

The Workforce Investments Required
for Early Learning and Child Care
System Building in Alberta

What Early Childhood Educators Have to Say



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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Research Background	3
Research Design	5
What Early Childhood Educators Said About Building Workforce Capacity and ELCC System Building	8
The Challenges Facing Early Childhood Educators	8
<i>The Shortage of Qualified Early Childhood Educators</i>	8
<i>Increases in Children and Families' Needs</i>	11
<i>Early Childhood Educators Low Pay and Lack of Benefits</i>	15
<i>The Undervaluing of Early Childhood Educators and their Work</i>	17
<i>Low Morale Among Early Childhood Educators</i>	18
Building Workforce Capacity	21
<i>Improvements in Early Childhood Educator Compensation and Benefits</i>	21
<i>Advances in Early Childhood Educator Educational Preparation and Professional Learning</i>	22
Early Childhood Educators' Knowledge of the Canada-wide Agreement and Interest in System Building	24
The Workforce Investments Required to Support Early Learning and Child Care System Building	28
A Workforce Transition Strategy	28
Improvements in Early Childhood Educator Compensation, Benefits and Working Conditions	30
The Participation of Early Childhood Educators in ELCC System Building	31
Conclusion	34
Appendix One: Focus Group Protocol	35



*The Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide
Early Learning and Child Care
Agreement, signed in November 2021,
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Introduction

The federal government's Budget 2021 announcement of more than \$27 billion in new spending over five years to build a Pan-Canadian early learning and child care system, in collaboration with provincial and territorial governments, provides an opportunity to transform child care services across the country. Significant new investments in the early learning and child care workforce will be central to this transformation, as provincial and territorial governments work both to expand and raise the quality of affordable, regulated child care for young children and their families.

The federal government has further committed to work with Indigenous governments to advance early learning and child care for Indigenous children and families. This work will be guided by the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework which affirms the rights of Indigenous governments to design and develop early learning and child care systems and services that are distinctions based and self-governed.

The Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, signed in November 2021, allocates \$3.8 billion in new federal monies to support system building. The agreement highlights the importance of 'valuing the early childhood workforce and providing them with training and development opportunities'. It allocates \$306 million of new federal funding over five fiscal years to improve the quality of regulated child care, with \$298 million allocated for 'professional development, skills training, and improved certification levels' for early childhood educators. The agreement also references funding for wage enhancements for certified early childhood educators, although it does not specify the monies to be invested in these.

The central role that well-qualified and well-supported early childhood educators play in the delivery of high-quality early learning and care makes it critical that new workforce investments are sufficient both in their amount and how they are allocated to support the growth in the number of well-qualified early childhood educators needed for system building. The Alberta early learning and child care sector, in common with child care sectors across the country, has faced longstanding challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff. The depth of these challenges highlights the need for significant new workforce investments as part of system building, informed by a combination of research and input from early childhood educators.

The following report, prepared by the Muttart Foundation, in partnership with the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA) and the Alberta Leaders' Caucus within the Canadian Child Care Federation, presents the findings from focus group discussions with early childhood educators held in the fall of 2022. As part of these discussions, certified early childhood educators shared their insights on the challenges facing the workforce and the strategies needed to increase its size and build its capacity to support the delivery of high-quality early learning and child care. The discussions further explored early childhood educators' knowledge and understanding of the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement and asked them how they would like to provide input into the work that lies ahead.

The findings from the current study have the potential to inform early learning and child care system building work, with a particular focus on the workforce. They can also help policy makers better understand what early childhood educators will need to support the delivery of high-quality, affordable child care.

Research Background

The foundational role qualified and well-supported professional early childhood educators play in the provision of high-quality early learning and care is well-documented.¹ Early childhood education is a specialized field that requires professional, well-qualified and well-supported staff to deliver the high-quality early learning and care that benefits children and their families. Staff with higher levels of formal pre-service education are more likely both to support the rich interactions that foster children’s development and to create the stimulating environments in which young children thrive than staff with lower levels of education.

Despite this realization, provincial and territorial governments have historically struggled to build and support the capacity of their early learning and care workforces. The limited public investments in child care in much of Canada, with the exception of Quebec, allied with the primary reliance on market-based approaches to organize, finance and deliver services, have resulted in workforces that are underprepared, poorly resourced, and modestly paid for their important work.² The predominantly female workforce remains undervalued, with high rates of staff turnover and longstanding challenges in the recruitment and retention of qualified staff. Over a decade ago, research supported by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council found that the most qualified early childhood educators commonly worked outside of the child care sector.³

The Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement 2021-2026 invests \$3.8 billion in new federal funding to support system building in Alberta.⁴ The Alberta government, in common with other provincial and territorial agreements, has allocated the bulk of these new federal monies to reduce parents’ out-of-pocket child care fees (\$2.865 billion over five years). There are smaller funding allocations for the expansion of services (\$240.64 million), improvements in service quality – including workforce investments (\$306.16 million) and the inclusion of children from vulnerable populations (\$202.6 million).

The workforce investments outlined in the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Agreement (around \$298 million of the \$306.16 million allocated for ‘quality’ improvements over five years) are directed to ‘professional development and ECE supports’ and an increase in the percentage of child care workers who ‘fully meet’ provincial certification requirements. There is a further provision for a ‘base salary’ for early childhood educators, which includes wage top-ups, during the final three years of the agreement. The provincial government’s initial two-year Action Plan under the agreement does not, however, include a commitment to develop a comprehensive workforce strategy – a provision common in other Canada-provincial agreements and a strategy recommended as a central part of system building work by early learning and child care stakeholders.⁵

1 See the series of OECD *Starting Strong* reports that summarize research findings and provide comparable data on early childhood education and care and the OECD *Engaging Young Children* report from 2018. See also the European Commission Directorate reported on *Competence Requirements in early childhood education and care* prepared by Urban, M et al, in 2011.

2 See Halfon, S. 2021. *Canada’s child care workforce*. Occasional Paper 35. Childcare Resource and Research Unit for a summary of the longstanding challenges facing Canadian child care workforces.

3 Childcare Human Resources Sector Council. 2009. *A portrait of Canada’s early childhood education and care workforce*. Ottawa, ON: Childcare Human Resources Sector Council; Centre for Spatial Economics. 2009. *Understanding and addressing workforce shortages in ECEC*. Ottawa, ON. Childcare Human Resources Sector Council.

4 The Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement: [Canada – Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement - 2021 to 2026 - Canada.ca](#)

5 See the *Roadmap to a Quality Early Learning and Child Care System in Alberta*, prepared by the Muttart Foundation, the Canadian Child Care Federation, Child Care Now and the YMCA of Northern Alberta. <https://muttart.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Roadmap-to-a-Quality-Early-Learning-and-Child-Care-System-in-Alberta-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>



Prior to the signing of the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement, the Alberta child care workforce faced many of the same challenges as similar workforces across Canada. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 deepened these challenges, with falling enrollments and significant disruptions in regulated child care services severely impacting the workforce. The number of certified early childhood educators working in regulated child care fell from 18,800 in March 2020 to 13,172 in June 2021, as the sector experienced widescale staff lay-offs. While this number had rebounded to just over 20,000 by early summer 2022, as the new federal affordability and expansion investments increased the supply of regulated child care, service providers continued to report problems with staff burn-out and staffing shortages. In early summer 2022, just under 60 percent of the certified early childhood educators working in regulated child care held formal educational qualifications (certificates or diplomas) or their equivalents, a small reduction in the proportion of qualified staff from prior to the pandemic.

To gather input into how the new workforce investments included in the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Agreement might build workforce capacity, the Ministry of Children's Services held two virtual consultations with invited early learning and care stakeholders in April 2022. The first focussed on workforce strategies and the second on the certification of early childhood educators. The Ministry followed up these virtual consultations with two online surveys; the first for early childhood educators, released in May and the second for family child care providers, released in June.

The online survey of early childhood educators sought input on the issues facing the workforce and the opportunities available to increase its size and advance the certification process. The family child care provider survey sought stakeholder input on the standards for family child care, as well as the funding supports required to recruit new family child care providers. The Ministry of Children's Services subsequently advised of its intention to support future phases of engagement with early learning and child care stakeholders around workforce strategies.

In early October 2022, the Ministry of Children's Services, drawing on the findings from the above consultations and surveys, announced new measures 'to support the quality and professionalism of the child care workforce'.⁶ These measures included support for the recruitment, certification and retention of early childhood educators, including the expansion of wage top-ups; a commitment to develop a competency-based model for certification; and, the expansion of eligibility for registration for the Child Care Orientation Course. In December 2022, the Ministry of Children's Services announced further workforce supports comprising increases to the wage top-ups for certified educators and one-time payments to eligible staff.⁷ These measures, announced after the completion of the field research for the current study, took effect at the beginning of January 2023.

⁶ Government of Alberta. (2022). *Supporting early childhood educators in Alberta*.

Retrieved from <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=84828CB8887C8-9D34-EA71-1396CD797D686CD9>

⁷ Government of Alberta. (2022). *More support for early childhood educators in Alberta*.

Retrieved from <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=8509810E011EB-98B7-3984-E9BA5F43F1AB8978>

Research Design

The current research builds on the Ministry of Children’s Services spring 2022 virtual engagements and summer 2022 online surveys. It presents the findings from focus group discussions with certified early childhood educators held in September and October 2022. The research partners specifically sought the input of early childhood educators on system building given both the central role educators play in the delivery of high-quality child care and the relatively limited opportunities available for them, to date, to share their thoughts and insights on the changes coming to regulated child care across the province. Through focus group discussions, the research team was able to hear directly from early childhood educators and reduce some of the barriers front-line staff, in particular, face in participating in policy discussions.

Ninety-six early childhood educators attended the focus groups, which included seven in-person discussions and two virtual ones. The in-person focus groups were held in Edmonton (three discussion groups), Calgary, Drayton Valley, Fort McMurray, and Grande Prairie. The virtual discussions included early childhood educators from communities in the south-east, south-west, central and northern regions of the province. The ninety-six participants included front-line educators, administrators and pedagogical leaders, family child care educators and consultants, owners/operators and one board member from a facility-based program. Apart from the one board member, all participants were certified early childhood educators and worked, or had recently worked, in licensed child care programs across the province. Seventy-nine of the participants worked in facility-based programs (one third for-profit and two-thirds non-profit) and 16 in licensed family child care. On average, they had worked in regulated child care for close to 17 years.

The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta recruited educators to participate in the focus groups through an invitation sent out through its social media accounts and its email distribution list. Members of the Alberta Leaders’ Caucus, within the Canadian Child Care Federation, also shared the invitation through their networks. The research partners further provided information on the focus groups to other stakeholder organizations which expressed an interest in the research. Educators who attended a focus group received a \$50 gift card to thank them for their participation.

The discussions followed a consistent format (see Appendix One for the focus group protocol). There were three related discussions: first, an exploration of the current state of the workforce and the challenges facing early childhood educators; second, a consideration of the investments and measures required to increase the size and capacity of the workforce; and third, a discussion of early childhood educators’ knowledge and understanding of the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide agreement and how they would like to contribute to the system building work that lies ahead. As part of the introduction to the group discussions, the research team provided participants with some summary information on the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement and responded to questions they had about early learning and child care system building.

Like any research method, focus groups have both strengths and limitations. Their strengths include the interactive nature of the discussions, which allow participants to share their own experiences and ideas on a particular subject, while also hearing and responding to the experiences and ideas of other participants. Focus groups can help researchers better understand the range and strength of stakeholder views or experiences of complex matters and can support the generation of new ideas and the identification of areas for further research and analysis.

The limitations of focus groups include cautions around generalizing the experiences, insights and views of the participants to the broader population - in this case all certified educators working in regulated child

care. The interactive and dynamic nature of the discussions may further influence the experiences some participants choose to share and the views they express. Participants who have views or experiences that differ significantly from those of other group members may choose not to share them for a variety of reasons. A skilled facilitator and clear ground rules for the discussion can help to reduce the risk of participants not feeling comfortable in sharing their views or experiences.

In undertaking the research, the study partners recognize the complex and long-term nature of early learning and child care system building. They also remain committed to ensuring that the voices of different stakeholders are heard in designing and introducing the transformational change anticipated under the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement.





I would describe our ECE experience as we are all in just survival mode. Everyone is so burnt out. . . We are short-staffed all the time with all the illness. We can't seem to get ahead of everything. (Virtual focus group participant)

What Early Childhood Educators Said About Building Workforce Capacity and ELCC System Building

Early childhood educators actively participated in the focus group discussions. There were connections between the three main discussion areas and educators commonly returned to some recurring themes or arguments that formed threads throughout the discussions. There was much upon which educators agreed and they frequently shared similar views and experiences. They also offered insights and described experiences that differed, reflecting both the diversity of the workforce and the various roles educators play including that of frontline educator, program supervisor or manager, business owner, director and professional leader or specialist coach. The following sections present the findings from the discussions. They include quotes from individual participants to illustrate some of the arguments educators made or the experiences they shared.

The Challenges Facing Early Childhood Educators

Early childhood educators identified a series of challenges facing the workforce as disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic recede and system building begins under the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Agreement. The challenges they described were similar across groups and highlighted the significant pressures on front-line educators, those in supervisory or management positions and those working in supporting roles. Educators were both frustrated by these challenges and concerned with their impacts on staff. Some expressed fears that they were further undermining both the availability and the quality of regulated child care.

The Shortage of Qualified Early Childhood Educators

Early childhood educators in all of the focus groups identified the shortage of qualified staff as a major concern. They described the significant difficulties programs and services face in recruiting and retaining qualified educators as they look either to return to pre-pandemic service levels or, in a smaller number of cases, expand services. Early childhood educators saw low pay and the lack of benefits as the major factors contributing to staff shortages. They identified the service disruptions brought on by the pandemic as one of the main reasons experienced and qualified educators were leaving the field. Staff in leadership roles advised that child care programs were increasingly unable to compete for staff with sectors that offer higher wages, benefits and less demanding working environments, including the retail and service industries.

Feeling short-staffed, stressed, carrying the workload. We are running with low numbers and trying to stay within ratios.

Making sure we don't have to shut down - closing rooms and combining rooms just so we can stay open.

(Virtual focus group participant)

Early childhood educators saw a number of negative impacts resulting from the shortage of qualified staff including the inability of programs or services to fully re-open or operate at full capacity; reductions in or the elimination of specific services (e.g. infant care and nutrition or food services); the loss or erosion of

supports for children with exceptional or special needs and the inability of some programs to accept children who required additional supports; and the temporary or rolling closure of some programs and services in northern communities. Participants in the Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray focus groups advised that the shortage of qualified staff was most severe in the north-east and north-west regions of the province, limiting programs' ability to operate at full capacity.

I supervise in various regions and in Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie we are having big issues. We have big waiting lists but have no educators. We are sitting at 69% capacity because we have no one to work and a ton of kids on the waiting list. That has a huge impact on the economy and the lives of children and families. Parents can't work if they don't have care.
(Edmonton focus group participant)

We still are not to the full capacity as prior to COVID. We aren't willing to just take anyone as staff now. Options for staffing are next to none. Do we take staff that is less qualified, not as experienced or not suited to our program or do we stick to quality? (Virtual focus group participant)

Early childhood educators described the additional responsibilities senior staff had taken on due to staff shortages including working 'on the floor' (in ratio) to meet licensing requirements and training and mentoring new staff entering the field - many of whom have little or no child care education or experience. They also described an associated rise in the number of staff absences due to illness or burnout, as front-line early childhood educators work longer hours and additional shifts to cover for staff shortages, with some also facing additional financial challenges and family responsibilities at home.

I would describe our ECE experience as we are all in just survival mode. Everyone is so burnt out. . . We are short-staffed all the time with all the illness. We can't seem to get ahead of everything. (Virtual focus group participant)

The educators that I've worked alongside are feeling overwhelmed - we are getting children in with different needs. We are taking on students from the colleges - it is a lot on somebody to provide high quality care and teach a new educator, as well as students, as well as build relationships with families again.
(Virtual focus group participant)

Early childhood educators in supervisory or management roles described the shortage of staff with either a Level II or Level III certification as particularly acute. They reported receiving few or, in some cases, no applications for job postings for credentialed staff. Educators described similar challenges recruiting qualified staff either to work with children with exceptional needs or children with additional language or cultural needs. Some senior staff and owner-operators reported changing their recruitment strategies to try and attract qualified staff, including using their own networks for 'word of mouth' referrals. Others described programs competing for qualified staff, with some service providers reported to be actively recruiting qualified early childhood educators from other programs and services. Educators from the north-west region of the province described how some programs were trying to 'grow their own' qualified staff, but reported it was common for these staff to move to the school system after they had completed higher qualifications.

I'm desperately looking for Level 3's but they aren't there. When I can't find Level 3's I have to hire Level 1's to meet ratios. I try to help them get to Level 2 and 3 but they don't have the English language ability to get into the program. They are new to the country and they are not able to get Level 2 or 3. I go with the minimum requirement just to meet ratio to be able to run.
(Edmonton focus group participant)

There is not a big pool to pick from. You take the time, you train them, you give them what they need and encourage them. Then they go to the schools. We lose them to the schools because of the wage – every time. (Grande Prairie focus group participant)

Early childhood educators reported that service providers had recruited inexperienced staff with a Level I certification to address staffing shortages. They described this as placing further demands on already stressed front-line staff and expressed fears that it may also result in more experienced educators leaving the field. Individual early childhood educators further identified challenges with what they saw as a lack of professionalism among some new staff entering the field. They reported an increase in staff not coming into work for their scheduled shifts and advised that some new staff frequently moved between employers, often after relatively short periods of employment. Individual educators in management roles suggested that some new staff were entering the field primarily to find employment rather than a commitment to work with young children and families. Others described some new staff as reluctant or unwilling to participate in professional learning opportunities.

Some of the experiences our program has had with Level I's is the quality. Some of these staff, they just need a job and the centre is desperate. It can cause confusion and is a detriment to the care the children are getting because the staff is not totally aware of what ECE is or what dealing with younger children entails. There is no quality in it. It is a band-aid honestly. (Calgary focus group participant)

It is impacting the children, constantly having new lead educators, they never get that consistent educator in the room with them. They are constantly having to form relationships with these educators. They don't know if it will be that way the next day or if there will be someone else in the room. (Virtual focus group participant)

Educators advised that some new staff did not have the educational foundation needed to work effectively with young children and their families. Individual educators also expressed concerns about the quality of the early learning and care credentials from some private colleges as well as their oversight of student field placements. They were also critical of the online orientation course for Level I certification, advising that it was insufficient. Educators raised further concerns about staff entering the field with equivalency qualifications, which they saw as not providing staff with an appropriate knowledge of early childhood development and learning.

Early childhood educators saw the shortage of qualified staff as a significant threat to the sector. They expressed concerns about the increase of staff in senior roles with exemptions from certification requirements; the loss of the pools of qualified educators they previously relied on to provide relief or temporary support to staff teams; and the erosion of the quality of child care. Individual front-line educators described the challenges they faced working with new staff who had limited educational preparation and little or no experience in working with young children and their families. Some expressed fears that the quality of their own work was becoming compromised as a result.

Our new director does not care about new staff; all the responsibility goes onto the senior educator. They just put the untrained educator in the room and that's it. Staff is covering the ratio but she's not meeting the children's needs. I've been suffering for the last month and a half. (Edmonton focus group participant)

The smaller number of early childhood educators who reported faring better with staffing shortages advised that they had retained most of their core staff team during the pandemic, including staff with higher level qualifications. As a result, they experienced lower levels of staff turnover and had not had to attempt to recruit new staff in the current competitive labour market. They described a strong organizational culture and good leadership as factors which can help encourage qualified staff to remain in the field.

Early childhood educators described some strategies individual centres had used to respond to staff shortages. For example, in Grande Prairie, staff reported that centres had, out of necessity, worked together to pool staff resources. They also described the use of ‘rolling closures’ across centres to ensure that they met ratio requirements, provided quality education and care, allowed for staff respite or sick leave and supported the operational viability of the centres themselves. Senior staff from a rural centre in the southern region of the province reported that the program had chosen not to recruit staff with lower qualifications and had been required to reduce its capacity as a result.

Increases in Children and Families’ Needs

Early childhood educators in eight of the nine focus groups reported an increase in the number and proportion of young children who had additional or higher needs compared to prior to the pandemic. They described these additional needs as placing further pressures on early childhood educators, many of whom were already stressed by long work hours, funding and policy changes and service disruptions. In just over half of the focus groups, early childhood educators reported that a greater number of parents also required additional supports, with staff allocating more time and resources to counselling, information sharing and helping families adjust to their child’s participation in child care. They also described spending more time supporting parents in identifying their child’s inclusion needs as well as accessing inclusion supports.

For our program we have a higher number of children requiring speech and a lot qualifying for PUF. They have delays all around. . . Severe separation anxiety for children and families. (Virtual focus group participant)



The higher needs educators observed among children included additional socio-emotional needs, as well as speech-language and other developmental delays. They also reported more children with social anxiety, separation anxiety and behavioural challenges, including higher levels of aggression. Early childhood educators attributed some of these higher needs to the social isolation many young children experienced during the pandemic, as well as disruptions in families' lives and increases in their financial stresses. They highlighted the particular challenges that some very young children (infants and toddlers) born during the pandemic faced in regulated child care, given that this was their first experience in non-parental or non-familial group care outside of their family home.

Early childhood educators also reported higher anxiety and stress levels among some parents, including those returning their children to regulated child care after the pandemic as well as those accessing regulated care for the first time. They advised that some parents had increased concerns about their children's health and well-being, while others were struggling to manage the stresses of returning to work either on a part-time or full-time basis after the pandemic. Educators further reported an increase in the number of families who wanted part-time rather than full-time child care, as well as more instances of families withdrawing their children from child care for periods of time.

A further challenge educators identified was the unwillingness or reluctance of some families either to acknowledge that their child had additional needs or to seek the professional diagnoses their child required to be eligible for funded supports. Individual early childhood educators suggested that the social isolation brought on by the pandemic appeared to have contributed to some parents' lack of knowledge of children's normal development. As a result, educators reported spending more time counselling families on child development, while also re-establishing relationships with families whose child care use had been disrupted by the pandemic.

There are more children with special needs. Some parents during the interview do not open up about their children. Then a couple months later, through multiple discoveries, we find out. (Fort McMurray focus group participant)

In the family day homes the parent's social skills and communication skills have also been affected. Because of this whole COVID isolation, even parents aren't like they were. They weren't able to talk to other parents and they didn't look up other resources to know how their child is developing. (Fort McMurray focus group participant)

Individual early childhood educators identified previous Ministry of Education changes to Early Childhood Services funding as contributing to the larger number of children with speech-language or social-emotional delays. They also reported that the shortage of specialized staff who work with children with exceptional needs had worsened since the pandemic, making it more difficult to access additional supports for children with exceptional or special needs.

Early childhood educators also saw recent changes to the Inclusive Child Care program as contributing to the difficulties they faced in supporting children with additional needs and reported long delays in children receiving supports. Others described the mentoring and coaching supports available to support inclusion as less effective than before the pandemic due to the greater demands on front-line staff. They further described instances of senior staff being unable to participate in coaching and mentoring to support inclusion, as well as staff with inclusion training leaving a program only to be replaced by new staff with no experience in working with children with exceptional needs.

Mental health, anxiety, parent separation, communication, trust. There are a lot more behaviours and a lot more tensions. (Grande Prairie focus group participant)

We are seeing a two-year delay in social, emotional development and communication skills. They don't know how to talk to each other, how to feel. They just don't know. (Calgary focus group participant)

Early childhood educators saw the shortage of qualified staff to work with children with exceptional needs as a growing problem and highlighted the need for enhanced staff to child ratios, improved access to inclusion specialists, and funding for dedicated aides. Some educators reported that many child care programs were now less able to support the inclusion of children with special needs than prior to the pandemic. They described 'lots of need' for inclusive child care, with more young children 'falling through the cracks'. Some educators expressed concerns that the long waiting-lists at many child care centres was further contributing to delays in children accessing the supports and services they needed.

Right now we have a ton of Inclusive Child Care contracts but no staff. That means we have to triage on a scale of 1 to 5 where are your needs. If you are a 5 we have to get a staff there. If you are a 2, maybe not so much. It is pretty scary that kids are falling through the cracks right now and it is getting worse. (Edmonton focus group participant)

If only there was funding for an aide we could accommodate these children. We have two-year olds that we've had to let go because it is unsafe. Even if it is four children with one staff, they are following that one child all day so that he doesn't choke or harm himself. (Grande Prairie focus group participant)

Family child care providers described the challenges they faced in meeting some families' expectations for extended hours of care – sometimes up to twelve to fifteen hours a day. They described these longer hours as placing additional pressures on family child care providers and leaving them with no time for program planning, relief time or respite from care. As a result, some family child care providers reported only accepting families who required fewer hours or more regular hours of care, which they acknowledged, in turn, increased the demands on other providers.

Early childhood educators also advised that the number of children attending child care with symptoms of illness, including respiratory infections, had increased. They described mixed reactions from parents when asked either to keep sick children at home or to pick them up when they presented symptoms of illness. Some reported that parents were more willing to follow health protocols, given public health concerns with COVID and other respiratory infections. Others, however, reported parents' unwillingness to do so, which placed additional pressures on educators and increased the health and safety risks for both children and staff. Early childhood educators cited some parents' concerns about losing their child care subsidy as one reason they might be unwilling to remove a sick child from care. Others suggested that families were worried about their employment and unable to take time off from work to care for a sick child.

There are a number of children who are regularly sick. Parents can't keep up to the child's sick days as they have to take an unpaid leave of absence. They can't afford to take off work. They know it isn't the day care's fault that kids are being sent home but they can't keep up with it and still pay for child care while maintaining their jobs (Fort McMurray focus group participant)

Early childhood educators shared some strategies they had developed to address the challenge of caring for children and families with higher needs including setting up small, part-time care groups for families accessing child care for the first time as well as collaborating with other community programs and services. Some educators advised that the revised staff to child ratios introduced under the *Early Learning and Child Care Act* were only workable with typically developing children, while others commented that the ratios were not sufficient to ensure quality provision. Individual educators recommended that the Ministry of Children’s Services review staff to child ratios to ensure that they support high-quality service provision and the inclusion of children with higher or exceptional needs.

I feel that the toddler ratio 1:6 is a lot. They are toddlers, it is hard. It should be at least 1:4. My staff knew I was coming here to share their voices. Staff can't support 6 kids. They are toddlers, they are active. They need more support. They need more focussed time. We have a capacity of 18 in the toddlers' room and they are so active and with three staff – at the end of the day, we are done. We are done. (Edmonton focus group participant)



We have staff working a full day in daycare and a second job after that. And, they show up again the next day. They are working a crazy amount of hours. One lady ... She works daycare all day and then at a restaurant all night to make ends meet. (Calgary focus group participant)

Early Childhood Educators' Low Pay and Lack of Benefits

Early childhood educators in all of the focus groups highlighted staff's low pay and the lack of benefits as major challenges facing the field. They saw them as the root cause of the difficulties programs face in recruiting and retaining well-qualified early childhood educators, as well as support staff (for example, cooks); a threat to the quality of regulated child care; and a barrier to the expansion of services.

Educators described their low wages and limited access to benefits as longstanding problems. They expressed their frustration and, in some cases, disappointment that early childhood educators continued to be underpaid, given the importance of their work. Some highlighted the recent cost of living increases as making the problem of low wages more difficult. Numerous educators criticized both the lack of increase in provincial wage-enhancements, which they reported had not increased for well over a decade, and the monthly cap on the eligible hours for wage top-ups. They described examples of front-line staff working extra hours to cover for staff shortages, for which they did not receive wage top-ups. They also reported that senior staff did not receive wage top-ups for their program planning and administrative roles.

We need some benefits, someone who could support us. We are the foundation- the profession. At least acknowledge the educator. We are the making of everything. We need more money, benefits. (Edmonton focus group participant)

Wages have always been a problem. We are just like teachers and other educators. Persistent issue. What are other provinces doing so that we can learn and pay ECEs what they deserve and still be able to run a non-profit centre or business? (Virtual focus group participant)

Some educators described the flat wage scale for certified early childhood educators as discouraging staff from raising their educational levels. They advised that experienced staff, with many years of service, were often paid a similar hourly wage to staff much newer to the field, reducing the financial incentive for experienced educators to stay in the sector. Overall, they described their low wages and relatively flat wage scale as sending the message that their work was not valued. Some educators shared examples of how low wages impacted the mainly female workforce, reporting that many front-line staff worked two or more jobs to support themselves and their families. Early childhood educators from Banff, Canmore, Fort McMurray and Peace River further described how the lack of affordable housing in their communities made it difficult for staff to enter or stay in the field.

Staff wages are making it quite difficult. Certainly, in Banff and Canmore and I'm sure in other locations, and because of the wages, it is harder to find affordable housing. (Virtual focus group participant)

The low pay, no coverage, no sick days, no benefits. Why would we stick around when we can go to the schools and start at \$19.50 rather than minimum wage. At our worksite 85 percent of us have second jobs. We have to make ends meet. (Grande Prairie focus group participant)

I think there is a difference between a living wage and a fair wage. I think we are worth more than just being able to pay our bills. (Fort McMurray focus group participant)

ECEs can be a receptionist or an administrative assistant at an oil and gas company and the wage is four times higher. We are in Alberta so that is the reality. So, how are you going to attract ECEs to come back? (Calgary focus group participant)

In almost all of the focus groups, early childhood educators described examples of staff leaving the field to work in other sectors with higher pay and benefits, including the food and hospitality sectors, the retail sector and the oil and gas industry. They also reported that qualified early childhood educators frequently moved to the school system, which not only offered better wages, benefits and working conditions, but was also more valued and respected than child care. A related financial challenge individual early childhood educators identified was the inability of staff to afford regulated child care for their own children.

I've been working for 10 years and I can barely afford child care for my own children. I provide quality child care for other children and then I think, how am I going to afford quality child care for my own children? It's a struggle. (Fort McMurray, focus group participant)

The main challenge is that educators are leaving and the wages are equivalent to working at Walmart. In 2006, I was making more. Over time, the wage enhancements are no longer working. I'm looking to work at another place. (Edmonton focus group participant)

We are asking a lot of ECEs with Flight and the regulation update. We are asking them to do 80 to 90 percent of what a classroom teacher is doing for a fraction of the pay. It is a joke. It isn't like I'm not a professional and don't want to learn. But realistically, how much do you want from me if I only make \$17 per hour? (Calgary focus group participant)

Early childhood educators described the lack of benefits as compounding the problem of low wages. They reported that, with the exception of staff who either worked in publicly supported services (for example, the municipal child care centre in Drayton Valley) or for larger non-profit organizations such as the YMCA of Northern Alberta, early childhood educators received few paid benefits. Some educators in management positions or those operating private businesses advised that most service providers could not afford to pay staff benefits such as paid sick or vacation time, pensions or RRSP contribution plans, and health and dental benefits. Front-line early childhood educators reported that the lack of benefits was one of main reasons staff left to work in other fields, including the public school system. The lack of pension benefits was a particular concern for some long-time educators who expressed the fear that they would be unable to retire. Early childhood educators further advised that the lack of paid sick time had contributed to high levels of stress and burnout among front-line staff during the pandemic, with many staff unable to afford to take time off from work to care for themselves or their family members.

I've had three jobs. I'm a mother of two and I have to take care of my family. (Drayton Valley focus group participant)

Individual early childhood educators described initiatives service providers had introduced to improve staff wages and benefits including wage increases and bonuses, linked to higher levels of education and years of service, and supports to help staff access funding for further education. Others reported centres using creative scheduling such as four-day work weeks, occasional short program closures (like Spring Break in the public school system), and collaborations with other community programs (for example, maternal health programs)

If we are saying that this is the most important stage for children, then the educators working with these children should be the best. It is not showing. We are not being valued. (Virtual focus group participant)

to support staff training and team development. While early childhood educators were supportive of these types of initiatives, some expressed concerns that growing staffing pressures and potential revenue shortfalls would make it more difficult for service providers to continue to provide them going forward. Educators also advised that even when centres did provide benefits, qualified staff still left to work in schools.

Some educators expressed support for a provincial wage scale, financed by increased provincial funding, to address the problem of low wages. Others highlighted the benefits of the former Early Learning and Child Care Centre Initiative (\$25 per day child care) which included higher wage-floors for early childhood educators as well as quality enhancement funding and supports. Some educators in management roles described the ECE Recovery and Retention Grant, funded under the *Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement*, as helpful in enabling centres to retain and, in some cases, recruit and train new staff during the pandemic. They identified the flexible nature of the funding as particularly helpful for service providers.

The Undervaluing of Early Childhood Educators and their Work

Early childhood educators consistently expressed their commitment to working with young children and their families and their pride in supporting children’s socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical development. They emphasized the importance of high-quality child care with some referencing the many advances in the field over the last two decades. Educators consistently shared their frustrations, however, that their work was not valued in the same way as public schooling or that of some of the health professions. They advised that some parents still viewed them as ‘babysitters’ or childminders, providing custodial care, rather than professional educators supporting children’s development and learning. Individual educators observed that some owner-operators also treated staff in ways that did not reflect the value or professional nature of their work.

When I came into this field I had so much passion – working with children. What I am getting is that we are just babysitters. We are more than that. (Edmonton focus group participant)

There are still the same struggles. ECEs are not being seen as educators. So I think it has to start with education. They need to be seen as teachers. It has to start with being equal to other educators. (Fort McMurray focus group participant)

In almost all of the focus groups, early childhood educators expressed concerns about the increased recruitment of inexperienced staff with a Level I certification. They cautioned that this reinforced the view that child care was unskilled, vocational work that ‘anybody can do’, without the need for formal education; undermined the value of their own credentials, as well as the quality of their work; and contributed to qualified staff leaving the field. Individual educators advised that the decision of some service providers to recruit staff with lower qualifications so that they could operate at their full licensed capacity had left qualified staff feeling discouraged. Others shared their concerns with the Ministry of Children’s Services fall 2022 decision to expand access to the free online orientation course for Level I certification. They suggested that this would make it more difficult for early childhood educators to be viewed as qualified professionals.

You should feel valued for doing what you do. Why would you stay in a sector if you don't feel valued? You are building a career, which everyone in our sector should be doing. We lost 20 percent of our sector during COVID. (Calgary focus group participant)

Individual family child care providers expressed similar concerns about the undervaluing of their work and their capacity to provide high-quality child care. They advised that family day home agencies were facing increased pressure to bring unlicensed day home providers into the regulated sector and expressed their fears that this might undermine the public view of approved family child care. They further cautioned that some unlicensed day homes were unlikely to provide high-quality family child care.

Individual early childhood educators also reflected on the loss of previous program supports which helped improve their working conditions and raise the quality of early learning and care. They identified the dedicated time for planning and professional learning included as part of the Early Learning and Child Care Centre Initiative as an important contributor to quality that was now lost. Some educators described the loss of these supports as contributing to staff feeling less valued and supported.

Early childhood educators suggested some strategies to raise the public perception of early learning and child care including establishing a mandatory professional association or college for certified early childhood educators; moving child care into the public education system; and the development of a public education campaign to help parents and the general public better understand the importance of high quality early learning and child care. They argued that one goal of such a campaign should be to promote early childhood education as a profession, which would, in turn, help to recruit qualified staff; encourage educators to improve their own education and training; and ultimately improve the quality of early learning and care. Several educators observed that the designation of child care as an essential service during the pandemic had helped the public see its value and importance. They expressed the hope that regulated child care would, over time, become as valued as public education, although they differed on whether this change was likely to take place.

If we are saying that this is the most important stage for children, then the educators working with these children should be the best. It is not showing. We are not being valued. (Virtual focus group participant)

Low Morale Among Early Childhood Educators

In all but one focus group, early childhood educators shared their concerns about falling or low staff morale, including among both centre-based staff and family child care providers. They linked low and falling morale to the significant challenges facing the workforce including staff shortages and burnout among experienced educators; the undervaluing of early childhood educators' work; educators' low wages, lack of benefits and challenging work environments; and the continuing impacts of pandemic related service disruptions. They described much of the workforce as feeling vulnerable, burnt out and 'at their end' and characterized themselves and their colleagues as exhausted and 'just surviving.' Some educators saw low staff morale negatively impacting the quality of child care across the province, which, in turn, further lowered morale.

There are a lot of our ECEs who haven't come back and those that do come back, it is more of a warm body and that brings down the morale of the other staff. (Virtual focus group participant)

*When I came into this field I had so much passion – working with children. What I am getting is that we are just babysitters. We are more than that.
(Edmonton focus group participant)*

Early childhood educators identified the longstanding recruitment and retention challenges facing the sector as major factors contributing to low staff morale, especially among more experienced educators and senior staff. They described the pressures of educators working longer hours while dealing with high rates of staff turnover as taking a toll on the workforce. Staff in supervisory or management roles, owner-operators, and frontline staff all referred to the undervaluing of the sector and its work as negatively impacting them. They also expressed their frustrations with what they saw as limited government support and communications during the pandemic, which they argued had been repeated during the initial phases of system building. They argued that these experiences had left educators feeling that their interests and concerns were not a priority for government. Individual educators further described the shift away from pedagogy during the pandemic to a focus on health and safety as discouraging, with staff spending much of their time sanitizing toys and equipment rather than working with children. They saw this shift as one of the factors contributing to high rates of staff turnover.

We had the pandemic which put us in a place of massive layoffs of educators. Then we devolved into this place of just health and safety. There is no pedagogy. There is washing Lego. Then comes this ramp up time and affordability grants and here comes all these children. We weren't ready to get back, get re-inspired. (Edmonton focus group participant)

More burn out, some staff have left the field. Sometimes parents are angry because they're not understanding all of the policy changes from the pandemic and they take their frustration out on ECEs. (Drayton Valley focus group participant)

Early childhood educators described staff morale as particularly low following the pandemic and advised that significant improvements in staff wages, benefits and working conditions were urgently needed to prevent larger numbers of qualified and experienced staff leaving the field. They cautioned that early childhood educators required stability in their daily work lives before services expanded, with individual staff expressing the view that 'things are out of control.'

Morale is really low. As a worker, we feel we've gotten more work, less pay and less respect. (Grande Prairie focus group participant)

Family child care providers expressed similar concerns about low morale. They advised that some providers felt isolated during the pandemic and had missed their face-to-face meetings and interactions with family day home agency staff. They also described the lower affordability grants for family child care as making them feel less valued than centre-based child care. Individual providers described having to provide families with longer hours of care (up to 12 to 15 hours per day), which negatively impacted their own family lives and wellness. They also reported that some families were unwilling to pay additional fees for these longer service hours, which was a further cause of stress for them. Individual family child care providers expressed the frustration that some parents did not value their work and were unaware of the time and resources they spent on planning, documentation and professional learning outside of program hours. They advised that family child care providers did not feel included in system planning work and expressed their fears that the needs of existing providers were a lower priority for the Ministry of Children's Services than recruiting new family child care providers.

For the day homes, we start at 12 hours. The challenge is that parents expect us to work longer. The fact that we don't have our own families at home, parents think we are doing home stuff during work hours. We practically don't have a life. They want to come in at 05:30 and leave at 19:30. And, they only want to pay the regular price. Centres are able to charge \$1200 but we can't. (Fort McMurray focus group participant)

Some early childhood educators in focus groups held after the Ministry of Children's Services announcements of new workforce supports at the beginning of October 2022, expressed frustrations that they had not been asked to provide input on the proposed new measures. They considered them unlikely to address the workforce challenges facing the sector, particularly in smaller urban centres and rural or remote communities. Individual educators expressed the view that they were further unlikely to prevent the loss of more qualified staff, would not help address the need for supply or substitute staff and would not help improve staff morale.

Given the longstanding nature of the workforce challenges facing the sector, early childhood educators argued that improvements in staff morale would require a larger workforce strategy that addressed staff compensation, benefits, working conditions and supports and career pathways for qualified staff. Individual educators whose centre had previously participated in the Early Learning and Child Care Centre Initiative further saw this model as having the potential to boost staff morale through the dedicated funding included for wage floors, staff development and professional learning.

We were part of the \$25/day pilot. I found that it boosted morale, professionalism, meeting with team members from Calgary, learning about Flight and ASaP. My goal was to have all educators in the centre learn – then COVID hit. (Virtual focus group participant)

I think if educators weren't so burned out they would like to be here and speaking out. But you know, when you are short-staffed all day, then you are getting off the floor and running home, you have your own kids and like there is just no time. (Fort McMurray focus group participant)



Building Workforce Capacity

The proposed expansion of regulated early learning and child care outlined in the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement will require a significant increase in workforce capacity. Early childhood educators shared the following thoughts and observations on the strategies required to build workforce capacity.

Improvements in Early Childhood Educator Compensation and Benefits

Early childhood educators saw low wages and the lack of benefits as the most significant barriers to increasing the number of qualified educators working in the field. They frequently returned to their earlier remarks on the challenges facing the workforce, highlighting the large number of experienced staff leaving the field to work in higher paying and less demanding jobs in the service sector; the attraction of similar work in public schools given its better pay, benefits and perceived higher value; the lack of increases in the provincial wage enhancements for certified early childhood educators for over a decade; and the relatively flat pay scales for early childhood educators. Some educators expressed frustration that the initial focus of system building was limited to reducing parent fees with no investments in higher wages or improved working conditions for early childhood educators. Educators recommended removal of the cap on the number of monthly hours for which staff can receive wage enhancements, which they argued penalized educators who worked additional hours to cover for staff shortages. They also suggested that a provincially funded pension plan would help make the field more attractive to staff and encourage experienced, qualified educators to remain in the field.

To get more certifications, I think there should be more wage enhancements. I always send things to my staff about more workshops and PD funding. They say, why should we do it? There is nothing in the wage. Why should we do it? (Edmonton focus group participant)

As a manager, when my employee comes to me and says, "I can't afford to work here and need to go to a grocery store or McDonalds," I lose them. (Fort McMurray focus group participant)

In addition to improvements in staff wages and benefits, early childhood educators in six of the focus groups identified the need for changes in staff working conditions. They identified the lack of paid planning and preparation time as particular concerns for front-line staff and highlighted the emotional and physical demands of working with young children. Individual staff in management and supervisory roles described their own long working hours, that included time working in ratio given the current staff shortages and administrative work at the end of the day and into the evening, as discouraging experienced staff from taking on management or leadership roles.

One of the prime reasons they are leaving the field, if you don't have the environment to do what you need to do you are living in constant frustration. (Virtual focus group participant)

Day home providers have no staff coverage. They work for 14 or 15 hours with kids in their care. Plus, they are expected to do professional development, plan for the next day and there is so much to it. (Fort McMurray focus group participant)

Advances in Early Childhood Educator Educational Preparation and Professional Learning

Overall, early childhood educators supported efforts to increase staff's formal educational preparation, although they advised that this would present difficulties for some experienced staff with a Level I certification. Early childhood educators highlighted the need to promote the field as a valued profession to attract more qualified staff but cautioned that without improvements in pay and changes to the current flat wage scales, educators would have few incentives to increase their formal education. Some saw the similar workplace roles and responsibilities of educators with different levels of certification as a disincentive for staff to increase their formal education.

I have a Level III and want to go higher but it doesn't pay me to do higher education. My wage would not go up. It is more work and nothing for it. (Fort McMurray focus group participant)

Early childhood educators identified the barriers that some staff would face in raising their qualifications. They saw the high costs of completing a formal credential as a challenge for many early childhood educators and highlighted the need for full or partial funding for tuition costs and living expenses so that staff did not incur student debt. Some educators reiterated their earlier concerns that the relatively small increases in wages for higher credentials, allied with the additional responsibilities for staff in senior roles, did not provide staff with a strong incentive to complete further education. Individual educators expressed regret that staff with a degree qualification did not receive a higher level of certification or a higher wage enhancement.

Early educators emphasized the importance of flexible post-secondary programs delivered both in-person and online. They identified specific groups of educators who would need assistance or supports to increase their formal education including those staff working more than one job or with family responsibilities, who would have limited time available to attend school; mature or experienced staff with a Level I certification who have been out of formal education for a long time; newcomer or new immigrant educators who would need additional English language education and supports to enroll in certificate or diploma programs; certified staff with equivalency qualifications, whose qualifications might not be recognized by post-secondary institutions; and educators living in smaller or more remote communities who have limited physical access to post-secondary institutions. Individual educators suggested that staff who received educational funding should be required to work in child care for a period of time after completing their studies.

A variety of delivery options is important as well. I couldn't find a program online so that was hard. I work full-time and I'm a single parent, I can't go places to do schooling. (Drayton Valley focus group participant)

Support the post-secondaries. You need money upfront so ECEs are able to pay for courses – they don't have the money. (Fort McMurray focus group participant)

Individual early childhood educators outlined possible strategies to help staff increase their formal education including the use of apprenticeship style models to enable staff to work while they attend school; the introduction of options for experienced educators to challenge post-secondary exams and course requirements so that they could complete credentials more quickly; new 'bridging courses' to help educators move from a Level I to Level II certification; dual credit programs to enable high school students to work toward credentials and certification; and the expansion of management and leadership education for educators.

Some early childhood educators were concerned that lowering the post-secondary educational requirements for certification or 'fast-tracking' educators' completion of credentials might undermine efforts to build the capacity of the workforce and professionalize the field. They questioned whether extensive work experience was an appropriate substitute for formal education and spoke to the importance of all staff having a strong early learning and care knowledge base.

Early childhood educators were generally supportive of professional learning and saw it helping staff increase their knowledge and skills. Some cautioned, however, that early childhood educators' heavy workloads, as well as their low pay, meant that they were either unwilling or unable to participate in professional learning. They were further sceptical that additional investments in professional learning would build workforce capacity unless they were supported by improvements in staff wages and working conditions. Individual educators expressed doubts that new investments in professional learning alone would build workforce capacity and argued that new funds be directed to increasing the number of professional educators with Level II and Level III certifications.

There are gaps between a Level I and II. There is one course and then to get to Level II there are ten courses. We need to address those gaps. We need some standardized things. If they are entering the field, they must have the basic knowledge and work on the gaps. (Edmonton focus group participant)

Early childhood educators advised that some front-line staff and management staff were not aware of the funding available for professional learning. Individual educators reported that some owner-operators did not provide their staff with information on professional learning and recommended that the Ministry of Children's Services communicate directly with front-line educators on the funding available. They also expressed some frustrations with the eligibility requirements for professional learning funding as well as the time required for funding approval and the reimbursement of costs. Individual educators raised concerns that recent changes to professional learning funding had penalized staff who previously paid to complete Flight training themselves. More broadly, some educators questioned whether staff made the most appropriate use of professional learning funding and cited examples of staff accessing the funding to take courses and complete credentials that enabled them to work in other fields, including education. Educators suggested some possible changes to professional learning including funding for coaching and mentoring and the introduction of continuing professional learning requirements for certification.

We need a paid position within each program to provide mentorship. Programs need to have someone on site at all times – for Flight, practicum placements and ASaP. We need someone in a paid position to provide peer and pedagogical support (Grande Prairie focus group participant)

Early Childhood Educators' Knowledge of the Canada-wide Agreement and Interest in System Building

The majority of early childhood educators reported limited knowledge of the *Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement*. They were unaware of the principles outlined in the agreement and did not have a strong sense of the vision it outlines for regulated child care in the province. Educators were similarly not familiar with the amount of federal funding provided under the agreement nor its proposed allocation.

The aspect of the agreement with which early childhood educators were most familiar was the commitment to reduce parent fees to an average of \$10 per day, although they were uncertain of the timeline for reaching this goal. Some educators expressed fears that the reduction of parent fees would negatively impact their wages and working conditions.

A number of educators in senior roles (including owner-operators) were also aware of the plan to increase the supply of regulated child care spaces, with the initial focus on expansion in the not-for-profit sector. Some owner-operators were critical of this focus. Most early childhood educators were unaware of the workforce commitments included in the agreement.

Generally, early childhood educators in senior management roles and owner-operators reported a better understanding of the agreement than front-line staff. Much of what they described, however, centred either on the new affordability measures or their funding contracts with the Ministry of Children's Services. Most were unaware of the decision-making responsibilities of the federal and provincial governments under the agreement and confused these when discussing the new measures introduced to reduce parent fees and to limit parent fee increases.

Senior staff and owner-operators expressed frustration at the limited information they received about funding changes and were also critical of the timing of provincial government communications, which they described as giving them little time to implement changes. They described the new affordability measures, which took effect at the beginning of January 2022, as challenging to administer and questioned the rationale for their rapid introduction at a time when many programs and services were still recovering from the impacts of the pandemic. Individual senior staff referred to what they characterized as a 'lack of transparency' in funding decisions and raised concerns that service providers were not given an opportunity to provide input into the changes that impacted them.

There was zero engagement with the sector by the government. They didn't come and say, we're thinking about these things. How do we get there? It was, here's what's coming down the pipe, and then find your own support network because we're too busy. (Drayton Valley focus group participant)

I like the analogy of building a house. If we are going to work with government we wouldn't have a plumber building our house. We are the contractors – the ones on the floor, front-line. I feel it is unrealistic when government makes decisions and they haven't talked to front-line staff about it. (Virtual focus group participant)

Some senior staff expressed the view that Ministry staff had not considered the impact of the new affordability measures on service providers. Individual owner-operators expressed fears that the new affordability grants and proposed cap on parent fee increases would negatively impact their businesses. Senior staff in non-profit centres expressed related concerns that the limit on future parent fee increases would make it difficult for them to meet rising service delivery costs. Some family child care providers expressed the concern that their funding was lower than that of facility-based programs.

Those senior staff and owner-operators who attended provincial town hall meetings on the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Agreement expressed disappointment at the limited information provided and the lack of answers to service providers' questions. They advised that the new affordability grants and revised parent subsidies had increased the administrative burdens on senior staff, many of whom were already working longer hours to compensate for staff shortages. Senior staff in non-profit organizations and owner-operators described challenges in communicating with families about fee reductions and the difficulties that this presented for both staff and families.

Some senior early childhood educators also described inconsistencies in the information they received from government staff and expressed frustration that regional staff (for example, licensing officers) were unable to answer questions on the implementation of the new funding measures. Individual owner-operators expressed concerns about the ineligibility of for-profit service providers to participate in the initial phase of service expansion. Going forward, senior staff largely agreed on the need for improved government communications and more advance notice of policy changes. They also identified the need for the provincial government to outline a longer-range plan for system building, so that service providers could both plan for upcoming changes and better inform parents and families of any changes that would impact them.

I'd say there is not a breakdown in communication, there is no communication. We are on a need-to-know basis and sometimes that means we get changes the day of the change. Or the day after they change. It is very difficult. (Edmonton focus group participant)

Almost all front-line early childhood educators reported very little knowledge of the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Agreement. They advised that most front-line staff were focused on their day-to-day work with children and families rather than government policies, even though these impacted their daily work. Educators described front-line staff's heavy workloads and the language barriers some staff face as making it more difficult for them to access information on policy changes. Individual early childhood educators reported that some service providers did not share information on policy changes with front-line staff. They identified the important roles that provincial associations (for example, The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and the School Age Care Directors Association of Alberta) had played in sharing information on system building. Individual front-line staff described the difficulties they encountered in responding to families' questions about parent fee reductions - questions they were commonly unable to answer. They advised that some families had expected their child care fees to be reduced to \$10 per day right away and were upset or disappointed when this was not the case.

Early childhood educators in all of the focus groups wanted to know more about the new federal investments and the long-term plans for system building, particularly as they relate to the workforce. They wanted early childhood educators' 'voices' to inform future policy changes, although they acknowledged that most staff were overwhelmed by their daily work. They suggested workshops and webinars as two ways in which the Ministry of Children's Services could share information with early childhood educators and seek their input on policy changes. They also saw value in early childhood educators meeting together to discuss how to advance the workforce. Senior educators in some northern communities were critical of the Ministry's

workforce announcements released at the beginning of October, which they felt did not address the needs of staff or programs.

With the workforce we need some short-term things to stop the bleeding. But, we also need a long-range, 10 years down the road, plan for where we see the workforce going. (Edmonton focus group participant)

It's vital to get feedback from the people doing the work. The communications piece has to improve as well. Drips of information, especially over the affordability grant, directors were scrambling for information. Parents wanted information and it put directors in an awful position with parents. Even with staff - staff not knowing and being very uncertain. (Virtual focus group participant)

Our family child care providers know that in 5 years they will get something. But all they see now is that there is a benefit for parents but no benefit for them. It feels like a slap in the face. (Grande Prairie focus group participant)

With the affordability grant, there is no manual on how to do everything. When folks ask how to address different situations, there is a lack of consistency with the answers. People are being told different things. There is a need for consistent information. (Virtual focus group participant)

Early childhood educators wanted the Ministry of Children's Services to send information on the agreement and policy changes directly to front-line staff. They also saw value in an online 'portal' which early childhood educators could access to learn about the agreement and system building, as well as an information line for them to share their comments and, in some cases, concerns with Ministry staff. Individual front-line staff expressed the fear that Ministry staff were not aware of the needs of staff and families. They identified what they saw as inconsistencies with the new affordability measures including the lack of support for families with school-age children; the difficulties families face in remaining eligible for subsidy when they only access child care part-time; and the financial barriers that very low-income families continue to face in accessing regulated child care.

Single family income, specifically single mothers, are being hit very hard by this. Their fees haven't changed. Dual parent households who are middle to higher income, those prices are dropping. (Edmonton focus group participant)

It is more administration, more time tracking subsidized and non-subsidized children. Sometimes parents say the wrong thing and we have to fix it – calling government about the claim. It has changed so many times since January it is hard to keep up. (Fort McMurray focus group participant)

Dads who are out of town for weeks and come home and try to catch up with children can't do that. They would be under their 100 hours. (Grande Prairie focus group participant)



I'd be interested in hearing the more rural side of things because things are usually designed for big cities and leave small guys out. What works for the cities, doesn't work for us and what works for rural, doesn't work for cities. (Virtual focus group participant)

The Workforce Investments Required to Support Early Learning and Child Care System Building

The findings from fall 2022 focus groups with certified early childhood educators provide insights into the current state of the Alberta child care workforce as system building enters its second fiscal year. They also help to identify the strategies required to build workforce capacity and highlight the interest certified educators have in contributing to the important work that lies ahead. Early childhood educators in both leadership and front-line positions identified the significant challenges facing the workforce including the shortage of qualified staff; low staff wages and limited access to benefits; increases in the learning and care needs of young children and their families; the continued undervaluing of the field and falling or low staff morale. They advised that these challenges had increased significantly over the last two to three years due to the COVID-19 pandemic and expressed concerns that they were impacting the quality of their own work.

The central role well-supported, professional early childhood educators will play in a high-quality child care system makes it critical that the above challenges are addressed. The Ministry of Children's Services will need to work closely with early childhood educators, their professional associations and policy experts to develop the strategies required to recruit and retain qualified educators, with a focus on providing them with more competitive compensation and benefits, new pathways to education and credentialing and appropriate workplace supports. There will also need to be a focus on public communications to raise the profile of early childhood educators and highlight the importance and value of their work. Early learning and child care system building in Alberta will require a new vision and comprehensive plan for services, with the workforce one of the central elements of the system that the plan will need to consider.

Drawing on the observations and insights of the early childhood educators who participated in focus groups, the following areas for new investments are identified. These areas, which will require further research and development, align with the findings from related workforce research in Alberta and other jurisdictions including the *Roadmap to a Quality Early Learning and Child Care System in Alberta* developed in 2021, with input from early learning and care stakeholders.

A Workforce Transition Strategy

To stabilize the workforce and then begin to build its capacity, the Ministry of Children's Services should work closely with the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and other early learning and care stakeholders, including public post-secondary institutions, to develop and implement a workforce transition strategy. The strategy will need to include targets for increases in the number of qualified early childhood educators as well as new measures to support staff education and professional learning.

Based on the insights and observations of early childhood educators, the following broad strategies are proposed:

- The development of annual targets for the recruitment and education of certified early childhood educators, including targets for the number and proportion of staff certified at Level II and Level III;

- Funding for the expansion of early childhood education credential programs delivered through public post-secondary institutions, including the development of new post-diploma programs with a focus on ELCC management and leadership;
- Funding for the expansion of online, flexible and satellite delivery options for early childhood education credential programs at public post-secondary institutions;
- Reductions in (or the waiving of) tuition fees for Alberta students completing early learning and care credentials at public post-secondary institutions and relief for student debt, with the requirement that students who receive funding commit to work in regulated child care for an agreed period of time after graduation;
- Expansion of high school/post-secondary dual credential options to provide high school students with a pathway to ECE credentialing and certification;
- New pathways for staff already working in the field to upgrade their credentials through further formal education, including access to educational programs and funding that enable staff to complete credentials while working;
- The introduction of induction programs and workplace supports for new staff entering the field with a Level I certification and dedicated funding to help them complete certificate and diploma credentials through public post-secondary institutions (including funding for English language supports);
- Increased investments in professional communities of practice including pedagogical networks and learning communities supported through infrastructure organizations such as the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement;
- The requirement, over time, that all certified educators working in regulated child care hold a membership in one of the professional associations that represents the field.

Improvements in Early Childhood Educator Compensation, Benefits and Working Conditions

Early childhood educators consistently identified their poor wages and the lack of benefits as two of the main factors contributing to staff shortages. They described significant challenges with qualified staff leaving regulated child care to work in related fields, such as public education, as well as other sectors which offer higher wages and less stressful work environments. They further saw early childhood educators' low wages as contributing to the reluctance of some staff to pursue further education and participate in professional learning, as well as reinforcing the view that early learning and child care work was of lower value than work in related fields, including public education.

The Ministry of Children's Services announcement of increases to the wage enhancements for certified early childhood educators and one-time bonus payments in December 2022, is an important step in addressing early educator compensation. Further investments will be required, however, to ensure that early childhood educators are fairly compensated for their work and that their wages remain competitive with those of staff in related fields. There is also the outstanding matter of paid benefits and improvements in educator working conditions which will also need the support of additional public funding.

Consistent with the approaches taken by other provincial governments in support of system building under the Canada-Wide early learning and child care agreements, the Ministry of Children's Services should begin work on a comprehensive review of early childhood educator compensation and benefits in partnership with early childhood educators, their professional associations and academic researchers.

The proposed review of educator compensation and benefits should include the following:

- The research and analysis of competitive provincial wage scales for early childhood educators that take into account educators' level of formal education, years of experience and level of responsibility⁸;
- The inclusion of appropriate incentives that compensate educators for higher levels of formal education and continuing professional learning;
- The research and design of options for a provincially supported comprehensive benefit package for certified early childhood educators, including health benefits and pension provisions;
- The review of options for improving certified early childhood educators working conditions including the provision of paid non-contact time to support their participation in program planning, family engagement and professional learning;
- The research and development of professional profiles and role descriptions for certified early childhood educators with different levels of education and certification that support clearer career-pathways for professional educators.

The Ministry of Children's Services should include the above work as one of its priority areas for new policy development and investment in its upcoming three-year Action Plan for the period 2023/24 to 2025/26 developed under the *Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement*.

⁸ The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta's has undertaken research and design work on a provincial wage scale that provides a useful starting point for the Ministry of Children's Services review of early childhood educator compensation and benefits. AECEA. (2022). *The Alberta compensation framework report: ECE wage grid recommendations*. Retrieved from <https://aecea.ca/sites/default/files/1-ECE%20Wage%20Grid%20Recommendations.pdf>

The Participation of Early Childhood Educators in ELCC System Building

Early childhood educators in management and leadership roles expressed their frustration with Ministry of Children’s Services communications during the initial phase of system building. They expressed concerns about the limited information they received in respect to funding changes and the timing of these communications, which they described as leaving them with little time to plan and implement changes.

The majority of front-line early childhood educators, as well as many staff in senior positions, further reported only a limited knowledge of the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Agreement. They did not have a strong understanding of the principles guiding the agreement and were mostly unaware of the main priorities for investment, aside from reducing parent fees and expanding services. Early childhood educators in both front-line and management or leadership positions wanted to know more about the agreement. They also wanted to provide input into future policy changes, particularly those impacting the workforce. Educators identified the need for direct communications between the Ministry of Children’s Services and early childhood educators on system building. They were concerned that the voices of early childhood educators were not informing system building, a position which reinforced their view that their work and knowledge were undervalued.



The Ministry of Children's Services has an important opportunity to engage early childhood educators more fully in system building as it develops its second Action Plan under the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement. Early childhood educators are an essential partner for the Ministry in building a high-quality early learning and care system and are important advocates for investments and policies that improve the quality of early learning and child care for children and their families. The active engagement of early childhood educators in system building is consistent with advancing the professionalization of the field and further has the potential to help raise the profile of educators and the value of their work.

Based on the comments and advice of early childhood educators, the Ministry of Children's Services should consider the following strategies to engage staff in system building.

- Direct and regular communications with certified early childhood educators on early learning and child care system building, including through the development of an online information portal and dedicated information line;
- Funding support for the professional associations that represent early childhood educators (including the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, the Alberta Family Child Care Association, the Alberta Preschool Association and the School Age Care Directors Association of Alberta) to enable them to communicate with their members on system building and to organize and host online and in-person meetings and policy discussions on workforce capacity building;
- The formation and support of an early learning and child care workforce advisory council to provide expert advice to the Minister of Children's Services on building workforce capacity and to serve as a forum for stakeholder engagement. The advisory council would comprise certified early childhood educators, post-secondary early learning and child care faculty and academic researchers. The professional associations that represent early childhood educators would be standing members of the workforce advisory council;
- The design and implementation of a public communications campaign to increase public knowledge and understanding of the value of early learning and child care and the work of professional early childhood educators. The Ministry of Children's Services would work in partnership with the professional associations that represent early childhood educators to design the proposed campaign.



With the workforce we need some short-term things – we need to stop the bleeding. But, we also need a long range plan, 10 years down the road. Plan for where we see this workforce going. (Edmonton focus group participant)

Conclusion

The foundational role professional, well-supported early childhood educators play in the delivery of high-quality early learning and care makes it critical that the Ministry of Children's Services works closely with professional educators in the design and implementation of system building. Alberta will be unable to transform its child care sector into the high-quality, early learning and child care system envisioned under the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement without the development and support of a well-qualified workforce. This will mean finding solutions to the longstanding challenges of staff recruitment and retention that continue to impact the field and which have deepened over the last two to three years given the significant disruptions linked to the pandemic.

Fall 2022 focus groups held across the province with certified early childhood educators highlighted the challenges facing the child care workforce and the resulting pressures on front-line and management staff as well as those educators who provide pedagogical and inclusion supports. While educators expressed their continued commitment to working with young children and their families, many also shared their frustrations and concerns with the challenges facing the workforce. Educators reported feeling undervalued and left out of the system building work with most front-line staff not having a good understanding of the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement and its vision for child care in the province.

As previous research has found, the difficulties early learning and care workforces face result from the devaluing of early learning and child care work with young children and their families, the limited public funding for regulated child care and the reliance on market-based approaches to organize and deliver services. The new federal investments under the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement provide an opportunity to change how child care services are planned and delivered and in so doing elevate the work of early childhood educators. The move towards a publicly funded, and publicly managed system of early learning and care requires a significant increase in workforce capacity. The commitments set out in the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Agreement to value the early childhood workforce dictate the need for significant new investments to improve educator compensation, benefits and working conditions as well as parallel new strategies to advance staff's educational preparation and ongoing professional learning.

Appendix One: Focus Group Protocol

The Current State of the ELCC Workforce in Alberta

We know that the Alberta child care workforce was hit hard by the pandemic. As were child care workforces across the country. The disruptions of services and the new health and safety measures introduced to reduce the risk of infection made working in child care more challenging. And we know that some staff experienced burn-out while others chose to leave the field.

Now that services are mostly back up to pre-pandemic levels and the provincial government has begun work on system building we are interested in the challenges you see today and staff morale.

As an early childhood educator, what are the main challenges you currently face in your daily work with children and families as the pandemic recedes and ELCC system building begins?

How would you describe the current level of staff morale in your workplace? How has this changed over the last two years? And what are the main factors that have contributed to these changes?

Looking ahead, do you see yourself continuing to work as an early childhood educator in the child care sector in the next three to five years? What are the things that cause you to consider leaving the field? And what are the things that would encourage you to stay?

Early Learning and Child Care System Building

The provincial government's Action Plan under the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Agreement includes new investments to support early childhood educators and their work with young children and their families. There are initial new investments in 'professional development and supports' and a longer-term commitment to provide early childhood educators with 'a base salary' that includes wage top-ups.

Thinking about how we grow the early learning and care workforce and raise staff qualifications, what should the provincial government do to increase the number of certified ECEs who hold certificate or diploma credentials?

What specific barriers do ECEs face in completing certificate and diploma credentials? What could the provincial government do to help ECEs overcome these barriers?

Thinking about the wages and working conditions of ECEs:

What specific changes to ECEs compensation and benefits would help to attract more qualified staff into the field and encourage them to stay?

What specific changes to ECEs working environments would help to attract qualified staff into the field and encourage them to stay?

The Participation of ECEs in ELCC System Building

Child care advocates and researchers have long called for the federal government to work with provincial and territorial governments to develop a Pan-Canadian child care system that is supported through higher levels of public investment, planning and management. The new federal investments available through the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Agreement provide the opportunity to transform how child care services are organized and funded in Alberta. Changes will take time, however, and will need to be informed by many different stakeholders including early childhood educators.

Based on your experience, what do you know and understand about the Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Agreement and the new investments in affordability, the expansion of services, service quality and the inclusion of all children? How well do you think most ECEs understand the agreement?

What have you heard about the system-building work that is now underway?

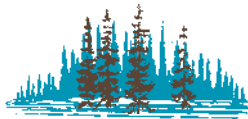
How would you like to be involved in building the new ELCC system (or not)? What kinds of resources or opportunities would help you provide your input and ideas into ELCC system building?

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