

Staff shortage shuts Manitoaning daycare ^[1]

Assignack facility serves 25 children with a waiting list of 26

Author: The Manitoulin Expositor

Source: The Manitoulin Expositor

Format: Article

Publication Date: 14 Sep 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

MANITOWANING—Although it is not closed just yet, the daycare facility at Assignack Public School will be closing in two weeks, leaving parents scrambling to find other spaces for their children. The daycare currently has 25 children in its care with 26 on the daycare’s waiting list, as well as 15 on the waiting list for the daycare’s after school program.

“We have been operating with a skeleton crew,” daycare manager Andrea Lewis, who also manages the Gore Bay daycare, told The Expositor last Thursday. Currently, the daycare operators have transferred one of the Gore Bay staff members to the Assignack facility to help keep the doors open.

Ms. Lewis said that it is hoped the closure will only be a temporary measure, but with most daycare facilities across the province experiencing staffing challenges, it is unclear when the daycare will be able to re-open.

“We are very saddened that it has come to this,” Ms. Lewis said in a statement released on Friday. “We have been struggling for quite some time to find staff. We know that this is a real hardship, especially when we have so many families already involved with childcare as well as many families who have been actively looking for childcare. Ideally, we would like to not close at all, but we will use this time to recruit and better prepare staff for working in the field of childcare.”

Under normal circumstances, daycare workers would be expected to have early childhood education (ECE) certification, but given the crisis situation, Ms. Lewis said she encourages anyone with experience in working with children to come forward and apply.

Adding to the recruitment challenges are the relatively low remuneration available and competition from better resourced organizations to compete for available workers. “We keep losing people to the school board,” noted Ms. Lewis. “Unfortunately, this is a very underpaid and often undervalued field, so we often lose staff to other opportunities with better pay. Staff retention is a problem across the province as many centers are suffering from staff shortages.”

Those shortages have also been putting a strain on the daycare services offered by Manitoulin Family Resources (MFR), noted Ms. Lewis.

“We were very fortunate over the summer to be able to get three summer students,” she said, but with school returning, those resources have dried up.

MFR Children’s Services Program Director Diana St. Pierre confirmed that they have been receiving calls from parents needing childcare at their two sites in Mindemoya and Little Current due to the closure. “But we have a huge waiting list ourselves,” she said. Worse, even MFR is teetering. “We are at the cusp ourselves. If we were to lose one or two more staff, we might have to close down ourselves.”

The province and federal governments may be patting themselves on the back for childcare deals, but the reality on the ground tells a very different story.

“We can offer you \$10 a day childcare, but we don’t have the staff to be able to bring your child in,” said Ms. St. Pierre.

The staffing issues are closely linked to strains from the pandemic, she pointed out. “Our staff are burnt out and they have received zero thanks from the province.” Wages for ECEs have been set at \$18 per hour by the ministry, which lies far below what is needed for a living wage, but the worst part is that staff feel completely unappreciated.

What many people remain unaware of is that when school moved to virtual learning, it was daycare staff who were suddenly thrust onto the front lines. “We got the word on a Friday that we would be taking in essential staff’s children for the next two weeks,” she said. Suddenly, ECE staff were expected to be teachers with 12 or 15 students ranging from junior to mid-level grades. “Parents had to work,” said Ms. St. Pierre.

“So far we have been able to muster the staff to keep going,” she said. But the wall is fast approaching. “At the end of every summer we lose two or three staff.”

Still, agencies such as MFR are doing their best for those interested in working in the childcare field. “There is the ECE Grant Program,

which will pay your expenses to gain your certificate,” she said. “What isn’t covered most agencies will step up. So, you can work full time, go to school part time, and get your ECE.”

Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care has called for improvements to wages and working conditions for early childhood education and childcare workers. Despite government efforts to train more ECEs and better professional development opportunities, the real issue lies in retention, noted Carolyn Ferns, that organization’s public policy co-ordinator. She points out that ECEs tend to only stay in the field for an average of three years before leaving for other pastures.

According to Ms. Ferns, burnout is a real challenge in an occupation that attracts people with “high hopes” going in, but are soon ground down by the day-to-day reality.

In the meantime, it is important for parents and other caregivers to understand and appreciate the strains ECE staff have been, and are, under.

Ms. Lewis said that anyone interested in working with children should contact her at andrea@gorebaychildcare.com [3] or (705) 210-0062 in order to learn more about opportunities at the daycare centres. Updates on the current status of Assignack Daycare can be found on that facility’s Facebook page.

Ms. St. Pierre can be reached at dst-pierre@mfresources.net [4] or 705-368-3400 ext. 225 about MFR’s child care employment opportunities.

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