

Early learning programs need more funding — daycare group ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

About two dozen people protested Tuesday morning outside Province House, calling on the government to provide funding for early learning.

Kathleen Couture, chairwoman of the Nova Scotia Child Care Association, said members "are protesting something that's been protested since 1968."

"Nova Scotia needs an early learning and care system," she said. "They need a system where every child in Nova Scotia has access to quality care. Early learning ... is the most important for brain development."

She said investing in learning for young children is "a sound economic investment. You invest in the early years and there will be money for the government to do all those other projects they want."

The group wants the government to commit to an early care and learning system. The move would save the government money because there would not be as much need for educational assistants and other support in the public school system, Couture said.

"If they want to save money for education, teach (children) when they're below five. Bring them to the quality early childhood education centres with trained early childhood education specialists who can help them so they're better learners when they get to Primary."

Couture said two-thirds of children entering Grade Primary are at risk of having trouble in school, and a third of those will have literacy issues.

"We can help that. And when they get to the education system, there will be higher numbers of graduates and (fewer) teachers' assistants needed.

"A higher number of children will go off to post-secondary education. The benefits will be tremendous."

Couture said other provinces have better systems than Nova Scotia, where early education costs \$7 to \$10 a day.

"Nova Scotia needs to step up to the plate and look after our children."

She said the province has some early learning centres, but they only look after about five per cent of children under the age of five. Couture said her organization wants a core-funded system from the province, not subsidized spaces.

Sue Wolstenholme started her career in the early learning and care system in 1968. She retired in 2000 but continues to push the government for support.

Wolstenholme said the government needs to provide core funding so there are only limited fees for parents.

"Right now, the costs are astronomical, and many families can't afford it."

She said the fees can run from \$30 to \$40 a day.

"This is a financial investment," Wolstenholme said of the need for government funding.

"Nobel Prize-winning economists have assessed the return on investment of early learning and care programs and have documented the fact that there is a major financial return because (the programs) prepare children for school and for life in a way that nothing else can."

Community Services Minister Denise Peterson-Rafuse met briefly with the protesters. She said afterwards that while the government wants to continue to help, core funding is not something to be expected in next week's budget because the government is looking to provide a balanced budget.

-reprinted from the Chronicle Herald

Region: Nova Scotia ^[2]

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