

# Efforts underway to boost P.E.I.'s early childhood education workforce <sup>[1]</sup>

New programs aim to make career field more accessible, provide backfill for workers who want to upgrade their skills

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## EXCERPTS

CHARLOTTETOWN, P.E.I. — Luandra Gallant began working in the early childhood education field in May of 2015.

She had never intended to enter the field, but after finishing her undergraduate studies, she needed a job and took a position at a Charlottetown childcare centre.

“At the time, I was honestly just looking for summer employment,” she said in a phone interview with SaltWire Network on Feb. 22.

Her summer placement quickly became something she enjoyed, leading her to pursue a long-term career as an early childhood educator and attend Holland College to complete her level 1 certification.

However, Gallant would eventually make the choice made by many other ECEs in P.E.I. In August 2021, Gallant finished her final day as an ECE in favour of returning to school to follow a different career path.

Gallant said her choice to leave was mostly due to new interests in a different career, but barriers around upgrading certifications and wages also played a big role.

“I would have been more eager to stay if wages were increased,” she said. “I was struggling a bit financially, and because I had interest in another career path, that kind of just confirmed my decision for me.”

Gallant, who had completed her level 1 ECE certification and started her level 2, was paid \$17.50 an hour.

Losing workers to other careers that potentially offer better wages isn't new to the Island's ECE field.

Jennifer Nangreaves, executive director of the Early Childhood Development Association of P.E.I., said non-competitive wages have led workers to positions in the public school system or even unrelated jobs that offered more pay in the past.

“I know some who left to go clean at the hospital because it was more money,” she said.

However, she said the province and its early childhood education stakeholders are taking a stab at fixing Prince Edward Island's retention issues by offering new ways for people to either enter the ECE field or upgrade their credentials easier.

In partnership with the Department of Education and Lifelong Learning, Skills P.E.I. and Holland College, the EDCA is offering the Steps to Success program, which provides those interested in entering the ECE field with six months of on-the-job training, courses and funding to complete their level 1 certification.

### Increasing affordability, experience

Nangreaves said the program is aimed at people who have wanted to get into the field but weren't able to for various reasons.

“We were finding that there are people out there who've always wanted to try this out, but maybe they couldn't afford the two-year program,” she said.

The first round of the program was held from March to July 2021 and saw 12 people go through the course. This year, the program started in January with 37 people attending.

“We have always struggled with retention and recruitment, but this seems to be a really supportive way for the people who are interested,” said Nangreaves. “Once they see success, they might go for their level 2 or 3 and stay. We've heard from participants and directors that it's been a really wonderful project.”

Nangreaves said they are hoping the program will help bring more ECEs into the workforce, which will help fill some of the vacant positions in centres across the Island.

However, this year's program is running a bit differently than last year's. This year's students will be backfilling for current ECE workers taking advantage of another new program aimed at upgrading their existing certifications.

Through the same partnerships as the Steps to Success program, Holland College is now offering the new accelerated early childhood education program, giving current ECE workers a secure and fast way to reach their level two or three certifications.

The program is split into two cohorts – a 16-week course allowing level one ECEs to reach level two and a 21-week course that will allow level two ECEs to reach level three.

### 'A big trial run'

"This is a big trial run," said Liam Corcoran, program manager of the Early Childhood Care and Education program at Holland College. "We will offer it this first time and then we will go back to our partners to see if there is enough demand out there to make a run of it in the future."

The program, which launched on Feb. 7, removes the barriers that often prevented those interested in reaching a higher level in the ECE career from upgrading, said Corcoran.

"Without an offering like this, it's very challenging for someone who is already working to be able to go back to school," he said. "With the accelerated program, you have people actually leaving their place of work for the time they are studying. They are with us 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. That's why they are able to complete the training in such a short time because they are studying full-time."

He said thanks to the backfilling done by those in the Steps to Success program, allowing employees to leave for upgrading is possible.

Outside of the two new programs, the province is offering a one-time grant of \$5,000 for level 3 ECEs who may have left the field but are interested in returning.

### About the grant

The Return to ECE Profession Grant is open to applications until March 7. More information on qualifications can be found here.

Nangreaves said the grant is just another way to recognize the importance of ECE workers.

"We had already seen a huge wage increase of \$4 for level 3, so that's kind of where that return to service grant is coming from," she said. "We've finally got ECEs recognized for the work they do, so come back and join the profession."

While the grant and accelerated programs might be enough to bring some workers back to the field, for Gallant, it's too late.

"I did enjoy it and I was very comfortable in that field," she said. "Those are really awesome incentives, but I don't think it would be enough for me to go back though."

**Region:** Prince Edward Island [3]

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