

Early childhood educators rally in Halifax to demand living wage

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EXCERPTS

Dozens of early childhood educators (ECEs) gathered at Grand Parade in downtown Halifax on Thursday demanding a living wage. In January, the province announced an improved wage and benefit package as part of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement. But ECEs at Thursday's rally said they've waited long enough.

Bobbi Keating was one of those ECEs who spoke at the rally. She started working as an ECE in 1989 and recalled that after just 16 months on the job, she attended a rally at the legislature fighting for fair wages.

"Imagine 33 years fighting the same fight," Keating said in an interview with the Halifax Examiner. "It never gets fixed."

In her speech, Keating painted a story about how ECEs get by, often eating at the daycares because they can't afford groceries. She said others couldn't afford bus tickets or gas for their cars, if they can even afford a car.

"There are lots of people who don't understand," Keating said. "They see early childhood educators and think, 'Well, they must be getting paid well. That's the most important job there is.' And you realize, no, \$15 an hour you can't afford rent, you can't afford food. It's educating people to know that even though we're there for your children every day, we can't feed our children at night. It's really important people understand that."

Keating added that ECEs needed to spread the word about their work and they want to know when the compensation is coming.

"It needs to be tomorrow, it needs to be today," Keating said. "Any time we wait is too long."

Jessica Cooke and Sophia Saunders-Griffiths work at Wee Care Centre in Halifax said today's rally was about getting immediate answers on the compensation plan.

"We're still waiting," Cooke said. "There are other provinces, New Brunswick in particular, they already have theirs. Why is it taking so long to get ours? We want answers. We want a plan. We want them to say 'you're not going to get the compensation package in months; you're going to get it on this day in particular.'"

Cooke and Saunders-Griffiths said they want a living wage, which in Halifax is now \$23.50/hour. That's according to the Living Wage report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives that was released on Wednesday.

Cooke said that's far off of the current starting wage for an ECE, which is \$15/hr and go up to around \$19/hr.

"That's two dollars off from minimum wage," Cooke said. "That's sad. It's sad that an ECE, who is an essential worker, can make such little money."

Saunders-Griffiths said they'd also like to have a pension.

"My mother-in-law (who is an ECE) will probably have to work until she's in her 80s because she does not have a pension," she said.

Saunders-Griffiths said she loves her job and watching the children learn and grow while under her care.

"We get very attached to them," she said. "We're also a community. We all support one another. We support our families, we support our fellow ECEs, and we watch these young minds being inspired every day and developing every day."

Cooke wanted people to know that ECEs are "not glorified babysitters."

"There's so much more to early childhood education than people see. We don't just come in and change diapers and make sure your kids are fed. There's so much more to the job than that. I wish people could see in the window and see how much we do in the run of a day."

NDP leader Claudia Chender spoke to the crowd. She recalled meeting with many of the ECEs in the crowd back in 2017 when she was running to be MLA for Dartmouth South. Chender recalled that back then she met with ECEs who told her stories about how they couldn't

make ends meet. Chender said she talked with ECEs again in 2018 with the announcement of the pre-primary program that created wage disparities between those workers and ECEs.

“When I decided to run for office, I had three children in regulated child care. And if had not had access to that, I would not be here today, no question. While we are happy about the expansion of regulated child care, and the affordability that goes along with it, none of that can happen until ECEs are properly compensated.”

Keating said she’s “carefully hopeful” ECEs will get compensation.

“I’m optimistic change that change has come. I think this is the most momentum we’ve had for a really comprehensive compensation and benefits package. They rolled it out for pre-primary, so they know how to do it. They have the infrastructure, so let’s do it for us.”

On Thursday, after the release of the living wage report, Child Care Now (Nova Scotia), which advocates for a universal, comprehensive, affordable, accessible, publicly funded, quality, non-profit child care system, shared this tweet about the wages of ECEs in the province.

After the rally at the Grand Parade, the ECEs marched to the offices of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development on Brunswick Street. There they lined the street and the steps heading up to the building chanting, “ECEs can’t wait, fall is too late.”

Education Minister Becky Druhan, who was at the rally early in the morning, spoke to reporters at Province House about the wage increases for ECEs later in the day, but wouldn’t give a solid date on when the new wage plan would be announced, other than saying she wouldn’t “preempt an announcement.”

“When we inherited the childcare agreement with the federal government, the timeline for this was the end of the year,” Druhan told reporters. “It became very clear to us early on that that was not aggressive enough, that this needed to be more urgently done. And so we moved the timeline ahead and we moved the timeline to this fall. And the reason for that is that there is complexity and it’s not work that can be done overnight. But we are doing this as quickly as we can and we will deliver on it as quickly as we can.”

Reporters asked Druhan about the differences between the wages and benefits made by ECEs and those who work in pre-primary programs in Nova Scotia schools.

“The rushed implementation of pre-primary caused a bunch of problems and the Auditor General wrote in length about that,” Druhan said. “And in this work that we’re doing to transform child care, we need to go fast. We know that we need to deliver on increased wages and we need to make the other changes that we need to make. But we also need to do it right. And we’re very much mindful of that as we do the work to make sure that we consider all the things that we need to consider so that we create a system that works for Nova Scotians. That’s not just Nova Scotian families and children, but also our operators and our ECEs.”

Meanwhile, Keating said she was happy to see a lot of young ECEs at the rally.

“I’m sorry it’s taken so long and we haven’t been able to fix the broken system,” Keating said. “I am glad they believe in us and are willing to join in the fight, and being so young, they’re hopeful. They’re not hopeful when they listen to interviews with the minister when she says, ‘don’t worry. You don’t have to walk out today, the money’s coming. But when I look out there today and I see these girls and they’re hopeful that we’re behind them and we’ll support them and make sure this doesn’t keep happening. This is the end.”

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