

More recognition is needed for early childhood educators ^[1]

Author: Sommers, Jan

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EXCERPTS:

It's 5:30 a.m., and my two-year-old son and I are sitting at the kitchen table in the early glow of a spring morning eating cereal.

I am barely awake, but my little blond firecracker is full of life and ready to greet the day.

"Let's sing 'ama ina-dell mommy,'" he says. I can't quite make out what he said, but it quickly becomes obvious as his little voice sings the full chorus of the Farmer in the Dell. I am slightly amazed; we've never sung this at home. He then tells me a story about how his teachers made him giggle and they are silly when they sing this song.

I work in the emergency room and my husband is a medical officer of health and runs a family practice. Our two sons attend Near to Me Daycare in Truro. I cannot in anyway put into words how vitally crucial the loving and diligent staff at the daycare are in our family's lives. This little moment in time, at our family table, was one of the many gifts we receive as a result of their commitment to quality early childhood education (ECE). It wasn't easy going back to work, but knowing that my children have a safe place to play, learn and grow played a major part in my decision.

We count ourselves lucky to have access to quality daycare. For many families in Nova Scotia this is not the case. Before having my own children, I really didn't understand the importance of ECE to our province. Reading this, perhaps you don't really see the relevance of affordable quality childcare to your life right now. If you pay taxes; are concerned about the economy, gender equality, crime, teen pregnancy, or high school drop-outs; or if you employ or work with women, this issue impacts you.

Studies have shown time and time again that society saves money every time we invest in quality early childcare. In fact, the return on dollars invested in ECE is so good, that investment companies in the United States are providing quality childcare in exchange for a portion of the funds saved by governments in societal costs later.

The societal savings in high-risk groups can be as much as seventeen times the initial cost of daycare. Children who attend quality ECE programs are more likely to graduate from high school and attend post secondary institutions. They are less likely to commit crime, become pregnant or require extra services during the school years.

Parents, particularly women, are more likely to return to work and contribute to growing the economy and the overall tax base when they have access to quality and affordable childcare. Single mothers are better able to find meaningful employment and lift their families out of poverty. International leaders in family friendly policies (Denmark) are among the most financially successful in the world.

Given the importance of ECE to society, one would assume that early childhood educators, like those who care for my sons, would receive a salary reflective of the impact of their work. You might be surprised to learn that most ECE workers are paid at the same rate as the servers at your local fast-food restaurant. Although their work is equally important to their counterparts in the public school system, they do not enjoy any of the benefits teachers in the province enjoy. This wage disparity raises many questions about the value we place on what is typically considered "woman's work" and the value we as a society place on young children.

Worthy Wage Day was marked on May 1. It is a day dedicated to drawing attention to wage disparity for ECE workers. Competitive wages are key to attracting qualified staff. I hope that I have inspired you to speak with local, provincial and federal leaders regarding the importance of investing in quality childcare for Nova Scotian families.

Recently Nova Scotia opened three publicly funded ECE centres, with a fourth slated to open later this year. I am hopeful that this represents a shift in public policy and that governments will have the political courage to continue to increase investment in ECE. The paybacks may not be immediate, but you can be sure, they will be immense.

Jan Sommers is a local physician. She lives with her two young sons and husband Ryan Sommers in Truro.

-reprinted from Truro Daily News

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