

Education ministers meet in B.C. to talk child care ^[1]

Looming shortages in the child-care workforce should be a top priority, one expert says.

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EXCERPTS

Canada's premiers aren't the only ones soaking up the sun on the West Coast this week.

A little over a year after British Columbia became the first province to sign on to the federal government's national child-care plan, provincial and territorial ministers responsible for child care are set to meet in Vancouver to discuss it.

There's scant information on the meeting, but it's mentioned in the weekly agenda of R.J. Simpson, Northwest Territories minister of education, culture and employment.

A federal source confirmed the meeting is taking place and that ministers from every province and territory — save for Newfoundland and Labrador, which just had a cabinet shuffle — will be there.

Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce's office did not respond to questions before our deadline.

The ministers will talk at a high level about what's worked and what hasn't in the year since the first agreement was signed, with time left for provincial and territorial ministers to bring up their own concerns, the source said.

They'll also have dedicated time to talk about concerns around the child-care workforce, which is a huge looming issue, experts said.

As child-care fees drop across the country — except in Ontario, where parents are still waiting — it'll create more demand for spaces, said Morna Ballantyne, executive director of Child Care Now.

One of the biggest issues in meeting that demand is ensuring there are enough early childhood educators, she said.

"We need more qualified early childhood educators. Governments can't build new spaces without tackling the big problem of who's going to be working in those spaces," she said. "And that means you're going to have to address the workforce and develop a workforce strategy."

The sector is in perennial trouble due to low wages. The experiences workers faced during the pandemic — not to mention inflation and gas prices — only exacerbated such shortages, said Nikki Martyn, program head of early childhood studies at the University of Guelph-Humber.

The bilateral agreements between Ottawa and the provinces recognized the child-care workforce as essential to a successful national program, and wage grids were built into all of them.

Ontario's wage grid, for example, sees registered early childhood educators making a minimum of \$18 an hour in 2022, increasing to \$21 an hour in 2025. For supervisors, the 2022 minimum is \$20 per hour, rising to \$23 by 2025.

The wages proposed in the frameworks aren't nearly enough, Martyn said.

"That's only a couple bucks over a minimum wage."

The agreements also provide money for professional development, training, books and more.

Martyn said a lot of people coming into her program at Guelph-Humber are single mothers who have children of their own and work multiple jobs; \$18 an hour isn't going to cut it, especially in areas with high rent or housing prices.

While the agreements, and the accompanying ministerial statements, all acknowledge workers as a central cog in the program, there hasn't been nearly enough work on it to date, Ballantyne said.

"We have very little data. There's been very little information communicated by provincial governments. Not only on what their plans are and what they're doing, but also what the results have been," she said.

"If you have a critical labour shortage, you need to put in place strategies to improve the wages and working conditions so the sector is a

better place to work and more educators are likely to enter the field and stay in the field,” she said.

Provinces hold the pen on coming up with local strategies, and the feds are mostly charged with footing the bill for the program. But it doesn't need to be a disjointed approach, Ballantyne said.

“Why investigate and come up with strategies in 13 jurisdictions when essentially the problem is the same (across the country),” Ballantyne said.

While there are international examples to learn from, Ontario has a solid system that could help address some of the workforce problems, she said.

In Ontario, there are essentially municipal agencies that take the money and distribute it among providers, to help manage the supply of licensed child care.

Because the staff at municipal child-care centres are almost all unionized, “pay equity laws apply. The wages and benefits given to child-care staff are much better. Turnover is less. Working conditions are much better,” but that makes it a more expensive program to operate, she said.

Region: British Columbia ^[3]

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workforce ^[5]

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