

Affordable child care is great. But the real crunch in N.L. is spaces and staff, say workers ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

People working in child care in Newfoundland and Labrador are welcoming the federal budget's massive influx of cash to make the sector cheaper for parents, but say in order to improve the system, some of that money must go toward fixing persistent staffing and spacing problems.

On Monday, an affordable child-care plan formed the centrepiece of the federal Liberals' budget, promising \$30 billion over five years with a goal of driving down child-care costs across Canada to \$10 a day, along with a series of other investments in the sector.

That investment is "phenomenal," said Michelle Ranger, an early childhood educator in Gander, and will come as a relief to parents she knows are struggling with costs.

But it also comes with a catch.

"You're not going to have the spaces. The spaces are going to be full.... There is not enough spaces."

That void is exacerbated in rural Newfoundland and Labrador where few, if any, regulated centres exist, said Ranger. Solving that space crunch is complicated, but Ranger and others say a key factor is a lack of early childhood educators, or ECEs.

"There's a huge demand for trained ECEs and there's just not enough out there to support the child care that currently exists," said Meredith Loveys, an early childhood education instructor at the College of the North Atlantic in Corner Brook, and a board member of the provincial association of ECEs.

There will be about eight ECE graduates this year in Corner Brook, Loveys said, when the program has the capacity to graduate as many as 30.

Wages are one factor. Pay is fairly low, although provincial government subsidies exist to top those up, with those subsidies themselves increasing in recent years.

"Right now, ECEs, who are mostly women in this province, make poverty wages. And a lot of them can't even afford to stay in early childhood education — they leave the industry even though they're qualified," said Neria Aylward, the executive director of the Jimmy Pratt Foundation, which advocates for better child care.

Loveys said the profession itself also doesn't get a spotlight or respect when it comes to choosing a career.

"It needs to be said in high school, and in college and university, that this is a great career, and that there's lots of opportunities," she told CBC News on Tuesday.

Loveys has done that advocacy work herself, speaking in classes and events, but said the province needs to push forward programs and the sector overall.

"I think it's coming, every few years. I see a big jump like this, and it makes a big difference," she said. "But I think really it needs to be an all-around societal shift to say child care is extremely important."

Targeting cash

Any federal money must pass through provincial and territorial governments, as they are in charge of handling child care. Newfoundland and Labrador already has some of the cheapest child care in the country, particularly after its \$25-a-day plan rolled out in January.

On Monday, Premier Andrew Furey said he was on board with the \$10-a-day plan, saying he was "very excited" to get to that figure, "if not lower." But he also said that federal money may be spent elsewhere.

"We're looking at continuing with early childhood educator education, to ensure that we're providing the highest quality of care, not just

the volume of child care. And we're also looking at things like junior kindergarten and other elements," he said.

Junior kindergarten — a program in other provinces for four-year-olds, rolled into the school system — points toward a desire of many in the sector for a universal child-care system, which the federal budget falls short of.

Newfoundland and Labrador's system is a patchwork of private and non-profit centres working within the regulated sector, which is tracked by the provincial government and can avail of subsidies and grants, including the \$25 daily fees.

There's about 8,100 such regulated spots, with an untold amount of home-based, unregulated operators operating largely beneath the radar and serving some of the other thousands of children below school age in the province. That slice of the child-care sector needs more support to enter the regulated world, said Loveys, and it can't simply come in the form of cash.

"If there were people of expertise out there who would walk them through that process, who would support them through that process and get them there, I think they want to join the regulated sector, and get the support and the recognition that they deserve," she said.

Loveys and others are optimistic that the flawed system can be addressed with the federal government's focus on their sector.

"The recognition and the understanding that early learning and education for young children is vital, so I think that that's a great step forward," said Ranger.

"However, to make this all come to fruition, and make it successful and make it achievable, that they have to look at more elements than just the financial component of it."

Region: Newfoundland ^[3]

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