

Ontario advocates continue to raise the alarm on workforce shortage and lack of decent work ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) and the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (AECEO) hosted a second emergency Roundtable on January 12th, 2022 to discuss the critical shortage of early childhood educators (ECEs) in the province. The meeting followed up on a similar December roundtable.

Carolyn Ferns, OCBCC's Public Policy and Government Relations Coordinator, explained at the start that "much has changed since our last conversation [because] we have gone into a whole new level of crisis and challenge driven by the fifth wave of the pandemic."

Almost 300 people took part in the session to express their frustration with changed provincial regulations for operators, lack of communication from the Ministry of Education, and lack of support for programs to stay open and safe for families.

"The last 22 months have shown us that this government continues to view our sector as an afterthought," said Amy O'Neil, Executive Director of Treetop Children's Centre. "We are disrespected, devalued, and ignored."

ECEs and operators reported that it is impossible to find substitute staff because those on call-lists are employed elsewhere or sick with COVID. Operators have been forced to close child care rooms, mix age-groups and/or require staff to work longer shifts to keep centres open. Face masks are being reused due to short supply, and providers do not have access to COVID tests. Centres are attempting, often unsuccessfully, to purchase their own N95 masks and ventilation systems because the government has failed to deliver.

"We need to stop being creative to solve the government's messes and instead make government officials and policy makers accountable for the decisions that they make," said O'Neil. "We must continue our collective advocacy, because without it, change will not happen."

Roundtable participants agreed that enough is enough and identified what the sector needs from the Ministry of Education:

- Clear and coordinated communication by all levels of government
- Pandemic pay and sick days for workers
- Access to N95 masks and testing
- Priority vaccination
- A federal-provincial child care funding agreement that provides for an ECE wage grid

Just prior to the start of the Roundtable, Ontario Minister of Education Stephen Lecce announced that child care workers will get two rapid tests each. However, Roundtable participants said this was insufficient.

"Minister Lecce's announcement today was like 'school, school, school' and 'oh, child care,'" said Tracy Saarikoski, a child care centre director. "We are an afterthought to the education system. Before the December holidays, school boards got rapid tests to hand out to families. We stayed open and didn't have anything."

"I feel like crying every time I think about this, it's just a collective sadness at the lack of respect and understanding of what we do from Minister Lecce," said Gaby Chauvet, the executive director of a home child care agency.

Christa O'Connor, also a child care director, echoed these feelings. "It's disparaging that the Ontario government hasn't signed onto the provincial-federal child care agreement yet. What does that say to the sector as a whole?" she asked.

It was clear that Ontario child care centres and ECEs are at the brink of collapse.

"We are small agencies. We don't have the resources at our fingertips that school boards do. So, when the ministry is emailing us hours before a statutory holiday or weekend and expects us to put a plan together to open on Monday with new regulations, it's disrespectful," says Kathy Da Silva, a child care director.

AECEO and OCBCC both vowed to take participant's collective concerns forward and continue to advocate for urgently needed change in the sector.

Alana Powell, AECEO's Executive Director, ended the meeting by thanking participants for their time, expertise, and willingness to share, and added, "your experiences on the ground in your programs really shows us how policy and funding decisions are lived. We will follow up with advocacy actions. We are stronger together."

Region: Ontario ^[3]

Tags: child care workforce ^[4]

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