

"It's extremely stressful:" Union for early childhood educators says COVID-19 public health measures endanger workers and children ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The union representing more than 200 early childhood educators in Nova Scotia says the provincial government is failing workers and children in child care centres.

In a media release issued after Wednesday afternoon's provincial COVID-19 briefing, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) representatives said Nova Scotia's public health measures endanger children and early childhood educators (ECEs).

Margot Nickerson, an ECE and president of CUPE Local 4745, said the union sent a letter to education minister Becky Druhan on Tuesday asking for N95 respirators and rapid test kits for staff and children and calling for reduced class sizes.

"Early childhood educators are essential front-line workers who provide very close contact learning and care for children who are still waiting to be vaccinated. It is known that COVID-19 spreads more rapidly among unvaccinated populations," Nickerson wrote to the minister.

In an interview Wednesday evening, Nickerson said the decision by the province to delay opening public schools until January 17 to address issues like ventilation systems, ensuring proper three-ply masks and testing and testing kits left ECEs feeling abandoned.

"We've been feeling like this for a long time, but it feels like a slap in the face again once more. We're working with the population of children from infants to four and a half year olds, and they're not able to be vaccinated," Nickerson said.

"Also, because they're in child care settings, they're not really socially distancing from one another or are really able to distance so we're just feeling that again, there's been no thought given to what should be done to keep the people who work in the centres and the children and the families safe."

'It's extremely stressful'

In addition to the inability to remain socially distanced and the fact children under the age of two are unable to wear masks, Nickerson said many child care centre classrooms are poorly ventilated, if they're ventilated at all.

"It's extremely stressful. We've got directors telling ECEs not to eat lunch around anybody else because you're afraid to take your mask off," Nickerson said.

Following Wednesday's announcement about HEPA filtration systems being provided for 71 public schools in dire need, Nickerson wonders if child care centres in similar need could receive them.

The union also wants to see public reporting of COVID cases in child care centres. Nickerson said while cases do happen and ECEs realize it's inevitable, they want to "limit and slow down" transmission via enhanced measures.

"There were many cases (in child care centres) as we got into this third wave and the fourth wave," Nickerson said.

"We became aware of many cases happening, and they're happening now, but people just don't know about it and it's really a worry."

The union is also demanding an immediate reduction in classroom capacity.

"We understand updated guidance is forthcoming and we are asking that capacity in child care centres be immediately reduced to no more than 50% and that it be applied to each 'classroom,' not each 'centre'. They must stop enforcing that rule only by 'centre'," Nickerson said in the release.

"While one classroom may have five children, another may have 20 children, and the need for reduced capacity is not actually being met."

'Tired of having to fight this fight'

Nickerson said ECEs are feeling “lost in the shuffle” and many would welcome official recognition that their concerns are valid. She said ultimately, the same concerns and guidelines in place for public schools should be extended to child care centres.

"We know that we need child care. We know that we're essential workers most of us. But we just want it to be done properly, carefully, and with the right measures put in place," Nickerson said.

"We're just tired of having to fight this fight. Every time something happens we're not considered in the mix, right? I suppose that's how some other frontline workers feel as well. But they're not all working face to face, hands on, with unvaccinated people."

Following a request from the Halifax Examiner to respond to the concerns of ECEs as outlined by CUPE, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development said keeping children and ECEs safe is a “top priority.”

In an emailed statement, spokesperson Jenna MacQueen said the department has continued to support child care centres in various ways throughout the pandemic.

"Centres and family home child care agencies continue to have the ability to order masks, hand sanitizer and gloves from the provincial government supply free of charge," MacQueen wrote.

MacQueen said N95 masks have a specific purpose, and the department follows public health guidance on the types of masks used for various situations and circumstances.

“The guidance at this time is to use medical or cloth 3-ply masks for non-medical situations,” MacQueen wrote, adding that child care centres and family home child care agencies have had access to 3-ply masks since September 2021 “and continue to have the ability to access 3-ply masks for their centre if needed.”

MacQueen added that given the current epidemiology in the province, testing resources must be used carefully. She provided this link offering more information about the shift in the province's testing strategy.

“At this time, rapid tests are primarily for people who have symptoms or are identified as close contacts,” MacQueen wrote.

“Anyone who is sick or who is a close contact of a known case should follow public health guidance that is available online. Public Health is not recommending closing child care centres.”

Region: Nova Scotia [3]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/01/%E2%80%9CIt%E2%80%99s-extremely-stressful%E2%80%9D-union-early-childhood-educators-says> [2] <https://www.halifaxexaminer.ca/featured/its-extremely-stressful-union-for-early-childhood-educators-says-covid-19-public-health-measures-endanger-workers-and-children/> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7853> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/workforce> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/health-and-safety> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/advocacy>