

Nova Scotia's private daycares facing tough decisions ^[1]

Province has told for-profit owners they have option of changing business model

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EXCERPTS

Private child-care centres face big decisions ahead of the Nova Scotia government's transition to a publicly funded, centralized system.

The province is giving those centres the option of changing their business models to charge lower fees and offer staff wages and benefits in line with the government's new framework.

The move follows an affordable child-care agreement between the province and Ottawa that was signed last year.

"It was quite shocking – overload, for sure," said Helen Gamble, who owns and operates Health Park Early Learning Centre in Sydney, N.S.

"There is a lot to go through and a lot to process. A lot of the information is not present, like, we don't know what this is going to look like. All we know is what our options might be. But what the funding part of it looks like, we don't know."

Last week, the Education Department provided centres with a brief overview of what their options will look like. Among the choices is maintaining the status quo, becoming an approved service provider, or operating as a non-profit.

One-time payment

Centres entering the new framework would fall under the management of a new central organization the Education Department is creating to oversee the daycare system. The facilities making the switch would also receive a one-time lump sum transition payment.

Any centre that opts out will lose provincial funding and will not be eligible to offer a child-care subsidy program to families. A decision must be made by March 18.

The province is providing centres considering a change with a grant of \$15,000 to be used for professional advisory services.

Gamble said she's grown her business through "blood, sweat and tears" and it now has a long wait-list of children. She's worried the quality of care will decline under a government-run model.

"I'm invested wholeheartedly and financially," said Gamble. "It took me 20 years to build up the centre and save for it and get it going. How can I make a decision, an informed decision in two months?"

Gamble said she's concerned parents will no longer have a choice of where to send their kids, and that the province will simply assign an open daycare space to the next child who needs one.

During a virtual press conference last week, Nova Scotia Education Minister Becky Druhan said parents will have options.

"That's a key element of accessibility," Druhan said. "People have different priorities for how they want to see offerings in child care and the availability of all these new spaces, and the diversity of the providers and the offerings will really add choice to the menu."

Concerns about new system

Lesley Corbett owns and operates the Tallahassee Early Learning Centre in Eastern Passage, N.S. She's worried what may happen under a new system.

Corbett said that she could add more children to her daycare right now under provincial regulations, but she said their quality of care would be impacted.

Last week, the province announced 1,500 new not-for-profit child-care spaces will be available beginning this fall as part of the promised 9,500 new spaces to come through the five-year federal-provincial agreement.

"I think the children are going to suffer and I think we're going to end up seeing staff being burned out," Corbett said.

Calls to extend deadline

Corbett said little explanation was given as to how her salary might be paid. She later ran the province's information package by a lawyer who told her it was too vague for a decision to be made.

"Just be honest with us, be transparent and tell us this is what's happening," said Corbett. "And you know what? I'm a very positive person. I will look at it and say, 'OK, then I can work with this.' But let us know what it is."

Both Corbett and Gamble, along with Hammonds Plains-Lucasville MLA Ben Jessome, are calling on the province to extend the March deadline for private child-care operators to decide what option they will make.

Region: Nova Scotia ^[3]

Tags: for-profit ^[4]

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