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

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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

In 2021, the province of Saskatchewan and the federal government signed the Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement.[i] Since the signing, Saskatchewan has emerged as an early leader among the provinces and territories by reaching the goal of lowering maximum fees to $10 a day three years early.[ii] However, in spite of various provincial space creation initiatives, 92% of children in the province still live in "child care deserts," where access to licensed care is extremely limited,[iii] particularly for low-income and newcomer families.[iv] The Saskatchewan Action Plan aims to address persistent workforce shortages and retention issues that threaten to undermine the intent of this agreement. However, there is a need for further investments in the workforce and sufficient capital grants for creating centre-based spaces. As shared by the Canadian Child Care Federation:

> …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.[v]

Research likewise confirms that workforce must be a key consideration in the development of such policies and approaches as qualified and well-compensated educators are central to a quality, well-functioning system.[vi]

Numerous studies have found that high quality early learning and child care (ELCC) programs have many developmental and social benefits for children and their families.[vii] Quality can be assessed through close interactions between educators and children as well as features of the environment, staff qualifications and working conditions, and group composition.[viii] Within Indigenous and other cultural communities, *quality* is also defined through additional elements such as cultural beliefs, traditions, values, and knowledges; life experiences; socialization goals; interactional patterns; hopes for children; and the local context.[ix] Educators are an "integral element of the child care ecosystem and landscape."[x] Their educational background, pay, working conditions, supports and resources, and how they are valued by society all contribute to the quality of the program**.**

Analyses of these first years of the $10-a-day program show that greater investment in the child care sector has spurred economic benefits.[xi] Access to quality, low cost child care enables broader workforce participation, job creation, full time employment, and higher earnings; all of which have contributed to growth in the Canadian economy and a reduction in inflation.[xii] However, there is a critical need for a qualified and well-compensated ELCC workforce in Saskatchewan. A comprehensive workforce strategy and a sound policy framework should lay out a 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. This report 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.[xiii]

The development of the report was informed by values such as fairness, respect for the ELCC profession, and commitment to high-quality and inclusive 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. It affirms the calls to action outlined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada report by confirming the necessity of developing culturally appropriate curricula and ELCC programs by equipping educators to work with a diverse population through investments in professional learning. 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.

The report's recommendations are grounded in a thorough examination of historical and current issues in the ELCC sector within Saskatchewan, nationally, and internationally. The project involved a review of the literature, environmental scans of wage grids and compensation structures in other provinces, and comparisons with similar professions. The report was developed in close collaboration with the Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus, or Working Group, in consultation with an Advisory Committee comprised of local experts to ensure the recommendations are well-rounded and contextually relevant. 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, SECA, and Saskatchewan Early Learning and Care Leader's Caucus with educators across the province. These findings have been included in the report.

Saskatchewan has unique strengths, including a predominantly not-for-profit ELCC sector and comparatively higher minimum qualifications for certification. These 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 Context

Low turnover rates and workforce stability are shown to enhance children's positive developmental outcomes and ensure program quality.[xiv] However, like ELCC sectors across Canada, Saskatchewan grapples with substantial difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified early childhood educators. In one report, Saskatchewan educators cite "a revolving door of staff."[xv] Many programs 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.[xvi] Research confirms that high staff turnover comes at a tremendous cost.[xvii] Programs lose educators holding significant organizational knowledge.[xviii] Moreover, the existing staff must take on additional duties, including mentoring and training new educators which, in turn, contributes to their exhaustion and stress.[xix] Directors in the province report that low wages are a major barrier to recruiting and retaining educators.[xx] Recent Government of Saskatchewan investments for items such as signing bonuses and pension contributions have not significantly

alleviated the underlying issues that drive educators out of the sector therefore further action needs to be taken.

Adding to these challenges, currently, 30% of ELCC staff in Saskatchewan lack any certification, and only 22% hold the Level III certification which is often considered the minimum qualification in many provinces.[xxi] This lack of qualified staff severely limits the capacity to expand and sustain high-quality ELCC services. 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 goal is unlikely without targeted recruitment and retention strategies including wage increases and an improved compensation structure.

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 educator 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. These actions are essential to transform the province's ELCC sector into a competent system that meets the needs of children, families, and educators while supporting economic growth.

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. 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.[xxii] 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. In PEI, 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.[xxiii] These grids serve as benchmarks for establishing competitive salaries and clear career progression opportunities. Saskatchewan 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.[xxiv] Wage enhancements have led to some improvement, but significant disparities remain. For example, average hourly wages for educators in Saskatchewan range from $15.56 to $20.43 before wage enhancements, depending on certification level, with wage enhancements ranging from $5.50-8.50 per hour capped at certain thresholds.[xxv] These wage levels are insufficient to attract and retain qualified educators, particularly when compared to wages in similar professions. Moreover, wage enhancements do not provide the same certainty and stability over time as a wage grid. 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.

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

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. In a publicly managed child care system with the bulk of operating revenues coming from government, it is also essential to have a legislated or regulated wage grid tied to supply side funding otherwise educators in each centre will be paid a different amount. If Saskatchewan were to adopt a similar model to PEI, educators could see a 24% increase in their hourly wage rates in line with the provincial average wage. 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 economist 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 differentials between ECE I, ECE II and ECE III should be sufficient to incentivize certified staff to continue to upgrade their professional knowledge and skills. Certified educators who assume roles as Supervisor, Assistant Director or Director need to be reasonably compensated for taking on 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 these educators would receive an increment relative to ECE I, II and III.

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 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. These rates account for the enhanced professional expertise and responsibilities of trained educators who are more involved in mentoring, room supervision, and programming activities. Other higher-responsibility positions, such as Pedagogical Leader and Executive Director, have starting wages that reflect their additional duties. Educator wages that currently exceed those on the recommended grid would not be negatively impacted. In addition, 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.

	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	$52.64 (could vary by number of sites in multi-site organization)	$1.00	10

The report also highlights the need for a separate wage structure for non-educator roles such as housekeeping, maintenance, and nutrition specialists, acknowledging their critical contributions to the sector.

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.

Benefits

A recent Newfoundland study confirms that benefits are almost as important as wages.[xxvi] Benefits can include paid sick days, extended health benefits, dental benefits, parental leave top-up, personal days, and pension. Comprehensive benefits packages improve job satisfaction and retention in the sector while ensuring the health and well-being of educators and their families.[xxvii] For instance, educators can be more susceptible to illness or injuries due to the physically demanding nature of work with young children.[xxviii] Research suggests that 84% of Saskatchewan educators, including teachers and early childhood educators, experienced acts, attempts, or threats of workplace violence in 2022-2023.[xxix] Currently, benefits in Saskatchewan's ELCC sector are inconsistent, with significant variation across programs, even among those that are unionized.

Implementing centralized strategies may be imperative to address these gaps and enhance the overall well-being of ELCC sector employees. Several of the provinces and territories currently offer health benefits to the ELCC workforce. For example, Nova Scotia offers a comprehensive benefit plan fully funded by the provincial government and administered by the Health Association of Nova Scotia,[xxx] while Yukon compensates programs for up to 8% of staff wages to purchase benefits for their staff.[xxxi]

Recommendations

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

- 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

Pensions are a critical component of compensation, directly impacting retention, yet the sector has long been challenged to provide pension plans given the size and number of programs. In one survey, 98.5% of Saskatchewan educators who responded declared that an employer-funded pension or RRSP was important, while only 66% currently had access.[xxxii] The report advocates for the adoption of a defined benefit pension plan in Saskatchewan. A defined benefit pension

plan offers the most security for the employee as other types can fluctuate depending on market conditions. This plan would offer long-term financial security and low risk for educators, with matching contributions from employees and employers.

Nova Scotia offers an exemplary model for Saskatchewan.[xxxiii] Child care staff pensions across the province are now part of the existing Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology pension plan and the provincial government is funding 100% of the employer contributions. Improved wages would then provide educators with the financial resources needed to make their contributions to the plan.

Recommendations

- We recommend that the provincial government move to adopt a defined benefit plan with matching employee and employer contributions. Consistent with K/na recommendations,[xxxiv] we suggest signing up educators to an existing provincial pension plan, such as the Saskatchewan Health Authority, rather than creating and administering a new plan to ensure consistency and fairness.
- 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

Improving working conditions is essential for enhancing job performance and satisfaction and the overall quality of ELCC programs.[xxxv] 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 enhanced respect for the profession. Currently, educators in Saskatchewan have limited or no paid time for these activities, which negatively impacts program quality, educator well-being, and recruitment and retention. Research suggests that family child care providers experience particular challenges related to taking time off or accessing professional supports which, in turn, can contribute to higher stress levels.[xxxvi]

Paid Non-Contact Time for Planning and Administrative Tasks

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.[xxxvii] Such processes require dedicated time outside of time spent in ratio or direct contact with the children; time which is not currently available given the staffing crisis and financial constraints. 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. 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. In the context of family child care, educators report working an estimated ten to twelve hours a day, therefore this issue is particularly acute for educators in those programs.[xxxviii] Prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers doing similar work receive approximately 18-20% of each day for planning. The report recommends allocating 20% of an educator's workday to engage in these tasks. 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.

Paid Time for Professional Learning and Educational Opportunities

The availability of further training and professional learning opportunities enriches program quality. Furthermore, Canadian and international research indicates that there are higher retention rates among educators having paid study leave or a post-secondary diploma.[xxxix] Saskatchewan educators believe that professional development and training are important. The OECD Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey found that new educators, in particular, need mentoring to develop and enhance their knowledge and skills and navigate this complex field of work.[xl] The ongoing coaching, mentoring, and onboarding of new educators has presented challenges to senior staff who take on this work in additional to their regular workloads. The pedagogical leadership model used in Alberta, where experienced mentors go into the child care centre or family child care home to provide guidance, modelling, and supports, is the approach this report recommends for Saskatchewan.[xli] This initiative would help to onboard, mentor, and retain educators. Directors also need access to professional learning and mentorship.[xlii] Research suggests a strong correlation between having a knowledgeable, experienced, and supportive leader and educator attitudes and retention.[xliii]

Respect for the Profession

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.[xliv] A UNICEF report stated: "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."[xlv] The gendered and racialized nature of the undervaluation of educator's work is particularly pronounced; 97% of educators in the province are women and increasing numbers are from immigrant and refugee backgrounds.[xlvi] The lack of respect for educators is a multifaceted concern, encompassing various aspects of recognition of the complexity of the work, compensation, and societal attitudes. The report emphasizes the need for greater societal recognition of the complexity and importance of educators' work. Enhanced working conditions are seen as an essential part in addressing this issue.

Recommendations

- Saskatchewan educators should have paid time for planning and administrative tasks. 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 need and deserve. 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. 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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