

# Advocates criticize N.L. government's child-care update <sup>[1]</sup>

6K new child-care spaces promised by 2026, but advocates say they haven't made a dent

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### Excerpts

Though Newfoundland and Labrador's education minister has been touting an increased number of child-care spaces operating at \$10-a-day or lower across the province, advocates say those numbers don't paint the full picture.

In a child-care update on Wednesday, Minister of Education Krista Lynn Howell said there are currently 8,300 child-care spaces operating at \$10-a-day or lower across the province.

Child-care advocate Yolande Pottie-Sherman says while 8,300 might sound like a lot, there haven't been enough net new spots added since the federal government's promise of 6,000 new child-care spaces in 2021.

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"We just need to be real about the numbers," said Pottie-Sherman. "Only 258 more kids in 2023 have access to regulated child-care spaces than did in 2021. So I think we need to remember we are losing spaces at the same time we're gaining them."

In 2021, it was announced the province would receive around \$347 million in federal funding to make child care more accessible. At the time, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said almost 6,000 new child-care spaces would be created within five years, as well as a new optional full-day, year-round pre-Kindergarten program.

However, Pottie-Sherman said the province is so far falling short of those goals.

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"It's a bit of a stall tactic," said Pottie-Sherman. "They know what the demand is, they know how many kids there are."

In a statement from the Education Department, media relations manager Lynn Robinson said they do not track the waitlists for child care services.

"These are not an accurate representation of the full need for child care in the province due to duplication, or the potential for a lack of service providers in a community or area. Parents and guardians seeking child care will often have their children on multiple waitlists in their community, and there may also be children on wait lists for certain child care services while attending another service," read the statement.

Similarly, Neria Aylward with the Jimmy Pratt Foundation said Wednesday's announcement was a bit of a disappointment for her.

"It's always good to hear about the progress of the early learning and child-care action plan," said Aylward. "I will say it was a little underwhelming for advocates in the sector."

Aylward's remarks come in the wake of a report on how to make more child-care spaces released by the Jimmy Pratt Foundation in July. The report stated that demand for daycare spots skyrocketed once \$10-a-day child-care was implemented.

In regards to Howell's update, Aylward said the announcements regarding the pre-Kindergarten pilot program were a particular disappointment.

"We know now that about 10% of four-year-olds are enrolled in those programs. That's not enough kids," said Aylward.

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"Today we have 18 pre-Kindergarten locations that are open representing 340 child-care spaces," said Howell. "Another 17 sites will become operational in the next few weeks."

Aylward believes that rather than a slow roll out of pre-Kindergarten programs, a universal, or junior Kindergarten program would be the better option.

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Pottie-Sherman said there also needs to be an effort to recruit and retain more child-care workers to keep up with the growing demand in the province. She suggests better working conditions to make this possible.

"We really need to keep advocating for dignified working conditions for early childhood educators, and that includes things like mandatory paid sick days," said Pottie-Sherman. "Less than half of ECEs in this province have access to paid sick days, less than half had access to paid vacation, less than a third have had access to paid coffee breaks."

Aylward also cites working conditions as an issue. She said studies show benefits, like pensions, keep ECEs in the workforce.

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"To help increase the number of early childhood educators in the province the Department of Education has implemented the early childhood wage grid and a wage grid bonus," said Howell. "Since Jan. 1 of this year, we have over 100 early childhood educators who have become attached to the workforce."

Both Pottie-Sherman and Aylward agree that any expansion of the child-care system needs to be a government-led public system, like the healthcare system or the school system.

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