

# Early childhood educators launch campaign calling for pay equity

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Gap in pay and benefits compared to pre-primary sites must be closed, say advocates

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## AVAILABILITY

Access online [2]

## EXCERPT

Daphnee Hahn became an early childhood educator because it was a calling. She wasn't looking to make a lot of money.

But Hahn and others in her field are finding it difficult to overlook the wage and benefits disparity that exists within the sector.

As a Level 3 early childhood educator with a four-year degree from Mount Saint Vincent University, she makes \$19 an hour at St. Joseph's Children's Centre in Halifax.

Her colleagues who have the same level of training, but work at pre-primary locations, get paid at least \$5 more an hour, have better access to benefits and a pension plan.

"I want equal pay for equal work," Hahn said during a news conference at Province House on Thursday.

"Both child-care centres and pre-primary programs follow the same curriculum and regulations. We have the same training and qualifications, so why is it OK to be paid so drastically different if we do the same job?"

In an attempt to close that gap, a campaign has been launched on behalf of early childhood educators for a provincewide pay scale and equitable access to health benefits and pension, regardless of where a person works.

"A fairly compensated workforce is going to help us create stability in the child-care sector and it will encourage less turnover of staff in high-quality programs," said Margot Nickerson, president of CUPE Local 4745, which represents six child-care centres in the Halifax Regional Municipality.

Nickerson said the campaign is on behalf of both unionized and non-unionized workers. They urge the public to contact Education Minister Zach Churchill and their local MLA to voice their support for equitable compensation within the sector.

Nickerson said the campaign is being launched now because the workers believe there is public support for the work they do, the federal government has expressed recognition of the importance of supporting the sector, and because the pandemic has highlighted the need for quality child care.

## Unintended gaps created

Nickerson said the department indicated in December that work on developing a pension plan could be possible, and she's hoping that it would be comparable to what people working at pre-primary sites receive. There are about 880 early childhood educators working in the pre-primary system and about 3,200 at other centres, according to CUPE.

A spokesperson for the Education Department said the government provided a one-time grant to the Association of Early Childhood Educators to work with a consultant.

"...[P]art of that work includes possible options for better compensation and benefits for those working in the industry," Violent MacLeod said in an email. "The Minister's Early Childhood Educator Working Group has informed this project."

No one questions the importance of quality early learning in the first five years of a child's life, said Hahn. Indeed, that was the driving force cited when the Liberal government first introduced the pre-primary program, which provides free access to all four year olds in the province.

But while the intention of the program was to try to level the playing field for children as they prepared to enter the school system, early childhood educators such as Hahn say it created an unfair imbalance for those working in the sector.

Claudia Chender, the NDP's education critic, said addressing the situation comes down to a question of priorities for the government.

The pandemic has highlighted the disadvantages many women face in the workforce as well as the importance of reliable, quality, affordable child care, said Chender.

Pre-primary was a good first step, but now it's time for the government to extend access to all children and for that effort to incorporate the needs expressed by workers, she said.

"I think it's a no-brainer."

**Region:** Nova Scotia <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** wages <sup>[4]</sup>

advocacy <sup>[5]</sup>

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