

Labrador daycares 'ecstatic' over cash boost, but MHA questions timing ^[1]

Child-care centres getting provincial government cash to pay workers more

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EXCERPTS

Child-care centres in Labrador are thrilled their long-standing cries for staffing help have been addressed by the provincial government, even as one Opposition MHA questions whether the timing of the announcement has more to do with an impending election than listening to Labradorians' concerns.

On Tuesday, the Liberal government announced a tweak to its operating grant system for child-care centres in Labrador. The province will now top up those subsidies by an extra 15 per cent, with strings attached: the extra cash has to go directly toward compensating daycare staff.

"I am ecstatic," said Bernie Mullen, the administrator of Labrador West Child Care Centre.

"I think it is a stepping stone in the right direction. It has been a long time coming. I have watched many staff leave to go and work other places as we were not competitive with our wage scale, and I'm hoping that this is a start to get them into a livable wage."

Mullen has previously spoken out about the problems plaguing child-care workers in Labrador West, where starting wages at \$14.50 an hour mean trained early childhood educators can get higher-paying jobs at McDonalds or Walmart.

As a result of staff shortages, her daycare's sister facility has had to close, and Mullen hopes the wage boost will help reverse that trend, estimating it will add between \$1.50 to \$2 an hour.

Pumpkin House Child Care Centre in Happy Valley-Goose Bay has suffered from similar shortages, resulting in administrators being forced to close some rooms and leave families without care at times this past fall. The newly announced money comes as a relief to one of its board members.

"Things are being heard, people are being listened to, and the issues in Labrador have been highlighted, and they see that they are real and they're causing real struggles within our daycares here. So it was a really good step," Rhea Dale told CBC Radio's *Labrador Morning*.

While training and keeping staff is a provincewide child-care concern, several factors exacerbate the issue in Labrador. The nearest campus to train ECEs is in St. John's, there's little in-migration to the region, and other fields often boast higher wages, despite the fact that even prior to Tuesday's announcement, ECEs can avail of subsidies to top up their salaries.

Campaigning, or child care?

None of these concerns are new, said NDP Labrador West MHA Jordan Brown.

"I've been bringing it to the attention of the last two ministers of education, that you know, something needs to change," he told CBC News.

While Brown endorses the relief for child-care operators, he's skeptical of the timing of Tuesday's announcement.

It came hours after Brown called for change on a radio call-in show, and Brown said that when he inquired with the Department of Education prior to Christmas if there was any movement on wages, he was told nothing was happening.

"From the emails I received, there seemed to be no intention of making any changes to this. This is nothing but to garnish votes in Labrador," he said.

Education Minister Tom Osborne said he directed department staff to take on the Labrador-specific issue after he heard about it in the fall, and that the top-up announcement came as soon as staff shifted money around and navigated bureaucracy.

"Six or eight weeks to work on a situation and find a resolution is, I think, a reasonable time frame," Osborne said, adding the department announced the funding as soon as it had worked out the administrative details.

As to Brown's implication that the Labrador plan was released in the wake of his critique, Osborne said it sounded like Brown was campaigning himself.

"Does he want the solution, or does he want to play politics?" said Osborne.

Election speculation has ramped up in the new year, as all three major parties have been setting increasing numbers of candidates in place. By law, Premier Andrew Furey must call a provincial election before August, when he hits the one-year mark in office.

The early days of 2021 have also seen a flurry of child-care announcements from the Liberals: the rollout of \$25-a-day daycare, the Labrador boost, and the release of how the province will spend its \$10.2 million in federal COVID-19 child-care funding all came out within January's first week.

The federal funding was first announced in July, as part of the Safe Restart Agreement that funnelled money to the provinces and territories. But spending that cash, Osborne said, was complicated, and getting the final signoff from the federal government took until December,

"We would've like to have seen it sooner, as well. As quickly as we could get this, we did," he said.

Systemic problems persist

That money, which will go toward expenses incurred by child-care operators for things like increased cleaning or staffing costs, is retroactive to July 1.

Even with the relief the Labrador top-up brings, both Mullen and Dale say there is more work to be done, and investments to be made, in the province's early education system. Each of their child-care settings require more staff, and Mullen hopes to attract enough to reopen the second Labrador West facility.

In Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Dale said Pumpkin House has been able to hire enough ECEs to keep it from closing, although they would still like to have more, and can't satisfy local demand.

"We just want to offer high-quality child care in a place that is still desperate for it. Pumpkin House doesn't even scrape the top of the people looking for good quality child care," she said.

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Tags: funding ^[4]

wages ^[5]

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[4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/wages> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/workforce>