

Daycare workers are exiting the profession in droves, just as access for parents opens up ^[1]

Ottawa and provinces have plans to open thousands of new child-care spots by 2026, but current workplace issues could undermine those efforts before they begin

Author: McGinn, David

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EXCERPTS

Eighteen months into the pandemic, Patricia Nogueira decided she'd had enough. She was tired of straining to communicate with children through a mask and face shield at the daycare centre where she worked, worried about the germs her unvaccinated charges might be bringing in, and too exhausted to muster the positive, everything-is-going-to-be-okay attitude she knew parents expected of her.

Snacks and lunch could no longer be served all together at one table; each child had to be served individually, and their stations carefully sanitized several times a day. Any time a child had a toy in his mouth it would have to be quickly intercepted and disinfected before it could be handed to another kid.

While primary and secondary school teachers were being prioritized for vaccinations, daycare employees like her were being ignored. "It felt like I was worth nothing," she says.

She quit her job last August and became a nanny – a position that pays less per hour but feels more manageable. The long hours and emotional toll of institutional child care were "just too much," she says. Now that she's away from the chaos of the classroom and the risk of infection from dozens of families, she says her anxiety levels are lower and she feels safer.

But while the job change is positive for Ms. Nogueira, it's bad news for the federal government's plan to bring affordable, \$10-a-day child care to families across the country. Ms. Nogueira has joined a steady stream of early-childhood educators who are exiting the profession at a time when demand for their services is set to dramatically expand. The federal government's plan is expected to create 146,000 new child-care spots by 2026, according to estimates by the Canadian Child Care Federation – and generate tens of thousands of new jobs for child-care workers. But without addressing the work-force issues and staffing shortages already plaguing the daycare sector, provinces and territories may not be able to meet the requirements.

More than 38,000 new early-childhood educators will need to be hired to accommodate the provincial deals signed with the federal government so far, according to an estimate from the Canadian Child Care Federation. And that number doesn't include Ontario, the most populous province in the country, which hasn't yet signed a deal.

Finding new workers won't be easy. Employees, researchers and child-care advocates say daycare staff – many of whom earn little more than minimum wage – report feeling overwhelmed, exhausted and underpaid. A survey of early-childhood educators' well-being conducted by the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) found that 60 per cent felt their salaries do not reflect the work they do, and 68 per cent said they feel "worn out."

"Everywhere in Canada, including Quebec, we're suffering from a major problem of retention of qualified early-childhood educators," says Morna Ballantyne, executive director of Child Care Now, an advocacy organization.

So far, the daycare conversation has centred on affordability, and how vital child care is to supporting women returning to the work force – nearly 100,000 women left their jobs from the start of the pandemic to March, 2021, according to an analysis by RBC. (The figure for men was 10 times less.) The monthly costs to parents, even for just one child, can be steep. Across Canada, the median monthly fee for infant care in 2020 was \$995. In Toronto it was \$1,866 a month. But experts say that staffing is the real challenge.

"You can talk about expanding child care until you're blue in the face, but if you don't have people to work in those programs, it's not going to happen," says Brooke Richardson, president of the AECEO.

A national work-force survey conducted in 2013 by Child Care Canada found that one-quarter of child care workers said they plan to leave the sector within three years, and 63 per cent of employers reported difficulties in trying to fill vacant positions.

Many in the sector say that since then, the situation has become worse, with multiple indicators of a growing labour shortage.

Membership in Ontario's College of Early Childhood Educators has been steadily declining by an average of 7 per cent each year since 2014, even though the volume of people graduating with a degree in early-childhood education has been growing.

Paying dues to the college – \$160 annually – is required for every ECE who works in licensed child care or uses the title of ECE, but members are letting their memberships lapse after three years on average. They may be working as nannies or in unlicensed home daycares, or have left the sector permanently.

Temporary daycare shutdowns during the worst COVID-19 peaks also exacerbated the employee attrition.

According to Statistics Canada, there was a 21-per-cent drop in employment among child-care workers across the country from February, 2020, to February, 2021. Some of this reduction was likely owing to involuntary layoffs during the shutdowns, but after daycare centres reopened, many of these frustrated and fed-up employees didn't come back.

Some daycares, meanwhile, were allowed to remain open during lockdowns, but most workers with COVID-19 symptoms couldn't take time off without losing wages because they don't have paid sick days. By January, 2022, when tracking COVID-19 cases in child-care centres had ceased, but Omicron numbers were still climbing, daycare operators were pleading – unsuccessfully – with the Ontario government to reinstate PCR testing for their staff.

For ECEs, the message was clear: they were expected to keep working long hours for low pay, with unmasked, unvaccinated kids and no access to proper testing.

Ms. Nogueira, who decided to leave her job when Delta was surging, had initially been optimistic that the pandemic would be the catalyst for big changes in her industry – she even started her own podcast, called “The Child Care Revolution.” But that transformation never materialized. If anything, she feels that esteem for child-care workers has only diminished with each successive COVID-19 wave.

The frustrating workplace conditions and meagre paycheques are primarily a result of gender bias, Ms. Ballantyne says: More than 95 per cent of child-care workers in Canada are women.

“There has been an expectation that women, particularly young women, will just do this work for low pay,” she says.

The policy failures that have sprung from that gender bias – no pensions or sick days, no paid time to work on professional development, and not enough money – need to be corrected to achieve the federal government's goal, she says. (Licensed child-care centres in Ontario will soon have two paid professional development days for staff thanks to \$149.9-million in federal funding.)

Raising wages will be an important step. Most workers in licensed centres in Ontario make \$15 to \$20 an hour, according to Ontario's Early Years and Child Care Annual Report 2020. Employees in non-licensed centres typically make even less.

In PEI, a 2019 report commissioned by the government examining why nearly 200 staff – more than 30 per cent of the province's work force – left their jobs at child-care centres in the previous two years found that low wages were the main reason for the exodus.

ECEs often leave their daycare positions to work as educational assistants in the school system, where wages are higher. The pay range for ECEs in Saskatchewan, for example, starts at \$15.65 an hour, while an educational assistant earns \$22.67.

ECEs in New Brunswick make \$19 an hour, compared with the \$31 an hour educational assistants typically earn. The province recently committed to increasing the hourly ECE rate to \$23.47 an hour.

Even in Quebec, long considered the gold standard for affordable daycare thanks to robust public funding – child-care workers complain they're underpaid. Late last year, they went on strike for higher pay – at the time, their wages started at \$19 an hour and could rise to a maximum of \$25.18. In response, the province promised to increase the pay of qualified educators by 12 per cent over three years. Quebec also hopes to upgrade the skills of 7,000 current ECEs by 2026, in addition to hiring 18,000 new ones. The government has announced a multimillion-dollar plan to attract people to the sector, including funding scholarships in early-childhood education, and TV and online ads to promote the hiring campaign.

In Manitoba, which signed the federal child-care agreement last summer, the province's targets call for 23,000 new spaces to be created over the next five years, or about a 58-per-cent increase to the system. To fill those spaces, it is estimated the province will need between 4,600 and nearly 6,000 new ECEs.

“We have a sector that needs to be protected and supported currently, before we lose more qualified educators,” says Jodie Kehl, executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association.

She wonders how Manitoba, or any province or territory, for that matter, is going to attract massive numbers of new workers when so many ECEs are fleeing the profession.

At the Red River College Polytechnic Early Childhood Centre in Winnipeg, executive director Susan Sydorchuk says the daycare is used to getting “the cream of the crop” of recent ECE grads, because they're located within a college that offers an ECE degree. But she has still struggled to retain and recruit staff.

“There's just not people out there to hire, or people going into the field any more,” Ms. Sydorchuk says. “We're really, really suffering with a critical shortage here.”

Kim Yeaman, who operates two child-care centres in Innisfill, Ont., has had three staff members quit during the pandemic, all of them saying they were done with the profession for good. “There's a staff shortage everywhere,” she says.

The widespread hiring challenges have started to affect the services daycares can offer families, says Carolyn Ferns, public policy and government relations co-ordinator at the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. “We’re seeing programs have to close rooms, having to – in some cases – close some of their child-care centres temporarily because they didn’t have enough staff to run all their programs, or programs asking parents if they can keep their children home one day a week.”

Leah Shoemaker, 32, was working in child care in British Columbia before moving to Toronto to pursue a Masters degree in early-childhood studies in 2018.

“It’s just not a career that’s very enticing right now,” says Ms. Shoemaker. “So many of these places are paying \$15, \$16 an hour for a career that you need to have two years of education, you have to pay our college of ECEs, you have to do professional development.”

Tuition for ECE programs range across the country. At Toronto’s George Brown College, one of Ontario’s most well-regarded programs, the cost of tuition, materials and ancillary fees is nearly \$8,000.

For much of the pandemic, Ms. Shoemaker was working as a private nanny for a couple who work in health care, but she recently found a job as a program lead in an EarlyON centre, which provides support and drop-in programs for families with young children. She hopes that one day she’ll be able to return to working in a licensed child-care centre, but the way things are now, it is simply not a financially viable career for anyone with even the most basic life goals.

“I want to help my parents retire. I want to retire some day. I want to have a family. And that is not something I can do on a child-care worker’s wage,” Ms. Shoemaker says.

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care is calling for a salary scale starting at \$25 an hour. But other factors need to be addressed in any successful work-force strategy.

“There’s a lot more that needs to be done,” says Martha Friendly, executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, a non-profit policy research institute. Pensions, paid sick days and benefits, all of which the majority of child-care workers in Canada don’t have access to, should also be considered in every jurisdiction’s plan with the federal government, Ms. Friendly says.

Like Ms. Nogueira, Jess Tomas cited burnout as her main reason for leaving her full-time position at a non-profit child-care centre in Toronto last September. “Since COVID, the job became unrecognizable,” says the 38-year-old, who is now doing only occasional supply work at a daycare centre. “I couldn’t do five days a week, eight hours a day any more. It’s really heartbreaking.”

Ms. Tomas hoped that COVID-19 shutdowns would help society finally begin to appreciate the work ECEs do, but she has been disappointed by the government and by the public at large. “The disrespect that people are feeling has created something in child-care workers that I haven’t seen in 10 years,” she says. “It’s almost anger.”

“Every single person who works in child care right now is hanging by a thread.”

Region: Canada ^[3]

Tags: child care workforce ^[4]

national child care system ^[5]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/national-child-care-system> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/10-a-day-child-care>