

\$10 childcare attractive to parents, but industry needs to attract more ECEs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There's a spike in applications for licensed childcare in Chatham-Kent with the recent promise of \$10 a day care, but it will only cause the existing 1,200-plus wait list to grow larger if more early childhood educators aren't hired.

Eighty-nine people left licensed childcare centres across Chatham-Kent over the last two years, says Kelly Emery, director of childcare, early years and recreation services.

That that's left a major impact on the 3,200 licensed childcare spaces in the municipality.

"Right now, we have rooms that aren't opened for licensed care, because we don't have enough ECEs to fill those positions," Emery said.

More than 200 applications for licensed childcare have been received in Chatham-Kent since the province signed on to a historic \$13.2-billion agreement with the federal government on funding for a Canada-wide early learning and child care program.

"So, what we're probably seeing is some people coming out of the informal, unlicensed home childcares, coming into the licensed settings," said Emery.

She added the \$10 a day childcare will not be applied to unlicensed operations.

Meanwhile, the Ska:na Family Learning Centre quietly opened its doors two weeks ago at its new Eight Street facility in Chatham.

But the facility nowhere near its 49-child capacity because of a staff shortage.

The shortage, said executive director Faith Hale, means "we cannot take in all the children in that we would be able to."

There are three ECEs working at the new centre, but at least four more are needed, said Hale.

She said they can't even consider opening the infant room because they just don't have the required staff ratio.

As well, another four ECEs are needed for the new Ska:na Family Learning Centre in Wallaceburg.

A big reason for the ECE shortage is wages.

"It's a tough one, because they're not paid well," Emery said.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, ECEs were earning more income on CERB, and if they had children younger than 12 they would have to stay home with them, she said.

Other ECEs were lost to grocery stores and restaurants.

"Obviously, we've increased what we pay people," Hale said.

She said they also offer training and education supports as well as being willing to accommodate flexible working schedules.

Emery believes it has become clear to the government over the last two years how essential childcare is, even for the economy, because childcare facilities stayed open during the pandemic to serve families of essential workers.

The new childcare agreement offers improved compensation for staff in licensed child care facilities, but Emery said that only applies to those making less than \$18 per hour.

Noting a \$2 per hour wage enhancement grant was already received from the Ministry of Education, she said, "Most of our ECEs are already making \$18 so they won't see any change in their benefits or their wages this year."

Emery said the municipality is working closely with the ECE program at St. Clair College and hopes to fill positions when the latest class graduates.

Some good news for families is that, beginning in May, fees will be reduced by an average of 25 per cent retroactive to April 1. There will be another 25 per cent reduction in fees by the end of the year, with the goal of reaching an average of \$10 per day childcare by September 2025.

Emery said the value of early learning for children needs also to be appreciated, noting between the time of birth and age two “that’s the most growth in their brain development is during that time.”

She said it important to get children into quality programs to start that learning process.

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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