

Some early childhood educators left out of wage increase^[1]

Child care providers say the increase's structure may limit its reach, prompting concerns about the creation of a forthcoming wage grid.

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Source: Saskatoon Star Phoenix

Format: Article

Publication Date: 29 Nov 2021

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPTS

After 20 years of working as an early childhood educator, Collene Douglas still loves what she does.

Douglas, 60, has spent a large portion of her life working with children, starting in her home country of South Africa. It's been time well spent, she said. "It gives me purpose."

Douglas has worked at Preston Early Learning Centre in Saskatoon for eight years.

"I feel very passionately about working with children. I've been working with them before I came to Canada since 1983. And I just feel that it's a worthwhile career," she said.

Douglas has seen a steady stream of children come and go over the years. She's also noticed a lot of staff turnover. In an industry facing a labour shortage that's only been exacerbated by the pandemic, a new one-time wage increase could make a difference in recruiting certified staff.

However, child care providers say the way the increase is structured may limit its reach, prompting concerns about the process behind the creation of a province-wide wage grid.

"We need to make sure that we get that part of it right as well, so that we can have sustainable wages for employees so that they want to remain in the sector," Preston executive director Lisa Leibel said.

"And we can't build a system without them."

Under a 2017 agreement, the federal government is giving Saskatchewan a one-time investment of more than \$17 million in 2021-22 to support the early childhood workforce; \$9.6 million of that is to cover a wage increase of up to \$3 per hour for qualified ECEs.

Child care centres will be able to access the funds by December.

The government says the increase will provide a "baseline" for work on developing a forthcoming provincial wage grid under the \$1.1-billion federal-provincial child care agreement signed in August.

The grid is expected to be created by the end of 2022-23. It will be used to guide increasing compensation and is projected to benefit 1,800 ECEs.

In a statement, the Ministry of Education said the current increase is focused on enhancing compensation for ECEs who make the lowest wages.

The dollar amount for each employee will correspond with their certification level; levels 1, 2 and 3 will receive an increase of \$1, \$2 or \$3, respectively.

The ministry says the increase is capped at \$1, \$2 and \$3 above the average provincial wage for each certification level and position type.

In response to a question about how many ECEs in the province will be affected, the ministry said "initial projections indicated that nearly 80 per cent of certified staff" would see an increase. The remaining 20 per cent are already receiving a wage "above the threshold for their position and certification level," the statement said.

The issue is with how that threshold was calculated, Leibel said.

The ministry says an average was determined by looking at centres across urban and rural areas of the province, as "certified ECEs have the same responsibilities of caring for and educating young children regardless of where they live."

Centres in rural areas typically see lower wages, making the increase less applicable in urban areas, Leibel said.

It's a "really great announcement" for rural areas and for recruitment in urban areas, but retention is one area where the industry falls

short, she noted.

“A lot of (my staff) will not see any monies from that grant because we already pay more wages than what the provincial cap allows. So any of my staff, basically, after two years of service with our organization, will not receive any monies.”

Douglas said while she loves her work, fulfilment can only go so far.

“Our bosses have tried very hard to give us a fairly decent wage. Sure, it’s still not what I feel we should be getting, but I can make ends meet as long as I’m pretty careful,” she said.

For the time being, it means more waiting for an increase that’s been needed for a while.

“I feel very passionately about my job. There’s a reason I’ve stayed in it and it isn’t only for the money, but at the end of the day, I do have to buy groceries, I do have to live,” Douglas said. “And I really feel if they value us properly, show it.”

Region: Saskatchewan [3]

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