

Child-care facing cash crunch: Higher salaries would require hike in fees, day care operator says [CA-ON] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Karen Eilersen would love to be able to pay her skilled child-care staff what they're worth. But, the way Ontario's flawed day-care system operates now, parents wouldn't be able to afford the fees she would have to charge to boost salaries, says the Barrie child-care provider.

"My kindergarten teacher doesn't get paid what a kindergarten teacher in the public school system would get," said Eilersen, owner of the Discovery Child Care Centre, a Barrie facility licensed for 70 children a day.

"I would have to double the salary. Wages are 75 per cent of our budget. In order to pay the staff better, I would have to raise fees."

As it is, many parents are struggling to come up with the \$600-plus they can expect to pay for a month of full-time day care. That's if they can find quality care when they need it.

"I know there is a lack of licensed child care and the waiting lists are quite long," said Eilersen, who is also president of the 300-member provincial Association of Day care Operators. "It depends on the age of the child, but generally the wait is six months to a year."

Infant care, which is more time-consuming and, therefore, more expensive, is usually toughest to find, she says. A waiting list of 30 or 40 is not uncommon. Parents looking for subsidized day care face formidable obstacles.

"Lack of subsidy is a constant issue," said Kath Gradwell, co-ordinator of Georgian College's early childhood education program.

"Government money always seems to get allocated and re-allocated. (But) it doesn't always come to the people who need it most in a timely fashion."

New eligibility requirements make it harder for families to qualify, and those who do qualify may have trouble getting the subsidy, as municipalities, including the County of Simcoe, hit the bottom of their funding pools.

A local freeze on day care subsidies will put the chill on new applicants as early as next week, said Eilersen. "No new families can be put on subsidies until the freeze is lifted," she said, "because the county's run out of money."

Simcoe County is not unique in dealing with a child-care conundrum. Children throughout the province are being shortchanged by chronic underfunding of child-care services, according to a study conducted by the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

An analysis of child-care service plans submitted to the provincial government by 10 municipalities shows the system of subsidized, regulated child care is "in crisis," said Brian O'Keefe of CUPE Ontario.

Since 1995, the Conservative government has cut \$90 million from the system and thereby "created a crisis in child care," O'Keefe said. "All of the municipalities have identified very severe pressures in all areas of the system, pressures of crisis proportions."

The 90 students a year who enroll in Georgian College's ECE program in Orillia are well aware of the financial limitations they face in their chosen field, says Gradwell.

But, she said, they also recognize the importance of quality education in the early years and "have a genuine desire to make sure our children are well cared for."

"In the perfect world, I would love to see early childhood educators compensated adequately for their education and their level of responsibility," said Gradwell. "They're looking after very important persons -- children."

Despite evidence documenting the value of early childhood education as an investment in the future, critics say the government has failed to take steps to create integrated, universal, early childhood education programs.

Earlier this month, a report by Dr. Fraser Mustard and Margaret McCain slammed the government for not adequately responding to their commissioned recommendations from three years ago.

According to Karen Eilersen, "the whole system needs to be revamped."

"The government needs to play a bigger role" and improve supports for working parents and qualified child-care staff, she said.

"I think it's going to be a lengthy process," said Eilersen. "We just have to keep advocating and fighting."

Children's Services Minister Brenda Elliott offered little immediate hope of a cash infusion, saying only that she would consider it. "We are spending a great deal of money on child care -- \$700 million is a lot of money," Elliott said. "Certainly, there are improvements that can be made and I'm certainly considering those."

New Democrat Marilyn Churley says the Tories want it both ways. "You can't have a government that says, on one hand, everybody should go out to work and support themselves, and, on the other hand, not supply the child care that's needed," said Churley.

Critics warn the system could reach a point of collapse, noting those who can't afford to pay the full freight either do without child care or, in many cases, are forced to find inferior care.

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Region: Ontario ^[2]

Tags: subsidy ^[3]

affordability ^[4]

funding ^[5]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/03/07/child-care-facing-cash-crunch-higher-salaries-would-require-hike> [2]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7856> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/subsidy> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/affordability> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding>