

Day cares face dire straits: Many operating with critical shortage of qualified child-care workers [CA-MB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

A critical shortage of early childhood educators in Manitoba has left hundreds of licensed day-care centres operating without qualified staff and unable to meet provincial standards. One Winnipeg day-care centre may be forced to close as a result of the lack of qualified workers.

Child-care experts say the shortage also means children aren't receiving the education and care they would get at the hands of a trained professional.

"It's like telling a parent there will be no Grade 1 teacher available to teach their child in school, but their child will be taught by a teaching assistant, instead," said Pat Wege, executive director of the Manitoba Child Care Association (MCCA).

"That wouldn't be acceptable to parents and this shouldn't be either. This problem is huge."

According to MCCA statistics, 296 day-care centres recently reported they cannot fill 182 qualified early childhood educator positions.

There are 537 centres in the province and Wege suspects many of them are also in need of staff, so the actual demand for qualified workers is likely much higher.

Provincial regulations stipulate that two-thirds of the staff at every licensed day-care centre must be early childhood educators with either Level II or III qualifications, meaning they possess either a diploma or degree in early childhood education. Day-care centres unable to maintain that level of staffing must apply for a variance to their licence to remain open.

According to MCCA statistics, 33 per cent of licensed centres in the province were operating with a variance in 2000. This year, the MCCA found that number had jumped to 40 per cent.

Board members of the McPhillips Children's Centre know all too well how difficult it is to find and keep trained staff. Chairwoman Maureen Olafson said the 11-year-old centre faces closure at the end of the month because they've been unable to hire qualified staff to care for the centre's 16 kids.

The centre lost three staff members in the summer of 2000 and, despite an aggressive advertising campaign, no one with the needed credentials has applied. The centre has been functioning on a licensing variance ever since.

The threat of losing the licence and funding has left Shirley Genereux scrambling to find a suitable place for her daughter, Casey, 4. Genereux said she likes McPhillips Children's Centre because it is smaller and more intimate than other day-care centres. "I feel sick to my stomach about this," she said. "It's a small centre, it can't compete."

Red River College trains most of the early childhood educators working in the province. For the last three years, the program has been open to 60 students and has been running near or at capacity each year.

The problem, said Wege, is that many trained child-care workers leave the profession after just a few years because the pay is dismal. Wege conceded the situation has improved over the last few years, thanks to an infusion of cash from the NDP government. In 2000, the Doer government increased funding to the day-care system by \$9 million to help attract and maintain skilled workers. But this year, Wege noted, the increase fell to just \$4.7 million. And while she's pleased the current government has directed some attention to the needs of the child-care system, more still needs to be done.

In 1998, a new early childhood educator could expect to be paid about \$9.50 an hour. Today, the starting wage hovers around \$11.56 per hour.

"It's not enough," she said. "The system has been neglected for years. (By dedicating fewer dollars to the system this year) the government has missed an opportunity to continue that progress. We're just establishing another low pay ceiling and the problem will continue."

A spokeswoman for Family Services Minister Tim Sale said the government remains committed to improving the system.

"The child-care system is a priority," she said. "We've taken significant steps to address the problems but we can't undo a decade of underfunding in a short period of time."

- Reprinted from the Winnipeg Free Press.

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