

Early childhood educators plan day of action on Thursday for fair pay, benefits ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Early childhood educators across the province will take a recess from their daily duties on Thursday to hold a Day of Action to express their concerns about low pay and the wait for a previously announced government program to improve their working conditions.

The largest event will take place in Halifax's Grand Parade at 9 a.m., followed by a walk to the Department of Education office on Brunswick Street. Besides raising public awareness of an ongoing crisis in the early childhood education system, organizers hope that the event will persuade the Nova Scotia government to provide more information about the upcoming improved wage scale and benefits promised by the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement that was announced in January.

Sophie Saunders-Griffiths and Jessica Cooke are early childhood educators at the non-profit Wee Care Centre in Halifax who plan to take part in Thursday's Day of Action to help prevent what they see as a looming crisis of a growing Nova Scotian population with greater demand for daycare services and an increasing number of ECEs leaving the field due to burnout from increased workloads and what they consider inadequate compensation.

"I've had mental health issues due to the burnout," said Saunders-Griffiths at Wee Care on Wednesday. "I'm in bed by eight o'clock every day, I have days where I go home, and I'm crying my eyes out because I'm just so mentally exhausted.

"I love what I do, and I don't want to give it up. But there are days when I just feel the burnout isn't worth it. One day I want my own family, and if I'm so burnt out, I don't know how I'm going to be able to come to work, and then go home to my own family, and be able to support them in the way that I'm supporting the children where I work, because I love the work."

Cooke says the importance of the work done by ECEs, preparing young children for their future education while ensuring that parents can take their place in the workforce, has been undervalued for far too long. Especially considering the investment they make in their education, either for a two-year diploma or a four-year degree, incurring debt that allows them to follow their passion in a profession whose pay rate hasn't kept up with inflation.

"That's what I struggle with the most when I explain how much I make in early childhood education," she explained, "and people say, 'Well, why don't you reach out? And why don't you find a different job?'"

"I don't want to do that. That's silly to me. I want to be in daycare, that's where I want to work. I just want the wage that we all deserve as ECEs. We need that raise."

Improvements on the way in coming weeks

Nova Scotia's Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development Becky Druhan understands the frustrations of ECE professionals like Saunders-Griffiths and Cooke, and agreed on Wednesday that the work that's been underway to introduce a fairer pay structure is decades overdue.

"Higher wages for ECEs is our top priority right now with the childcare transformation that's underway," said Druhan in a call from her office on Wednesday. "We've been working very diligently, we feel the urgency on this and we've promised to deliver an increase in wages for ECEs in the fall, and we absolutely will deliver on that."

Druhan said the complexity of the daycare system in Nova Scotia, with 330 centres across the province — including private and non-profit facilities — has required a lengthy process of consultation with centre operators in urban and rural areas, as well as parents, to assess the current state of the system as well as its immediate and future needs.

"We are just weeks away from our committed timeline to deliver more money to ECEs," said Druhan. "And we will deliver more money within that timeline. I know that the vast majority of ECEs just want to do the work they love, deliver quality child care, and be paid fairly and compensated for the work that they do."

“I want them to know higher wages are coming this fall, and the walkout just weeks before our target isn’t going to impact that timeline. It won’t speed things up. We’ve heard them, we feel the urgency, and we’re going to deliver on this just as soon as we can.”

Ultimately, Druhan hopes the new plan will ease the burden on childcare workers by improving their quality of life and attracting more people to the profession to reduce staffing shortages, which will help centres, educators, parents and employers in the long run.

“This is important to everyone,” said Cooke. “This could be a game changer for the ECE field if we go out there, and they finally hear our voices and say, ‘Do you know what? They’re right, they need this,’ and they finally deliver us a plan. Not just ‘OK, you’ll get it by the end of November.’”

“They need to give us a date, give us a package, and actually put a plan on the table.”

Region: Nova Scotia ^[3]

Tags: child care ^[4]

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