

# Lack of early childhood educators driving factor in Prince George childcare crisis <sup>[1]</sup>

'It's probably kind of the brightest time ever to come into Early Childhood Education'

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**Source:** Prince George Citizen

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 11 Feb 2022

## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Childcare is currently so limited in B.C. that expecting couples in Prince George are often advised to get on waitlists before they even give birth to their child.

Local mother Karen Muir experienced these challenges firsthand when her youngest daughter was six-months-old and she needed to return to work.

Muir said she went through everything from being waitlisted, to having to hire a private nanny, then finding group care but having that centre close on short notice. Eventually, Muir lucked out and found a spot for her two children at a centre in College Heights.

"I laugh at a little bit because I'm looking at moving to College Heights and I've put my daughter in school in College Heights all because that's where I have daycare. I'm planning my life around daycare because that's what people do when daycare is so, so short supplied."

Muir, who is an accountant, says having access to childcare is essential to keeping her in the workforce.

"I'm a single parent. I have my kids full time," said Muir. "I have to work and there is so much benefit to me working – it makes no sense for me to not work but I also can't really work without childcare."

Muir says there's not enough social infrastructure to support parents, primarily women in the workforce and that even though she's found a spot for her children daycare is still a constant concern.

"That stress is always there in the back of my mind 'what if something happens to daycare'," said Muir.

## A long way to go to fill the gap

Although the provincial government is moving towards implementing a \$10 per day childcare system by 2026 and opening new childcare spaces across the province to address this crisis, there's currently a lack of Early Child Care Educators (ECEs) across the country to fill these new positions.

"I would say that the lack of Early Childhood Educators is a national problem," said Lynette Mikalishen, director of childcare services at the YMCA of Northern B.C.

The YMCA recently opened the Park House Child Care and Early Learning Centre in downtown Prince George with over 80 new spaces for kids of all ages, but those spots are currently being filled by the waitlist, and only gradually, depending on staffing capacity.

Mikalishen says the lack of ECEs puts pressure on the whole entire system as childcare centres are already juggling the number of trained and qualified people they need to run programs every day, making it even more difficult open new programs.

Although the province has committed to a rapid expansion of spaces, there's not enough qualified ECEs in the field to meet the demand which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mikalishen says there are a lot of contributing factors to the lack of ECEs but a common thread is lower wages in a challenging field.

As part of the province's early care learning and recruitment and retention strategy, the province did announce that front line ECEs working in licensed childcare facilities will receive a \$4 per hour wage enhancement by March 2022.

"There's things happening, but there's a long way to go in filling that gap. We were short prior to COVID across the province and honestly, it's not gotten easier."

Mikalishen says that the pandemic has shone a light on how essential quality childcare is across all ages and investing in a quality workforce.

## An exciting time to enter the field

"It is really difficult for parents to find childcare in Prince George, particularly if you are looking for infant or toddler care," said Cheryl Emerson an ECE instructor at the College of New Caledonia (CNC).

While some childcare centres keep a waitlist and others do not, it is still typically a two-year wait for someone to get an infant and toddler space in the city, and this is partly because of a lack of qualified staff needed for infant and toddler ratios.

"People may be coming into the field don't realize that they can earn a living wage now and so it's taking a while for people to understand that it's a real viable job opportunity," said Emerson, noting that low remuneration traditionally made it difficult to both keep and draw people into the field but it's starting to catch up.

"I think that there can be some more equity in terms of wages and wage scales which in the province is currently working and I think that there needs to be that societal shift around the value of providing quality accessible affordable childcare," said Christine Jackson, another ECE instructor at CNC.

"It is a win for everybody regardless of whether you have children or not."

Emerson said that the federal and provincial governments have made a shift in the past number of years to support the ECE field and that people are now able to make a living wage in a dynamic career with a lot of opportunities for movement and change.

"It's probably kind of the brightest time ever to come into early childhood education," said Emerson, adding that she has a positive outlook regarding the future of the province's childcare system.

"Many young parents need to be in the workforce and working people in our economic system with children can only work if they have childcare, right? It seems like people in power really understand that now more than ever before."

Since July 2018, almost 26,000 new licensed child care spaces have been funded in British Columbia, including 566 in Prince George.

**Region:** British Columbia <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** child care workforce <sup>[4]</sup>

\$10aDay <sup>[5]</sup>

public investment <sup>[6]</sup>

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