

New training program aims to grow sub list at P.E.I. child-care centres ^[1]

Lack of qualified substitutes for ECEs an 'ongoing issue'

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EXCERPTS

Child-care centres on P.E.I. are hoping a new training program for early childhood workers will help fill a major gap on the substitute list.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Island daycares struggled to find staff to fill in if someone called in sick, and the situation has become worse in the past year.

"It's always been a challenge, from the day the centre opened almost 32 years ago, to find a substitute to come in who has any qualifications or knowledge of the centre," said Elizabeth Jeffery, owner and director of Little Wonders Early Learning Centre in Charlottetown.

"With COVID happening and teachers being out to have COVID testing and so on, it's become even more challenging," she said.

The new training program, Steps to Success, is funded by P.E.I.'s Department of Economic Growth, Tourism and Culture.

Right now there are 12 trainees in the program, which includes taking courses at Holland College and interning at child-care centres in P.E.I., after which they will receive their Level 1 early childhood certification.

"We just need people," said Jennifer Nangreaves, executive director of P.E.I.'s Early Childhood Development Association, which started the program.

"So as soon as you're on the sub list, you're getting scooped up. So the goal is to really bulk up that sub list," said Nangreaves.

You're generally looking for somebody who will work for minimum wage, which is very difficult to find.

— Elizabeth Jeffery, Little Wonders Early Learning Centre

The dearth of early childhood educators on P.E.I. stems from low wages, said both Nangreaves and Jeffery.

"To find people to come in to work as a sub, you're generally looking for somebody who will work for minimum wage, which is very difficult to find," said Jeffery.

"This job is not yet seen quite as professional as many others are. It's something that we're working on to help people understand the importance of this job and the work that we do," she said.

At Little Wonders, Jeffery said if they're unable to find a sub for the day, she will step out of her director role and work as an ECE, or the cook will.

The worst-case scenario is having to send children home because of a lack of staff.

"We did have one day where we had to send home two babies that were well, because the baby ratios were so much bigger," said Jeffery.

Laura Murphy is one the 12 students in the new program, interning at Little Wonders.

She said she was in a career transition when she saw the ad for the program.

"I'm still currently paying off loans, so I was worried ... having to take more money out. So when I found out the program's actually free, I thought that'd be great," said Murphy.

Hopes for program to continue

Murphy hopes after graduating from the program in July, she can start out on the sub list and gain experience at multiple child-care

centres around P.E.I., before hopefully landing a full-time job.

"I know if it weren't for seeing that ad, I might not have signed up right away to do the schooling. But when I saw all that was included, even the work experience included with it, I couldn't pass on the opportunity."

Both Nangreaves and Jeffery hope there will be more government funding so the program can continue with a new batch of students in the future.

"It's my strongest hope that this program will happen again, again and again and again, so that we can have a solid group of subs that we can call on when needed," said Jeffery.

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