

Daycare cash for front-line workers, says minister ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Nova Scotia's education minister says money designated for increased wages for early childhood educators will not be allowed to be used for anything else.

The Liberal government's budget, which passed last week, includes \$6.6 million more for raises for front-line workers and more subsidized daycare spaces.

At \$12.84, Nova Scotia has the lowest hourly rate of any province and is almost \$4 below the national average of \$16.50. Daily subsidy rates for low-income parents have increased by just \$2.25 in the last 10 years.

Details coming soon

Now that the budget has passed, Casey said department staff will meet with sector members so they understand how the money will be rolled out. While the minister still won't provide specifics on that, she did confirm that the money for wages will go to those on the front lines.

"It will be very clear, whether [the money] goes directly to the workers or goes through the operators, that it will be designated for wage and salary increases," she said Thursday at Province House.

There are currently 3,970 families active in the subsidy program, which translates to 4,956 children. The subsidy program cost \$16.9 million in 2015-16. Casey said she believes the new money is enough to make a real difference.

Preliminary numbers crunched by her department lead her to believe they can respond to the need for more subsidized spaces while also bringing wages closer to the national average.

Is it enough?

But some people aren't sure it will be enough.

"It sounds like a really great big number, however there are also a lot of early childhood educators in this province and there are a lot of families," said Lisa Davies, the executive director of a Dartmouth child-care centre and spokeswoman for the Non-Profit Directors Association.

Davies said access to daycare spaces can be extremely limited at times, particularly for infant spaces and in rural communities.

There is much demand for subsidized spaces, she said, and right now the program is only helping some people.

"A lot of the people that are receiving a subsidy are folks who are, perhaps, not working, who are receiving other assistance from other sources, as well."

Gaps remain in the system

There are also parents who make a low wage but still make too much to qualify for the subsidy, she said. Meanwhile, rates keep going up to cover the cost of staff wages, rent, food and other bills.

"We keep raising those rates but the government support for those families hasn't increased ... in quite some time," said Davies.

The Non-Profit Directors Association is advocating for a publicly funded system to ensure everyone gets equal access to what is proving to be an important resource, said Davies.

Retention a problem

Michelle Lohnes, an early childhood educator with more than 20 years of experience, said she was pleased when she heard about the government's increase, but she's waiting for more details.

"I think they understand that they have to do something."

The low pay rate is a particular problem when it comes to attracting and retaining staff, Lohnes said.

"I've been around long enough to see the ramifications of that; I've seen some really good teachers get lost or they leave because they just can't live on the salaries.

A sector with long-term impacts

Jane Cawley, executive director of the Nova Scotia College of Early Childhood Education, said an entry level salary for someone with a diploma working at one of the three child-care centres the college runs is \$30,000 a year, and that would be considered high in Nova Scotia.

Cawley worries not enough people still understand the importance of early childhood education, which research is starting to show can help as early as infancy.

"The critical importance — and I'm talking about positive outcomes — positive outcomes for adults hinges on positive experiences in early childhood."

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