

Early Childhood Educators to Federal leaders: Your child care platforms won't work without us ^[1]

Opinion

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EXCERPTS

Here in Ontario, parents seeking a child care space may have to pay well over \$1000 a month, upon return to work after parental leave. Fees are similarly high in many parts of the country. Some parents may assume this high fee means that Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) and other staff working at their child's centre are paid handsomely.

They wouldn't be the only ones who have assumptions about the child care workforce. Three of the four main federal political parties — NDP, Liberals and Greens — have child care platforms. This is fantastic and long overdue. But even these platforms are silent on the issues of the child care workforce. I suppose we should be thankful that they even have a platform on child care at all, since our current government, the Conservatives, do not.

And with sky-high fees for parents, it's understandable that affordability has become a central part of the child care conversation this election. However when you take a good look at the situation facing the child care workforce you realize the need for consideration. And these shiny child care platforms aren't going to build themselves; they are going to need the work of dedicated ECEs to make them reality.

ECEs are the key to quality child care programs, and yet we are underpaid and many do not have benefits or a pension. In fact, less than half of the child care workforce have access to a pension. Many ECEs face split shifts or permanent part-time positions. How can any profession cultivate a quality workforce under such realities? Sadly, ECEs have become accustomed to such things.

As an ECE you are faced with difficult decisions. Usually finding a full-time, permanent position is difficult, so we accept contracts in hopes of it becoming permanent. And when it doesn't, we become supply staff at many different centres and attempt to piece together enough hours to get by. If you do find a full-time, permanent position, you hope it is with a non-profit centre and not a centre that makes a profit from parent fees. Since commercial centres need to make a profit, ECE staff are sometimes paid just above minimum wage.

But even non-profit centres face the impossible task of trying keep fees affordable for parents and pay decent wages to staff. Without proper funding into a child care system this is an impossible balance, a zero sum game.

Can you guess who picks up the tab?

Underfunded centres often have to get by without adequate supplies. ECEs are professionals and we take pride in what we do, so if we need something for the curriculum we've planned we buy it, using our already stretched paychecks. Despite the Liberals promise of a teacher and ECE tax credit, personally, I think it would be better if centres had enough funding so that educators didn't need to shell out their own money in the first place.

ECEs are trained and skilled professionals. Educators are putting time, energy, money, care, into a system that gives them little back. The result is often burnout and staff turnover, which is not in the best interests of anyone looking to build a quality service.

Without passionate ECEs who plan curriculum, teach it, and provide the emotional support young children need, where would child care be? Families count on us to help care and teach their children. The economy depends on us to provide parents with the ability to go to work. With ECEs being the key to quality child care, how can any political party be silent on the child care workforce? Their child care platforms can't work without us.

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