

Could a staffing crisis jeopardize \$10-a-day child care? ^[1]

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After nearly seven years at Stó:lō Service Agency's A:lmélháwtxw Early Learning Centre, Jenn Carman had finally worked her way up to manager. It was 2017, and after working in nearly every program offered at the centre, Carman's roles had morphed over time into a leadership job. Though she never intended to become a manager—she was initially a preschool teacher, until she discovered that full-time hours were hard to come by and she had to take on a second job to make ends meet—she was next in line to take on the role when her previous manager didn't return from maternity leave.

Months later, in the summer of 2017, good news arrived: The centre received a long-awaited grant from the Ministry of Children and Family Development. The previous manager had spent years trying to get funds to renovate the centre's basement to expand their programming, filling out applications year after year, with little success. With the approval, A:lmélháwtxw would be licensed for an additional 20 child care spaces, bringing the centre's total to 60 spaces. At that time, the centre hosted two multi-age programs, one program for kids aged 3-5, and an after-school program, alongside Aboriginal Headstart programming.

But Carman remembers feeling panicked, not excited, when she found out about the grant. Not only was it a huge project to take on as a new manager, she wasn't sure how they would find the staff for those new spaces. In B.C., licensed child care centres are required to have one Infant and Toddler-certified educator for every four children under three years of age. Programs that host a wider range of ages, from 2.5 years old to school-age, must have one educator for every eight kids.

Concerned that rejecting the grant would put future funding in jeopardy, Carman and her managers went through with the renovations. What was once a dim, unfinished concrete basement used for storage at the early learning centre was divided into one large classroom and a sensory room, a space to foster creativity and support neurodivergent kids. There are comfortable areas to sit with a variety of textures (from furry rugs to velvety blankets), light displays on the wall to keep the attention of developing minds, and colourful gel mats on the floor to advance fine motor skills.

The classroom feels expansive and bright in spite of the lack of windows, and the ceilings are high. But in March 2022, compared to the classrooms upstairs, it's also remarkably empty. When the pandemic hit in 2020, the entire centre closed for five months.

Carman says it weighs heavily on her that the new child care spaces, which were supposed to operate for 10 years under the terms of the grant, shuttered at the beginning of the pandemic and didn't reopen for two years. The biggest struggle: She and her coworkers were unable to find the staff necessary to re-open.

Carman and A:lmélháwtxw are not alone. Across the country, low wages and poor working conditions have pushed many early childhood educators out of the field, resulting in a decades-long worker retention crisis. Just as federal and provincial governments are making historic investments to build a universal child care system, child care centres are struggling to find staff, putting promises of \$10-a-day child care at risk. Many experts are concerned that without major improvements to wages and working conditions, there simply won't be enough staff building careers in child care to provide consistent, quality care.

Martha Friendly, founder and executive director of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, a national non-profit, non-partisan policy research organization, says that addressing poor working conditions in child care is "absolutely critical" to the success of Canada's universal child care system.

"It's the underpinning to the story," she says. "And unless that changes, and the workforce issues are really taken on by the government, I would envision that the whole thing is going to flop."

The first national survey of child care workers' wages and working conditions was published in 1984 by the Katie Cooke Task Force, a group of experts in care work, sociology, law and economics assembled to study the prospect of a national child care system. Though it relied on a small survey of 279 employees at 85 centres, it provided some insight into Canada's patchwork child care landscape. The author observed that "general labourers and workers who care for animals earn 30 percent more than daycare workers." The task force ultimately recommended the federal government and the provinces work together to develop a publicly funded universal child care system. By the time the report was released two years later, a Progressive Conservative government, led by Brian Mulroney, had been elected to replace

the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Liberals, and the expert-led Cooke Task Force was replaced with a Special Committee staffed entirely by members of the House of Commons. More than 30 years later, few of the report's 53 recommendations have been acted upon.

Despite the adoption of the Early Learning and Child Care Agreements in 2021, little else has changed. While many aspects of child care—like the level of education required to enter the field and staff-to-child ratios—vary from province to province, some aspects of the workforce are consistent: The vast majority of workers are women, and the average annual employment income for early childhood educators and assistants across the country is \$26,800, nearly 30 percent less than the average Canadian worker. Access to job benefits like health and dental coverage isn't much better, with just over half of early childhood educators and assistants in B.C. receiving them, according to a survey of the province's child care workforce.

While A:lmélháwtxw offers benefits and a pension plan, this isn't the first time Carman has struggled to find staff. A:lmélháwtxw used to run two programs, one for infants and one for toddlers. Despite high demand for those spaces, Carman says both were very difficult to staff and didn't last long, closing in June 2017, just as she was assuming managerial duties. She described the issue as one of constant turnover.

The centre runs above the government-mandated staff-to-child ratio. Rather than one educator looking after a program of eight children, Carman aims to always have at least two fully-certified educators for a group of eight. Often ECE assistants, or workers who have their Responsible Adult certification who are working toward their ECE certificate, will come in to assist with the programs at A:lmélháwtxw. Carman believes that using the mandated ratio would negatively affect both the staff and the children they care for. "We want to take them out onto the land, we want to let them do their big body play and climb trees and run ahead and do all of these great things," says Carman. "But one staff [member] with a group of eight children? That is a logistical nightmare."

Carman says that while maintaining a higher educator-to-child ratio can be difficult, it results in better care for the kids and a better working environment for her staff. She says it's important that her staff knows they can take a sick day or a mental health day without causing their coworkers to stress or work overtime.

"We really are over-staffed in the capacity of our ratios, but it's because that's what the children need. That's what my team needs to not burn out," says Carman. "Because I want them to be here for the long-term. I want them to return from their maternity leave. I want them to stay here and build a career here."

In B.C., infant and toddler programs also need to be run by staff who have their Infant Toddler Certificate, a voluntary specialization that educators can earn after completing their one-year Early Childhood Educator certificate. In order to have two Infant Toddler programs with up to eight kids in each program running at A:lmélháwtxw, the centre needed to maintain four staff members with that specialization, plus other ECE-certified staff available to substitute whenever the Infant Toddler staff were sick or on vacation.

Finding educators with their Infant Toddler certification was difficult. Research on the child care workforce from the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation shows that only one-fifth of B.C.'s child care workforce has either of the two ECE specializations available in B.C.: Infant Toddler and Special Needs. Getting these specializations involves months of coursework and a six-week practicum, which in most cases is unpaid. In a sector where wages are low, many early childhood educators struggle to afford the extra tuition and weeks of unpaid labour. Ultimately, Carman and her staff opted to replace the Infant Toddler programs with multi-age programs, which allow for up to three infant and toddler spots in a program of eight kids.

"We're still able to offer Infant Toddler care, just not at that large capacity," Carman says. "It's a disservice to our community, but for us as a facility, it's a godsend."

A similar situation plays out in other provinces. In Nova Scotia, 82 percent of child care operators had difficulty hiring staff with the necessary qualifications, and in Ontario, nearly half of the ECEs registered with the Ontario College of Early Childhood Educators do not work in licensed child care. (The majority of those working outside of licensed child care work in either the public or private K-12 education systems.)

Monique Belanger has worked at A:lmélháwtxw for five years. She wears many hats at the centre: working full time with the three-to-five-year-olds program, overseeing staff schedules, planning for vacations and arranging emergency staffing when her coworkers are out sick. With the time in her week that she has left, she's taken on a liaison role for the Aboriginal Supportive Child Development and Fraser Valley Child Development programs. It's that last role that she's most passionate about. She works with consultants and specialists who come to the centre to support the children at A:lmélháwtxw, including pediatric occupational therapists, physical therapists or speech therapists.

At her previous job, Belanger was in charge of child development, and she's brought that expertise over to A:lmélháwtxw. In turn, the centre has earned a reputation as a refuge for children who require additional support or have experienced trauma, and thus have difficulty fitting in at other centres. Belanger has always been passionate about early childhood education's ability to serve neurodivergent kids and those who are considered special needs, who may get left behind later on in their education.

Though she's now able to support herself with her job at A:lmélháwtxw, like Carman, Belanger spent years supplementing her child care income with a second job to make ends meet. After working all week, she would bartend at weddings on the weekends.

Belanger says that while A:lmélháwtxw hasn't had the severe turnover and shortage issues that other centres in the area have, the shortage of educators means that covering staff who get sick or go on maternity leave is very challenging.

Belanger and Carman have been active in discussions about the future of child care in their community, attending roundtable discussions

and hosting the former minister of State for Child Care, Katrina Chen, for centre visits. When Chen first visited in 2018, she and Carman discussed difficulties around hiring and retaining staff, and how those struggles have affected their ability to provide dedicated programs for infants and toddlers. When she returned in June 2022, Carman gave the minister a tour of the new classroom and sensory room, which were still being renovated during her first visit. Carman says not much has changed in the four years between Chen's visits.

"We're still talking about the same issues," she says.

Carman and Belanger agree that while the investments in the child care system are sorely needed, the government's approach has been short-sighted. "There have been a lot of places that have closed over the past couple years because they just can't find staff, but then so much additional funding is being provided to create these spaces," says Belanger. "I think first what needed to happen is they needed to address the ECE shortage and ECE quality first, and then move on to creating those additional child care spaces."

While all of the Early Learning and Child Care agreements between the federal government and the provinces commit to lowering fees to an average of \$10-a-day and increasing the number of child care spots available, they vary on improving working conditions and educator wages.

Some provinces and territories, like B.C. and Yukon, have implemented wage enhancements that add a few dollars per hour to certified educators' wages. But even provinces that mandate benefits and higher wages for educators via wage grids, like Quebec and P.E.I., have experienced child care worker strikes and public campaigns for higher wages, and their sectors continue to struggle with educator shortages.

A:lmélháwtwx sits on the traditional territory of the Ts'elxwéyeqw Tribe, in a complex that houses a variety of community services, including dental and medical care, child care, a library and the Stó:lō archives. The centre is set back far from the busy main road. The sound of traffic that overwhelms you when you're walking down the sidewalk is reduced to a faint wash by the time you arrive at A:lmélháwtwx. You feel farther from the road than you really are, and as Carman says, you'd never know you're in the middle of Chilliwack.

At the very edge of the Ts'elxwéyeqw community services complex, a cedar tree that the children love to climb towers over the playground. A trail leads away from the centre between the field and a sliver of forest. Every day, educators lead children on walks along the trail, ending at a bridge that connects to a quiet residential community nearby.

Finding educators who love the outdoors enough to spend nearly every day outside, rain or shine, is yet another staffing challenge. In order to maintain a connection to A:lmélháwtwx's Stó:lō roots, knowledge keepers regularly visit the centre to teach children about the land they play on.

"We can always bring people in to do the teachings, to do the songs, to do the drumming," says Carman, who is a member of Skawahlook First Nation, where she is also a councillor. Skawahlook First Nation is a member of the Stó:lō Xwexwilmexw Treaty Association.

Research from Statistics Canada shows that in the child care sector, the amount of time a worker spends at their employer has improved over the past two decades, nearly doubling from 44 months in 1997 to 84 months in 2019. But the sector still struggles to retain workers, and improving worker recruitment and retention has been a pillar of the B.C. NDP's ChildCareBC plan since its inception in 2018.

Recent data on B.C.'s child care workforce shows that the number of employers who reported staff net loss grew in 2020. "The last group of staff that left here, out of the four that resigned, two left the field," says Carman. "So it's not that they left because they weren't happy here; they're just done with child care."

When educators in B.C. who are no longer working in child care were asked why they had left, the most cited reasons were dissatisfaction with pay, working conditions, benefits and career opportunities.

Child care facilities' budgets, especially those of public or not-for-profit centres, are dominated by labour costs. If centres want to raise wages, that typically also means that parent fees will have to be raised. Many are hesitant to raise those fees and price out their clients, making child care even less accessible to those who need it.

For advocates like Martha Friendly, that predicament reinforces the need for public funding. "The only way to have the childcare that all these parents want, and that we've been working for for 50 years, is to have it be publicly funded with really solid public policy."

Friendly has spent decades advocating for universal childcare in Canada and sincerely wants it to succeed. However, she cautions that enthusiasm for \$10-a-day child care cannot come at the cost of a well-compensated child care workforce. Friendly says there are three pillars of a successful universal child care program: affordable fees, available spaces and good working conditions. As fees are lowered, the demand for child care increases, so the workforce needs to be available to meet that demand. Tens of thousands of additional child care workers will be needed over the next decade. If the system expands without improving wages and working conditions, ECEs will continue to leave the field.

Friendly wants to see parents align themselves with child care workers. "Their success at being able to access good quality child care is going to depend on whether the workforce is available to provide that child care," she says.

Last year was a big one for A:lmélháwtwx. In the May 2022, Carman and her staff re-opened the basement classroom for a program for kids aged three to five. Then, after months of deliberations, they decided to change one of the multi-age programs into an infant and toddler

program in September. Where they once had six spots for kids under the age of three, they are now licensed for 15. Past difficulties with providing infant and toddler care weighed on their decision. In order for staff, like Monique Belanger, to go back to school to get their infant and toddler certificate, they need to complete their practicum. Offering infant and toddler care at A:lmélháwtxw allows staff to stay at the centre for their practicum, rather than having to leave the centre to complete it elsewhere.

“It’s been really great to open those spaces for our community,” says Carman, but the infant and toddler spaces were “full before they were even created.”

Families on A:lmélháwtxw’s waitlist who already have children attending programs at A:lmélháwtxw and Stó:lō Service Agency staff who recently returned from maternity leave were prioritized. “A lot of our families have children at different centres, and that creates a lot of issues [with] drop-offs, pick-ups, payments,” says Carman.

Still, the waitlist for infant and toddler child care at A:lmélháwtxw sits at about 50 families. Nearly every day, parents call the centre to see if there are any child care spaces available. Carman offers to add their name to the waitlist, but cautions parents that there are no guarantees they’ll get a coveted spot.

“I want to help. I want to provide quality care to anyone who wants it,” says Carman. “Everybody who has a child deserves quality child care, and the stories that I hear just break my heart.”

Region: British Columbia ^[3]

Tags: child care workforce ^[4]

recruitment and retention ^[5]

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