

'Long overdue': Nova Scotia early childhood educators get 30 per cent pay raise ^[1]

Author: Armstrong, Lyndsay

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Excerpts

DARTMOUTH, N.S. - Nova Scotia is raising wages of early childhood educators by about 30 per cent, but daycare operators say the pay hike doesn't go far enough to ensure many workers in the sector are making a living wage.

Education Minister Becky Druhan on Tuesday said the pay raises for most of the 2,600 employees in the province's early childhood education sector are "long overdue."

"Early childhood educators do incredible, valuable work, and we are excited to make this significant investment that reflects their importance," Druhan said.

Prior to the new pay framework, the wage floor for early childhood educators was between \$15 and \$19 per hour, depending on their level of training. Under the new structure, wages for employees in their first year of work will increase to between \$19.10 and \$21.67 per hour. For workers with five years of experience or more, they will be paid between \$21.49 and \$24.39 an hour.

Daycare operators and staff have said the province's child-care network is in a labour crisis, as early childhood educators leave the sector due to the rising cost of living and low wages.

Bonnie Minard, who runs the Portland Daycare Centre in Dartmouth, N.S., said in an interview that the pay raise is a step in the right direction, but she said she is worried the change isn't big enough to help recruiting efforts.

"It's disappointing when we're looking at trying to recruit and retain staff and there's such a shortage of people in the sector," Minard said Tuesday. The pay bump is "not the draw that we had hoped it would be."

Minard said that while an average raise of 30 per cent is significant, early childhood educators are "starting at such a low pay scale to begin with that this isn't quite what we were hoping to see."

Halifax YWCA executive director Miia Suokonautio also expressed concern that Tuesday's announcement isn't enough to improve recruitment. Many child-care centres "are currently unable to operate at their licensed capacities because they can't find teachers to meet ratio requirements," she said in a statement.

Margot Nickerson, the president of CUPE Local 4745, which represents about 200 daycare workers across seven child-care centres in the Halifax area, said in an interview Tuesday she's disappointed that for some staff, the pay raises still fall short of a living wage.

"It's just barely a living wage for some of the people who would be in the top classification," Nickerson said.

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives said in its September report that the living wage for people living in the Halifax area is \$23.50 per hour. The lowest living wage in the province, according to the report, is \$20 per hour in Cape Breton.

Nickerson said she had hoped the province's new pay scale would have started at what's considered a living wage and go up from there. The union president also said the new framework doesn't do enough for early childhood educators with decades of experience, who may not notice much of an increase in pay under the new wage model.

"There should be incentive to continue your education and to stay loyal to the profession and work your way up," Nickerson said. "But if you're capped at five years, that doesn't provide much of an incentive."

The wage increase is part of a transformation — in partnership with the federal government — of the province's daycare sector into a publicly funded network in which fees will be lowered to \$10 a day, on average, by 2026. Prior to the July 2021 agreement with Ottawa, many of Nova Scotia's licensed child-care centres were privately run.

Under the wage agreement, the province will pay \$65 million annually for daycare staff salaries, up from \$25 million. The federal government will cover \$35 million a year for the new pay structure.

Christine McLean, a professor in the department of child and youth studies at Mount Saint Vincent University, said in a statement that these pay raises will move the province's early child-care sector from a "patchwork" of services to a publicly funded and managed system.

McLean said the new structure "recognizes child care as a common public good and not a market-based service where a parent is 'lucky' to find, afford or access suitable child care."

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