ont. in the hopes they would have smaller class sizes and a safer environment. And she isn't alone.

"I know lots of people considering taking a leave of absence," says Pretty. "I know someone who sold a second business. I know teachers who are considering leaves of absence — they have little people at home."

Susan Prentice, a sociology professor at the University of Manitoba who studies childcare policy, says the current situation will cause "unfathomably tough problems" for families to figure out.

"For any household that has children, a school closing is a make-or-break factor for family decision making," says Prentice. "Women trying to do homeschooling by day and trying to do their own work at night — in the end, they manage it at the expense of their own health, by sleeping very little. You can get through a short-term period like this, but it's not sustainable over months or semesters."

Experts say there simply aren't enough daycare spots to accommodate the number of school age children who may find themselves without a caregiver if parents return to work. Monica Lysack, a professor of early childhood leadership at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ont. says that even in the best of times, Canada only has space in licensed childcare facilities for less than 30 per cent of kids.

"Imagine being told your business could open up only at half capacity, and you have to keep going with all the same expenses," says Lysack of childcare centres in the pandemic.

"That means parents are going to have to pay double fees, for already astronomically priced childcare ... And where are the other 50 per cent of children going to go?"

For many families, having two working parents is not optional. Prentice says that families have been able to offset flat wages in the Canadian economy through the contributions of working mothers.

"This discussion of dual earners, or 1.5 earners as we sometimes call part-time work, it's really mothers," says Prentice. "When children are

in school, this is when mothers' labour force participation rate jumps to its highest."

"If [schools] open on some crazy extraordinary schedule, like two days one week, three days the next week, this will play havoc with the ability of mothers and fathers to keep their jobs. It will play havoc on children. And it immediately has huge, huge economic and social consequences," says Prentice.

Pretty says that among the concerns she's hearing from her employees and clients, the return to school is the most pressing.

"Everyone is really obsessed with school opening," she says. "We are getting it from every angle. Everything is complicated."

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