

Early childhood educator shortage in Niagara and rest of province 'a crisis for some time' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A shortage of early childhood educators is a problem that has plagued the province for many years, says Niagara Region children's services director Darlene Edgar.

"This is a crisis and has been a crisis for some time," she said Monday.

Earlier this month, Niagara-based A Child's World, a non-profit with 11 daycares across the region, announced it would not be able to offer programming to close to 300 kindergarten and school-aged kids due to a severe staffing shortage that caused it to not be able to meet provincial ratios of children to staff.

It said low pay was a factor in an unsuccessful mass-hiring campaign that attempted to recruit more than 50 new staff. More than 20 people resigned due to being "burnt out," executive director Kim Cole said in a recent interview.

Edgar said this is an unfortunate reality in the industry.

"We certainly know there are individuals who are leaving the system because of the pay," she said.

The average hourly wage for an early childhood education worker in Ontario is \$21.

The Association of Early Childhood Educators, a provincial advocacy group, is pushing for this to increase by four dollars, said Edgar.

Before the pandemic, Niagara Region-managed sites were operating at about 75 per cent capacity. Today, the municipality has about 60 per cent of the staff it could have as a result of "staffing issues," said Edgar.

The Region can find other agencies in Niagara to take on some children left out of summer care, said Edgar.

Families can also register for licensed child home care, she added.

St. Catharines MPP Jennie Stevens and Niagara Falls MPP Wayne Gates released a joint statement last week, urging the province to take measures to assist the struggling sector.

The pair said the government should provide funding so centres can hire more ECEs, get additional space and stabilize after losing significant revenue during the pandemic.

An emergency top-up fund for daycare workers to "encourage them to re-enter the market and support childcare centres in Niagara" is a recommendation Stevens and Gates are making.

In an interview Monday, Stevens said part of the problem is a gender-equity issue, something that started with several past governments and which continues to not be addressed.

As the economy reopens, many single mothers are going back to work and not having easy access to daycare. Most have dealt with having to readjust their lives while schools have been closed.

"They've been struggling, and hearing they might not have childcare in the summer — it's the last thing they want to hear," Stevens said.

She said the province needs to "adapt to ensure women have the supports they need."

She said the province needs to find a way to "make it enticing" for college graduates to seek jobs in this field.

Gates said the Ontario government has received a low grade so far in the pandemic in its financial treatment of ECEs, as well as personal support workers.

"Essential workers across the board are grossly underpaid," he said Monday.

"They deserve to be paid a fair wage, and benefits, and the only way to do this is to fund the industry properly," said Gates.

Putting diplomas away in a drawer and working in an entirely different field seems to be the route many workers are taking, said Gates.

“They can go somewhere else, make better money, and not have the same kind of stress,” he said.

Carolyn Triemstra, Niagara College’s dean of community health studies, said the “entry-to-workforce salary is not great” for students who graduate from its two-year early childhood education program.

Especially during the pandemic, their “value of work” may not line up with what they are paid, factoring the important responsibilities that come with the job, she said.

Last week, 100 students graduated from the college’s ECE program. This fall about 120 students are expected to start their first term.

“Enrolment has been relatively stable, even during COVID,” Triemstra said.

She said that some organizations can’t afford to pay incoming staff what they are hoping for.

“Sometimes their hands are tied from a budget perspective.”

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: child care workforce ^[4]

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