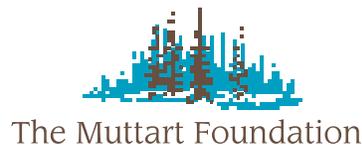




Roadmap to a Quality Early Learning and Child Care System in Alberta



Acknowledgements

Ms. Jane Beach served as the lead researcher for the policy roadmap. Ms. Beach also designed and facilitated the virtual engagements with stakeholders held during summer 2021.

The roadmap partners would like to thank the stakeholders who participated in the virtual engagements. Their insights and experiences informed the roadmap and provide the basis for building an early learning and child care system in Alberta that meets the needs of all children and their families.

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Introduction

The massive disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted for many Canadians the vital roles that governments can play in shielding them from economic and social hardships. They further revealed for governments the importance of strong economic and social policies not only as stabilizing influences during a time of crisis, but also as the foundations for recovery as families, communities and businesses look to the future and potentially new ways of working together.

Not surprisingly, early learning and child care has taken central stage in much of the discussion of Canada's economic and social recovery. Governments at all levels have recognized what child care researchers and advocates have long known and argued: that high quality early learning and child care remains an essential foundation for modern societies and economies given its support for young children's development and well-being, the full participation of women in the labour market and the building of equity and social inclusion.

The federal [Budget 2021 - A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth and Resilience](#) placed early learning and child care at its heart. It outlined a bold and innovative vision for the federal government to work collaboratively with provincial and territorial governments to transform the current patchwork of services into a publicly funded and managed system that will meet children's and families' needs in ways not previously seen in much of Canada. Budget 2021's historic new spending of \$27.2 billion over the next five years, which are added to the previous federal commitments under the 2017 *Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework*, represents the most significant investments in child care in Canadian history.

Seven provinces and one territory reached system building agreements to work with the federal government prior to the fall federal election. British Columbia was the first province to do so in July 2021, with the provinces of Manitoba and Saskatchewan signing agreements in August. The Government of Alberta signed its historic system building agreement on November 15, 2021 at the YMCA Shirley Stollery Child Care in Edmonton.

These are exciting times for Alberta's early learning and child care sector. Over the next five years, the federal government will transfer \$3.8 billion to Alberta to support early learning and child care system building. These investments have the potential to transform early learning and child care in the province and make high-quality, affordable regulated child care available to all young children and their families. And while building an early learning and child care system will involve a significant amount of work, for many partners, over an extended period of time, the benefits will extend for generations.

Why do we need an early learning and child care system?

Close to two decades of international and Canadian child care policy research show the limitations of market-based approaches for organizing, financing and delivering early learning and child care. In Alberta, as in much of the rest of Canada, the primary reliance on child care markets has resulted in challenges for both families and service providers. It has led to a child care sector that is underfunded and which struggles to meet the needs of children and their families.

Regulated child care remains unaffordable for many families and especially so for those with low-incomes. Services are not available in some communities and unevenly distributed in others. Many are of a modest quality. Private individuals, non-profit organizations, businesses and corporations take on much of the responsibility for developing and operating services and rely on parent fees to cover the bulk of service costs. Early childhood educators are modestly paid for their important work, commonly face difficult and challenging work environments and lack the respect and recognition they deserve.

Simply increasing the number of regulated spaces and trying to make child care more affordable for families through further investments in a market-based approach will not build a child care system, nor will it ensure that high-quality services, staffed by qualified educators, are equitably available to all children and their families. New approaches are needed which recognize early learning and child care as a 'public good' and place an emphasis on the public funding, planning and management of services to meet children's and their families' needs. It is these approaches that are the focus of the current roadmap.

How the roadmap was developed

The 'Roadmap to a Quality Early Learning and Child Care System in Alberta' is a collaborative effort of the Canadian Child Care Federation and its Alberta Leaders' Caucus, Child Care Now and its Alberta Chapter, the YMCA of Northern Alberta and the Muttart Foundation. Its focus is on regulated early learning and child care for children 0 to 6 years of age, although the roadmap partners recognize the importance of school age care, regulated and supported through the Ministry of Children's Services, and Early Childhood Services, funded through the Ministry of Education. Both of these will need to be more closely integrated with child care as the province builds a comprehensive early learning and child care system.

The roadmap reflects the findings from virtual engagements with early learning and child care stakeholders, held in summer 2021, as well as the many years of Canadian and international research and policy development in respect to system building. It further incorporates ideas and learnings from three similar policy roadmaps in support of system building: the [Roadmap for \\$10aDay Child Care in BC](#), developed by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and Early Childhood Educators of BC in spring 2021; the [Roadmap to Universal Child Care in Ontario](#), prepared by the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario in July 2021; and the national policy roadmap developed by Child Care Now, [Canada's Roadmap to Affordable Child Care for All](#), and its 10 elements of system-building. Four of the roadmap partners further participated in parallel work in summer 2021 to draft a policy roadmap for the province of Saskatchewan.

The roadmap is a forward-looking document. It is intended to promote discussion and generate further ideas about how Alberta can build an early learning and child care system. The roadmap cannot and does not cover all of the policy actions required to move toward a comprehensive system of early learning and child care. The policy actions it recommends are essential starting points, each of which will be strengthened and informed by further discussion over the coming months.

The roadmap partners recognize that building an early learning and child care system will take time and will require the ongoing review and analysis of the best approaches needed to meet the needs of all children and their families. They further anticipate that the provincial and federal governments will work closely with other levels of government, early learning and child care stakeholders including parents, and other interested groups throughout the system building work in ways that are transparent and meaningful.

Indigenous early learning and child care

The roadmap does not propose specific policy actions linked to Indigenous early learning and child care. The roadmap partners recognize and affirm the rights of Indigenous governments to design and develop early learning and child care systems and services that are distinctions-based and self-governed, consistent with the vision and principles set out in the [Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#) and commitments under the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#).

The Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework lays out a shared vision, principles and a path forward for Indigenous early learning and child care across Canada. Its overarching vision includes a distinctions-based approach that recognizes the unique priorities of First Nations, Inuit and the Métis Nation.

Moving forward, the roadmap partners call on the Alberta government and all early learning and child care stakeholders to ensure that provincial system building work is guided by meaningful and collaborative discussions with First Nations, Inuit and Métis governments, as well as with Indigenous organizations and communities. The work that lies ahead must respond to the calls to action of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) and the calls for justice set out in [The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#).

The roadmap document

The roadmap is organized into four sections:

Section 1: Ideas and vision proposes a vision and principles to guide early learning and child care policy development and provision.

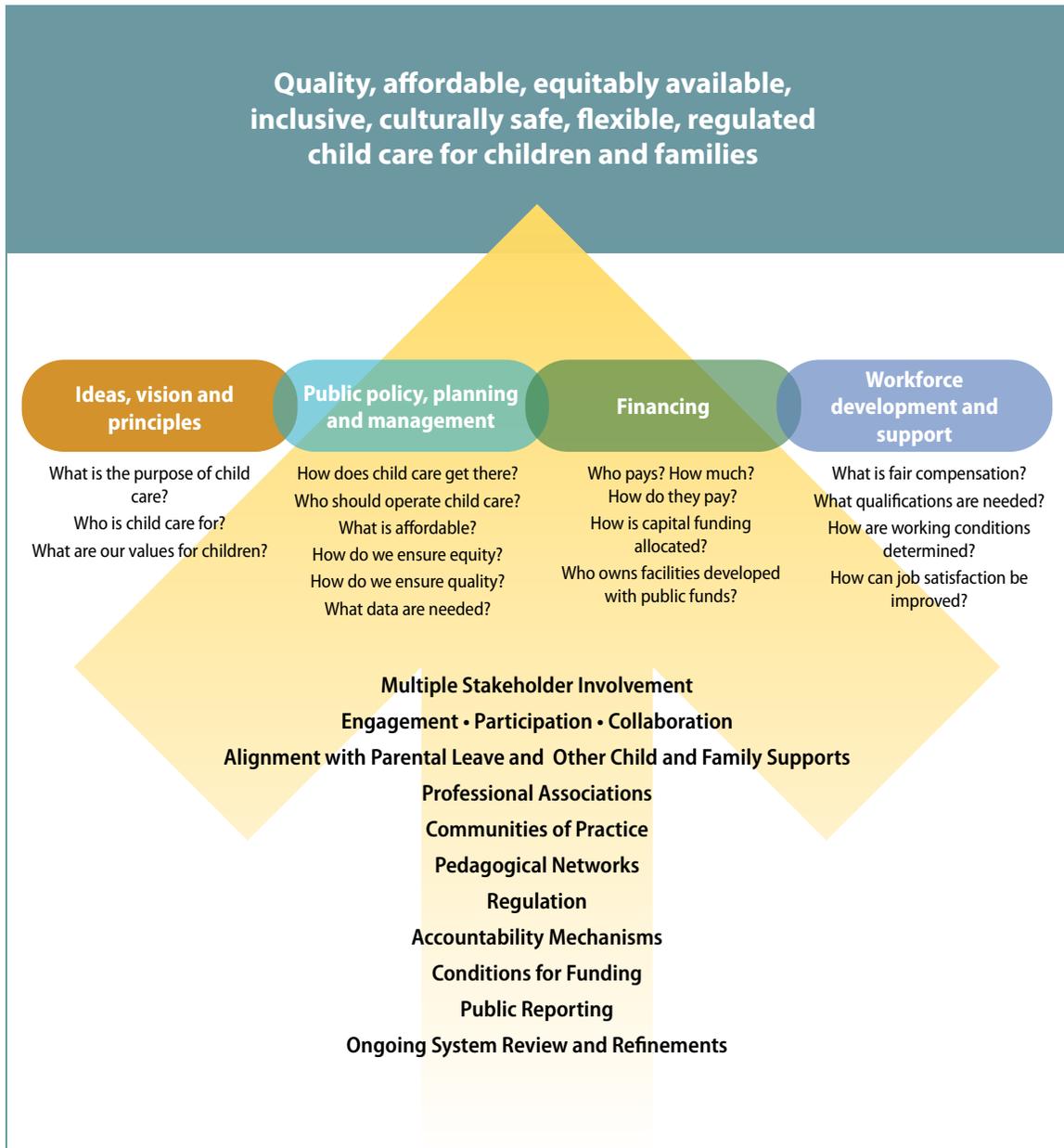
Section 2: Public policy, planning and management outlines the role of government in system building, including governance, expansion and service delivery.

Section 3: Financing examines system financing, considers affordability for parents and families, and proposes new funding approaches and accountability measures to support program sustainability and quality provision.

Section 4: Workforce development and support discusses and proposes policy actions to support the essential roles well-prepared, and appropriately compensated early childhood educators play in the delivery of high-quality early learning and child care.

Each section includes background information, a summary of the current Alberta context and the proposed policy actions in support of system building.

A Schematic Diagram of the Process for Building a Quality Early Learning and Child Care System in Alberta



The above diagram shows the stakeholders, key areas for consideration and core issues that will form part of the process of building an Alberta early learning and child care system. Early learning and child care system building is complex and involves both technical and value considerations. It demands a vision of the system as a whole, as well as a consideration of the linkages between different system elements. It further requires the engagement and input of many different stakeholders.

Section 1. IDEAS AND VISION

A high quality ELCC system should begin by articulating the ideas that will define it. The ideas will be contained in a conceptual framework that begins with a statement of the values held by the society and what it wants for its children. The values statement is based on implicit societal values and beliefs about the nature of the child and childhood. It is coloured by the history, circumstances and context - economic, social and cultural - in which the society exists.

Childcare Resource and Research Unit (2006:1)
[Elements of a high quality early learning and child care system](#)

Over the past two decades, international research has explored the purposes and goals for early learning and child care and examined how different ideas and visions shape the ways in which services are organized, financed and delivered. Broadly, most countries support public spending on early learning and child care both to enable parents' participation in the labour market and to support young children's early learning and development. The emphasis they place on each varies, as do the strategies they use to achieve their policy goals.

Countries with well-developed, high-quality, affordable and accessible systems of early learning and child care understand and approach it as a 'public good.' They place a strong emphasis on child rights and commit to provide all children and their families with equitable access to high-quality early learning and child care. In these jurisdictions, which include the Scandinavian countries, comprehensive systems of child care remove the financial barriers to children's participation and support the active involvement of parents in their children's care and learning.

The broad public goals and visions for early learning and child care in countries with comprehensive service systems contrast with the more limited ones common in countries that approach early learning and child care as a private service delivered through a child care market. This is the approach in much of Canada. In these countries, governments support child care through targeted public spending, which is often directed to children and families considered most in need. Children and their families do not have an entitlement to child care. Instead, the emphasis is on supporting parents' labour force participation, but not necessarily in ways which provide all children with high-quality learning and care experiences. Where families live, the type of child care they need and how much they can afford to pay shape the services they can access.

The OECD review of early learning and child care in Canada, completed in 2004, highlighted the importance of federal and provincial governments developing a 'coherent, long-term vision' for services as the first step to system building. The federal government's 2021 budget commitment to work collaboratively with provincial and territorial governments, to transform early learning and child care sectors across the country into a pan-Canadian system, elevates the importance of developing this vision and provides the opportunity to rethink both the goals and purposes of services as well as how they are delivered.

The Alberta context

In common with other provincial and territorial governments, the Government of Alberta sets out the nature and terms of its support for early learning and child care in a number of ministry documents, in legislation and in agreements with the federal government. There is some variation in how this support is described.

The new provincial child care legislation, the [Early Learning and Child Care Act](#), which came into effect on February 1, 2021, includes *'principles'* and *'matters to be considered by providers of child care programs,'* which set out parameters for the application of the legislation and the delivery of services. The *'matters to be considered'* require licensed service providers to take into account children's early learning and development, their diversity and cultural heritage, as well as the involvement of parents and guardians. They also require them to ensure that children are protected from abuse. The Act does not provide children and their families with an entitlement to service, nor does it commit the government to support a comprehensive system of early learning and child care.

The Ministry of Children's Services *Business Plan for 2021-24* includes one specific outcome for child care: *'Albertans have access to early childhood education and child care options to enable participation in the workforce'* with the supporting objective of improving access to child care *'through initiatives that support affordability, high-quality, safety, inclusion and parent choice.'* The accompanying performance metric identifies the government's focus on *'maintaining the safe operation of child care programs,'* given the COVID-19 pandemic and downturn in the economy, while also identifying *'anticipated future growth in child care spaces influenced by a combination of market forces and government supports.'*

The Children First Act (CFA), introduced in 2013 under a previous Conservative government, includes broader support for the recognition of children as rights holders – including provision for the minister to develop a Children's Charter that emphasizes the needs of children as a central focus in the design and delivery of programs and services that impact them.

The Government of Alberta's commitments to child care set out in its *Action Plan* under the *Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement 2020-21*, include a range of benefits that it believes quality, affordable child care can support including *'positive early childhood development, labour force participation of parents, women's equality, social integration and inclusion of newcomers, and poverty reduction - all aspects of social and economic growth.'* These broader benefits extend beyond the government's descriptions of the value and contributions of early learning and child care outlined in its own documents. Although they do align with some of the work previous provincial governments undertook in support of [Flight: Alberta's early learning and care framework](#) (formerly named *Play, Participation and Possibilities*). The framework includes a shared set of values for early childhood learning and care communities with a focus on democratic citizenship, equity, intercultural competence and communication and environmental sustainability. Licensed child care programs are not currently required to use the framework to guide their service delivery.

The Canada-wide system building agreement signed between the Alberta government and the federal government provides the opportunity to develop a bold new vision for early learning and child care in the province. Based on consultations with Alberta stakeholders and drawing on close to two decades of international and Canadian research on early learning and child care and its benefits for children and families, the roadmap partners propose the following new vision and guiding principles to support the building of a high-quality, affordable and accessible early learning and child care system in Alberta.

Policy actions

1. Develop and adopt a new vision and guiding principles for early learning and child care in Alberta

Proposed vision

All children in Alberta, regardless of family make up, circumstance or geography are welcomed into and have access to high-quality, inclusive, regulated early learning and child care that is responsive to their needs and dispositions, culturally safe, and where they have opportunities to play and learn, develop friendships, and form meaningful relationships with their peers and the educators who care for them.

All families have access to affordable, high-quality, convenient early learning and child care that supports them in their parenting roles, and enables them to work, study, or otherwise engage in and contribute to their communities. Parents and guardians have opportunities for meaningful involvement in their children's early learning and care.

Early learning and child care programs are staffed by **well-educated, fairly-compensated educators** who enjoy good working conditions, have opportunities for ongoing learning and career advancement, and are respected for their contribution to the well-being, learning and development of children.

Regulated early learning and child care programs and services are located in well-designed and situated buildings, receive adequate, stable public funding, are informed by best practice and contribute to our understanding of the importance of quality provision to a just and equitable society.

While **universal in approach**, regulated early learning and child care services receive additional resources and supports to ensure that all children, including those with exceptional needs, are welcomed into all child care settings and able to participate fully with their age peers; and that newcomer families, low-income families, Indigenous families, Francophone families and families living in conditions of risk can attend the regulated programs and services they choose.

Proposed guiding principles

Early learning and child care services are:

- **focused on the best interests of children** and the inherent value of childhood;
- **equitably available** to all Alberta families, regardless of income, family status or characteristics or where they live, with particular attention given to families living in conditions of risk or vulnerability, and to families who have a child with a developmental delay or exceptional needs;
- **evidenced-based**, reflecting current knowledge and research on quality provision, and regularly adapt to and incorporate new learnings;
- **supported by public policy** that is guided by research and informed by national and international benchmarks and standards;
- **comprehensive and integrated** across different levels of government, and across provincial ministries that support or deliver complementary services;

- **publicly planned, developed and managed** through collaboration and engagement with public and community partners and parents to advance the goals of a comprehensive child care system;
- **sustainable** through stable and sufficient public funding, capital investments and appropriate human resources to deliver quality services; and
- **accountable**, through ongoing planning, data collection and analysis, monitoring, ongoing public participation and engagement, and public reporting.

Indigenous early learning and child care

Consistent with the vision and principles set out in the [Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#) and the commitments made under the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), Indigenous governments will design and develop early learning and child care systems and services that are distinctions-based and self-governed.

Non-Indigenous early learning and care stakeholders will listen to and engage with Indigenous governments and leaders to understand the value of Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge. They will further commit through their work with young children and their families to address systemic racism and the impacts of colonialism, respond to the calls to action identified by the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) and honour and address the calls for justice set out in [The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#).

2. Amend Alberta's child care legislation to reflect the proposed new vision and principles

The Government of Alberta should, following consultations with early learning and child care stakeholders, amend the *Early Learning and Child Care Act*, and where appropriate the supporting regulation, to reflect a new vision and guiding principles for a comprehensive, publicly funded and managed early learning and child care system.

The proposed amendments to the legislation will include reference to the right of all young children to access regulated, inclusive and culturally safe early learning and child care and will set out the foundations for the move toward a publicly planned and managed system.

Section 2. PUBLIC POLICY, PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

Across Canada, developing child care provision has most often been treated as a private responsibility, with government playing a regulatory, supporting and occasionally facilitating role for the creators and managers of most Canadian child care services—large and small non-profit “third sector” groups and large or small entrepreneurs—rather than by ensuring through ongoing public processes that child care services are available where, when and for whom they are needed like schools, roads, electricity or sewers — part of the infrastructure.

Friendly et al (2020:10)

[Moving from private to public processes to create child care in Canada](#)

In countries with comprehensive early learning and care systems governments actively plan and manage services. Children and their families have an entitlement to regulated early learning and child care, just as they do public education, and both central and local governments support the organization, financing and delivery of services. Governments work together to provide all families and their children, regardless of circumstance or geography, with equitable access to high-quality, affordable early learning and child care.¹ They further align child care services with other supports for children and families, including parental leave and income supports.

Local governments often deliver child care services themselves, with the financial help and policy support from the senior level of government. This allows them to ensure that child care services remain responsive to community needs and are available in all communities, even those that are harder to serve because of their geography or socio-economic profile. While private service providers deliver services in comprehensive early learning and child care systems, families’ access to child care is not shaped by market forces and communities do not rely solely on parent groups, non-profit organizations and businesses to set-up and operate child care services.

The public planning and management of services further provides parents and other community stakeholders with opportunities to inform how services are organized and delivered. Early learning and child care services have a public profile, similar to that of schools, and form part of the local community. They are public services in which families and communities have an interest, rather than the private property of service providers.

The active roles governments play in planning, managing and delivering services in well-developed early learning and child care systems contrasts with the more limited roles they play in child care markets, such as those in Canada. In child care markets, private organizations assume the primary responsibility for developing services, with the expectation that the demand for child care will shape the provision of services and meet parents’ and children’s needs. The main roles for government centre on the regulation of services and the provision of limited public funding for specific market

¹ For example, Denmark, Germany, Norway and Sweden where ELCC is an entitlement for children from at least one year of age; and Belgium and France where ELCC is an entitlement and free, for children from 2.5 and 3 years respectively.

'interventions,' such as subsidies for low-income families. The common examples of 'market failure' in Canada and beyond, including the presence of child care deserts, high parent fees and the modest quality of services, highlight the limitations of governments' primary reliance on markets to provide children and families with equitable access to high-quality, affordable child care.

The Alberta context

The early learning and child care sector in Alberta has much in common with parallel sectors in most other provinces. It has grown over time as a 'mixed' market, made up of for-profit and not-for-profit service providers supported by various government spending initiatives and policies. Over the last decade, provincial governments have sought to encourage the creation of child care spaces through grant funding, developed initiatives to improve their quality and most recently, under the previous NDP government, piloted \$25 per day child care in select program sites.

In March 2020, prior to the onset of the pandemic, there were 138,367 licensed and approved child care spaces in the province,² the majority of which were centre-based. There were just under 3,000 centre-based child care programs, including full-time child care centres (1,106), part-day preschool programs (671) and out-of-school cares (1,079).³ The majority of centre-based child care programs are operated by for-profit businesses (around 60 percent) and Alberta is one of three provinces in which large corporate child care providers also deliver child care. In March 2019, there were 66 contracted family day home agencies, with around 1,900 approved family child care providers, and 11,922 family child care spaces. The majority of family child care spaces (60.5 percent) are supported by for-profit family day home agencies.

The majority of Alberta parents with preschool-age children rely on some form of non-parental care to balance the demands of work and raising a family, with over 60 percent of these parents accessing regulated child care.⁴ Despite increased public spending over the last decade to expand services and improve their quality, high-quality, regulated child care remains in short supply across much of the province, and particularly in rural and northern communities where 'child care deserts' are common. Overall, Alberta families have lower levels of access to regulated child care than families in some other provinces, while they pay amongst the highest parent fees.

Historically, municipal governments played an important role in the development and support for early learning and child care in Alberta. Between the 1970s and 1990s, a number of municipal governments delivered or supported child care, although changes to federal cost sharing programs, and provincial cut-backs to municipal grants resulted in the end of most municipal support for child care. Today, two municipally supported centres established in the 1980s remain in operation, and two additional municipal governments opened centres in 2008 and 2009.⁵

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the downturn in the provincial economy placed significant pressures on regulated early learning and child care services. The pandemic compounded these pressures, leaving much of the sector financially and operationally vulnerable. Enrolments remain depressed and service providers are forced to manage additional health and safety protocols and their associated

² [Ministry of Children's Services Annual Report, 2020-21.](#)

³ Based on 2019 data from Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada, 2019. Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

⁴ [Statistics Canada. 2020. Survey of Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements, 2019.](#)

⁵ The municipalities of Jasper and Beaumont have operated child care since the 1980s; Drayton Valley and the MD of Opportunity opened child care centres in 2008 and 2009 respectively. See [Municipal Child Care in Alberta: An Alternative Approach to the Funding and Delivery of Early Learning and Care for Children and their Families](#) for details.

costs. In 2020 and 2021 federal funding, including the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit, and dedicated child care monies under the *Safe Restart* initiative have provided the sector with some financial relief. Additional supports and new investments are required, however, both to allow the early learning and child care sector to stabilize and to begin to recover as the economy rebounds.

The \$3.8 billion in new federal investments available through the Canada-Alberta system building agreement provide the opportunity to transform Alberta's early learning and child care sector. The commitments to reduce parents fees, expand licensed not-for-profit, public and family child care services, and support high-quality child care will require significant changes in how the Government of Alberta supports and funds child care. Based on consultations with Alberta stakeholders and taking into account the findings from international and Canadian research, the roadmap partners recommend the following policy actions to support the public governance, planning and management of early learning and child care central to system building.

Policy actions to advance governance and policy development

3. Review and implement changes in how the Ministry of Children's Services governs, plans, manages and supports early learning and child care

To support system building, the Government of Alberta will need to invest in and support fundamental changes in how the Ministry of Children's Services governs, plans, manages and supports the delivery of early learning and child care. These changes will require the Ministry to take on expanded and active roles in the following areas:

- **the purposeful public planning** of services, including through partnerships with different levels of government, to ensure that the supply of services matches the demand, particularly in harder to serve communities;
- **the development and support for the public infrastructure** required to ensure services are developed where needed, with options for public delivery developed where necessary;
- **the development of comprehensive policies** that integrate early learning and child care services with other supports and services for children and their families;
- **a hands-on role** in ensuring that policy objectives, service targets and timetables are met, and the allocation and disbursement of appropriate public financing to meet objectives;
- **the meaningful and ongoing engagement** of a broad range of stakeholders during all phases of the system-building process and as part of system monitoring and evaluation;
- **regular data collection, monitoring and evaluation** to support ongoing improvements in system development and operation and to assess progress towards policy goals; and
- **the development of strong accountability measures** for both government and the ELCC sector.

The above expanded roles for the Ministry of Children's Services will require significant new public investments in staffing, resources and technical supports, including data collection and reporting systems. They will also require the Ministry to develop new partnerships with other government ministries and other levels of government.

4. Take a whole of government approach to the design and implementation of an early learning and child care system

The design and implementation of a comprehensive system will be complex. It will require attention to the many related elements of system building including the governance, financing and organization of services, workforce education and development, regional planning and service delivery and the alignment and integration of early learning and child care services with complementary services and supports provided through other government ministries, including Early Childhood Services which is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.

The following provincial government ministries have potential roles to play in building an early learning and child care system, working in partnership with sector stakeholders and other levels of government:

- Advanced Education, responsible for post-secondary education for the early learning and care workforce and other forms of adult learning;
- Community and Social Services, responsible for administering the current child care fee subsidy program and other family income supports;
- Education, responsible for Early Childhood Services;
- Infrastructure, responsible for planning, building and managing government-owned infrastructure;
- Municipal Affairs, responsible for the *Municipal Government Act*, assisting municipalities to provide well-managed, and accountable local government and providing funding support;
- Seniors and Housing, responsible for affordable housing; and
- Culture and Status of Women, responsible for increased gender equality and grants to support and enhance capacity in the non-profit sector.

The engagement of multiple government ministries in early learning and child care system building dictates the need for a ‘whole of government approach’ supported through one of several possible vehicles including a dedicated early learning and child care secretariat that includes senior staff from different ministries, a formal cross-ministerial partnership or a cabinet committee.

Policy actions to address expansion

5. The stabilization of existing regulated child care services

Alberta’s child care sector has drawn considerable and necessary support from the various pandemic-related federal supports provided in 2020-21. The phasing out or restructuring of these supports nationally, however, is taking place before the Alberta early learning and child care sector has recovered financially and operationally from low enrolments and disruptions in service delivery.

To address the current instability within the sector, the Ministry of Children’s Services should immediately assess the level and nature of sector instability and identify those services most in need of additional financial and other resource support, both by type of service and populations or communities served. Based on the results of this assessment, the Ministry should reallocate unspent provincial monies budgeted for child care in 2021-22 to sector stabilization, including investments in the workforce. Where necessary, the Ministry should further seek additional provincial resources from within government to support the stabilization of the early learning and child care sector.

In respect to the new federal investments for system building, the Ministry of Children’s Services should work with the federal government and early learning and child care partners to ensure that the new federal monies are used both to stabilize the sector and provide the basis for longer-term system building. New investments in operating funding for licensed child care providers, including support for improved wages and working conditions for early childhood educators and reductions in parent fees, have the potential to stabilize organization revenues and provide the basis for medium to longer-term system building. The need to carefully plan expansion, given the current instability within the sector, is addressed below.

6. The development of a multi-year expansion plan for regulated early learning and child care

The federal and provincial government announcements in support of the Canada-Alberta system building agreement include the commitment to create 42,500 new regulated child care spaces in not-for-profit and public centres and family child care. The Government of Alberta indicates that \$240.64 million in federal spending will be allocated to expand the number of child care spaces over the next five years. The timing and scale of this expansion will depend initially on the provincial government’s efforts to stabilize the sector. Pending this stabilization, the planned and supported expansion of regulated child care will require new strategies, including the engagement of local government partners.

Planned service expansion must ensure that new regulated child care spaces have the following characteristics:

- **are affordable** – to all parents, regardless of financial circumstances;
- **suitable** – of high-quality, inclusive, culturally safe and welcoming of all children, responsive to the needs of parents and conveniently located;
- **sustainable** – with stable system-level funding and infrastructure; and
- **staffed with well-educated and fairly compensated educators.**

To ensure that regulated child care services are developed where they are needed and that they provide high-quality, affordable care, the Ministry of Children’s Services will need to work with a wide range of government and community partners in developing the proposed multi-year expansion plan.

The expansion plan will need to include:

- targets and timetables for service expansion;
- a capital funding program – with a focus on using public resources to support the development of new publicly owned child care centres and the renovation of existing public buildings or facilities to accommodate non-profit or publicly delivered child care services;
- targets and timetables for increasing the supply of qualified early childhood educators;
- a data collection and monitoring process;
- benchmarks to monitor progress;
- a process for evaluating the impact and effectiveness of policy actions;
- accountability measures for public financing; and
- mechanisms to modify policies and amend regulations and standards as needed.

7. The development of new provincial-municipal early learning and child care partnerships to support the regional planning and expansion of regulated child care

Public delivery will be an essential part of system-building, especially in communities where there are no appropriate non-profit organizations to expand service delivery. Municipal governments can play important roles in identifying service needs, developing service plans, making public facilities and lands available for child care and ensuring that local planning and development guidelines and processes are supportive of regulated early learning and child care. Where appropriate municipal governments can also either play direct roles in service delivery or support service delivery through agreements with non-profit community partners.

The Ministry of Children's Services should engage with the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association (AUMA) and Rural Municipalities of Alberta (RMA) to examine and reach agreement on the opportunities available for municipal governments to partner with the Ministry of Children's Services in early learning and child care system building. The Ministry should explore the options for developing formal partnership agreements with municipal governments that provide them with the financial resources and capacity to plan, develop, and either deliver or support the delivery of regulated early learning and child care.

8. The development of a 'child care in schools' policy framework

Many schools across the province house regulated child care centres, preschools and out-of-school care programs. These regulated services have different agreements in place for the leasing and use of school space, many of which are negotiated at either the school or school board level.

The proposed expansion of early learning and child care could be supported through the development of a 'child care in schools' policy framework that would provide guidance and resources to support the location of regulated child care programs in school buildings or on school sites. The proposed policy framework could include provisions for dedicated space for regulated child care in all new school construction and major school renovation projects, the development of resources and supports to help child care centres operate in school settings, and public funding for nominal or no-cost lease agreements between school boards and eligible child care providers.

The Ministry of Children's Services should work with the Ministry of Education and the Alberta School Boards Association to develop and support the implementation of the proposed 'child care in schools' policy framework.

9. The development of an inventory of public buildings and facilities that could house regulated child care services and public lands on which new publicly owned child care centres could be developed

There are numerous public buildings and facilities which might house regulated child care services. These public buildings and facilities, which are owned or operated by one of the three levels of government, include federal, provincial and municipal buildings, hospitals, libraries, recreation centres and public post-secondary institutions. There are also publicly owned lands that might be developed to accommodate purpose-built child care centres.

The Ministry of Children’s Services should work with other government partners, including Alberta Infrastructure, to develop inventories of the above public buildings and lands and, pending their review, develop policies, including new public investment strategies, to support the development of regulated child care centres in public buildings and facilities and on publicly-owned lands.

The Ministry of Children’s Services should further work with early learning and child care stakeholders to identify eligible community-based, non-profit organizations to deliver regulated child care services in these publicly owned buildings or facilities or on publicly owned lands.

10. Funding to build the capacity of the non-profit sector to support ELCC system building

The Government of Alberta currently provides grant funding to build the capacity of non-profit organizations through the Enhanced Capacity Advancement Program (ECAP) and the Community Initiatives Program (CIP).

To help build the capacity of non-profit early learning and child care organizations to support the delivery of high-quality child care, and the expansion of regulated child care, the Ministry of Children’s Services should work with other government ministries to develop a grant program for eligible non-profit organizations looking to improve their governance, planning and management of operations.

As one component of the proposed grant program, the Ministry of Children’s Services should work with other government ministries and early learning and child care stakeholders to explore the feasibility and benefits of providing grant support for current child care providers incorporated as for-profit businesses that agree to transition to non-profit incorporation under the provincial [Societies Act](#).

11. The short-term stabilization of out-of-school care and the medium- to longer-term expansion of services

Child care for school-age children six and older is not included in the Canada-wide system building commitments announced in Budget 2021. Regulated school-age child care is an important service for children and their families and currently is in short supply across much of the province. There are regulated centre-based before and after school care spaces for less than one in ten children aged six to 12 years.

The increased public funding and expansion of regulated child care for children 0 to 6 years of age included in the Canada-wide system building commitments, as well as the proposed improvement in wages and working conditions for certified early childhood educators, will likely put school-age programs in competition with child care providers for well-qualified staff. To address these challenges in the short-term, the Ministry of Children’s Services will need to increase its own provincial investments in out-of-school age care both to lower parent fees and to improve the wages and working conditions of staff.

In the medium- to longer-terms, the Ministry of Children’s Services should seek to work with the federal government to advance a cost-shared, federal-provincial strategy that supports the public expansion of regulated school-age child care. The Ministry of Children’s Services, the Ministry of Education, school-age care providers and the Alberta School Boards Association should be partners in this proposed work.

12. The closer integration of Early Childhood Services and community-based child care

Alberta Education is responsible for Early Childhood Services (ECS), which includes kindergarten for children five years of age and pre-kindergarten for younger children with mild, moderate or severe disabilities, learning English as a second language or requiring a Francophone program. Publicly funded kindergarten and pre-kindergarten are delivered through public, separate, Francophone and accredited independent schools, as well by private ECS operators.

The majority of kindergarten and pre-kindergarten programs are part-day, although some school boards support the delivery of full-day early learning. A portion of pre-school age children in kindergarten and pre-kindergarten programs transition to licensed child care during the regular school or work day. Many of these child care services are not located on the same site as the ECS program resulting in transition challenges for young children, their families and service providers.

The Ministry of Education revised its funding for ECS for the 2020-21 school year. The changes in funding have resulted in school boards significantly reducing ECS programs for children below kindergarten age, especially those children with mild or moderate disabilities or delays. Some of these children now access licensed child care.

The Government of Alberta should support the building of a comprehensive, publicly funded early learning and child care system through the closer integration of ECS and regulated child care services. The majority of provinces and territories now fund full-day kindergarten, and some require school boards to provide out-of-school care where there is demand.

The Ministry of Children's Services, Ministry of Education and the Alberta School Boards Association should work together to support the phased introduction of full-day kindergarten for all five-year-olds, the expansion of pre-kindergarten for all children with exceptional needs, and the funding and delivery of regulated out-of-school care for all children in ECS programs who require extended hours service. Where possible, regulated out-of-school care should be located in schools or on school sites to support young children's transition between services. To support this option, the Ministry of Children's Services, Ministry of Education and the Alberta School Boards Association should develop strategies and guidelines for the use of existing kindergarten classrooms for regulated out-of-school care for children attending ECS programs.

Policy actions to support public input and engagement in system building and future system operation

13. Develop and support the infrastructure necessary to ensure public input into early learning and child care system building and ongoing system operations

The design and implementation of a publicly funded and managed early learning and child care system will benefit from significant stakeholder input and engagement. The Government of Alberta's commitment to seek input from content experts, sector representatives, post-secondary institutions, advocacy organizations, labour, anti-poverty groups, newcomer organizations, Indigenous organizations and parents will strengthen the policy and planning process and make it more

transparent. It will also help build a broad base of support for the proposed early learning and child care system.

As part of the system building process, the Government of Alberta should develop and support the necessary infrastructure (such as provincial and regional councils or working groups) that will enable a diverse range of stakeholders to provide input into the system building process.

The Government of Alberta will also need to work with other stakeholders, including municipal governments and school boards, early learning and child care organizations and associations and parents and families to develop and implement the formal structures that will enable ongoing public input into service delivery. The current structures and processes in place in public education and schools, such as boards of trustees and parent councils, may provide possible models for consideration.

The ongoing and meaningful engagement of stakeholders at both the system and service levels will support accountability and transparency and help confirm and maintain the public character of the anticipated early learning and child care system.

Section 3. FINANCING

Significant public funding is necessary to support sustainable and equitable early childhood education...without this... a shortage of good quality programmes, unequal access and segregation of children according to income follows. When the main burden of costs falls on parents, children from disadvantaged backgrounds become less represented in ECEC provision, or the quality of provision is inadequate

OECD (2006:112) [Starting Strong II](#)

Financing is one of the most important policy tools governments have to support early learning and child care. The level and nature of public funding impact the quality, accessibility, and affordability of services and can determine which children and families have access to them and which do not. Inevitably, government investments in early learning and child care reflect the priority they attach to this policy area, the goals and purposes they set out for services, and their political preferences for how public monies are disbursed to advance policy goals.

A number of international bodies have set targets or benchmarks for how much governments should invest in early learning and child care and recommended that it be a minimum of one percent of GDP.⁶ Previous international reviews of Canadian investments have found that the country falls well short of these targets, and spends less, on average, than its peer nations. The [Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Canada: Country Note](#) further drew attention to differences in public expenditures for kindergarten compared to child care, noting that the former was close to twice that of the latter.

Broadly, the nature of government funding for early learning and child care takes two main forms: demand-side and supply-side funding. Demand-side funding in the form of tax credits or deductions, and fee subsidies for individual parents is intended to make child care more affordable for families, while also supporting their 'choice' to purchase the child care that works best for them. Supply-side funding, the funding model in early learning and care systems, provides funding directly to services to cover all or some of the costs of program delivery. If supply-side funding is sufficient and sustained, it can provide services with financial stability and parents with affordable child care.

International research on early learning and child care funding, by the OECD and others, finds that supply-side funding approaches are associated with a higher quality of service, better training for educators and higher levels of equity, access and participation than parent subsidy models. Supply-side funding further provides governments with a greater capacity to manage services, in support of policy goals, than demand-side funding, even though the latter is sometimes viewed as more 'politically attractive.' The OECD, following its review of Canada's early childhood provision, recommended a 'move away from personal subsidy mechanisms toward operational funding and an entitlement for children, as in the traditional education model.'

Recognizing the barrier that parent fees present for many families, numerous OECD countries either provide funding to programs to enable them to offer some free provision or seek to limit the percentage of household income spent on parent fees. New Zealand provides up to 20 hours week of free child care for all children 3 to 5 years of age. In England, all 3- and 4-year-olds are entitled to

⁶ [See Quality Targets in Services for Young Children; Starting Strong II; UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 8](#)

15 hours per week of free child care, and 30 hours if the parent is working or attending school. In Norway families pay no more than 6% of their household income for child care, up to a maximum of about \$400 per month, and lower-income families with children 2 to 5 years of age are entitled to a number of free hours of care per week. Gordon Cleveland, in his analysis and economic modeling on affordability for the Government of Ontario, [AFFORDABLE FOR ALL](#), recommended that child care be free for preschool age children, with increased subsidies and sliding fee scales for younger children.

The Alberta context

Over much of the last decade, successive provincial governments have increased public spending on regulated child care. Between 2009-10 and 2018-19 The Ministry of Children's Services increased its direct investments from around \$190 million to \$351 million. This increase included \$45.6 million in federal funding received through the *Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* signed in 2017.⁷ Provincial child care expenditures (direct and indirect) reached \$408 million in 2019-20, before falling to \$379 million in 2020-21. The provincial government forecast expenditures of \$393 million for 2021-22 in its most recent provincial budget.

The Government of Alberta provides funding for for-profit, non-profit and publicly supported licensed child care centres and family day home agencies. This funding includes both supply-side and demand-side funding. The supply-side funding includes wage enhancements for certified early childhood educators and support for their education and professional learning, infant incentive grants to offset some of the additional costs in providing care for very young children and administrative grants for family day home agencies. The Ministry also provides capacity building grants for inclusive child care and has periodically made capital grants available for space creation. The demand-side funding consists of fee subsidies for eligible lower-income parents to reduce the cost of regulated child care.

Approximately half of the direct provincial funding in 2018-19 (\$154 million) was allocated for parent fee subsidies and half (\$151.5 million) for operational funding, including \$119.5 million for Accreditation funding, the majority of which supported wage enhancements for certified early childhood educators.

Beginning in 2017, the previous NDP provincial government supported an initial phase of 22 \$25 per day child care centre demonstration sites, through a grant-funding (supply-side funding) model. The estimated cost of these 22 sites was around \$10 million per year. From 2017 to 2020, the provincial government allocated its federal investments under the *Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* to support an additional 100 \$25 per day demonstration sites.

In 2020, the UCP government discontinued a number of long-time funding supports such as the Kin Care child care subsidy, the Northern Allowance payment for early childhood educators and the Benefit Contribution Grant for service providers. The Ministry of Children's Services further discontinued funding for the \$25 per day demonstration sites at the end of the demonstration periods. A small number of the \$25 per day sites received transitional funding to help them reintroduce market-rate parent fees.

The four-year bi-lateral extension agreement the provincial government signed with the federal government in 2021 allocated federal monies to parent fee subsidies, which the provincial government made available for more families through increases in the income thresholds for eligibility.

⁷ [Government of Canada. 2017. Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, 2017-2020](#); [Government of Canada. 2021. Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, 2020-21](#)

One of the outcomes of Alberta's primary reliance on a market-based approach to regulated child care is high parent fees. Service providers set parent fees according to 'market rates', taking into account their program costs. Recent national research shows that high child care fees make regulated child care potentially unaffordable for many Alberta families.⁸ The median monthly fees for full-time infant care in Calgary and Edmonton were \$1,300 and \$1,050 respectively in 2020, while the median monthly fees for preschool-age children were \$1,145 and \$925.

Following the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, the Ministry of Children's Services provided some relief funding to licensed child care services to compensate them both for the fall in enrolments and the increase in health and safety costs. In the 2020-21 fiscal year the Ministry invested \$130 million in COVID related relief, much of which was federal funding including monies received under the *Safe Restart* initiative and the critical worker benefit program. The Ministry further re-allocated funding previously budgeted for parent subsidies to the *Working Parents Benefit*, a one-time payment for eligible households who had used any form of child care (licensed or unlicensed) for three months in 2020.

In addition to Ministry of Children's Services investments in regulated child care, the Ministry of Education invested \$450.9 million in ECS programs in 2019-20 (including part-day kindergarten) for pre-school age children in the public education system and an additional \$126.1 million for children attending ECS programs provided through private ECS operators.⁹ There were no direct parent fees for children to participate in ECS programs.

The system building agreement Alberta signed on November 15th will see the province receive \$3.8 billion in new federal investments for regulated child care over the next five years. These federal investments will more than double the current provincial funding for child care during the first year of the agreement and make the federal government the senior funding partner for early learning and child care in the province. The Government of Alberta announcement in support of the agreement indicates that it will allocate the new federal spending to the following priority areas over the next five years: \$2.865 billion to lower child care fees for parents; \$240.64 million to increase the number of child care spaces; \$202.6 million to develop and fund child care options for vulnerable and diverse populations, as well as children with exceptional needs; and \$306.16 million to support licensed programs and certified educators in providing high-quality early learning and child care.

Based on consultations with Alberta stakeholders and taking into account the findings from international and Canadian research, the roadmap partners recommend the following policy actions to finance early learning and child care system building.

Policy actions related to financing

14. Fully and directly fund licensed child care centres and family day home agencies

Consistent with financing models in place in other early learning and child care systems, the Ministry of Children's Services should develop and implement a supply-side funding model for licensed child care that provides services with stable operational funding, reduces parent fees and provides early childhood educators with fair wages and improved working conditions.

⁸ [MacDonald, D. and Friendly, M. 2021. Sounding the Alarm. COVID-19's Impact on Canada's Precarious Child Care Sector. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.](#)

⁹ [Government of Alberta. 2020. Ministry of Education Annual Report 2019-20.](#)

The Ministry of Children’s Services should support the transition to this new funding model by sustaining and reallocating its own provincial child care investments and seeking the federal government’s approval to redirect investments received under the *Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* to system building. A number of the provinces that previously signed Canada-wide system building agreements have consolidated their federal funding in this manner.

15. Develop a funding formula for licensed child care centres, preschools and out-of-school care programs

To support the implementation of an equitable and sustainable supply-side funding model, the Ministry of Children’s Services should work with licensed centre-based services and early learning and child care researchers and content experts to develop funding formulas for the different types of licensed centre-based child care. The funding formulas will need to reflect the true operating or service costs for the delivery of high-quality early learning and child care.

The proposed formulas might include a base component that takes into account the following actual service delivery costs:

- wages for educators that reflect their education, experience and role descriptions;
- an allocation for substitute staff, other professional staff or resources, as well as for non-program and support staff;
- professional learning for staff;
- program hours of operation;
- average enrolment;
- administrative and program costs;
- occupancy costs, including utilities and regular maintenance; and
- any revenue collected from parents including parent fees.

In addition to the base component, the formulas might also include supplemental elements that provide funding for centres that serve populations or communities with additional needs. Examples of these communities or service populations might include:

- rural, northern and isolated communities;
- English language learners and minority language children;
- vulnerable children who experience barriers to full participation; and
- children with developmental delays or exceptional needs who require additional support.

16. Develop a funding formula for licensed family day home agencies and family child care educators

Similar to the funding formula for licensed centre-based child care, the Ministry of Children’s Services will also need to work with licensed family day home agencies and early learning and care researchers and content experts to develop a funding formula for family child care. This formula will need to reflect family child care operating costs linked to:

- the education and certification levels of the agency staff and day home educators;
- the ages of children served and average enrolment;

- program delivery costs;
- professional learning costs;
- the cost of community engagement activities; and
- any revenue collected from parents including parent fees.

17. The development of conditions for licensed centres and family day home agencies to be eligible for supply-side funding

To ensure that public monies are used to support high-quality, licensed early learning and child care, the Ministry of Children’s Services should establish conditions licensed service providers must meet to be eligible for supply-side funding. These conditions will ensure equity for parents and staff, accountability for the use of public funds, and may also support data collection to enable the Ministry to assess the effectiveness of its funding approaches.

All current licensed child centres and family day home agencies who meet the conditions would be eligible for supply-side funding. Supply-side funding for new child care services should be directed to non-profit and public providers, in keeping with the Canada-wide system building agreements signed to date.

The conditions for receipt of supply-side funding might include:

- be in compliance with requirements under *Alberta’s Early Learning and Child Care Act and Regulation*;
- pay staff according to an established provincial wage scale and benefit package;
- charge no more than any established provincial or regional parent fee, and apply any fee reduction established for lower income families;
- provide detailed financial reporting with respect to revenues and expenditures;
- welcome all children into the program, including children with developmental delays or exceptional needs, regardless of family circumstance or employment;
- have an inclusion plan which outlines the measures in place to ensure that children with exceptional needs are able to fully participate in the program alongside their peers;
- have an equity plan to indicate how barriers to a child’s participation or additional needs will be met, and how children from diverse backgrounds and identities, including Indigenous children, racialized children, LGBTQ2+ families and newcomers to Canada and Francophone children are welcomed, supported and provided with culturally safe early learning and child care;
- develop an annual quality plan in collaboration with educators and parents, including how opportunities for continuous learning will be provided;
- have an induction or mentoring plan for all educators and staff;
- accept and appropriately supervise practicum students to support the expansion of the early childhood educator workforce; and
- provide data and participate in any evaluation activities required by the provincial government.

To enable the Ministry of Children’s Services to effectively allocate public monies while controlling public costs, the Ministry should work with early learning and child care stakeholders and early

learning and child care content experts and researchers to develop provincial parent fee guidelines for licensed centre-based and family child care. These fee guidelines will set out the maximum parent fees licensed child care can charge parents and will help support the move towards the 50 percent reduction in parent fees by the end of 2022 and average parent fees of \$10 per day by the end of 2026 anticipated under the Canada-Alberta system building agreement.

18. Develop a definition of child care affordability to guide system financing

Making child care more affordable for families is a central priority for both the federal and provincial governments under the Canada-Alberta system-building agreement. The Government of Alberta advises that, under the agreement, parents will see fee reductions starting in early 2022 and for the next two years. The significant parent fee reductions proposed as part of Canada-Alberta system building will relieve the financial burden for many families, but some families will still find parent fees unaffordable and a barrier to their children's participation in licensed child care.

To ensure that all Alberta families have equitable access to high-quality, licensed child care that is affordable, as parent fees are reduced over time, the Ministry of Children's Services should work with early learning and child care content experts and researchers to develop a provincial definition of child care affordability. Possible options for defining child care affordability include reference to the maximum proportion of after tax and transfer household income families should be required to spend on child care with ceilings in place for families at different income thresholds. The proposed definition will inform provincial policies aimed at making regulated child care affordable for all families.

19. Replacement of child care fee subsidies with a 'geared to income' parent fee

Consistent with the development of a provincial definition of child care affordability, the Ministry should replace the child care fee subsidy program with a 'geared to income' parent fee which ensures that families pay no more than an agreed maximum proportion of their after tax and transfers household income on licensed child care.

A 'geared to income' parent fee will take into account the number of children families have in licensed child care and provide lower-income families with equitable access to regulated child care as parent fees are lowered over the next five years of federal funding. The percentage of income that families are required to pay should differ by household income, with families on very low incomes required to pay no parent fee for licensed child care.

The Ministry of Children's Services should further remove the requirement that only parents who work or attend education or training programs are eligible for fee support. This requirement discriminates against those children whose parents are either not working or attending an education program.



Section 4. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

There are significant challenges for the childcare workforce in Canada. However, many of the solutions are quite clear. All the available data and research indicates that if wages and working conditions improve, there are real opportunities to improve and sustain the quality of the childcare workforce and, therefore, the quality of childcare programs. The evidence has clearly indicated that with enhanced resources and on-going training and support, the childcare workforce is fundamental to delivering high quality childcare.

Halfon, S. (2014:16) [Canada's child care workforce](#)

A large body of research confirms that children benefit from participation in high-quality early learning and child care programs, while they receive little or no benefit from attending poor quality ones. There is further agreement that the specialized nature of the field requires a well-prepared and appropriately supported professional workforce and that the educational preparation of early childhood educators matters. Early childhood educators with higher levels of formal education are more likely to engage in the 'stimulating, warm and supportive interactions' with young children that support their learning and development than are educators with little or no formal pre-service education.

The [You Bet I Care!](#) study of quality in child care centres in seven jurisdictions across Canada identified both direct and indirect predictors of quality. Researchers found that key predictors of quality included the observed staff member's level of ECE specific education and their wages.

The 2008 [UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 8](#) proposed 10 internationally applicable benchmarks for early learning and child care as a set of minimum standards to protect the interests of young children. Benchmark 6 proposed that a minimum of 50 percent of staff in early childhood centres should have at least three years of tertiary education with a specialization in early childhood studies or a related field. Among OECD countries, a degree in early childhood education, for at least a percentage of educators, has become the standard for centre-based programs. By comparison, family child care providers generally do not require formal early childhood qualifications, although they often have the support of pedagogues and opportunities for regular peer interaction.

Despite agreement on the importance of well-prepared early childhood educators, the efforts of governments to increase the capacity of their early learning and care workforces have proved challenging. The low wages and poor working conditions of early childhood educators, common in market-based child care sectors which depend on parent fees to finance services, have led to stubborn problems around staff recruitment and retention. They have further contributed to an undervaluing of the field compared to related professions such as teaching.

Research by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC) completed from the early 2000s up to 2013 previously highlighted the challenges facing early learning and care workforces in Canada, including the lower wages for child care work compared to work in related fields; the public's perceived lack of recognition for the field and the value of the work; and the educational barriers some older workers face if they decide to change careers and move into child care. The majority of these challenges remain present today in early learning and child care sectors across the country.

The Alberta context

The Alberta early learning and child care workforce is almost all female, includes a significant proportion of women from racialized backgrounds, is modestly educated, relatively poorly paid and supported and continues to experience high levels of staff turnover.

The modest educational preparation of the workforce reflects the staff certification requirements developed by the Ministry of Children's Services and the staffing guidelines set out in regulation. Both fall below international benchmarks. In March 2020, just over 40 percent of certified early childhood educators held a level 1 certification, which requires completion of an orientation course or completion of an equivalent post-secondary course related to early childhood or a family child care training program; 16 percent a level 2 certification, which requires completion of a one-year ECE certificate, or equivalent post-secondary education; and 44 percent a level 3 certification, which requires completion of a two-year ECE diploma, or equivalent post-secondary education. There are no ongoing professional learning requirements for certified educators.

The level of certification staff require to work in licensed child care varies by program type. A program supervisor in a child care centre or in out-of-school care must be certified as a Level 3 early childhood educator. One in three staff in a child care centre, and one in four staff in an out-of-school care centre and preschool must be certified as a Level 2 early childhood educator. All other centre-based staff must be certified as a Level 1 early childhood educator within six months of employment. Program consultants in family day home agencies are required to be certified as Level 2 early childhood educators. There are no certification requirements for family child care providers.

The compensation for certified early childhood educators in centre-based child care also remains modest. In September 2020, the mean employer paid hourly wage for full-time early childhood educators ranged from \$16.19 for staff certified at level 1 to \$18.95 for staff with a level 3 certification.¹⁰ With the addition of provincially funded wage enhancements, the average hourly wage for certified educators ranged from \$18.33 for level 1 staff to \$25.57 for level 3 staff.

The last 18 months have brought particular challenges for certified early childhood educators across the province. The disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have increased their workplace pressures, while declining enrolments, particularly in centre-based care, have resulted in a fall in the number of certified staff working in the field. Between March 2020 and March 2021, the number of certified staff working in the field fell from around 18,800 to under 15,000, as programs were forced to lay-off staff.¹¹ It is not known how many of these staff will be in a position to return to the field when the economy stabilizes and enrolments increase.

The Government of Alberta made some new workforce investments in 2020-21 to support early childhood educators. It provided the majority of early childhood educators with the *Critical Worker Benefit*, a one-time payment of \$1,200 under a cost-shared (75 percent:25 percent) federal-provincial government program in February 2021; and in fall 2021 used a portion of one-time federal monies for staff recruitment and retention to extend provincial wage enhancements to certified early childhood educators in licensed preschools and provide additional professional learning funding for certified early childhood educators as well as a provision for paid relief time.

¹⁰ Government of Alberta. Ministry of Children's Services data. [Alberta Child Care Grant Funding Program | Alberta.ca](#)

¹¹ [Government of Alberta. 2020. Ministry of Children's Services Annual Report 2019-20. Government of Alberta. 2021. Ministry of Children's Services Annual Report 2020-21](#)

The longstanding and deeply rooted challenges facing the early learning and child care workforce, which were compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, require significant new policies and investments both to stabilize the workforce and then begin building its capacity as part of system building. The overarching need is for a comprehensive early learning and child care workforce strategy, developed through a partnership between the Government of Alberta, public postsecondary institutions, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and other early learning and care stakeholders. The workforce strategy will need to address the supply of early childhood educators; their educational preparation, certification and ongoing professional learning; their compensation and working conditions; and data collection, monitoring and evaluation of the child care workforce.

The Government of Alberta proposes under the Canada-Alberta system building agreement to allocate \$306.16 million to support licensed programs and certified educators in offering high-quality early learning and child care. This new investment, while welcome, does not appear sufficient to address the critical needs facing the workforce, including support for improved wages and working conditions.

Based on consultations with Alberta stakeholders and taking into account the findings from international and Canadian research, the roadmap partners recommend the following policy actions to support the early learning and child care workforce.

Policy actions to advance the qualifications, certification and ongoing professional learning of early childhood educators

The Ministry of Children's Services should work with other government ministries, early learning and child care stakeholders, public post-secondary institutions and researchers and content experts to develop and implement both short-term and long-term strategies to build the capacity of the early learning and child care workforce.

20. Review and immediately strengthen staffing requirements to support quality provision

In the short-term, the Ministry of Children's Services should consider the following measures to enhance the quality of centre-based child care within the existing staff certification levels:

- Require at least one staff per group of children in centre-based care to be certified as a Level 2 early childhood educator, and within two years require at least one staff per group of children in centre-based care to be certified as a Level 3 early childhood educator;
- Require any staff supervising a practicum placement for a student completing an early learning and child care credential to be certified as a Level 3 early childhood educator;
- Require all certified early childhood educators to participate in a specified number of hours of professional learning per year; and
- Increase the use of pedagogical leaders to support the ongoing development of educators and include mandatory coaching and mentoring in the implementation of the *Flight* framework.

21. Review and remove ECE equivalencies for qualifications unrelated to early childhood education

The Ministry of Children’s Services should work with post-secondary early learning and care faculty and other content experts to review the current equivalencies for staff certification to ensure that all equivalent qualifications include an appropriate level and amount of course work in early childhood education.

Equivalent qualifications that don’t meet the agreed criteria should be removed from the list of eligible equivalencies.

22. Increase the educational and certification requirements for all early childhood educators in licensed child care

The Ministry of Children’s Services should work with the Ministry of Advanced Education, faculty from public post-secondary institutions, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and other early learning and care stakeholders to develop a strategy and timeline for phasing out the current ECE Level 1 certification and introducing new post-diploma and degree level ECE programs of study, with new levels of early childhood educator certification that reflect these credentials.

In conjunction with increases in the educational and certification requirements for early childhood educators in licensed centre-based child care, the Ministry of Children’s Services should also work with the Alberta Family Child Care Association, licensed family day home agencies and family child care educators to review the timelines and process for implementing certification requirements for family child care providers. The level of educational preparation for family child care educators should be increased and come more in line with that for certified early childhood educators in licensed centre-based child care.

23. The regular renewal of certification and ongoing professional learning requirements

The Ministry of Children’s Services should work with the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, post-secondary early learning and care faculty and other early learning and care stakeholders to develop a mandatory certification renewal process for early childhood educators. An early childhood educator’s renewal of certification, perhaps every 3 to 5 years, would require the completion of a minimum number of hours of professional learning provided through a public post-secondary institution or an equivalent approved or accredited body.

Certified early childhood educators whose certification lapses would be required to re-apply for certification.

Policy actions to address staff compensation and working conditions

24. Develop a competitive provincial wage scale for all early learning and child care staff that reflects education, experience and role description, and includes a common benefit package and pension plan

To support the recruitment and retention of a qualified early learning and child care workforce, the Ministry of Children’s Services should work with other government ministries, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and other sector stakeholders to develop and implement a provincial salary scale that covers all staff who work in centre-based child care programs.

The provincial salary scale should ensure that the wages and benefits for child care staff are competitive with those of related professions, and reflect staff qualifications, experience and role responsibilities.

As a parallel to its development of a provincial wage scale for staff in licensed centre-based child care, the Ministry of Children’s Services should also work with the Alberta Family Child Care Association, family day home agencies and family child care providers to determine appropriate compensation levels for family child care educators.

25. Review and implement changes in the working conditions for certified early childhood educators

To encourage certified early childhood educators to remain in the field the Ministry of Children’s Services should support the following improvements in staff’s working conditions:

- The design and implementation of peer mentoring and induction programs for all new early childhood educators working in centre-based child care programs;
- The provision of paid non-contact time during the workday to enable certified early childhood educators to participate in program planning and ongoing professional learning;
- Support for the design and or reconfiguration of child care spaces to include dedicated and separate space for staff program planning, staff meetings and staff-parent/guardian conferences; and
- The development of guidelines for child care centres to support the participation of certified early childhood educators in program planning and evaluation.

As a parallel to the above work, the Ministry of Children’s Services should work with the Alberta Family Child Care Association, licensed family day home agencies, researchers and family child care providers to identify ways of improving the working conditions and supports available for family child care educators.

26. Develop early learning and child care professional profiles and role descriptions

The current absence of well-defined professional roles and responsibilities for certified early childhood educators can diminish the value of pre-service education and act as a disincentive for educators looking to increase their formal qualifications and advance their careers in the field. It can further discourage qualified students from pursuing a career in community-based child care.

The Ministry of Children's Services should work with the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, the Canadian Child Care Federation and post-secondary early learning and care faculty to develop professional profiles and role descriptions for early childhood educators with different levels of education and certification.

Policy actions to address data collection, monitoring and evaluation

Regular data collection, analysis and reporting will form a central component of a comprehensive workforce strategy. It will provide the basis for identifying workforce trends, informing planning and assessing the impact of policy initiatives.

27. The annual collection of human resources information from centre directors

The Ministry of Children's Services should work with early learning and care researchers and sector stakeholders to develop a centre survey that collects annual information on staffing complements in licensed child care centres, the level of staff certification and their educational qualifications, the professional learning opportunities made available to staff, human resource practices, staff wages and benefits and staff turnover.

The survey should be completed by the senior staff person within a licensed centre. The Ministry may determine that completion of the annual survey be a condition of receiving supply-side funding.

28. Annual surveys of centre staff and family day home educators

As a complement to the above centre survey, the Ministry should further work with researchers and sector stakeholders to develop parallel annual staff and family child care educator surveys, distributed at the centre and family day home agency level.

These staff and educator surveys should collect information on job/work satisfaction, participation in professional learning, compensation and anticipated work and career plans.



NEXT STEPS

The historic system building agreement signed by the Alberta and federal governments on November 15th, 2021 provides the opportunity to transform how early learning and child care services are organized, financed and delivered in the province. The \$3.8 billion of new federal spending included in the agreement provides the basis for the move away from a child care market towards a more publicly funded, planned and managed system that provides all children and their families with equitable access to high-quality early learning and child care delivered by professional early childhood educators.

The transition to an early learning and child care system in Alberta will require new public policy, new models of service governance, planning and management and new financing models. Based on consultations with early learning and child care stakeholders and the review of international and Canadian research, the current roadmap outlines the key policy actions required to begin the process of system building.

The roadmap partners see the policy roadmap as a vehicle to support discussions of how best to build an Alberta early learning and child care system. System building will require much discussion between the provincial government and other governments and between the provincial government and early learning and child care stakeholders. Early learning and child care stakeholders themselves must further have opportunities to discuss system building with their peers. They need to hear, consider and respond to the different ideas and perspectives of their sector colleagues as well as those of the parents and families they serve before reaching consensus on the priorities and issues that system building must attend to and address.

Over the coming months, the roadmap partners propose to share and discuss the ideas and policy actions presented in the roadmap with early learning and child care stakeholders across the province. They will also share the roadmap with governments and seek opportunities to engage elected officials and government staff in discussions around early learning and child care system building. Where appropriate, the roadmap partners may work together to draft more detailed policy briefs on key elements of system building that either stakeholders or governments see as requiring more dedicated discussion or attention.

