

Little children, small change [CA] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Jackie Dwyer counts herself among the lucky and the elite of child-care workers. After more than 30 years in the business, the administrator of the Sunflower Day Nursery in Ottawa is pulling down an annual salary of \$38,000 plus benefits for a job she still loves. It's the same salary everyone else at the co-operative child-care centre makes, whether they work as janitors, cooks or child-care workers.

The compensation paid at the unionized centre is, according to a recent report financed by the federal government, about \$15,000 more a year than the overall average income earned at licensed centres across Canada by early childhood educators and assistants who have a post-secondary credential.

Dwyer, who began working at a babysitting co-op in 1972, for \$2.50 an hour, says she's grateful to be among the few thousand unionized child-care workers in Canada who do better than most. But she says pay and working conditions remain so poor for most child-care workers, that she questions whether the industry will be able to retain and attract enough early childhood educators to support a quality, national child-care program.

She also says she's hard pressed to encourage young people to train in early childhood education.

"If it's something they really want to do, then I would say; 'Go ahead, study the field where your heart is.' But it would be with this caveat: There is no guarantee that you're going to be able to find a job that is going to pay you what you deserve to be paid," she says.

Echoing others in the field, Dwyer says she hopes that grim analysis will change over the next five to 10 years, as the federal and provincial governments implement a promised national child-care program.

Prime Minister Paul Martin's government has promised to spend \$5 billion to add up to 250,000 quality, regulated child-care spaces over five years.

Child-care specialists say the package must include measures to improve wages and working conditions, and also to encourage young people to train in early-childhood development. The latest report on wages and working conditions among regulated child-care workers says only a tiny minority -those working in municipally-operated, unionized shops - earn good compensation.

For a handful of workers, it is as much as \$70,000 a year, according to the report by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council. The vast majority earn much less. The average annual income was \$21,000 in 2000 for those working outside the home, and \$15,000 for those inside the home, the report said.

Only about 20 per cent of children under the age of seven are in regulated child care.

The problem is that pay levels, though subsidized by the Ontario government in licensed care with so-called wage enhancement and equity grants, remain largely dependent on parental fees. Those fees are already expensive, and can range anywhere from about \$8,000 a year for full-time care for pre-schoolers to more than \$13,000 for infant care.

- reprinted from the Ottawa Citizen

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