

Child-care program will create hundreds of new jobs – but who will staff them? ^[1]

Colleges are already ramping up to welcome more early childhood education students

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EXCERPTS

Tuesday's announcement of the creation of 9,500 new child-care spaces in Nova Scotia over the next five years means the sector will soon need to fill hundreds of new staff positions, too.

That's a challenge for a profession that's already in the midst of a labour shortage.

"I was talking to a principal yesterday who was talking to one of her recent ECE [early childhood education] grads who said, 'I have five job offers,'" said Terrah Keener, the dean for the School of Access, Education and Language at the Nova Scotia Community College. "Many of our students have job offers before they graduate."

Keener said when Nova Scotia rolled out its pre-primary program in 2017, it created a shortage of early childhood educators that is ongoing.

"We can't keep pace yet as to the number of openings that there are," Keener said. "But I see us really ramping up maybe where we're offering it or how many sections we're offering."

The province hasn't said how many staff will be needed to fill the positions. But with the current ratios of staff-to-children being 1 to 4 for infants and 1 to 6 for toddlers, the number will be "substantial," said Derek Mombourquette, the minister of early childhood education.

"I'm very confident that whatever that target number is going to be, that we're going to reach it," he said.

Mombourquette said other measures announced Tuesday, such as giving free tuition and books to 300 ECE students and bursaries to 300 others, will be an incentive for would-be students.

About 5,900 of the new 9,500 child-care spaces will be created between now and 2023, and the remainder will be created after that, once there's a clearer picture of the demand, the province said.

Mombourquette said new spaces could be placed within current child-care centres, schools or existing infrastructure in communities.

Increasing access to training

The Nova Scotia Community College is one of several schools that offers a diploma program for ECEs. It has at least 137 seats each year, and plans to open its doors to 300 students in 2022 who are already working in the child-care sector but want to earn a diploma.

The NSCC is looking at other options to increase the number of trained ECEs it produces over the next few years, including improving virtual learning opportunities, increasing the number of seats in physical classrooms, and offering more classes outside of regular working hours.

"I think all of us are going to be very busy in our programs," Keener said.

Better pay and wages

In addition to the \$605-million agreement between the federal and provincial governments that will create the new child-care spaces and reduce fees for parents, \$10.9 million will be spent on a new workforce strategy for the child-care sector. The strategy promises to develop a framework to improve pay and benefits for ECEs, who currently are paid between \$15 and \$19 an hour and do not have sick time, benefits or pensions.

Those incentives will help attract new workers to the field, said Carrie Melsom, the program services co-ordinator for the Nova Scotia College of Early Childhood Education.

"That's going to look more and more like something that people are interested in," she said.

While colleges are producing newly minted workers in the sector, they're also providing training to people who are already working in child care and who want to improve their skills, knowledge and pay.

Of the 175 students who will graduate from Nova Scotia College of Early Childhood Education this year, more than 100 are already employed in the sector, so those graduates won't boost the overall numbers of staff.

Melsom said the college is already scaling up its operations, and has just opened another 60 seats in an accelerated program to help meet demand.

Luring back workers who left sector

Another potential source of workers could be people who previously left the sector due to the working conditions.

"There are a significant amount of ECEs who are credentialed in Nova Scotia who have had to leave because they cannot afford to work in this field and put a roof over their head and food on their table, let alone have a family," said Catherine Cross, the executive director of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Nova Scotia.

"If the compensation goes up, it's going to open up opportunities for them to come back."

Region: Nova Scotia ^[3]

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