

Working parents scramble after schools closed Sept. 19 to honour Queen Elizabeth ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Workers are scrambling to find last-minute child care across much of Canada after governments announced the sudden closure of schools to mourn Queen Elizabeth.

The four Atlantic provinces, British Columbia and Yukon all declared Monday a holiday for provincial and territorial public-sector employees, including teachers and school staff.

Yet most private-sector businesses will remain open, leaving many workers struggling to find child care or in some cases taking the day off unpaid.

Kristine Grace, a Dartmouth, N.S.-based mother of two children in Grades 5 and 2, said the decision to honour the queen's funeral service by giving public-sector workers a holiday is disappointing.

"Many workers are now in a child-care bind because they've closed schools but haven't actually declared a full statutory holiday," she said.

Explainer: How will provinces across Canada honour the Sept. 19 federal holiday? Here's what we know so far

Queen Elizabeth lies in state at Westminster Hall after procession attended by thousands

After two years of pandemic-related school disruptions, Grace said it's frustrating for families to once again be forced to grapple with sudden closures.

"I do think these sorts of decisions disproportionately affect women," she said. "It's also a missed opportunity to discuss the monarchy in Canada and maybe hold an assembly during the funeral service or have a moment of silence."

Jill Bruce, a mom of three also from Dartmouth, said working parents haven't been given enough time to find alternate child care.

"We're left scrambling to find a babysitter and some parents can't afford to take a day off work," she said. "This just feels unfair after two years of pandemic school closures. We're all burnt out."

Part of the problem is the two-tiered nature of the holiday, Bruce added.

"Government employees get the day off and schools are closed but for most working parents it's like, 'You're on your own.'"

Judy Haiven, a researcher with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and retired Saint Mary's University professor, said it's a "charade" to claim that Monday is a holiday when only civil servants get the day off.

"They're trying to dangle the idea that workers have more rights in this province and it's absolutely not true," she said. "In fact the reverse is true because now some parents will lose a day of pay because they have child-care responsibilities."

It's not just working parents impacted by school closures.

Businesses are also juggling schedules to accommodate workers who need to stay home to care for children.

"This has come out of the blue and left some employees scrambling to find alternative child-care arrangements or booking the day off," said Gary Sands, senior vice-president of public policy with the Canadian Federation of Independent Grocers.

"Many businesses are dealing with labour shortages so this is certainly an issue."

Louis-Philippe Gauthier, the Atlantic vice-president of the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses, said some small businesses are already on reduced hours due to staffing shortages.

"This could impact the ability for some businesses to simply operate if workers can't come in because of school closures," he said. "It's just very challenging."

Mark von Schellwitz, Western Canada vice-president with Restaurants Canada, said the biggest challenge in the restaurant industry right now is also the labour shortage.

"It's really, really difficult to get staff," he said. "Many operations are already at about 80 per cent because they just don't have the staff to open full-time."

"If workers need to stay home because of school closures that makes it even more challenging for restaurants."

Region: Canada ^[3]

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