

# Child care workers deserved better than this <sup>[1]</sup>

During the pandemic the sector slipped through the cracks. Here's why, and four needed steps.

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Almost a year ago, I retired from my job as a daycare worker and began writing on the pitfalls of the child-care industry in Canada.

Canada's lack of consistency and support for the child-care industry and those who staff it is nothing new.

The COVID-19 pandemic has helped shed light on the necessity of the child-care system. In the height of the widespread closures that defined the early months of the pandemic, child-care centres remained open to provide care for children of essential service workers. Provincial health officer Dr. Bonnie Henry named child care an essential service in 2020. Yet policymakers and leaders have consistently let child care and child-care workers slip through the cracks, and those actions make it seem like child care isn't a priority.

It's now 2022. Across Canada, provincial governments have started lifting the public health orders that have become a feature of life for the last two years.

Looking back on the years as they've played out since March 2020, I'm reflecting on what we've learned and what we can continue to learn from Canada's treatment of the daycare industry throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 1. Child-care facilities need clear communication and consistency from policymakers.

Thousands of people are part of child-care support groups and early childhood educator groups on Facebook. In recent months, group pages have been riddled with questions that illustrate widespread, lingering confusion about what child-care providers are supposed to do about pandemic regulations.

"Can you clarify this for me?" they ask.

"Does anyone have a link to the government COVID-19 regulations? I can't find them," one person writes.

From another child-care provider: "A parent asked me this, I don't know if I'm comfortable with this but also I don't know if they match regulations."

Recent changes to government policies around isolation rules for children in care were publicized but weren't changed on the BC Centre for Disease Control website, making the work of child-care providers even more difficult as communication with parents became strained.

People working in the child-care sector have criticized the lack of consistency in government regulations and the ways in which child-care workers have felt abandoned in the pandemic.

After the Omicron variant swept through the December holiday season and children returned to daycare as their parents went back to work after the winter break, the Early Childhood Educators of BC wrote to Dr. Bonnie Henry on Jan. 11 calling on the need for PPE, prioritization and consultation during changes to K-12 and daycare based changes of COVID-19 protocols.

Dr. Henry and government staff conducted a virtual town hall meeting on Jan. 26 to try and ease child-care providers' discomforts and concerns.

But did it help? In short, no. Current messages in the Facebook support pages suggest that daycare providers are still not sure how or where to access information, or they're not entirely comfortable with the regulations, which leaves uncertainty on how to proceed.

Though there is sympathy and understanding for parents in difficult situations and in need of child care. There is a fine balance of prioritizing parental needs and protecting educators. And often, the protection of daycare staff is left behind.

In early 2021, I was still working in child care and a parent brought in a child who was exhausted. The parent dropped off the child as quickly as possible. We didn't have a chance to check his temperature until after she had left. But he had a fever. When we phoned her, the parent commented she noticed something was wrong and that he'd felt warm but still brought him to daycare because she needed to work.

Unfortunately, moments like this are not unusual in the child-care industry. Situations in which parents are focusing on their own needs before their child's or the safety of educators are common.

The lack of prioritization, coupled with educators' lack of understanding or support, suggests to me that the government is doing a poor job of communicating. And that's a problem.

## **2. We need a national child-care system. And this is nothing new.**

Currently there is no consistency between daycares, preschools and all child-care facilities. Unlike the K-12 school system that has a set list of regulations and a certain amount of government support, the child-care system is simply non-existent.

The lack of government communication and prioritization of early learning facilities during the pandemic have helped spotlight the need for consistency within Canada's child-care sector. The federal government has committed to creating a national daycare system, but this comes after years of fighting for change.

In B.C., child care has officially been moved to the Ministry of Education. This is a step in the right direction — and an acknowledgement of how child care is an integral part of the education process.

At the same time, daycare supports have consistently lagged behind while the K-12 school system has been continually prioritized throughout the pandemic. While K-12 schools postponed their opening in January to address Omicron's spread, for example, daycares were allowed to remain open at full capacity.

In recent months, the K-12 education system has received funding for proper ventilation systems, been offered expedited vaccine processes for teachers, and has been promised rapid antigen tests and KN95 masks. Though the school system has its flaws and though these promises do not guarantee follow through, the child-care field has felt the lack of support.

Recently, the government announced that they would be sending rapid antigen tests to child-care facilities who need them. But this only comes after advocacy and protest by child-care professionals.

## **3. We need to prioritize the safety of early childhood educators. And we shouldn't have to fight so hard for it.**

Unlike school-aged children, daycare- and preschool-aged children are unable to be vaccinated. And children under five are exempt from wearing a mask.

Recent regulations stipulate that daycare and preschool students can return to care even after exposure to someone with COVID-19, a rule that doesn't sit well with all child-care professionals.

The virtual town hall on Jan. 26 was riddled with contradictions. Dr. Henry noted the importance of everyone staying home when sick.

In the same town hall, Dr. Réka Gustafson of the BCCDC said if a COVID-19 positive parent picks up a child from child care they must wear a mask, and should request to pick up and drop off children outside. This was in response to a question about whether a parent can pick up and drop off their child at a child-care facility when they are COVID-19 positive. Her answer was, "We would ask that they aren't the ones to pick up their child. But we recognize life is not perfect."

Even while protected, this practice of child-care dropoffs contradicts with the mandatory five-day isolation period for those testing positive — and this protection method is questionable at best.

## **4. We need to improve on staffing the child-care industry — but that begins by providing proper support for child-care workers.**

Yes, Canada has committed to both creating a national child-care system and raising child-care workers' pay. And B.C. is actively adding bursaries and educational opportunities for early childhood education students. But is it enough?

According to a survey by ECEBC, 33 per cent of evaluated child-care professionals left the industry due to dissatisfaction in pay. Another 12 per cent left because they were dissatisfied with lack of career advancement opportunities. The same number, 12 per cent, left due to COVID-19 health-related issues.

And almost one in four child-care workers — 22 per cent of survey respondents — left because they were unsatisfied with the working conditions.

The child-care sector was not immune to the "Great Resignation" that, for some, has defined pandemic working life.

Forty-four per cent of employers reported having a staff net loss in 2020, marking a 10 per cent increase from 2019. Staff who have plans to leave the industry increased from two per cent in 2019 to six per cent in 2020.

None of this comes as a surprise to me — working conditions, pay and lack of career advancements are some of the main reasons why I left a career in child care. That, coupled with feeling perpetually disrespected and like my voice in children's lives were unimportant lead me to burnout.

And I'm not the only one who feels the lack of respect.

Of the child-care professionals surveyed while working during the COVID-19 pandemic, 47 per cent reported that they thought respect for early learning care increased, while 49 per cent reported that they thought that respect stayed the same.

This survey was conducted in 2020 and released in May 2021. What will child-care professionals say now, as they reckon with B.C.'s lack of

support, safety and clarifications for child care in recent months?

Funding the early childhood educators industry is integral. Bursaries and government-funded educational opportunities are important pieces of funding an important industry. On the need for government supports, Emily Gawlick of ECEBC had this to say: "For too long, investments in early childhood education weren't a priority in B.C. and it's led to a significant shortage of ECEs."

"We welcome these supports and professional development opportunities by both levels of government to help build the strong ECE professional workforce needed to effectively provide families with quality, inclusive and culturally safe child care in B.C. We look forward to continued work with government on ensuring ECEs have the supports they need to succeed."

We unquestionably need more child-care professionals. We need to staff this industry, and bursaries will help us get there. But standards need to change. ECE supports need to be better and the industry overall needs more respect, and more consistent standards.

How can we possibly expect to bring new people into this industry, when those working in it don't even want to stay?

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

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

national child care system <sup>[5]</sup>

wages and benefits <sup>[6]</sup>

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