

# Halifax daycare closing due to government plans for sector, says owner <sup>[1]</sup>

'It's going to get way worse before it gets better,' says member of private daycare group

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## EXCERPTS

A privately owned daycare in Halifax will close permanently this summer due primarily to the provincial government's plans to transition the sector to a publicly funded and non-profit model.

Wedgewood's Little School, located on Kearney Lake Road in the Rockingham area, will close on June 30.

Sonia Hage-Cameron, the centre's owner, said the province's plans are "a blow to us and our business."

"We don't think that the new approach to funding and supporting us will work for us," she said. "We're a for-profit centre, so that really doesn't align with what we're trying to do in our business."

Last July, the province signed an agreement with the federal government that will see child-care fees halved at licensed centres by the end of this year and reduced to \$10 a day by March 31, 2026.

Operators of for-profit centres have the choice to convert to a not-for-profit, to continue their business — but reject all government funding — or to sign their annual funding agreement with the province on April 1, which this year includes a one-time grant of between \$500 to \$16,000 and additional money to offset the 25 per cent parental fee reduction that takes effect April 1.

For-profit daycare owners have said they stand to lose years' worth of investments in their business if they transition to the new model.

Of 330 licensed child-care centres in the province, 196 are for-profits and 134 are not-for-profits.

Hage-Cameron said Wedgewood's Little School centre already lost staff and children after Nova Scotia launched its publicly funded pre-primary program for four-year-olds in 2017, which drew many early childhood educators away from daycare employment.

Wedgewood's Little School has 52 full-time daycare spaces, an after-school program and eight full-time staff members.

The centre operated for about 30 years before Hage-Cameron bought it five years ago, and has become an important part of the community, she said.

"We do feel terribly about it. It's a shame for sure," she said. "It wasn't something that we thought that we'd have to do, but we really do feel right now that we didn't have a choice."

## Parents left scrambling

Hage-Cameron said families and staff members will be offered the opportunity to move to the owners' other location, Play Learn Grow, in Bedford.

But some parents aren't confident they will get a space.

Kaitlin Russell's daughter attends Wedgewood's toddler program, and her four-month-old son was scheduled to begin at the centre in spring 2023. She's now scrambling to find a new provider by the end of June, and is on the waiting list for several daycares in the area.

"I think that's where every parent is at this point. We have our name on every list we could find on Google."

Russell said options for daycare in the area are slim.

"It's next to none, to be brutally honest.... For full daycare, there's very, very little in this neighbourhood and even less that would allow you to move out of the daycare into the after-school environment."

Russell said she supports the province's plans for the sector, which include the addition of 9,500 spaces and improved working conditions for early childhood educators.

"The plan sounds fantastic. We're obviously in need of more daycare and more affordable and accessible daycare. But at this point, we don't know where those places are going to be. They're not going to be ready by July. And so what do we do in the meantime?"

Nova Scotia plans to add 1,500 not-for-profit child-care spaces this fall, but has not announced where they will be located.

"The scary thought is that you might have to send your kid to somewhere that you don't feel comfortable with, or the only place that ends up with an opening because you don't have a choice," Russell said. "And even worse than that, you could end up with nothing."

#### 'It's going to get way worse'

Lisa Beddow, the owner of Friends for Life child-care centres in Nova Scotia and a member of a national working group of private daycare centres, said she anticipates many more for-profit daycares in the province will close in the coming months.

"It's going to get way worse before it gets better. I know many that are looking to sell. They're holding out. They want to sell their business. They want out," she said.

"But where the government isn't offering anything to take over their space to convert it to non-profit, many of them are getting forced to close. And it's just going to create a major child-care crisis in our province."

Becky Druhan, the minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, said it's normal in any year for some daycares to close, but she's not anticipating that happening more than usual.

Druhan said families have been given contact information to help them get their child-care needs met.

The department is continuing to work with for-profit daycare operators to develop transition options.

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