

Alberta lost one in five licensed early childhood educators during 1st year of pandemic, data shows ^[1]

More will be needed if province, Ottawa sign childcare funding deal: expert

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EXCERPTS

For seven years, Kedra Abdurahman was an early childhood educator at a daycare in Fort McMurray.

She was proud of the work she did, rising through the ranks from co-op student to director. But she had to leave that job — and the industry — two weeks ago because she could no longer afford rising child-care costs, after losing the northern living allowance last year.

"It was a very emotional, tough, tough decision," Abdurahman said.

"But I have to make it in order to figure out better financial revenue for me."

Alberta lost roughly 20 per cent of its licensed early childhood educators from March 2020 to March 2021. There are 14,984 licensed educators compared to 18,818 licensed educators the year before, provincial government data shows.

Many have left because of low pay and low enrolment at child-care centres due to the COVID-19 pandemic affecting staffing needs, said Jennifer Usher of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta.

But more educators will be needed if the Alberta and federal governments come to an agreement on child-care funding, that would halve the cost of child-care fees by next year and reduce the cost of child care to \$10 a day by 2026, Usher said.

Experts have previously said that lower daycare costs would mean higher demand for daycare spots, resulting in higher demand for educators.

"The solution to all of this is building a system of early learning and care that really looks specifically at a workforce strategy to recruit, retain and recognize the amazing work that our educators do here," Usher said.

The provincial government recently signed an extension to the Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, which includes \$56 million in 2021-22 for the recruitment, retention, and training of an early childhood workforce.

Federal agreements

Six provinces and one territory have signed agreements with the federal government on child care, and Saskatchewan is expected to soon join the list.

Most of the agreements include a wage scale that would increase the pay for certified educators who work in government-funded, licensed child-care facilities, based on their education and training.

A wage scale with higher wages would be welcomed in Alberta, said current and former educators who spoke to CBC News.

The average hourly wage is \$20.20 and the average salary is \$34,691, according to 2020 provincial data.

In Alberta, there are three certification levels based on education for early childhood educators working in licensed daycare centres, out-of-school care programs and family day home agencies, according to the Alberta Children's Services ministry's 2020-2021 annual report.

Losing certified workers is a huge loss to the child-care industry, said Janet Huffman, an educator and member of the Fort McMurray Early Years Coalition.

"When we are losing our educators that have that [Level 3 certification] with a diploma because they can no longer maintain in the field, we lose that level of quality within some of our centres," Huffman said.

"Having a strong workforce means you have quality child care."

Ongoing negotiations

Alberta is still looking for some flexibility in their agreement with the federal government, Children's Services Minister Rebecca Schulz said Tuesday on Alberta at Noon.

"At a time when we know this federal election is coming, I don't want Alberta parents to be left behind," Schulz said. "I want those dollars here. I want them invested in child care because I know that it's going to matter for our economic recovery."

The province provided its action plan late Thursday and it is under review, according to a federal government spokesperson.

Abdurahman hopes for an agreement so educators can receive a living wage.

"It hurts to know that people that work with children who are going to be your future citizens get paid the least," she said.

"Why can't we pay the staff the money they deserve?"

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