

Private child-care operators seeking clarity about future role in N.S. system ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The province's 200 private for-profit child-care centres still face more questions than answers about their future in the child-care sector.

"We're at a standstill," said Lisa Beddow, who has been operating child-care centres for 17 years and is owner of six for-profit Friends for Life child-care centres located in Halifax Regional Municipality, Enfield and Truro.

"The damage has already been done for private operators," said Beddow, who employs 80-plus early-childhood educators to work with 420 children.

"This has caused so much stress on the sector, between the owners and the staff. There are job security issues, people wondering if their business is worth anything. There are many concerns that they (government) have to own."

Education Minister Becky Druhan weighed in on owning those concerns while talking with reporters after Thursday's cabinet meeting.

"This is a huge and exciting and historic evolution of child care in Nova Scotia and we're moving quickly but this is going to be a five-year process," Druhan said. "As we move toward inclusive, accessible, affordable, quality child care, we want to engage with everybody, so we took a pause to discuss and to consult with our private operators but part of this process now and going forward is making sure that we talk with everybody who is involved in this and who has a perspective."

Everybody includes private operators, not-for-profit operators, families and the early educators who provide the care in both private and government operated facilities, she said.

"We've been engaging over the past couple of weeks and that process will continue," the minister said.

The historic evolution that Druhan referenced is the \$605-million funding agreement reached between the provincial and federal governments in July 2021, a five-year plan that promised to reduce by 50 per cent the cost of child care by the end of this year and to bring it down to an average of \$10 a day by 2026.

The plan would also add at least 9,500 new early learning and child care spaces by March 2025.

To get there, the province early this year provided three options for for-profit child-care operators that would include remaining a private business under strict government funding guidelines, to become a non-profit, government-run operation or to go it alone outside the system without any government funding.

The government had initially given the private operators, who account for the majority of the 344 licensed child-care centres and family home child-care agencies in the province and provide 57 per cent of the 17,000 total child-care spaces available across the province, until March 18 to choose an option.

The private operators said they were being squeezed out of business, that there was not enough information provided about the options presented and that the deadline was unreasonable.

On Jan. 20, the government relented.

"We recognize there is anxiety around the transformation that is happening in child care," Druhan said in an email at that time.

"That's why we are extending the March 18 deadline so that we can better consult with them about the opportunities and benefits of the new system."

Druhan and the private operators met by Zoom 10 days ago, a meeting that Beddow said generated some optimism among the private operators but offered little in the way of clarity.

"We were able to update the minister about our top concerns at the time, which are inflation and wages. Those are two key components

that are really hitting the sector hard right now.”

Beddow said the private operators wanted assurance that they would be included in the Canada-wide plan.

“She heard us out, it went OK,” Beddow said of what she called a one-sided conversation.

Beddow said the operators were promised a second meeting with the minister last week but instead she received an email Friday from Druhan’s office stating that “she heard our concerns and she does want to have a collaborative approach with the private operators.”

Beddow said they’ve been told a new funding arrangement for operators would be coming out this week.

Beddow also said they were told a new executive director of early childhood development and pre-primary, Tracy Crowell, has been appointed for the province’s education department.

Janet Lynn Huntington, executive director at the time of the initial rollout of the three-option plan for private operators said in January that “the days of patch-work agreements and funding here and funding there are over.”

Huntington said for-profit operators are being offered the opportunity to be part of a Canada-wide system “to access government funding to reduce fees for parents and to support wages for early childhood educators and to increase access for children with inclusive needs.”

Beddow said the department has told the private operators that “there was a real miscommunication in the way this rolled out, it was not in good taste.”

“We do believe that we have a place but it depends economically on what that looks like,” Beddow said. “We’re just waiting to see the actual figures behind the agreement and the actual agreement in writing to state that we are part of the plan.”

Asked if the options available to private operators had changed and to explain the remaining options, Druhan said “the dialogue is really about perspectives around child care, needs of the individual operators and what the system looks like in the future.”

She said there are a variety of different options available within the agreement in a variety of different structures.

“Three that were presented but within each of those three, there are a variety of paths that can be taken,” Druhan said.

Beddow said she has not been made aware of the variety of paths, just the options originally presented.

“We’re at a standstill,” Beddow said. “We’re not happy about that but we’re going to be patient for the next few days until this funding agreement comes out and, hopefully, she (Druhan) acted quickly to address some of these key issues.”

Region: Nova Scotia ^[3]

Tags: for-profit ^[4]

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