

Pandemic proved need for affordable, accessible childcare ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The pandemic has made the need for affordable, accessible childcare visible in ways that cannot be ignored, says a Mount Allison University professor.

“If nothing else, the pandemic has shown us the true fragility of the care economy,” said Rachelle Pascoe-Deslauriers, who teaches commerce and women’s and gender studies.

The issue disproportionately affects women, said Christine Griffin, associate director of Regroupement Féministe du Nouveau-Brunswick, a non-profit group which promotes the interests of New Brunswick women, noting that during the pandemic women were more likely to leave their jobs for reasons related to childcare.

Irasema Castellanos of Moncton has three children under the age of five and is a trained early childhood educator. When she came off maternity leave near the onset of the pandemic, she found work at a registered daycare that would also accept her own children.

Finding a space for three children felt like winning the lottery, she said. But during the pandemic, her husband, Evens, was temporarily laid off, and she was initially told she didn’t qualify for the province’s childcare subsidy.

That left the couple to pay \$2,227.65 for child care.

As an ECE she made around \$1,100 every two weeks, she said.

The situation was a hard one for the family to wrap their heads around. “Government wants you to work, but it would have been better to take the kids out and get government assistance,” she said. “That’s not what I wanted to do. I wanted to work.”

Flavio Nienow, a communications officer for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, said in the early part of the pandemic, the province implemented a policy to cover fees for parents who had lost significant income, so they could pay childcare fees while centres were closed and not lose their place, and continued to arrange ad hoc financial support arrangements for parents facing continued challenges throughout the pandemic.

This policy was over and above the usual Parent Subsidy program which provides financial support to families who make under \$80,000 on a sliding scale, also considering factors such as the number of children. Those with multiple children under five won’t pay more than 20 per cent of their income on childcare, according to the government’s website.

After several months of paying full fees, Castellanos said she now receives a subsidy that cuts her childcare costs by nearly half.

She has also changed jobs. Work as an early childhood educator can be long, hard hours, Castellanos said, while stressing she loved it. But she decided to look for another job as her family struggled to pay their bills. She has now found work as a casual educational assistant for the Anglophone East School District, where she is working less hours and making more money.

Castellanos is not alone. Many women make career decisions based on childcare needs, and many ECEs have left the early childhood system to move into the education system due to better pay and conditions, said Pascoe-Deslauriers.

Research from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives indicates many ECEs left their jobs due to their own childcare responsibilities. To make the system work, it needs to prioritize retention, linked to pay and conditions, said Pascoe-Deslauriers.

The federal government promised to make progress on national childcare in collaboration with provinces and territories, announcing investments in the 2020 Fall Economic Statement, said Mikaela Harrison, a spokesperson for the office of the minister of family, children and social development.

Investments announced federally include: the creation of a Federal Secretariat on Early Learning and Child Care; \$145 million to support Indigenous child care efforts over the next five years, with \$75 million coming in 2021-22; \$420 million in 2021-22 for provinces and territories for attraction and retention of early childhood education; and a commitment to sustained funding to provinces and territories, Harrison said.

Hassan Yussuff, president of the Canadian Labour Congress, which has advocated for national childcare for close to two decades, said seeing the government put dollars behind their words starts to create a framework and is a hopeful sign.

“While we are glad to see that there will be concrete investments, we also need to see an action plan and a timeline as to when and how all of this will be implemented to translate to the universal child care that was promised,” Griffin said.

An accessible and affordable childcare system exists elsewhere in the country. Quebec, for example, has a system that sees parents pay only a nominal fee for childcare, said Pascoe-Deslauriers, noting the system has kept more women with children active in the labour force since it was introduced in 1996.

Region: New Brunswick ^[3]

Tags: COVID-19 ^[4]

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