

Operators warn of crisis in out-of-school care programs ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Growing wait lists, fewer spaces and an "inequitable" provincial wage enhancement program is creating a crisis in Calgary's out-of-school care programs, say operators.

"We have no space to offer them and if we did have the space, we don't have the staffing," said Staci Brown, president of Adventurers School Age Care and co-chair of School Age Directors Association of Alberta Calgary Chapter.

"And if we did have the staffing, they're all leaving because they're going to daycare because they can make more with the wage top-ups," Brown added.

She said operators of before- and after-school programs are finding it difficult to attract and retain staff because they can't compete with wages offered by daycare operators.

The province's wage enhancement program tops up wages for daycare and school care workers, between \$2.14 and \$6.62 an hour. That wage enhancement, however, is capped at 181 hours a month for daycare workers and 100 hours a month for out-of-school care workers.

And that differential is making it difficult for out-of-school operators to attract and retain quality staff, said Ryan Sabourin, director of the school care program at St. Brigid School in Calgary's northwest.

"From our perspective, it makes it difficult to run day-to-day," said Sabourin. "When (staff) change over all the time you're constantly training and starting over from Square 1. You can't build traction.

"We spend up to seven hours a day with some of the kids, so we have a huge impact on their lives and the direction their lives can take," he added. "So if that element isn't there it's hard to justify calling yourself a quality program if the relationship aspect is missing."

A spokeswoman with Alberta Human Services said the 100-hour cap for out-of-school programs was set in 2009 when out-of-school programs mainly provided before and after care and when workers only averaged 70 hours a month.

Kathy Ducharme said the province was unaware out-of-school operators were facing challenges, but was willing to work with operators to address any deficiencies.

"We're also planning to communicate with operators to ensure they are recording staff hours accurately, so that we get an honest reflection of what's going on out there because we don't know," said Ducharme.

"We're going to have to go back to all operators and just remind them how important it is to record the hours accurately," she added. "Because that's how we determine the criteria for our programs. We didn't realize there was an issue."

-reprinted from the Calgary Herald

Region: Alberta ^[2]

Tags: quality ^[3]

 funding ^[4]

 staff ^[5]

 school-age ^[6]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/13/12/operators-warn-crisis-out-school-care-programs>

[2] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7859>

[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/quality>

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

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

[6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/school-age>