

Shortage of childhood educators anticipated

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The province didn't do its homework when it implemented the full-day learning program, according to the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care.

The initiative, developed to send four and five-year-olds to a full day of school five days a week, was rolled out in a handful of elementary schools across Ontario this fall and is expected to be in every school by 2016.

While getting younger children into the system earlier is expected to create 20,000 early childhood educator positions when the program is in full swing, many organizations question who will be teaching them with a shortage of early childhood education (ECE) graduates and many experienced workers leaving the field.

Fred Hahn, president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which is partnering with the coalition to insist the government create a strategic labour force plan to meet employment demands, said schools will find it difficult to fill 20,000 ECE positions when the province's schools are only spitting out 2,500 graduates a year.

"Another reality is over 40 per cent of ECEs don't work in their field

anymore either," he said. "We think the full-day program is great, but, by the third year, they aren't going to have enough ECEs for the classroom or the community sector."

Low wages and lack of benefits is forcing qualified ECEs to leave community-based positions in day cares, he added.

To make the situation worse, school boards offer higher wages, benefits and a pension plan that will only cause those working in the community sector to move to more attractive jobs with the schools.

Kinark Child and Family Services ECE Shawna Lee agrees there is a shortage and a large gap in wages and benefits since the field is not regulated.

"Some ECEs make 50 cents over minimum wage and significantly more see the public sector day cares as a stepping stone to get into the school board," she said. "It is one of the least-valued but most-needed positions in the community."

The school boards may not experience the shortage since their ECE positions are attractive, but this will only create havoc in community day cares since they will find it hard to hire needed staff.

In York Region, there are day

cares that are already having a hard time filling vacant positions, she added.

She would like to see the province create a level playing field with the creation of a labour force strategy that would make ECE wages, benefits and access to a pension the same across the board.

"The fact is, if money isn't the issue, more people will be attracted to the field," she said.

She would also like to see an effort made to attract more students to the post-secondary ECE courses.

Expanding apprenticeship funds for more than just traditional trades would increase access to ECE programs rather than forcing people to take night courses while retaining a full-time job to pay the bills, Mr. Hahn said.

However, he admits it would take new funding to allow ECEs access to a pension plan. For every \$1 invested by the government, \$2.42 will be returned to the economy, not only because ECE wages would be increased, but more parents would be willing to enter the workforce if there were more qualified staff able to care for their children, he added.

This investment has happened in Manitoba in the last few years

and seems to be working, he said.

"Hoping everything will work out is just not enough: we need a plan."

The Ontario Ministry of Education is proud of the job opportunities the full-day kindergarten program is expected to create across the province, spokesperson Gary Wheeler said.

However, it is aware of the need to attract qualified people to the profession during the next five years to ensure the education and community sectors have enough to fill the demand for the early educators while allowing enough time for institutions to train and retrain them.

Right now, the ministry has paired up with the Ministry of Colleges, Training and Universities as well as the College of Early Childhood Educators to develop a strategy to attract more students to the profession and help others retrain in the ECE field, he added.

Nearly 700 have returned to retrain to become an ECE through the second career program and there are 5,829 students enrolled in ECE programs, Mr. Wheeler said.

"We will continue to work to identify ways to attract more to the profession," he said.



STAFF PHOTO/NICK IWANYSHYN

Seneca early childhood educator Pauline Tuck works with students. According to the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, the province didn't do its homework when it rolled out all-day kindergarten this fall.

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