# A Wage Grid and Compensation Structure for Saskatchewan's Early Childhood Educators: A Report

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Recognizing that greater investment in the child care sector benefits everyone, this report addresses the critical need for a qualified and well-compensated Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) workforce in Saskatchewan. The report explores the contemporary ELCC landscape, highlighting the challenges faced by early childhood educators (educators), including low compensation, inadequate access to educational and professional learning opportunities, and challenging working conditions. The scarcity of licensed child care, compounded by workforce shortages, underscores the urgency for systemic improvements. As such, this report proposes a comprehensive workforce strategy, including a provincial wage grid and compensation structure, to address these issues and ensure a sustainable, high-quality ELCC system.

The report's recommendations are grounded in a thorough examination of historical and current issues in the ELCC sector, both in Saskatchewan and nationally. It involves a review of the literature, environmental scans of wage grids and compensation structures in other provinces, and comparisons with similar professions. Collaborative input was gathered from the Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus and an Advisory Committee comprising local experts, ensuring the recommendations are well-rounded and contextually relevant.

The report advocates for a wage grid grounded in values such as fairness, respect for the ELCC profession, and commitment to high-quality ELCC services. Other key values include equitable compensation based on educational qualifications, roles and responsibilities, and experience; respect for the unique contributions of educators; and support for ongoing professional learning. Additionally, the report underscores the importance of social justice and the empowerment of women, reflecting the predominantly female workforce in the ELCC sector. Most importantly, the report affirms the right of children, as capable and competent citizens, to high quality ELCC programs. Such programs yield many developmental and social benefits for children and their families.

Saskatchewan has unique strengths, including a predominantly not-for-profit ELCC sector and higher minimum qualifications for certification as an early childhood educator, which can be leveraged to improve the sector. By implementing a competitive wage grid and comprehensive benefits package based on equity and respect for the profession, Saskatchewan can address the recruitment and retention challenges that impact the quality and availability of ELCC services. These actions, supported by government funding, are crucial for ensuring that all children in the province have access to high-quality, inclusive, and affordable ELCC programs.

## Workforce Challenges

Saskatchewan's ELCC sector faces significant and interrelated challenges, primarily driven by a severe shortage of child care spaces and educators. Despite ongoing efforts to reduce child care fees to $10 per day, 92% of children in the province still live in "childcare deserts," where access to licensed care is extremely limited. This shortage disproportionately affects rural, low-income, and newcomer families, who struggle to find affordable, high-quality child care options. The shortage of ECEs further exacerbates this crisis, with only 18% of children aged 0-5 having access to licensed childcare, even as 76.3% of mothers are in the workforce.

High turnover rates among educators, driven by historically low wages, poor working conditions, and undervaluation of the profession, are central to the sector's challenges. Currently, 30% of ELCC staff in Saskatchewan lack any certification, and only 22% hold the Level III certification that is often considered the minimum qualification in many provinces. This lack of qualified staff severely limits the capacity to expand and sustain high-quality ELCC services, as the province's workforce is neither adequately educated nor compensated. The high cost of care provision and workforce shortages undermine the province's goal to create 28,000 new childcare spaces by 2026, despite some progress in space creation.

The Saskatchewan Action Plan, part of the broader Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, aims to address these issues by increasing the proportion of Level III certified staff to 40% by 2025-2026. However, achieving this target is unlikely without substantial wage increases and an improved compensation structure, which are crucial for attracting and retaining skilled educators.

Recent investments, such as signing bonuses and pension contributions, have not significantly alleviated the underlying issues of low wages and poor working conditions that drive educators out of the sector. Many programs (37%) are operating with staff exemptions due to shortages, and over half of the educators have less than seven years of experience, indicating high turnover and instability in the workforce. Additionally, there is a need to attract and support Indigenous and immigrant educators to the sector, who bring valuable cultural knowledge to the sector. Recognition of their knowledge and funded opportunities for their future training are both necessary.

To address the challenges facing the ELCC sector, the report advocates for the implementation of a comprehensive wage grid and compensation structure. This strategy includes aligning educators' wages with those of comparable professions and the average provincial salary, enhancing benefits such as health and dental coverage, improving working conditions, and increasing efforts to recruit and retain educators. The report also emphasizes the need for public funding and policy support to ensure the sustainability and equity of these measures across the sector.

By adopting these recommendations, Saskatchewan can build a more robust and sustainable ELCC system, ensuring that every child has access to high-quality, inclusive, and affordable care, while providing educators with the recognition, compensation, and working conditions they deserve. This comprehensive approach is essential for transforming the province's ELCC sector into a stable and thriving system that meets the needs of children, families, and educators alike.

**Designing a Wage Grid**

A well-designed wage grid is essential for setting appropriate wage levels, ensuring that qualified educators are both attracted to the sector and motivated to stay. Differentiated wages based on experience, roles, responsibilities, and educational qualifications are particularly crucial for retaining experienced educators and encouraging ongoing professional learning. The proposed wage grid for Saskatchewan is tailored to meet the unique needs of the province's ELCC sector, standardizing wages to ensure fair compensation based on educational qualifications, experience, and job roles and responsibilities.

Provinces such as Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, and Québec have successfully implemented wage grids that govern compensation based on certification level, position, and years of experience. These grids serve as benchmarks for establishing competitive salaries and clear career progression opportunities. Saskatchewan, along with several other provinces, has committed to implementing a similar wage grid by 2025-2026.

Wages in the ELCC sector in Saskatchewan have historically been below the national median (Halfon, 2021). Although recent wage enhancements funded through federal agreements have provided some improvement, significant disparities remain. For example, average hourly wages for educators in Saskatchewan range from $15.56 to $20.43, depending on certification level, with wage enhancements capped at certain thresholds. These wage levels are insufficient to attract and retain qualified educators, particularly when compared to wages in similar professions.

Comparative data from other provinces, such as Prince Edward Island, demonstrate the positive impact of a well-structured wage grid. In PEI, the introduction of a compulsory wage grid has significantly improved recruitment and retention, with starting wages for educators holding a two-year diploma now aligning with the provincial average across all occupations. If Saskatchewan were to adopt a similar model, educators could see a 24% increase in their hourly wage rates, bringing them in line with the provincial average wage of $31.64 per hour.

When comparing ELCC wages to other professions in Saskatchewan that require similar levels of education and training, the disparity is stark. For example, Licensed Practical Nurses earn an average of $35.02 per hour, and Dental Hygienists earn $51.10 per hour. This comparison underscores the need for a wage grid that not only aligns educators' wages with those in comparable professions but also reflects the critical role that they play in the development and education of young children. Implementing such a grid will be crucial for attracting and retaining a qualified workforce capable of sustaining high-quality ELCC services across Saskatchewan.

**Recommended Wage Grid for Saskatchewan**

The recommended wage grid, developed by Dr. Gordon Cleveland, is designed to standardize wages across the province, ensuring that all educators receive fair compensation based on their qualifications and experience. The starting wage for an ECE III, who holds a two-year diploma, is proposed at $31.64 per hour, aligning with the provincial average hourly wage across all sectors. Other key positions, including Supervisors, Pedagogical Leaders, and Directors, would have corresponding starting wages with annual increments. The grid also introduces wage differentials designed to incentivize further education and career advancement within the sector. For instance, the starting rates are set at $19.64 for uncertified staff, $22.64 for ECE I, and $31.64 for ECE III, with annual increments ranging from $0.50 to $1.00 depending on the role. Higher-responsibility positions, such as Pedagogical Leader and Executive Director, have starting wages that reflect their additional duties. A Pedagogical Leader would hold a Bachelor's degree focused on early childhood.

| | Starting Rate | Annual Increment for Additional Year of Experience | Number of Steps |
|---|---|---|---|
| Uncertified staff | $19.64 | $0.50 | 10 |
| ECE I | $22.64 | $0.50 | 10 |
| ECE II (1 year certificate) | $28.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| **ECE III (2-year diploma)** | **$31.64** | $1.00 | 10 |
| Pedagogical Leader (ECE Bachelor's Degree) | $34.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Supervisor (ECE I) | $24.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Supervisor (ECE II) | $30.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Supervisor (ECE III) | $33.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Supervisor (ECE Bachelor's Degree) | $36.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Assistant Director (ECE II) | $32.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Assistant Director (ECE III) | $35.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Assistant Director (Pedagogical Leader) | $38.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Director | $42.64 (could vary by ECE certification level) | $1.00 | 10 |
| Executive Director (could reflect complexity of their role such as managing multiple sites) | $52.64 | $1.00 | 10 |

This wage grid aims to increase the overall average wage in the sector by approximately 25%, making ELCC in Saskatchewan a more attractive profession. The grid also highlights the need for a separate wage structure for non-educator roles such as housekeeping, maintenance, nutrition specialists and bus drivers, acknowledging their critical contributions to the sector.

**Benefits**

In addition to wages, the report emphasizes the importance of comprehensive benefits packages to enhance job satisfaction and retention and ensure the health and well-being of educators and their families. Historically, educators have received few benefits alongside low wages except in some of the multi-site organizations or programs that have a parent organization delivering an array of services. Benefits in Saskatchewan's ELCC sector are inconsistent, with significant variation across programs. These benefits are crucial for supporting the well-being of educators, particularly given the physically demanding nature of their work. Licensed family child care providers should also have access to these benefits to ensure comprehensive coverage across the

sector. The report draws on examples from Nova Scotia, which offers a comprehensive benefit plan fully funded by the provincial government, and Yukon, which compensates programs to purchase benefits for their staff.

The report recommends introducing a standardized benefits package, funded by the provincial government, to ensure equitable access for all educators. This package should cover 100% of extended medical and dental benefits, life insurance, disability coverage, paid sick leave, personal leave, and vacation time.

**Pensions**

Pensions are a critical component of compensation, directly impacting retention. The report advocates for the adoption of a defined benefit pension plan in Saskatchewan, similar to models in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. This plan would offer long-term financial security for educators, with matching contributions from employees and employers. Given the current disparities in pension provision within the sector, a standardized pension plan would provide much needed stability and help retain experienced educators.

In Saskatchewan, 66% of educators currently have access to a pension or RRSP plan, but this access varies widely across programs, as do the amounts provided. The report recommends integrating educators in child care centres into an existing provincial pension plan, with the government funding employer contributions to ensure consistency and fairness. Licensed family child care providers should also have the option to participate in this provincial plan or receive grants to purchase their own which would be economically beneficial to them.

**Working Conditions**

Improving working conditions is essential for enhancing both job satisfaction and the overall quality of ELCC programs. The report highlights the need for paid non-contact time for planning; administrative tasks; professional learning opportunities; engaging with families, colleagues, and other professionals; and respect for the profession. Currently, educators in Saskatchewan have limited or no paid time for these activities, which negatively impacts program quality and educator well-being. The report recommends allocating 20% of an educator's workday to engage in these tasks, with additional paid release time for professional learning and coursework.

The ongoing mentoring and onboarding of new educators has presented challenges to senior staff who take on this work in additional to their regular workloads. The report also suggests implementing mentoring programs, such as the Pedagogical Leadership program in Alberta, to support new educators and those working in isolation. This initiative would help to onboard, mentor, and retain educators.

**Respect for the Profession**

The undervaluation of educators is a persistent issue that undermines the sector's sustainability. The gendered and racialized nature of this undervaluation is particularly pronounced, as the majority of educators are women and increasing numbers are from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. The consequences of this lack of respect ripple through the system, impacting the recruitment and retention of qualified educators, thus it is crucial to address this issue to foster a more supportive and equitable environment for ELCC.

The lack of respect for educators is a multifaceted concern, encompassing various aspects of recognition, compensation, and societal attitudes. Despite their critical role in shaping young children's development, educators often face societal perceptions that reduce their work to mere babysitting, leading to feelings of being unappreciated and exploited. The report emphasizes the need for greater societal recognition of the complexity and importance of educators' work. Enhanced wages, benefits, and working conditions are seen as essential first steps in addressing this issue.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

The report concludes with a strong endorsement for a comprehensive wage grid and compensation structure for educators in Saskatchewan. This approach, grounded in fairness, social justice, and respect for the profession, is essential for addressing the workforce challenges that threaten the quality of ELCC services. Saskatchewan has the opportunity to leverage its unique strengths to become an example for ELCC in Canada. The recommended actions in this report, supported by government funding, are crucial for ensuring that all children in Saskatchewan have access to high-quality, inclusive, and affordable ELCC programs.

In summary, the report recommends:

- Implementing a standardized wage grid with competitive salaries and clear career progression.
- Implementing more comprehensive workplace benefits to support staff well-being and retention: paid sick time, personal care days, and paid vacation time.
- Introducing a comprehensive, government-funded health, dental, disability, and life insurance benefits package for all ELCC staff.
- Adopting a defined benefit pension plan with matching contributions.
- Enhancing working conditions with paid time for planning; administrative tasks; engaging with families, colleagues, and other professionals; and ongoing professional learning.

By adopting these measures, Saskatchewan can build a more robust and sustainable ELCC system, ensuring that every child has access to high-quality, inclusive, and affordable care while providing educators with the recognition, compensation, and good working conditions they deserve.

## Table of Contents

**Executive Summary** ..... **3**
**Land Acknowledgement** ..... **11**
**Introduction** ..... **12**
**Methodology** ..... **12**
**Values-Based Standpoint** ..... **14**
**State of Early Learning and Child Care in Canada** ..... **16**
**Defining Quality** ..... **17**
**Landscape of ELCC in Saskatchewan** ..... **18**
- **Cost** ..... **19**
- **Spaces** ..... **20**

**Educators in Saskatchewan** ..... **22**
- **Certification Levels and Staff Qualifications** ..... **22**
- **Recruitment and Retention** ..... **24**
- **Wages** ..... **27**
- **Benefits** ..... **34**
- **Pensions** ..... **35**
- **Working Conditions** ..... **36**

**Conclusion** ..... **41**
**References** ..... **42**

## Land Acknowledgement

We begin with respect for the enduring presence of First Nations and Métis Peoples in what is now known as Saskatchewan. We recognize that these are the lands of the nêhiyawak, Anihšināpēk, Dakota, Lakota, and Nakoda Peoples, and the homeland of the Michif/Métis Nation. Given the province's geographical distribution, we collectively acknowledge that our relational responsibilities comprise Treaties 2,4,5,6,8, and 10. We express gratitude for the opportunity to live, learn, and work on these lands, and we commit to building respectful relationships with the First Nations and Métis Peoples who have been the stewards of this territory from time immemorial. We deeply appreciate the present-day contributions of Métis and First Nations Peoples, recognizing their significant role in shaping and strengthening communities, and fostering the well-being of children. Their traditions, wisdom, and resilience have laid the foundation for a nurturing environment for children within communities, and for ways of knowing and being with children that honour their strengths, capabilities, and past-present-future belonging. We commit to building respectful relationships that prioritize the well-being of children in the shared journey of uplifting early learning and child care.

# Introduction

This report on wages and benefits in the Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) sector in Saskatchewan is a response to the persistent need for a highly qualified, and well-compensated ELCC workforce to ensure high-quality programs. It offers a values-based vision for ELCC in the province to guide the development, funding, and delivery of a comprehensive workforce strategy. An examination of the contemporary ELCC landscape reveals a complex picture requiring increased, competitive compensation, as well as access to education, training, professional development, and better working conditions for educators to ensure a more stable workforce.

In Saskatchewan, 76.3% of mothers are engaged in the workforce but only 18% of children ages 0-5 have access to child care (Friendly et al., 2024). This shortage is attributed in part to difficulty recruiting and retaining sufficient Early Childhood Educators (educators) to meet the demands of children and families. In Saskatchewan, as in many other jurisdictions, educators are reluctant to enter and remain in a field where they are chronically underpaid. Regulated ELCC centres grapple with a consistently high staff turnover compounded by the enduring impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and an elevated rate of inflation. Recognizing that greater investment in the child care sector benefits everyone, this report proposes a wage grid and compensation structure to address these workforce issues. This wage grid and compensation structure is aspirational in the sense that it reflects optimal conditions to advance the credentials and supply of a quality ELCC workforce. However, it also addresses the urgent current need for higher wages to recruit and retain educators to support space creation in the province.

In the European context, Urban et al. (2012) explained that while there is a broad research base affirming the importance of having a workforce that is competent, educated, experienced, *competence* is challenging to define given the complexities of the work. Based on extensive consultations with key stakeholders, the team found that a need to take a holistic, broad approach to constructing competent ELCC systems within various levels or dimensions: individual, institutional or team, inter-institutional, as well as at the level of governance. In other words, working within a competent system means that planning and implementation processes should include all partners at individual, local, and provincial levels.

A comprehensive ELCC workforce strategy and a sound policy framework should lay out a comprehensive plan to set workforce targets based on current and future needs, workforce development, working conditions which would include work environments, paid non-contact time, stronger ratios and group sizes, better ways to address children's inclusion needs, an opportunity for preservice education and continuous professional learning. The SKLC (2023) states that, “A workforce strategy beyond a wage grid must be comprehensive and supported through additional government supply-side funding.” It must include:

- Well-defined professional profiles and role descriptions for educators with different levels of education, certification, and experience
- Competitive salary scales
- Professional learning incentives
- Retention strategies
- Learning communities
- Paid sick and vacation time
- Benefits and pension provisions

- Better working conditions, including paid non-contact time for planning, staff meetings, engaging with families, working alongside inclusion specialists, administration, and professional learning

This report thus expands and marks out the research base to support these aspects of a broader workforce strategy wherein educators are part of a competent system achieved through robust levels of investment and consultation and collaboration across levels. The recommendations are based on a vision of ELCC programs that are staffed by educators with strong educational backgrounds who receive equitable compensation. Educators should work in favourable conditions, with access to continuous learning and career progression opportunities, while also being acknowledged and esteemed for their significant contributions to the well-being, education, and development of children. This report focuses on a wage grid and compensation structure and includes the context for that structure.

## Methodology

The objective of this report is to research and recommend a wage grid and compensation structure for early childhood educators in the Province of Saskatchewan. Some of the following questions guided this work:

- What are some of the historical and contemporary issues experienced by families in relation to child care in the Province of Saskatchewan?
- What is the current context of early childhood educators' work in Canada, and more specifically in Saskatchewan, especially pertaining to educational qualifications, recruitment and retention, wages and benefits, opportunities for professional learning and advancement, and recognition of their work?
- What do wage grids and compensation packages look like for educators in other Canadian provinces? What can Saskatchewan learn from these wage grids?
- How do the wages of educators in Saskatchewan compare to those in similar professions?
- How can these workforce considerations support quality in the ELCC sector?

The project began with an extensive review of the literature to establish the national and provincial context of ELCC and the ELCC workforce. This initial review included academic research reports and articles, policy documents, press releases, and government documents. These resources were located through searches of University of Regina databases, the Childcare Resource and Research Unit database, and government databases such as the Government of Saskatchewan and Statistics Canada. This diverse range of resources allowed the research team to access the perspectives of various experts including academic researchers, policymakers, educators, and families.

The next stage was to complete an environmental scan to understand three key aspects of wage and compensation structures: 1. Recommended wage grids in other provinces, 2. Existing ELCC wage and compensation packages in other provinces, 3. Wages and compensation packages in similar occupations. This aspect of the research focused on other professions with comparable levels of education and/or roles and responsibilities.

This project was conducted in collaboration with the Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Leader's Caucus, constituting the Working Group, as well as an Advisory Committee. In creating a wage and compensation framework for educators in Saskatchewan, it

was important to have a range of perspectives. For this reason, we assembled an Advisory Committee composed of local experts, including: a degreed early childhood educator, a CUPE representative, a representative from a newcomer-serving agency, a Human Resources representative, an inclusion representative, a family child care provider, a Saskatchewan Polytechnic Instructor, and a member of the National Advisory Council on Early Learning and Child Care. In these final stages of the project, each draft of this document was reviewed first by the Working Group, then the Advisory Committee and their feedback was integrated into the final report. The sector was engaged through the Advisory and other focused consultations. Furthermore, the sector was involved through a concurrent province-wide research project undertaken by Muttart Foundation, Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association (SECA), and Saskatchewan Early Learning and Care Leader's Caucus with educators across the province. These findings have been included in the report.

## Values-Based Standpoint

The Saskatchewan ELCC Caucus advocates for the establishment of a wage grid and compensation structure grounded in specific values to enrich ELCC in Saskatchewan. Our position aims to explicitly recognize and justly recompense the professional role of educators, emphasizing the significance of ELCC for children, families, communities, and our society as a whole. By doing so, we strive to empower professionals in this sector to deliver high-quality services to young children and their families. This report and its recommendations are aspirational—defined as ambitious but realizable—and are rooted in a set of values dedicated to recognizing, valuing, and supporting the vital role these professionals play in the development, learning and well-being of young children. These values are:

**Commitment to Fairness and Equity**

- Valuing qualified educators and other ELCC workers as professionals with specialized skills and knowledge.
- Compensating educators equitably based on their qualifications, experience, and the responsibilities inherent in their roles.
- Recognizing and addressing historical disparities in compensation, particularly in comparison to other professions with similar educational requirements and responsibilities.

**Respect for the Early Childhood Educator Profession**

- Recognizing the unique contributions of educators and related workers to the holistic development of young children.
- Cultivating a society that respects and values the early childhood profession as an essential component of the education and care system.
- Acknowledging the importance of pre-service education and ongoing professional learning for educators, including paid non-contact time for planning, learning, engaging with inclusion specialists and nurturing relationships.

**Commitment to Early Learning and Child Care**

- Prioritizing the value of providing high-quality and inclusive early learning and child care services to children and their families.
- Acknowledging that fair and competitive compensation contributes to the recruitment and retention of qualified professionals, enhancing the overall quality of early learning and child care.
- Supporting the value of accessible and affordable education and training opportunities for individuals pursuing a career in early childhood education.

**Commitment to Children's Rights**

- Acknowledging that children are competent and capable citizens with rights. These rights are described in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. High-quality ELCC programs place children's rights at the forefront.

**Commitment to Social Justice**

- Ensuring that the wage grid addresses and mitigates disparities in income and opportunities, promoting social justice within the early learning and child care sector.
- Recognizing the importance of addressing potential gender and diversity-based wage gaps between the ELCC sector and other professions.
- Addressing some of the calls to action outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada report (2015), specifically: preserving, revitalizing, and strengthening Indigenous languages and cultures; enabling the full participation of parents in their children's education; developing culturally appropriate curricula; and developing "culturally appropriate early childhood programs" (p. 2).
- Drawing on the diverse and varied range of strengths that educators bring to their work with children and families to create inclusive and intercultural learning spaces. For example, Indigenous and immigrant/refugee background educators hold cultural knowledges that are often excluded from policy, curriculum, and practice.

**Societal and Economic Impact**

- Acknowledging the positive impact of well-prepared, supported and compensated educators on families, communities, and the broader economy.
- Emphasizing the value of investing in early childhood education as a means of promoting societal well-being.
- Creating alternative pathways to certification (CCCF et al., 2021) such as workplace or integrated English/French as an Additional language and ELCC programs to support immigrants with ELCC experience and credentials.

**Commitment to the Empowerment of Women**

- Acknowledging the predominantly female workforce in ELCC and the importance of empowering women through fair compensation, opportunities for advancement, and work-related benefits.
- Recognizing and addressing the intersections of gender with other social identities, such as race, class, sexual orientation, and ability, to understand the unique challenges faced by educators at these intersections.

**Commitment to Community Engagement and Collaboration**

- Recognizing the interconnectedness of early childhood education with the wider community.
- Locating ELCC services in well-designed and situated buildings that have programs with adequate, stable funding to ensure stability, viability, and security.
- Valuing collaborative efforts between educators, families, and communities to create a supportive and enriching environment for children.

These values collectively contribute to the development of a wage grid and comprehension structure that not only reflects the worth of educators and other childcare professionals, but also fosters a positive and thriving ELCC sector. Well-educated and supported educators are vital in order to reach the goal that every child and their family has access to high-quality, inclusive and affordable ELCC that matches their unique needs.

## State of Early Learning and Child Care in Canada

The Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (MELCC) was a collaborative initiative aimed at enhancing the accessibility, affordability, and quality of Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) services across Canada. Its aim was to foster collaboration among different levels of government and address key challenges, including variations in regulatory standards, funding models, and program availability. The Framework (Government of Canada, 2017, n.p.) established three guiding principles:

1. High quality: provides rich learning experiences and environments, values the importance of building strong, responsive, respectful relationships, views qualifications and ongoing training as essential
2. Accessibility, affordability, and flexibility: responsive to the needs of families, available, and accessible to families
3. Inclusivity: respecting and valuing diversity including varying abilities and children and families experiencing vulnerability

The Framework saw investments of 1.2 billion dollars directed to the provinces and territories to support regulated ELCC programs, including child care centres, home child care programs, preschool, and nursery schools (Government of Canada, 2017). Pasolli and Child Care Now (2019) noted that this framework was developed with little input from educators and advocates in the field. Provinces and territories needed to provide annual reports, but it was problematic that the use of funds was left entirely up to the region without parameters (Pasolli & Child Care Now, 2019).

One year prior to the Framework, the Government of Saskatchewan (2016), introduced the Early Years Plan which guided planning and initiatives until 2020 (Government of Saskatchewan, 2016). Priorities related to space creation (including Francophone spaces), staff training, inclusion supports, and play and equipment grants aligned with the goals of the federal framework (Pasolli & Child Care Now, 2019). One year later, the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework was developed in collaboration with Indigenous governments and organizations and in consultation with communities and families to advance principles for Indigenous ELCC and recognize the distinctiveness of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis cultures, goals, and needs (Government of Canada, 2018).

In the 2021 budget, the federal government invested more than 27 billion dollars in building a universal child care system via agreements with each of the provinces and territories apart from Québec. The province of Saskatchewan and the federal government signed the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement[2] on August 13, 2021 and it will be in effect until 2026 (Government of Canada, 2023). The Agreement specifically focused on:

- Access: space creation in licensed, not-for-profit and family-based child care programs
- Affordability: reducing fees to $10 a day
- Quality: drawing on evidence-based frameworks, increasing certification levels, and wages
- Inclusivity: ensuring access for diverse or vulnerable families (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023).

This report focuses on developing recommendations for a wage grid and compensation structure for educators consistent with the objectives set out in the Agreement. Specifically, in Objective 2.1, under quality, the provincial government commits to developing a wage grid for ELCC and establishing the policies and structures for its implementation (Government of Canada, 2023). Overall, these agreements are a promising first step towards universal, accessible, and affordable child care. However, families still experience barriers in securing high quality child care for their children. It is an ongoing challenge to resolve this issue, but key partners in the sector have been collaborating to suggest solutions, with the need for a qualified and supported workforce being chief among them (SKLC et al., 2023).

## Defining Quality

Numerous studies have found that high quality ELCC programs have many developmental and social benefits for children and their families (OECD, 2018). Moreover, access to high-quality ELCC programs has been found to ameliorate the effects of poverty and is closely linked to children's health and wellbeing (Greenwood, 2016). According to UNICEF (2022), 17.2% of Canadian children were found to live in poverty between 2019 and 2021 which places Canada 19$^{th}$ in the world. Canada has also been ranked 30$^{th}$ in the world for child well-being (UNICEF, 2020). We do not subscribe to the view that parents or carers in low-income families have inadequate parenting skills, but rather affirm that access to ELCC programs is a crucial support that enables families to earn a living wage and achieve economic stability.

There are two key components to quality in ELCC programs. As described in a report by Employment and Social Development Canada, process quality is widely deemed to be tied to the close interactions between educators, children, materials (Garon-Carrier, 2018). Structural quality relates to the features of the environment, staff qualifications and working conditions, and group composition (Garon-Carrier, 2018). While structural elements are seen to be more distant from the child, poor working conditions, low wages, poor benefits, and working alongside underqualified staff impacts the ability of educators to engage in warm, responsive, and nurturing interactions (Beach, 2020).

It must be noted, however, that quality in ELCC is often defined and assessed using standardized Western measures such as environmental rating scales (such as ITERS, ECERS, and the Baseline Quality Assessment Differential Monitoring System) that are not culturally

[2] Hereafter referred to as "the Agreement"

responsive (Greenwood et al., 2016; 2008). Specific communities define *quality* differently and such definitions are tied to elements such as cultural beliefs, traditions, values, and knowledges; life experiences; socialization goals; interactional patterns; hopes for children; and the local context (Freeborn et al., 2023; Greenwood et al., 2020). As Greenwood et al. (2020) explain: "Indigenous peoples have their own ways of understanding and describing ELCC that blend Indigenous and Western concepts and values" (p. 17). The European Commission Childcare Network likewise confirmed that quality is based on values and beliefs and must be defined by various groups through a dynamic, democratic, and participatory process (cited in Beach, 2020). Therefore, it is not only important to provide professional training and supports to enhance educators' qualifications, but also to connect these opportunities to the diverse children, families, and communities that they serve.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2012) has affirmed the right of Indigenous children and families to culturally appropriate ELCC programs. The Indigenous ELCC Framework (2018) recognizes that Indigenous children deserve "high-quality, culturally-strong ELCC" (p. 5). The main principles affirm the strength of Indigenous knowledges, languages, and cultures; First Nations, Inuit, and Métis self-determination, quality child and family-centred programs and services; inclusivity; flexibility, accessibility, transparency; and respectful collaboration. Principles and goals are articulated for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities. Halseth and Greenwood (2019) explain that "best practices" in Indigenous contexts are "culturally-focused and aim to revive and protect Indigenous languages and cultures to help restore Indigenous people's identity" (p. 36). In sum, ELCC programs can support cultural healing and reconciliation (Greenwood, 2016).

Process quality can be enhanced when educators are equipped to interact with children in culturally and linguistically responsive and inclusive ways. Structural quality can be achieved when educators are supported by having time to develop an inclusive physical space, plan appropriate learning experiences, and receive training and support to meet the demands of their profession, including working with a diverse population. In the Alberta context, Kemble's (2019) research confirms that Indigenous families want educators to have specific "foundational knowledge" to "work safely and respectfully" with children and families (p. 26). This knowledge includes the history of colonialism and its impact on identity, culture, and language as well as how colonialism appears in policy in "ways that act as barriers to the advancement of Indigenous peoples as a whole" (p. 26). Kemble's participants felt that having this foundation helped educators understand their lived experiences and circumstances and enact culturally responsive practice. When we use the term *quality* in this report, then, it is with these considerations in mind. In terms of quality, significant investments in ELCC are needed to nurture programs that are responsive to the diversity of Canadian families.

## Landscape of ELCC in Saskatchewan

Within the province of Saskatchewan, women's workforce participation in 2023 was 76.3% for mothers of children ages birth to five (Friendly et al., 2024). However, most current figures show that only 51% of Saskatchewan families use some form of child care (Statistics Canada, 2022a).

There are three main types of regulated ELCC programs outside of the school system:

- Child care centres offering care to children in a group setting. These are almost exclusively not-for-profit and can enrol up to ninety children.
- Family child care homes run by a licensed provider in their home for up to eight children, including their own children depending on the ages of the children.
- Group child care homes are licensed facilities operating in a residence and serving up to twelve children (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.).

First Nations child care programs located on reserves are not regulated by the government unless requested by the community. The high cost of child care and lack of spaces are a persistent issue. While the Agreement is intended to provide low-cost care, then, spaces in those programs are still difficult to secure.

**Cost**

The cost of ELCC has long represented a barrier to full participation in the paid workforce, especially for women who are more likely to undertake care responsibilities within a family (Bailliu & Leung, 2022; Mahon et al., 2012). The high cost of ELCC has been an enduring concern in Saskatchewan and nationally (Findlay et al., 2021), even though studies show that subsidized child care increases women's workforce participation (Gu, 2022). A 2021 report states that Saskatchewan had higher per space funding levels than most provinces, but fees still constituted the majority of the operating costs (CRRU et al., 2021). In 2019, monthly costs averaged $761 for infant care and $590 for preschool-aged care in regulated programs (CRRU et al., 2021). Prior to the Agreement, Saskatchewan provided a subsidy for low-income families enrolled in regulated, not-for-profit centres or family child care homes.[3] The structure of the subsidies has been such that families living below the poverty line may have been considered too "wealthy" to receive subsidies, but were unable to afford child care without assistance (Carlberg & Budney, 2019). Beach (2021) adds that since families need to demonstrate they are pursuing an education or employment, many may not have been eligible. In a study of newcomers in Regina, participants described this dilemma of having to be careful not to earn "too much" so they were eligible for the subsidy, yet needing more than one income to cover the family's expenses (Massing et al., 2018, 2023).

The Saskatchewan Employment Incentive has recently replaced the child care subsidy program to assist families with children who require child care beyond a certain income threshold (Government of Saskatchewan, 2024). Incentives range from $400 a month for families with one child to $600 a month for families with three or more children. This may seem slight, but ELCC programs fees have been substantially reduced over the past two years with the introduction of $10 a day child care. There are a small number of families that are still receiving subsidies until the end of 2024.

Since the signing of the Agreement, Saskatchewan emerged as an early leader among the provinces and territories by lowering maximum fees to $10 a day or $217 a month (Macdonald & Friendly, 2023). Macdonald and Friendly (2023) stated: "In Saskatoon and Regina, the fees fell by much more than the federal target---between 65 percent and 78 percent, depending on the age group…reaching the long-term goal three years early" (p. 7). The difference was most significant for families of infants who were paying an average of $995/month in Saskatoon and $850/month in Regina in 2019 (Macdonald & Friendly, 2023). Overall, for-profit child care programs are more likely to have higher fees (Macdonald & Friendly, 2023). Over 90% of the

[3] Some families are still receiving subsidies, but these are being filtered out.

child care programs in Saskatchewan are not-for-profit and government funds have never been used to support or subsidize for-profit childcare (Government of Saskatchewan, 2016), which may have facilitated quick action on fee reduction. As noted previously, though, lowering fees does not address the need for additional child care spaces or rising costs due to inflation.

**Spaces**

Between 2019 and 2023, the percentage of families nationally who experienced challenges securing child care increased from 36% to 49% (Statistics Canada, 2023a). The term "child care desert" has been used to refer to a "lack of or inequitable distribution of child care" (Macdonald & Friendly, 2023, p. 1). In Saskatchewan, the percentage of children five and under who had access to an ELCC space was only 16.6%. MacDonald and Friendly (2023) confirmed that "Saskatchewan has the highest proportion of children living in child care deserts by far" at 92% (p. 5). The next highest was Newfoundland and Labrador at 79%. There are variations within the province. For example, Regina and Saskatoon have approximately two licensed spaces per ten children, though supply varies by neighbourhood. This lack of availability places them in the bottom three of Canadian cities with more than 6,500 children not yet in kindergarten (Macdonald & Friendly, 2023). Interestingly, urban centres with a population of less than 30,000 have a lower percentage of children living in a desert, but this represents only two communities (Macdonald & Friendly, 2023).

Space creation supports the commitment outlined in the Agreement to offering equitable access and "culturally oriented ELCC information for Indigenous children, Black and other racialized children, newcomer children, and other groups of children that may require special consideration for accessing programs and services" (Government of Saskatchewan & Government of Canada, 2021, n.p.). Indeed, European research has found that children from low-income and ethnic minority families receive lower quality care than children from more affluent families due to lack of availability and affordability (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014). Saskatchewan has higher rates of poverty[4] than the national average and the child poverty rate for ages 0 to 6 was 28.6% (Sánchez, 2022). The depth of poverty is most acute in lone-parent families; their poverty rate is 47.6%, and their income was a minimum of $13,122 below the poverty line. Lone-parent families would also be the most negatively impacted by lack of access to child care. A Statistics Canada (2023b) report confirmed that over a third of children with disabilities who receive support services obtain such services in child care programs, yet only 62% have access. Vulnerable families may lack the resources, social networks, or English language skills needed to navigate wait lists and other administrative During discussions among key partners in the ELCC field in Saskatchewan, participants expressed concerns that "certain programs that serve vulnerable families are now being accessed by higher-income families, making it more difficult for lower-income families to access the services they need (SKLC et al., 2023).

Findings in a mixed-methods study of newcomers' experiences with childcare in Regina suggested that space shortages have a particularly negative impact on newcomers to Canada who do not yet have established social networks or knowledge of administrative procedures such as wait lists and subsidies (Kingsbury et al., 2021; Massing et al., 2018, 2023). However, although 99% of these newcomers deemed it very important (89%) or somewhat important (10%) to have child care available at language classes, many were constrained in accessing language training or other educational programs due to the lack of child care spaces (Massing et al., 2023). Nearly

[4] According to the Census Family Low-Income Measure After-Tax

40% of respondents reported that they had difficulties finding and retaining employment and 31.5% were unable to attend language training classes due to a lack of access to child care spaces (Massing et al., 2023).

Access to child care enables newcomers' full, meaningful economic and social participation and integration in the new context, particularly for women. The provincial government has been tackling space shortages, aiming to have 28,000 spaces by 2025-2026, and has been making some progress in this regard. A recent press release outlined investments from the federal and provincial government would be used to create more than 5,000 new spaces (Government of Saskatchewan, 2024, August 29). The number of regulated full-day child care centre spaces have increased from 13,735 in 2021 to 15, 219 as of March 31, 2023 (Friendly et al., 2024). Family child care spaces have likewise expanded from 2,306 to 3,481 over the same time period (Friendly et al., 2024). Before-and-after school spaces for children enrolled in kindergarten to grade six constitute an additional 1,620 spaces with a total of 20,307 regulated spaces (Friendly et al., 2024). Space creation initiatives accounted for this growth (Government of Canada, 2023). The following table illustrates our estimates of the regional distribution of licensed early childhood programs and spaces in the province.

**Table 1: Regional Distribution of Licensed ELCC Programs and Spaces in Saskatchewan**

| REGION | # Group Homes | # Family Child Care Homes | # Child Care Centres | Facility Total | # Group Home Spaces * | # Family Child Care Home Spaces** | # Child Care Centre Spaces *** | Total Spaces |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Battlefords Region | 2 | 4 | 9 | 15 | 24 | 32 | 317< | 373+/- |
| Central Region 'Rural' | 17 | 30 | 79 | 126 | 204 | 240 | 2,678< | 3,122+/- |
| Moose Jaw Region | 4 | 6 | 14 | 24 | 48 | 48 | 621< | 717+/- |
| Northern Region | 1 | 0 | 13 | 14 | 12 | 0 | 356< | 368+/- |
| Prince Albert Region | 2 | 2 | 26 | 30 | 24 | 16 | 1,132 | 1,172+/- |
| Regina Region | 95 | 80 | 80 | 255 | 1,140 | 640 | 4,001 | 5,781+/- |
| Saskatoon Region | 158 | 48 | 76 | 282 | 1,896 | 384 | 3,431 | 5,711+/- |
| South Region 'Rural' | 8 | 10 | 100 | 118 | 96 | 80 | 3,695 | 3,871+/- |
| Yorkton Region | 5 | 5 | 6 | 16 | 60 | 40 | 292 | 392+/- |

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *(9)* | *292* | *185* | *403* | *880* | *3,504* | *1,480* | *16,523* | *21,507* |

* Group home spaces represented at max regulatory capacity [12]
** Family childcare home spaces are represented at max regulatory capacity [8]
*** Estimations of childcare centre spaces calculated using data from sk.211.ca

Correspondingly, investments in space creation have grown with a recent investment of 27.7 million (Economic and Social Development Canada, 2024). However, space creation initiatives are entirely dependent on staffing, therefore persistent workforce shortages threaten to undermine the intent of this agreement. In discussions among key partners in the ELCC field in Saskatchewan, participants shared that there was a need for further investments in the workforce and sufficient capital grants for creating centre-based spaces (SKLC et al., 2023). As shared by the Canadian Child Care Federation [CCCF] et al. (2021):

> simply expanding the supply of regulated child care and reducing parent fees will not create a system of ELCC, nor will they ensure high-quality services staffed by qualified educators are equitably available to all families. New government policies and approaches are required to build a Saskatchewan early learning and child care system that is publicly funded, planned, and managed (p. 1).

The *Inclusive Child Care for All* project confirms that workforce must be a key consideration in the development of such policies and approaches as educators are central to a quality, well-functioning system (Friendly et al. 2023).

## Educators in Saskatchewan

Educators are the most crucial part of an ELCC program; an "integral element of the child care ecosystem and landscape" (Uppal & Savage, 2021). Their educational background, pay, working conditions, supports and resources, and how they are valued by society all contribute to the quality of the program (Macdonald & Friendly, 2023). Educators find themselves in a precarious position due to undervaluation and low compensation. This lack of respect reflects the gendered nature of labour, where women's contributions are often diminished. International studies suggest that such inequities are particularly evident for ethnically and racially diverse women who have been found to earn less than their white counterparts (Lee at al., 2022). There has been a longstanding separation between the salaries, benefits, and working conditions of teachers employed in the school system and that of educators who work in preschools, childcare centres, and other ELCC programs (Beach, 2013; Carlsberg & Budney, 2019). Yet, in the context of the Agreement, the expansion of high-quality ELCC services is reliant on securing a trained and competent workforce (Halfon, 2021). Poor working conditions and compensation in the sector have served as a deterrent to recruitment, retention, and the pursuit of further training.

### Certification Levels and Staff Qualifications

In Saskatchewan, educators are required to be certified if they are employed in a regulated centre for more than 65 hours a month (CRRU, 2023). There are three levels of certification in Saskatchewan:

1. ECE Level 1: Successful completion of nine credit hours (3 courses) in an early childhood education program, three credits in each of the following areas: child development, programming, and relationships.

2. ECE Level II: Successful completion of a one-year certificate or one-year of a two-year diploma from a recognized post-secondary program or an equivalent amount of education.
3. ECE Level III: Successful completion of a two-year diploma in a recognized post-secondary program or an equivalent amount of education (summarized from Government of Saskatchewan, n.d.)

The minimum qualification for each program staff member that works for 65 hours or more per month is a post-secondary early childhood education orientation course or three early childhood education courses in approved areas. Educators who move to Saskatchewan may need additional training due to variations in the content from province-to-province.

The Action Plan that Saskatchewan committed to when signing the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement with Ottawa (August 13, 2021) indicated the scope of the staffing problems that Saskatchewan faces. Many staff (30%) have no certification level. Only about one-fifth of staff have the two-year ECE diploma which many provinces consider to be the minimum required qualification. The Agreement and its attached Action Plan have confirmed the depth of the staffing crisis. The Action Plan notes that only about 70% of staff currently hold an ECE certification (I, II, or III). The rest of the staff do not have ELCC-relevant qualifications and must therefore either work less than 65 hours per month or must be granted exemptions by the Saskatchewan government to work without qualifications. People who are granted exemptions must be taking coursework at the time of application. There are no mandatory requirements to take ongoing professional development to maintain to improve one's certification and professionalize the field.

This situation is confirmed by data from the Canadian Survey on the Provision of Child Care Services (CSPCCS), conducted by Statistics Canada in the spring of 2022. This survey estimated the numbers of child care staff in Saskatchewan child care centres by education level.

**Table 2: Numbers of Program Staff and Supervisors by Qualification Level in Child Care Centres in Saskatchewan, 2022**

| Qualification Levels | Number of Program Staff Serving Children From 0-12 Years |
|---|---|
| No ECE training | 732 |
| Less than 1 year of ECE training | 366 |
| ECE certificate or diploma (1, 2, or 3 years) | 1,940 |
| Bachelor's degree or more | 37 |
| Total Program Staff | 3,074 |
| Supervisors - No ECE training | 0 |
| Supervisors - Less than 1 year ECE | 37 |
| Supervisors - ECE certificate or diploma (1, 2, or 3 years) | 659 |
| Supervisors - Bachelor's degree or more | 37 |
| Total Supervisors | 732 |

**Source:** Statistics Canada (from the Canadian Survey on the Provision of Child Care Services), (2022)

According to these data, 732 educators, or 24% of all frontline staff, have no early childhood education training and are below Level I. Another 366 educators, or 12% of all frontline staff, have less than one year of course work and are certified at Level 1. Another 1,977 are certified at Level II or Level III; this constitutes 64% of frontline staff. Based on these CSPCCS data, we would estimate that currently 76% of child care staff currently providing front-line child care services have some level of ELCC qualification.

Saskatchewan's Action Plan makes it clear that the intent is to increase the number and percentage of staff with a two-year diploma (ECE IIIs):

> Currently, approximately 22% of child care staff are certified as ECE IIIs; a 15 percentage point would translate to nearly 40% of ECEs employed in child care centres holding an ECE III, and Saskatchewan would target this level of ECE III utilization by fiscal year 2025 to 2026. (Government of Canada and Government of Saskatchewan, 2021, n.p.).

However, this increase of level three educators has yet to be realized. We would suggest that this increase will not happen without the guarantee of substantial wage increases through a comprehensive wage grid and compensation structure as well as making improvements to working conditions in the sector. To achieve the increase in the total number of staff required by system growth and the improvement in the overall certification levels of educators, Saskatchewan must make early childhood education an attractive profession to enter and build a career in.

Since the success of the Agreement is largely dependent on having a workforce to facilitate the creation of new spaces and programs, there must also be substantive investment in the quality and competence of this workforce. As noted in the Saskatchewan Action Plan: "Qualified early childhood educators are a significant factor predicting good outcomes for young children. Focusing on ensuring there is a qualified workforce to support the developmental outcomes of young children is essential" (Government of Canada, 2022, n.p). We examine the nuances of recruitment and retention before turning to our recommendations for a wage grid and compensation structure.

**Retention and Recruitment**

Recruitment and retention issues impact the sector by limiting space availability, but they also negatively affect program quality. Low turnover rates and workforce stability are shown to enhance children's positive developmental outcomes (OECD, 2018; Lawson, 2020). High staff turnover comes at a cost to programs because they must continuously find and mentor replacements. High turnover rates thus represent a loss of organizational knowledge. It also serves to create staff shortages in the sector (Pek-Greer et al., 2016). Existing staff are challenged to work effectively in an environment where shortages add to one's workload and cause additional stresses, affecting the structural quality of the program (Jovanovic, 2013; Schaack et al., 2020; Totenhagen et al., 2015). More significantly, in a field where stable and sustained relationships and attachments to warm, responsive, and skilled educators are essential to ensure program quality, a lack of consistency among staff can cause children to be anxious, mistrustful, and experience challenges in demonstrating prosocial behaviours (Schaack et al., 2020; Totenhagen et al., 2015).

International and national studies focused on aspects of the relationship among wages, benefits, working conditions, equitable human resource practices, and recruitment and retention have found that such factors have a significant impact on an educator's decision to stay in or

leave the field (Grant et al., 2019; Pek-Greer et al., 2016). The exhaustion and stress associated with issues with workload and poor working conditions are linked to recruitment and retention issues (Canobi et al., 2024; Farewell et al., 2021). Research suggests that 84% of Saskatchewan educators, including teachers and early childhood educators, experienced acts, attempts, or threats of workplace violence in 2022-2023 (Mallory et al., 2024). Such incidents take a heavy toll on educators, leading to burnout, job dissatisfaction, and poor physical and mental health. In the Australian context, educators expressed that discrepancy between workforce conditions in ELCC and those in schools was a deterrent to seeking employment in child care (Gibson et al., 2020). A Statistics Canada analysis found that educators with low wages and no pension plan were more likely to leave the sector, particularly in the first few years of employment (Morrisette & Qiu, 2023). International studies also support this finding; low pay made educators feel they were not valued, particularly when they compared their wages to people in unskilled occupations (McDonald et al., 2018). Saskatchewan educators confirmed the same---experienced educators at the top of the wage grid have little incentive to stay (Muttart Foundation, 2024). Correspondingly, work injuries, illness were also factors motivating a greater proportion of educators to leave the profession (Canobi et al., 2024). Compensation, health and dental benefits, pensions, training possibilities, improved working conditions, and opportunities for advancement have been found to motivate educators to stay in the sector (Corr et al., 2015; Jovanovic, 2013; McDonald et al., 2018). A recent analysis of labour supply and turnover rates across Canada found that increasing the wages by 25% would significantly reduce the turnover rate in the ELCC sector (Shariati, 2024). Such incentives can similarly be employed as recruitment tools. This issue is complex and demands multifaceted, layered, and interrelated approaches to improvement.

***Context of Recruitment and Retention in Saskatchewan***

Like ELCC sectors across Canada, Saskatchewan grapples with substantial difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified educators. In Saskatchewan, programs are required to have a certain minimum percentage of educators at Level III (20%) and Level II (30%). However, a 2019 survey indicated that 37% of programs were operating with exemptions from the regulations due to staff shortages (People First HR, 2019). Survey findings from ELCC providers, directors, and educators underscore the widespread consensus that wages and benefits are core issues, impacting recruitment and job retention (Kn/a HR Consulting, 2022). The composition of the workforce in child care centres suggests high rates of staff turnover; 53.7% of educators had less than seven years of experience according to one report (Kn/a HR Consulting, 2022). Family home child care providers had slightly higher rates of retention. A subsequent report for the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education emphasizes the critical role of higher wages in recruiting and retaining a high-quality ELCC workforce (Kn/a HR Consulting, 2022). Another issue needing further consideration is that of inclusive child care. Since the wage enhancements have been introduced, it has been challenging to recruit trained educators for inclusion due to the current funding models for such programs (SKLC et al., 2023). Saskatchewan directors reported overwhelmingly (91.5%) that insufficient wages were a major deterrent to retaining staff. A Canadian Child Care Federation study indicated that 33% of the current workforce in Saskatchewan is over the age of 45, therefore there needs to be plans in place to cope with these impending retirements (People First HR, 2022). Shariati (2024) notes that the average number of new graduates yearly is 135, but to create 28,000 new spaces as necessitated by the Agreement, at least 2956 new educators are needed[5]. This represents a significant recruitment challenge.

[5] The Canadian Child Care estimates that, at a ratio of six educators to one space, $4666 educators would be needed.

Moreover, educating those educators who are currently working under exemption adds to this dilemma.

Most current figures indicate that 97% of educators in the province identified as women and 9% identified as Indigenous (People First HR Services, 2019), while 27.6% of respondents were immigrants (Kn/A, 2022). However, Indigenous people constitute 17% of the overall population of Saskatchewan and this population is younger than the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2022c). These figures suggest there is a particular urgency to recruit and retain Indigenous educators. A recent report states that wages are a substantive barrier to recruitment and educators need specialized preparation to work with children with special needs, including the legacy of residential schools and trauma (Assembly of First Nations, 2017 cited in Public Policy Forum, 2022).

Similarly, the growing diversity of the Canadian population is reflected in the ELCC workforce which attracts more immigrants than the workforce overall (Statistics Canada, 2022). The Saskatchewan government has articulated a desire for more flexibility and autonomy in relation to immigration (Government of Saskatchewan, 2022, July 28), The province has a vested interest in attracting greater numbers of immigrants to the province. Immigrants are an important source that that can accessed to increase the labour supply (Shariati, 2024) and, indeed, there has been a marked increase in international students studying in postsecondary ELCC programs (SKLC et al., 2023). These educators hold valuable cultural knowledge which can support culturally and linguistically diverse children and families (Massing, 2015). Discussions among various ELCC partners have affirmed that there is a high proportion of racialized women and newcomers to Canada that "must feel welcomed, valued, and respected" (SKLC et al., 2023, p. 10).

However, a study by the Conference Board of Canada (2023) indicates that "onward migration—immigrants leaving Canada—is increasing among more recent cohorts of immigrants," but Canada's economic prosperity is heavily reliant on immigration (p. 4). The report affirms the importance of positive early experiences, settlement supports, and providing tools and training for recruitment and retention. This shift in the workforce demographics necessitates measures to ensure that international students will be able to access well-compensated work following graduation to incentivize them to stay in the field (SKLC et al., 2023). There must be sufficient resources and supports in place to transition them into the workplace and allow them to thrive in the field. Immigrant educators with home country credentials likewise bring professional expertise (Conference Board of Canada, 2023), but need access to educational programs to bridge them into the Canadian ELCC context as will be discussed later in this report. Moreover, programs and directors may need guidance in how best to support newcomer educators in gaining sufficient hours and completing the paperwork and so they can apply for permanent residency otherwise they will gravitate towards other careers.

The Government of Saskatchewan recently made welcome investments in recruitment and retention ($145/child care space) for signing bonuses, pension, or benefits (Government of Saskatchewan, 2022). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education has contracted with the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association (SECA) to develop workforce recruitment plans and a budget (SKLC et al., 2023). These initiatives are a starting point for developing recruitment and retention strategies. Given the high turnover rates, though, money could be allocated to reward educators for long service rather than to new staff. Saskatchewan can also build on the advantage of predominantly having not-for-profit centres which typically have lower turnover rates and increased job satisfaction (Cleveland et al., 2007). Recruitment and retention concerns

are closely intertwined with issues around wages, benefits, working conditions, possibilities for professional development and career advancement, and respect for the profession which we turn our attention to in the sections that follow (Child Care Now, 2024).

**Wages**

Research reports have decried low wages in the ELCC sector for decades, with hourly wages in Saskatchewan long being below the national median (CCHRSC, 2013; Doherty et al., 2000; Halfon, 2021). The Saskatchewan government provides operational funding to centres to support wages, but there is not yet an explicit or required wage grid. As in some other provinces, the Government of Saskatchewan offers federally-funded wage enhancements as part of the Agreement (Government of Saskatchewan, 2023). On March 31, 2021, Saskatchewan increased operational grants to fund increases in wages of certified staff (the Canada-Saskatchewan Early Childhood Workforce Agreement: 2021-22 Annual Report). Not all ECEs benefitted from wage enhancement funding, with 22% of certified ECE staff not receiving this wage top-up. The structure of the wage enhancements has been a source of frustration for more qualified or senior educators who had exceeded the provincial wage threshold as well as those ECEs whose centres had already made investments in wages. Moreover, directors need to devote significant time to completing paperwork; time that might be better utilized for supporting and mentoring staff.

The average hourly wages and the anticipated effect of wage enhancements as of September 1, 2024 are shown in Table 3 below (Government of Saskatchewan, 2024).

**Table 3: Average Provincial Wages and Wage Thresholds**

**Appendix A**

**Average Provincial Wages and Wage Thresholds for Certification Levels and Position Types, September 2024**

| Position Type | ECE I Average Wage – March 31, 2021 | Total ECE I Wage Enhancement Grant | ECE I Threshold, October 1, 2023 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Director | $19.93 | $5.50 | $25.43 |
| Assistant Director | $19.94 | $5.50 | $25.44 |
| Supervisor | $16.90 | $5.50 | $22.40 |
| Early Childhood Educator* | $15.56 | $5.50 | $21.06 |
| | **ECE II Average Wage – March 31, 2021** | **Total ECE II Wage Enhancement Grant** | **ECE II Threshold, October 1, 2023** |
| Director | $24.75 | $7.00 | $31.75 |
| Assistant Director | $21.25 | $7.00 | $28.25 |
| Supervisor | $20.19 | $7.00 | $27.19 |
| Early Childhood Educator* | $18.06 | $7.00 | $25.06 |
| | **ECE III Average Wage – March 31, 2021** | **Total ECE III Wage Enhancement Grant** | **ECE III Threshold, October 1, 2023** |
| Director | $27.03 | $8.50 | $35.53 |
| Assistant Director | $24.12 | $8.50 | $32.62 |
| Supervisor | $21.57 | $8.50 | $30.07 |
| Early Childhood Educator* | $20.43 | $8.50 | $28.93 |

* The position type for group family child care home assistants is early childhood educator.

Wage enhancements vary according to both certification level (I, II, or III) and position. There are three rows, one for each level (ECE 1, ECE 2, and ECE 3). The left column shows the different positions; director, assistant, director, supervisor, and early childhood educator. The

next column depicts the average wage as of March 31, 2021 by position and certification level. The third column shows the total wage enhancement grant. These grants vary according to level, totaling $5.50 an hour for Level 1 regardless of position, $7.00 an hour for Level 2, and $8.50 an hour for Level 3. The final column illustrates the impact of the wage enhancement, showing that these $5.50, $7.00, and $8.50 increments only apply up to a certain maximum or threshold. Therefore, any certified educator already earning more than this threshold wage will not benefit from the enhancement. Educators earning less than the average wage will also still be below the threshold. While supervisors, assistant directors, and directors earn higher hourly wages than early childhood educators, the amount of this increment varies according to certification level. Employees who do not have certification, such as summer students, are not included in the grant (Government of Saskatchewan, 2024). Even with these wage supports, then, wage levels vary considerably (see Table 3).

A study commissioned in 2022 by the Canadian Child Care Federation outlines minimum, maximum and median hourly wage rates at each certification level for educators, "On site Centre Directors," and "Executive Directors" (People First HR Services, 2022). The table shows a range of about $2.50 to $3.00 between the lowest and highest wage rates at each certification level for early childhood educators and a wider range for the director positions. This variation is partially explained by the growth in wage levels for different levels of job experience. This report indicates that a fully proficient employee would be at the market median wage rate within 4-5 years of commencing employment. Long serving educators should be rewarded appropriately for their years of service (Muttart Foundation, 2024).

**Table 4: Hourly Wage Rates in 2022**

UPDATED: 2022 HOURLY WAGE RATE

| Position | Market Median | Range Minimum | Range Maximum |
|---|---|---|---|
| ECE 1 | $16.29 | $13.84 | $18.73 |
| ECE 2 | $18.82 | $16.00 | $21.65 |
| ECE 3 | $20.73 | $17.62 | $23.84 |
| On Site Centre Director | $27.46 | $23.34 | $31.58 |
| Executive Director | $37.56 | $31.93 | $43.20 |

**Source:** People First HR Services, 2022

According to this report, more than 50% of early childhood educators in Saskatchewan do not earn the hourly wage levels for levels I, II, and III that are said to be supported by federal government-funded wage grants (People First HR Services, 2022). The 2023 study by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of B.C. and Early Childhood Educators of B.C. (ECEBC) calculates the minimum wage for an ECE II in Saskatchewan to be $17 an hour and the minimum wage for an ECE III to be $18 an hour. Moreover, the wages have not kept pace with inflation (CRRU, 2023). Saskatchewan is currently engaged in the development of "a renewed funding model which recognizes the wage grid and compensation as an essential feature of child care funding" (CRRU, 2023, p. 10), but to date the province has relied on wage enhancements instead. Prince Edward Island offers an excellent model for Saskatchewan.

Since 2010, Prince Edward Island has had a wage grid in place for early childhood educators. The implementation of a wage grid in 2010 has been transformative. The starting wages for educators holding a two-year diploma now align with the provincial average across all

occupations and recruitment and retention issues have virtually been eliminated. On the 16th of January 2024, Nathalie Nadeau, executive director of CHANCES (the largest not-for-profit operator in PEI) testified before the Standing Committee on Education and Economic Growth of the PEI Legislature, stating:

> There's been significant advancement in ECE wages – and I want to recognize that, and the pension and everything, which we do not have any issue recruiting or retaining staff. That's really amazing, especially in the environment that we are in right now in terms of hiring and retaining staff. That's a very good step forward.

She went on to say there were still recruitment issues with cooks and other types of support staff.

While initiatives such as new policies to encourage skills upgrading, a funding formula which supports hiring educators with more training, and a pension plan have positively contributed to recruitment and retention, the increase in wage levels guaranteed by a compulsory wage grid has had the most significant impact in PEI. The starting wage for educators with a two-year ECE diploma is now $28.86 per hour, **which is equal to the average hourly wage rate in the province across all jobs and occupations**.

Table 5 below shows average and median hourly wages across all industries and occupations in the four western provinces. If the Saskatchewan government were to adopt PEI's model for wages and pay the provincial average hourly wage rate to educators with a two-year ELCC diploma, their hourly rate would be $31.64 per hour, instead of $25.43, an increase of 24%.

**Table 5: Employee Hourly Wages, Annual, All employees, All Industries, 2023**

| | Average Hourly Wage Across all Industries/Sectors | Median Hourly Wage Across all Industries/Sectors |
|---|---|---|
| Saskatchewan | $31.64 | $27.40 |
| British Columbia | $34.68 | $30.00 |
| Alberta | $34.93 | $30.00 |
| Manitoba | $29.53 | $25.00 |

**Note:** Table shows employee average and median hourly wage levels across all employees and all industry sectors, both full-time and part-time workers, 2023
**Source:** Statistics Canada, Labour Force Survey, CANSIM Table # 14100064

***Wages in Some Comparator Occupations in Saskatchewan***

In order to recommend a wage grid for Saskatchewan, we examined average and median wages in some comparator occupations in 2021-22 (illustrated in Table 6) using the Job Bank website (Government of Canada, 2022b). The data was extracted from the monthly Labour Force Survey and, in order to accumulate sufficient data on all occupations, two years of data are used for each occupation.

**Table 6: Average and Median Hourly Wages in Saskatchewan from the Job Bank, Statistics Canada 2021-22**

| | **Hourly Wages of Occupations in Saskatchewan Requiring a College Education, Specialized Training or Apprenticeship Training** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **NOC Code** | Occupation Title | Average Hourly Wage | Median Hourly Wage |
| | | | | |
| Health Occupations | 32111 | Dental Hygienist and Dental Therapists | $51.10 | $46.50 |
| | 32101 | Licensed Practical Nurses | $35.02 | $37.00 |
| | 32102 | Paramedical Occupations | $32.75 | $33.26 |
| | 32120 | Medical Laboratory Technologists | $38.10 | $38.46 |
| | | | | |
| Occupations in Education, Law and Social, Community and Government Services | 42200 | Paralegal and Related Occupations | $32.89 | $28.72 |
| | 42201 | Social and Community Service Workers | $23.89 | $21.36 |
| | | | | |
| Business, Finance and Administration Occupations | 13100 | Administrative Officers | $29.92 | $27.88 |
| | 12100 | Executive Assistants | $30.42 | $30.24 |
| | 12101 | Human Resource and Recruitment Officers | $36.73 | $36.33 |
| | 13111 | Legal Administrative Assistants | $26.36 | $26.00 |
| | 13112 | Medical Administrative Assistants | $24.76 | $23.09 |
| | 12112 | Records Management Technicians | $26.14 | $26.55 |
| | | | | |
| Trades, Transport and Equipment Operators, and Related Occupations | 72014 | Contractors and Supervisors, Other Construction Trades, Installers, Repairers | $37.92 | $35.00 |

***Designing a Wage Grid***

Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec and Manitoba all have wage grids governing the compensation of staff by certification level, position, and years of experience (Gouvernement du Québec, 2021; Government of Manitoba, 2023; Government of New Brunswick, 2024; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2023; Government of Nova Scotia, 2023; Government of Prince Edward Island, 2023). Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, British Columbia and Saskatchewan have committed to implementing wage grids before 2025-2026 or sooner. Alberta suggests that its long-standing wage top-up model serves as a salary grid to establish base salaries for different certification levels. In a publicly managed child care system with the bulk of operating revenues coming from government, it is essential to have a legislated or regulated wage grid tied to supply side funding otherwise workers in each centre will be paid a different amount. It would be nearly impossible to calculate fairly the legitimate costs that should be compensated by public dollars in each centre.

A wage grid needs to set the **general level of wages** of qualified workers in the sector. It also needs to establish the correct **differentials** in wages between those with different qualifications, years of job experience, and different job positions and responsibilities. Both level and differentials are important because wages affect behaviour. If the level of wages is too low, then well-qualified workers will not be attracted to the sector, individuals will continue to reject child care as a long-term career alternative, and educators will actively seek alternative employment and leave the sector.

Differentials between wages paid for different amounts of experience are important to keep experienced workers in the field. Wage grids across the provinces and territories reward job experience in different ways. For instance, PEI's wage grid has 5 steps, each of which represents a year of experience (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2023). Québec has 10 steps for qualified educators (each step representing a year of experience), but for unqualified front-line staff, there are 14 steps (Gouvernement du Québec, 2021). Educators who have reached the top step will still benefit from regular, often annual, revisions of the wage grid, and are likely to benefit from rising up the career ladder of different positions.

Differentials between wages paid for different levels of education and for different job responsibilities are important to establish a career ladder in the child care sector, and to encourage existing staff to take on increasingly higher levels of job responsibility. The differentials between ECE I, ECE II and ECE III should be sufficient to incentivize certified staff to upgrade their credentials over time. Certified educators who assume roles as Supervisor, Assistant Director or Director should be reasonably compensated for taking on these additional duties and levels of responsibility. There should also be provision for Executive Directors in multi-site child care organizations due to the complexity of this role. Similarly, we believe there should be a new position of Pedagogical Leader. This position could require a Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood or acceptable equivalent and would receive an increment relative to ECE I, II and III. Current Pedagogical Leaders who do not hold a degree would continue to be paid commensurate with their certification and experience. Furthermore, educator wages that currently exceed those on the recommended grid would not be negatively impacted. The grid must be reviewed and adjusted annually to ensure that it continues to be aligned with the provincial average hourly wage across all sectors. Keeping these points in mind, we share our recommended wage grid for Saskatchewan.

### *Recommended Wage Grid for Saskatchewan*

This recommended wage grid is intended to establish uniform wage rates in all centres across the province for any combination of certification level, position, and years of experience.[6] Some wages will rise more than others to get to these new rates, but all educators will receive wage increases. The overall average wage increase is likely to be about 25%, therefore wage costs of the provision of care will rise by about this amount. The "level" of this wage grid is based on the rate paid to a starting ECE III (holding a 2-year ELCC diploma) which is set equal to the average hourly provincial wage. Other wages are set as differentials from this level.

[6] This wage grid was developed by Dr. Gordon Cleveland, co-author and Associate Professor Emeritus of Economics at the University of Toronto.

**Table 7: Recommended Wage Grid for Saskatchewan**

| | Starting Rate | Annual Increment for Additional Year of Experience | Number of Steps |
|---|---|---|---|
| Uncertified staff | $19.64 | $0.50 | 10 |
| ECE I | $22.64 | $0.50 | 10 |
| ECE II (1 year certificate) | $28.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| **ECE III (2-year diploma)** | **$31.64** | $1.00 | 10 |
| Pedagogical Leader (ECE Bachelor's Degree) | $34.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Supervisor (ECE I) | $24.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Supervisor (ECE II) | $30.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Supervisor (ECE III) | $33.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Supervisor (ECE Bachelor's Degree) | $36.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Assistant Director (ECE II) | $32.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Assistant Director (ECE III) | $35.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Assistant Director (Pedagogical Leader) | $38.64 | $1.00 | 10 |
| Director | $42.64 (could vary by ECE certification level) | $1.00 | 10 |
| Executive Director (could vary by number of sites in multi-site organization) | $52.64 (could vary by number of sites in multi-site organization) | $1.00 | 10 |

Please note that we have not included housekeeping, maintenance staff, nutrition specialists (cooks), or bus drivers in this wage grid. While we believe that these staff serve crucial roles within programs and should also be fairly compensated, it would involve establishing appropriate comparators to ensure wage levels for these staff are fair and competitive. We recommend the development of a dedicated wage grid and benefit structure for staff to facilitate recruitment and retention in these important roles. Similarly, licensing officers and post-secondary faculty are not included in the wage grid, yet these positions are an essential part of the ELCC workforce career ladder.

The intention of this wage grid is to make ELCC in Saskatchewan into an attractive profession and career choice as well as to appropriately value the important work of educators. Implementation of a wage grid and comprehensive benefits package will enable establishing uniform wage and benefit levels across the province. In turn, this action will facilitate the development of an effective funding formula for operational costs and establish strong measures

of financial accountability for government funding in the early learning and child care sector. The importance of this wage grid was underscored by a recent study in Newfoundland and Labrador. Educators were surveyed about the implementation of their new wage grid: 42% said they were planning to leave due to low wages, and 31% stated that their salaries did not increase as a result of the new grid (Jimmy Pratt Foundation et al., 2024). Furthermore, the lack of attention to benefits in the grid left 83% without a pension and 57% without health and dental benefits.

**Benefits**

Historically in national and international contexts, early childhood educators have received few benefits along with low wages (CCHRSC, 2013). Benefits can include paid sick days, extended health benefits, dental benefits, parental leave top-up, personal days, and pension (which will be addressed separately). Due to the nature of working with young children, educators can be more susceptible to illness or physical injuries (Morissette & Qiu, 2023). Research suggests that 84% of Saskatchewan educators, including teachers and early childhood educators, experienced acts, attempts, or threats of workplace violence in 2022-2023(Mallory et al., 2024). Personal days allow educators to attend medical or dental appointments since they are unable to do so during the workday. Extended health benefits and sick days allow educators to stay home when sick, thus ensuring a positive and healthy environment for the children. Several of the provinces and territories currently offer health benefits to the ELCC workforce (Child Care Now, 2024). For example, Nova Scotia has a comprehensive benefits plan which includes medical, dental, orthodontics, travel coverage, vision, and disability coverage, administered by the Health Association of Nova Scotia (Government of Nova Scotia, 2023). The provincial government is funding employer contributions to this plan. Family child care providers are also to receive grants to buy health benefits and contribute to an RRSP (Government of Nova Scotia, 2024). Yukon compensates programs for up to 8% of staff wages so that they can purchase benefits for their staff (Government of Yukon, 2021).

Within the ELCC sector in Saskatchewan, comprehensive benefit packages are uneven and inconsistent. Provincial data is difficult to locate due to the number of small programs, but one survey suggested that the majority of respondents had some paid sick time, a drug plan, a vision plan, and some dental benefits (Kn/A, 2022). Multisite programs are often better equipped to offer such benefits. An examination of 11 collective agreements covering educators in unionized programs demonstrated that each of the programs varied in terms of the specific benefits made available to employees. Paid vacation days range from 1.25 days per month to 30 days a year, often depending on years of service in these unionized programs. Likewise, 1.5 paid sick days a month is the norm in these programs. Campus Day Care Cooperative collective agreement offers an excellent model as it includes life insurance, accidental death and dismemberment insurance, extended health care, dental, vision, and long-term disability all paid at 100% by the employer. Some Saskatchewan educators have noted that the lack of benefits often motivates people to leave for the school system (Muttart Foundation, 2024).

***Recommendations***

Having universal, equitable access to such benefits is an essential part of any new funding model. A recent Newfoundland study confirms that benefits are almost as important as wages (Jimmy Pratt Foundation et al., 2024). Addressing the persistent lack of comprehensive benefits in the ELCC sector and exploring centralized strategies, particularly for employees in small centres, emerges as a critical avenue for improving job satisfaction and retention within the sector. Halfon (2021) suggests that implementing centralized strategies may be imperative to

address these gaps and enhance the overall well-being of ELCC sector employees. We recommend the following:

- The province should establish a benefits package to apply uniformly across the sector, however, we recommend that all ELCC staff be given access to an existing public sector employee benefit plan to streamline the process. Licensed family child care providers should likewise have access to this plan.
- A comprehensive range of medical and dental benefits should be made available to ELCC staff with 100% coverage, including: paid sick leave, paid vacation leave, health benefits, vision benefits, life insurance, accidental death and dismemberment, and short and long-term disability.
- Similar to Nova Scotia, the government should fund the employer contributions to this benefit package.

**Pensions**

There are several models for pension plans, including defined benefit, defined contribution, or an employer-sponsored group RRSP. A defined benefit pension plan offers the most security for the employee. As noted by Child Care Now (2024), a defined benefit pension plan uses a formula to calculate the retirement benefit based on the employee's earnings (pre-retirement) and years of service. The fund is then invested and regulated. Both employee and employer contribute to this fund and the amount of this contribution is tied to the funds needed to pay out the retirement benefit. The employer manages the fund, but also assumes the risks if the investments do not perform at the rate needed to pay the guaranteed retirement benefit. The contributions are locked in until the employee's retirement, though it can be transferred to another fund. The other two pension models can fluctuate depending on investments and the market; in sum, the amount the employee/employer put into the plan (plus the accrued interest) determines the amount of the pension (Child Care Now, 2024).

Across the sector, provision for pensions has varied. A recent Newfoundland survey suggests that issues with pensions are closely linked to retention with 90% of educators stating that they had "no idea how they will ever be able to retire" (Jimmy Pratt Foundation et al., 2024, p. 9). However, some provinces are mobilizing to offer pensions to the sector. PEI now offers a defined contribution plan (Government of Prince Edward Island, 2023). The province has designated 1.18 million dollars a year to make the matching pension contributions of 4% and the plan is administered by the Early Childhood Development Association of PEI (Government of PEI, 2023). Nova Scotia has recently instituted a defined benefit plan (Government of Nova Scotia, 2023). Child care staff pensions across the province are now part of the existing Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology pension plan. The provincial government is also funding 100% of the employer contributions to this plan.

***Context of Pensions in Saskatchewan***

In a survey of some educators in Saskatchewan, nearly 66% of those employed in child care centres reported having a pension or RRSP plan funded in part by their employer, though these contributions may be minimal (Kn/A, 2022). However, over 70% of family child care providers stated that they were "unable to save for retirement" (p. 210). Of the educators surveyed, an overwhelming 98.5% declared that an employer-funded pension or RRSP was important to some extent (Kn/A, 2022). A review of collective agreements for 11 unionized programs across the province demonstrated that all but one had access to some form of pension plan. The amount of their contributions ranged from 2% to 6%. The Campus Child Care Co-operative is noteworthy

because the employer contributions to a multi-sector pension plan are fixed at 6% and the employee contributions at only 4.5% (CUPE Local 1902-01 and Campus Day Care Centre Co-operative, 2022).

### *Recommendations*

The sector has long been challenged to provide pension plans given the size and number of programs. However, Nova Scotia offers an exemplary model for Saskatchewan. Improved wages would then also provide educators with the financial resources needed to make contributions each pay period to the pension plan.

- We recommend that the provincial government move to adopt a defined benefit plan with matching employee and employer contributions. Consistent with K/na (2022) recommendations, we suggest signing up educators to an existing provincial pension plan rather than creating and administering a new plan.
- The province should also fund the employer contributions to this pension plan that addresses resource disparities from program to program.
- Family home child care providers should also have the option to participate in the pension plan or purchase their own plan using government grants.

## Working Conditions

Positive working conditions are integral to the structural and process quality of the program as they enhance job performance and satisfaction (OECD, 2018; Wong et al, 2023). Working conditions encompass a variety of factors including having dedicated, paid non-contact time for planning and administrative tasks, paid opportunities for professional development and educational advancement, and respect and recognition for their work. Child Care Now (2024) asserts that "working conditions, along with wages and benefits, have a profound impact on educators' job satisfaction and their decisions to persist or exit the profession" (n.p.). Poor working conditions compromise overall educators' well-being, leading to burnout and attrition (Grant et al., 2019; Muttart Foundation, 2024; Wong et al., 2023). Issues with working conditions were exacerbated during the pandemic **(**Bigras et al., 2022; Massing et al., 2022; Smith, 2021). A Saskatchewan study confirmed that educators in the province are "under significant stress, working longer hours, and caring for more children with additional or more complex needs, often with insufficient access to the specialized resources they needs to support inclusion" (Muttart Foundation, 2024, p. 11).

Family child care providers can experience particular challenges due to their isolation, lack of support for taking time off, and lack of collegial and professional supports (Woodman, 2022). Providers in the province cited ten or more hours working with the children followed by administration, planning, and cleaning (Muttart Foundation, 2024). An Australian study found that over 40% of family child care providers reported having experienced moderate to high levels of psychological distress due to aspects of their working conditions (Corr et al., 2015). Therefore, working conditions are integral to the overall wage and compensation structure. In this section, we review the literature and describe the Saskatchewan context for various aspects of working conditions in the ELCC sector and then offer overall recommendations.

### *Paid Non-Contact Time for Planning and Administrative Tasks*

Employment in the ELCC sector differs from teaching in the school system in terms of the provision of release time for professional development, planning, and meetings. An

educator's workday is in ratio working directly with the children which requires a level of vigilance that does not permit planning and preparation of learning experiences, materials, and the environment. In family child care, educators may not even have time for a break. Having time for planning enhances process quality of the programming and positively influences children's learning and development. Paid non-contact time is also crucial for building relationships with families, other educators, and specialists such as inclusion experts to support children's learning and development. Furthermore, educators in various studies affirm that it negatively impacts their health and well-being to have to complete planning and administrative tasks after work and on their lunch breaks (Jovanovic, 2013; Muttart Foundation, 2024). Dedicated space is needed for these tasks.

Currently, it is not typical for educators in Saskatchewan to receive release time for planning and administration. Educators in the province are guided by the *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* which structures planning around processes of gathering information about children's interests and abilities, engaging in reflection and decision making, planning collaboratively, creating environments and experiences, and documenting learning (Government of Saskatchewan, 2008). Such processes require dedicated time outside of time spent in ratio or direct contact with the children. A review of collective agreements in the province indicated that only one program allowed time for preparation and research related to work, however it was still only two hours a month (CUPE and Wascana Child Care Co-op, January 2020-December 2025). Educators in a Saskatchewan study reported that few staff have any time for planning and, those who do, often only receive an hour or two a week at most and only if they were not needed to cover staff absences (Muttart Foundation, 2024). In contrast, prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers doing similar work receive approximately 18-20% of each day for planning (this varies slightly depending on the school division). An over-staffing model allows the flexibility to replace educators for meetings with families and professionals, program planning and preparation, preparing inclusion supports, and personal appointments.

Educators in family child care report working an estimated ten to twelve hours a day (K/na, 2022), therefore this issue is particularly acute for educators in those programs. These educators suggested that enhanced supports from the government would assist them in completing their administrative tasks and ensuring coverage for sick days and appointments. One study reported that nearly 50% of Saskatchewan educators are not comfortable with the "mental and emotional demands" of their work, suggesting a need for on-the-job supports as well as professional learning opportunities (K/na, 2022).

### *Paid Time for Professional Learning and Educational Opportunities*

The availability of further training and professional learning opportunities has been found to enrich program quality (CCHRSC, 2013; OECD, 2024). Canadian research indicates that there are higher retention rates among educators with a post-secondary diploma as opposed to those with only high school (Choi & Frank, 2024). The OECD Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey found that new educators especially need mentoring to develop and enhance their knowledge and skills and navigate this complex field of work (OECD, 2018). Woodman's (2022) study with family child care educators in Alberta suggested that continuing education opportunities and experiences have the potential to enhance or inhibit their ability to provide high-quality care. Family child care educators may struggle to find meaningful opportunities for professional learning pertaining to the unique context of their work so it is important to tailor opportunities to various needs in the sector (Woodman, 2022). Indeed, Australian research

suggests that mandating professional development is less effective than providing supports for educators to explore and pursue training according to their own professional interests (Jovanovic, 2013). A British Columbia study found that while many educators engaged in professional development, it could be costly and did not necessarily bring other benefits such as promotions (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, 2020). International studies have confirmed that educators were motivated to continue their education when they had paid study leave and this solidified their commitment to the field (Lux et al., 2022; Pek-Greer et al., 2016). Alberta offers grants to educators in licensed centres and family day home programs of up to $1500 per year for post-secondary tuition and books and $500 per year for workshops and conferences with paid release time (Government of Alberta, 2023). The Government of Saskatchewan likewise offers paid release time of up to 20 hours. However, educators cannot access this opportunity if their program lacks the staff to cover for them.

Given unique challenges in the family child care sector as well as in rural communities, peers are an invaluable source of connection and support (Woodman, 2022). Programs such as the Peer Mentoring Program for Early Childhood Educators in British Columbia could eventually be a promising option for Saskatchewan (ECE Peer Mentoring, 2024). The program brings together new and experienced educators with trained facilitators in 25 communities of practice across the province. The goal is to enable retention by building capacity, supporting specific professional learning needs, and increase educators' self-confidence (ECE Peer Mentoring, 2024). Such a program could facilitate involvement of more isolated educators such as those operating family child care homes or those located in rural communities. However, it would take time to create the appropriate workplace supports to enact such a model, including leadership development and training, paid non-contact time, and stability in the workforce.

A pedagogical leadership model, where experienced mentors go into the child care centre or family child care home to provide guidance, modelling, and supports, is the approach which we recommend for Saskatchewan (Bjarveit, 2017). This model has proven to be very successful in Alberta and other jurisdictions. Leaders visit programs, facilitate discussions within communities of practice, and are available for consultations and questions between meetings (Bjarveit, 2017), It can facilitate inter-program collaboration and strengthens program quality by bringing educators together to learn within the context of their own practice. This model also relies on the availability of post-secondary coursework and professional learning opportunities which can be tailored to the specific needs and desires of the sector.

Moreover, directors and supervisors also need professional learning supports to become effective leaders. For this reason, the Canadian Child Care Federation [CCCF] et al. (2021) suggests that directors should have access to a mentorship program to advance their understanding of leadership, human resources, and communication. Research suggests a strong correlation between having a knowledgeable, experienced, and supportive leader and educator job attitudes and retention (Doromal & Markowitz, 2023; Zinesser et al., 2016). Ideally, Directors would be supported in obtaining a Bachelor's degree.

An overwhelming majority of educators in one Saskatchewan study cited professional development and training as very important (58.3%) or important (32.9%) which also speaks to the complex and shifting nature of this work (Kn/A, 2022). The Muttart Foundation (2024) study identified working with children with complex needs as an area of particular need in terms of professional learning. Directors similarly also value professional development, particularly if they have less formal education (Kn/A, 2022). A third of educators in the province do not have any paid time off for engaging in professional learning and time and family responsibilities

hinder participation (Kn/A, 2022). Directors often find themselves stretched with day-to-day demands on their time which include administrative tasks, staff mentoring and training, and time spent with children and families (Kn/A, 2022). Most of the unionized centres have some form of support for professional learning, including funds for registration costs for courses or workshops and paid time off for training or educational study. Family and group child care home operators in the province can apply for various grants and supports including professional development grants to a maximum of $300 ($300 for family child care homes and $600 for group homes) and tuition and book grants of up to $500 per year (Government of Saskatchewan, n.d). The family child care agency model, as found in provinces such as Ontario and Alberta, provides the infrastructure to facilitate professional learning (Government of Alberta, 2023). Agency staff visit family child care providers to provide in-house mentoring and support to enhance program quality. Agencies also offer professional learning opportunities for providers under their supervision.

Mentoring and support for educators, and particularly new graduates, is necessary (SKLC, 2023). New educators need onboarding to understand the context of their work environment, policies and procedures, and job duties so they can successfully apply their knowledge and skills and integrate into the workplace (SKLC, 2023). In a recent study with Saskatchewan educators, participants highlighted that increased pressures and staff shortages "have made it more difficult for some organizations to support new educators' transitions into the field" (Muttart Foundation, 2024, p. 8). Orientation meetings and resources, being paired with a mentor, shadowing, and hands-on training in different rooms were cited as valuable for onboarding. Some new graduates decline to seek employment in the field due to a lack of mentoring in their practicum experiences.

According to partners in the Saskatchewan ELCC sector, one of the crucial professional development needs is to learn how to work with an increasingly diverse population (SKLC, 2023), especially since Saskatchewan has a substantial Indigenous population and cities such as Saskatoon and Regina are receiving significant growth in the number of new immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2022). Directors have increasingly referenced "intercultural competence" as an extremely important (68%) or very important (29%) skill (Kn/A, 2022). Specialized professional development sessions will be needed to advance the intercultural competence of the ELCC workforce. Opportunities to increase one's level of certification are another integral part of professional learning.

In 2022, the Saskatchewan Government announced a partnership with Collège Mathieu, Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies (SIIT) and Saskatchewan Polytechnic to offer free training for Levels I, II, and III. This initiative was intended for training and professional purposes, but also to facilitate space creation in centres (Global News, August 15, 2022). Sector partners believe that this plan, in combination with wage enhancements, may be incentivizing some educators to improve upon their education (SKLC, 2023) since affordability of coursework is an issue (Kn/A, 2022). Overall, more than 90% of educators prioritize having opportunities to advance their careers and moving into higher levels of certification is a means of achieving this goal (Kn/A, 2022). However, lack of time and, relatedly, family responsibilities are still key barriers to increasing one's level of certification (Kn/A, 2022). Many educators do not have the resources to pay for course out-of-pocket and then wait for reimbursement.

To retain immigrant educators, it is crucial to consider issues such as how to build on existing international qualifications and experience while learning Canadian ELCC practice and English/French language. The structure of such programs is crucial to best support these learners.

As Massing's (2015) research with immigrant and refugee early childhood education post-secondary students found, given the tensions between dominant and cultural theories and pedagogical practices, instructors need to create spaces for dialogue to draw out the learners' own values, beliefs, and stories with respect to teaching and caring for children and negotiate new possibilities. Program flexibility is also crucial to respond to their diverse prior knowledges and experiences (Schmidt et al., 2010). Built in language supports and skilled use of scaffolding can assist these students in learning (Massing, 2019). Finally, international and immigrant students often report experiencing racism, discrimination, and exclusion in conventional post-secondary programs (Cho, 2010; Martonovic & Dlamini, 2009). Field placement supervisors from similar backgrounds as the supervisors may offer better support (Massing, 2015). Instructors need to be aware of dynamics within the class and, sometimes, specialized programs may offer a more supportive environment.

Several pilot programs in Alberta have offered alternative pathways to post-secondary studies for immigrants. A unique government-funded bridging program in Alberta offered workplace-embedded ELCC courses to women from immigrant and refugee backgrounds, many of whom were teachers in their home countries, during their scheduled work hours (Prochner et al., 2017). The program featured volunteer mentors for each student, many of whom were retired elementary teachers. The program was intended to transition educators into conventional post-secondary programs and a number of them did pursue further studies. NorQuest College in Edmonton has likewise offered a blended English as an Additional Language and ELCC program focused on family child care. More recently, in Calgary, Mount Royal University has started a micro-credential program to bridge English language learners into post-secondary studies (Yu et al., 2023). The Calgary Immigrant Women's Association (CIWA) has partnered with Bow Valley College to offer several pathways to certification depending on the level of the learner's digital literacy and English language proficiency.

***Respect for the Profession***

The lack of respect for educators is a multifaceted concern, encompassing various aspects of recognition, compensation, and societal attitudes. Educators find themselves in a profession that plays a crucial role in shaping the foundational years of a child's life. In the foundational "You Bet I Care!" survey, conducted in 1998, only 19.9% of educators surveyed believed that they were respected by professionals in other fields, and 8.2% felt they were respected by the general public (Doherty et al., 2000). International research suggests these feelings are especially acute among novice educators (OECD, 2024). During the pandemic, educators in several studies were discouraged to find that little changed in terms of recognition and value for their work in spite of being deemed "essential workers" (Berger et al., 2022; Massing et al., 2022; Smith, 2022). This lack of recognition was especially demoralizing given that educators were experiencing high stress levels and lower levels of well-being (Bigras et al., 2021; Smith, 2022). Educators have consistently reported having high levels of job satisfaction (Doherty et al., 2000; CCHRSC, 2013). However, there comes a point when the enjoyment derived from teaching young children is outweighed by feelings of being unappreciated and exploited. Low status and recognition for the complexity of the work would seem to be universal concerns (OECD, 2018). As stated in a UNICEF (2021) report: "Public perception of childcare work matters as, along with work conditions, it influences who applies and stays in the profession, which translates into quality of childcare" (p. 17).

This lack of respect is evident not only in the stark pay disparity between teachers and other educators but also in the broader societal perception that sometimes reduces their role to mere "babysitting." As Woodman (2022) notes in the context of family child care, such perspectives can influence how positively or negatively the educator perceives themselves which, by extension, impacts the quality of their care. The gendered and racialized nature of this undervaluation is particularly pronounced, as the majority of educators are women and increasing numbers are from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. The consequences of this lack of respect ripple through the system, impacting the recruitment and retention of qualified educators, thus it is crucial to address this issue to foster a more supportive and equitable environment for ELCC. Increased wages, comprehensive benefit package, and improved working conditions are a crucial first step in valuing the important work of educators.

***Recommendations***

- Saskatchewan educators should have paid time for planning and administrative tasks (CCCF, 2021). This dedicated planning and administrative time should constitute 20% of the educator's workday.
- Free public post-secondary coursework is an excellent initiative to facilitate recruitment, and we recommend continuing this initiative for educators currently employed in the sector.
- Educators and directors should have paid release time for professional learning and post-secondary coursework.
- A mentoring program such as the Pedagogical Leadership Model in Alberta would support educators in child care programs, while an agency model would support family child care providers.

## Conclusion

Investment in the workforce facilitates the development of accessible, affordable, and high-quality ELCC programs that children and families deserve (CCCF, 2024). Saskatchewan has several advantages that can be mobilized to implement the recommendations outlined in this report. First, unlike many other jurisdictions, the child care service provision in Saskatchewan is overwhelmingly not-for-profit which numerous studies have linked to higher quality programs and workforce stability (Beach, 2020). Second, Saskatchewan has higher minimum qualifications for certification than some jurisdictions. Enhanced wages, benefits, and opportunities for professional advancement would address recruitment and retention issues and diminish the need to offer exemptions. Finally, Saskatchewan has been an early leader in lowering child care fees and can now capitalize on the strengths that facilitated quick action. It is now crucial to address the space crisis through targeted actions aimed at improving recruitment and retention. Developing a competitive wage grid and benefits package based on principles of equity, fairness, and respect for the profession would ensure a qualified ELCC workforce and, in turn, high-quality programs for our youngest citizens and their families. These actions would ideally be embedded in a larger workforce strategy supported by government funding.

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