

First a thank you, then a wage hike: That's what daycare operators want ^[1]

London childcare centre operator Kara Pihlak calls the current wages for ECEs insulting

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EXCERPT

Ontario's daycare operators, who have remained open through much of the pandemic by ramping up cleaning and outfitting employees with masks and face shields say they need a financial boost from the province so they can pay their staff a livable wage.

They also want a formal thank you from Ontario's Minister of Education.

"Stephen Lecce and Doug Ford have not really thanked early childhood educators at all in the past year during this pandemic," said Kara Pihlak, executive director of the Oak Park Co-Operative Children's Centre in London, Ont., which has so far avoided a COVID-19 outbreak. "And we're all just feeling that the lack of recognition is starting to get to us."

Early childhood educators (ECE) who work in daycares make between \$16-20/hr. The wage is set by the individual daycare providers, but the funding comes from the province and is funnelled through municipalities.

"The province is treating us as essential workers as we've been working on the front lines during this pandemic," said Pihlak. "However, they have not given us any sort of pandemic pay while we are working through a riskier period and expected to do more tasks."

Calls for a \$25/hr wage

Childcare centres shut down for four months in the spring last year, but have been open since then.

"We reopened in July, two months before teachers, with really no attention toward us," said Pihlak. "We've been open through the Christmas holidays, through the stay-at-home orders in January. So, we've really been here."

Pihlak said her staff are working hard and getting tired, and in many cases leaving the profession. "They're not making enough money to do the work they truly do love," she said.

"They can't be expected to continue to work on an insulting wage."

Pihlak, who also advocates for the profession on behalf of London's Licensed Childcare Network (LLCN), wants a provincial funding boost that would allow daycare providers to pay ECEs \$25/hr.

Education ministry spokesperson Caitlin Clark said the province has provided daycares with \$234 million during the pandemic, "to keep children and staff safe along with additional supports for cleaning and PPE in child care and early years settings," and also pointed to a continuing \$2/hr wage subsidy for ECEs introduced by the Liberals in 2014.

Where is the recognition?

Barbara Jackson, executive director of Parkwood Children's Centre in London, Ont., and co-chair of LLCN, said a \$25/hr wage for ECEs would bring them in line with what their in-school counterparts make.

And she also thinks the province needs to better acknowledge the work educators have been performing under strenuous circumstances.

"I feel like we have kind of gone unnoticed during the pandemic," said Jackson, who has watched premier Doug Ford's COVID-19 briefings over the last year, always anticipating a shout-out. We'd always be waiting and it would never come. Because their their wages need to improve and their hard work's not being recognized, I think it's very discouraging for the educators."

As for the missing thank you, education ministry spokesperson Caitlin Clark directed CBC News to a tweet from October 2020 on ECE appreciation day.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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