

PEI early childhood educators push for more money, respect [CA-PE] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

After seven years, the owner of a thriving childcare business in Summerside is selling her operation because she's frustrated at losing so many of her trained staff to better-paying jobs in department stores and the Summerside Tax Centre.

Laura Cannon, who runs Kare-A-Lot Child Care Centre on Poplar Street, says it's an embarrassment to have to pay college-trained employees barely more than minimum wage when grocery store clerks earn as much or more. "It's just ripped my heart out, but I've got no choice."

Her only source of funding is parents' fees, and many can't afford to pay more than \$85 a week. Families are struggling to make ends meet, even with both parents working, she said.

To pay childcare workers, who have completed two or three years of early childhood development programs, what they deserve, fees would have to be raised to \$220-\$225 a week, said Cannon. The only government support available is directed at parents, who receive wage subsidies to cover part of the cost of their children's enrollment.

"Over 75 per cent of my revenues go to staff," and it's still not enough to pay them a decent wage, said Cannon.

"I have one person on staff who has a B.A. in early childhood education."

The Early Childhood Development Association of P.E.I. and the P.E.I. government are attempting to fix glaring deficiencies in the system and have used the groundbreaking national report, *For Our Children, A Strategy for Healthy Child Development*, released in November, as a starting point.

The association has developed its own plan of action and recommendations, called "Unlocking the Early Childhood Sector", targeted at the Health and Social Services and the Education ministers.

The association's recommendations form the basis for a membership meeting taking place in Charlottetown, Saturday and Sunday.

High on the list of priorities is addressing the "poverty-level" wages paid to childcare workers, to arrest a growing exodus of trained professionals, says Cindy Donahue, provincial president for the 400-member association. A crisis is rapidly overwhelming the sector as more and more professional childcare workers decide there is no future in minimum-wage work, leaving the field increasingly to people without post-secondary training.

Quality is steadily eroding and that will have an impact on the emotional and intellectual development of children during the crucial early years, to age five, said Donahue.

"The early childhood sector, which provides a critical support service for working parents, has been unable to develop the resource base required for high quality care with the resources provided by parent fees," said Donahue, in a news release.

Members within the child care sector are still battling the persistent image of child care workers as babysitters. Babysitting wages are all many parents are able to afford without greater government participation in the system, said Donahue.

Childcare workers at the forum will relate stories about the impact of low wages and poor working conditions on their professions.

There are 4,200 licensed day care spaces in P.E.I.

-Reprinted from The Journal Pioneer (PEI)

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