



JAMES MURRAY/OBSERVER

Education for educators: Okanagan College early childhood education student Cailey Ukrainec reading to a group of pre-school children at Ladybug Landing.

Caught in a conundrum

Child care: System falters without spaces, trained staff.

By Tracy Hughes
OBSERVER STAFF

Workers, employers, parents, students and educators in the early child education field feel they are caught in a downward spiral of decline in the system.

Salaries are low, so students are not choosing early childhood education as a viable option, but demand for quality child care is higher than ever. Licensed child care centres are struggling to meet demand, but without qualified staff, they can't offer spaces for children.

And many parents are already feeling overburdened by trying to find quality, affordable care for their children as they need to work to make ends meet.

"I think we are at a critical place in the way of early childhood care," says Deb Jarvis, coordinator of the early childhood education program at Okanagan College.

"There's a huge demand for care but not enough people qualified, in fact more and more people are leaving the field because the wages are better elsewhere. It's a tough place to be."

No one knows this better than Leigh-Anne Chapman, owner of Ladybug Landing Child Care Centre. She is overwhelmed with children's names on the waiting list for spaces, but can't find enough staff to run her centre at full capacity.

Licensed child care centres have strict limits on the staff-to-

child-ratio, which varies depending on the age of the children.

"I have eight licensed spaces I could be filling, but I can't because I have no one qualified to work," says Chapman.

"It's a constant stress because if I get one of my staff say she is pregnant or calls in sick, I want to cry because I just can't find replacements."

Jarvis agrees, noting many of Salmon Arm's licensed child care centres are only able to keep the doors open on a regular basis by applying for special exemptions to allow non-licensed caregivers to fill in.

"I know there are a lot of programs being run with variances,

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Graduates hired immediately

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because there is no other option. Otherwise the centre would have to shut down for a day or a week, and what would that do to the parents and children counting on them?"

All six upcoming early childhood education graduates will walk straight into employment.

Jarvis says a recent survey of jobs at the local Employment Centre showed 12 openings for qualified ECE, however, at a pay rate of \$12 to \$13 an hour, potential employees may be motivated to look elsewhere.

While some people would say the solution is simply to pay ECEs more, Chapman notes that cost gets put onto the backs of working parents and day care costs are already a significant burden. Two children in full time day care can cost parents \$1,500 to \$2,000 per month.

"Many parents can't afford not to work, but they reach a point where they can't afford care either," says Chapman.

"Their needs to be some shifts in how we look at child care and how it is delivered," adds Jarvis, who encourages parents to make politicians aware of their dissatis-

Students can get \$4,000 back

In order to keep the Early Childhood Education program viable at the Salmon Arm Campus of Okanagan College, the program needs to attract 15 students for the upcoming September entrance.

But for students considering a career in the field, there can be a considerable bonus in terms of subsidizing the educational costs. The total cost of the program is \$6,000, however, students can receive a bursary for \$4,000 of the cost should they successfully complete their studies.

The first local class will graduate and be able to get a basic licence after Christmas, and then can take one additional semester of special-needs education, which will be done in the evenings and on weekends, so students can be employed in child care during the day.

"This was a pilot program and if we don't get enough students starting, we may not get the go ahead," says Deb Jarvis, the program's instructor.

"We know there is real demand out there for qualified employees; the graduates now are all walking right into jobs, but we need to get the students in the seats for the program to continue."

faction with the current system.

In the meantime, students in the ECE program are not worried about finding employment, but wish their jobs carried more respect, both in reputation and financial terms.

"I'm doing this because I love children, they are our future and I believe each child, deserves a good chance at development even if their parents have to work,"

says Stacey Chapman, who is not related to Leigh-Anne.

Cailey Ukrainec, another ECE student, says the work is rewarding because they know they make a difference in the lives of families.

"It's much more than playing with children. The early years are critical in terms of what kind of adult that child will become. What could be more important?"