

Wage and benefit increases coming for regulated child-care workers in Manitoba ^[1]

\$98M in funding will benefit more families, childhood educators, province says

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EXCERPTS

Increased pay and benefits are coming for child-care workers in Manitoba after the federal and provincial governments announced they have extended a funding agreement.

The Canada-Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, originally signed in February 2018, has now been extended to March 31, 2025, with a \$98-million boost, according to a Tuesday news release from the province.

That includes nearly \$19.2 million this year for recruitment and retention of staff in regulated child care. The province's news release says up to \$12.6 million of that will be used by the end of March 2022 to:

- Increase wages for eligible current staff and support the lowest-paid workers until a new wage grid is implemented (according to the document outlining the federal-provincial agreement, that grid is still under development).
- A two per cent top-up of the percentage offered by Manitoba to the pension plan for child-care centres, and the RRSP program for home child-care providers.
- Offer early childhood educators who've worked for at least two years a one-time investment into a tax-free savings account. They will receive a minimum of \$450 to a maximum of \$1,400, depending on their years of service.

"Today's announcement is welcomed and long awaited. Early childhood educators and providers are at the heart of a high quality, regulated child care system. They need to be fairly compensated," said Jodie Kehl, executive director of the Manitoba Childcare Association.

"We have a sector that is overburdened and exhausted. Today's announcement — I really am optimistic — is that glimmer of hope to signal to our sector that there's more and there's better to come."

Pandemic underscores need for child care: Kehl

The challenge of recruitment and retention has been amplified, particularly over the past two years of the pandemic, Kehl says, noting about 30 per cent of facilities in the province are running on provisional licences because they've been unable to attract and retain enough qualified and educated early childhood educators.

"I think that one of the greatest learning lessons through the pandemic is how critical and how essential early learning and child care is," she said. "Folks that work in health care can't go to work without child care. Someone that works at a grocery store can't go to work without childcare."

"Without early learning and child care ... our economy is going to falter."

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- Jodie Kehl, executive director, Manitoba Childcare Association

The wage increase announced Tuesday is supposed to tide over the lowest-paid workers until the government develops a wage scale in the upcoming fiscal year, a government official says.

For instance, an early childhood educator with the ECE II designation that currently earns minimum wage will start making around \$15.50.

"We know that there is a gap," Wayne Ewasko, education and early childhood learning minister, said on Tuesday.

"That's where the \$19.2 million is going to go to, to try and bring some of those individuals up in their wages, whether it's an ECE or a child-care assistant."

There is currently no wage scale specific for child-care workers in Manitoba.

Cash for renovating

In the coming months, the province will also create a renovation grant to provide funding for non-profit facilities to expand their existing spaces.

Another \$15.5 million from the new \$98-million funding boost will go toward ongoing initiatives created under previous agreements, the province stated in its news release.

That includes operating grant funding for more than 1,800 child-care spaces, increased funding for francophone and Indigenous programming, expanded supports for children with additional needs, and support for rural and northern communities to build capacity.

Other funds will be used to attract qualified workers by providing tuition reimbursements to early childhood educators already enrolled in, or recent graduates from, a training program.

The government will provide a maximum of \$4,000 per student per year for the current 2021-22 academic year and the following year.

The province says it intends to help subsidize costs to make it easier for people to access the 40-hour course to become certified as a child-care assistant, and will directly fund training programs focused on underserved communities to help remove barriers of entry for early-childhood education programs.

Training praised

Kehl lauded the training and tuition funding as a way "to provide high quality, inclusive and culturally supportive childcare" in Manitoba.

In August, the province signed on to a separate federal plan — the Canada–Manitoba Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement — to provide daycare at an average cost of \$10 a day in regulated child-care spaces by March 2023.

Under the plan, the federal government promises to spend \$1.2 billion to fund early learning and child care in Manitoba over the next five years.

To that aim, the two governments also announced Tuesday that \$75 million will immediately provide facilities with a six-month subsidy advance and three-month parent fee coverage.

The funding will support "the growing number of families that are now eligible to receive financial assistance for child-care subsidies" and "and reduce the administrative burden on facilities," the province's news release said.

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