

Compensation package for early childhood educators expected to be ready by this fall ^[1]

Province has promised to create up to 9,500 new early learning and child-care spaces by March 31, 2025

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EXCERPTS

The Nova Scotia government is working on a plan to properly pay for and recognize the work of the people who staff child-care centres across the province, and it's hoping to have it ready within months.

Sarah Melanson, the acting executive director for early learning and child care for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, told the legislature's human resources committee Tuesday that "we're well on our way on that work and [it] will be in place for fall."

"We're also looking at the role and the competency of [early childhood educators]," she said. "We're looking at what an ECE does in a centre, what is minimum training and how we can continue to work on those things."

The work is needed to ensure the province can live up to its promise to create up to 9,500 new early learning and child-care spaces, including new spaces for infants and toddlers, by March 31, 2025. That is along with a new early learning program for three-year-olds, which will be included in existing child-care centres.

Staffing shortages made worse by pandemic

It's all part of the \$605M deal the Nova Scotia government struck with the federal government last July, just before then premier Iain Rankin called the last election.

The creation of the pre-primary program in 2017 resulted in an exodus of qualified staff from daycare centres that could not compete with the higher salaries, better working conditions and benefits on offer from schools boards. The pandemic has only worsened the staffing shortages.

The province has expanded training, offered bursaries and other incentives to try to entice Nova Scotians to become early childhood educators. It is also recruiting ECEs from across Canada and internationally.

The coming raise and the offer of other benefits is an attempt to sweeten the pot so that there are enough trained workers available for the government to live up to its expansion commitments.

ECEs do more than spend time with children

Catherine Cross, the executive director of the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Nova Scotia, said she is happy with the province's work.

But she noted ECEs needed to be compensated for more than just time spent with children, including meeting with families or colleagues, doing paperwork or simply preparing space for the day ahead.

"All those things need time and currently the majority of early childhood educators in this province, I would even go so far to say across the country, a lot of it that is not provided or compensated enough within the paid work day," said Cross.

This year, the promise is to open up 1,500 new daycare spaces, with an emphasis on communities that are considered "daycare deserts," according to Cathy Montreuil, the deputy minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. "A lot of them [are] in rural areas where the care would be largely resting on the backs of informal networks or nothing available."

Melanson said Guysborough "is a community that had no regulated, licensed child care. That is one that is on the way. It was announced last summer."

Lower fees fuelling demand

Opening new spaces isn't the only thing fuelling staffing pressures. The federal-provincial agreement also included the promise to

decrease fees.

Tracy Crowell, the department's executive director for early childhood development and pre-primary, said the 25 per cent cut in fees this year, and a planned further 25 per cent cut in December, is driving demand.

"We are seeing an increased demand in the need for and desire for spaces since we've moved to reduce fees, and I suspect that we will continue to see that," said Crowell.

"So the space-expansion part of this is so critical, as is ECE compensation, recruitment, training, because those pieces very much need to go hand in hand."

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