

Executive Summary

January 2021 will mark the expiry of Alberta’s 2007 Child Care Licensing Act and regulations. Much has changed since this legislation came into force. A large and growing body of research has accumulated on the importance of high-quality early learning and child care care—not just for children and families, but for the enormous benefit it has for economies, communities and societies.

There is growing recognition that child care and education are inextricably linked. And there is clear evidence that children’s experiences in their early years have a powerful, lasting effect on their future success. High-quality early learning and child care is the foundation for health and well-being throughout life. It provides children with rich, varied and nurturing learning experiences that help them develop and grow into healthy, well-adjusted, self-reliant adults who have the skills they need to succeed at school, at work and in life.

Across Canada and around the globe, governments are moving away from the historically rooted model of child care as custodial care toward a model that acknowledges the importance of children’s early years and respects the rights of children as citizens. This new model places the child at the heart of an integrated system that includes research, policy, quality delivery, sustainable funding, governance, partnerships, evidence-based curricula and supportive workplaces.

Well-qualified, caring early childhood educators are the prime determinant of a quality child care system, and education is the prime determinant of qualified early childhood educators. Sadly, the educational preparation of Alberta’s early learning and child care workforce is well below international standards.

In many countries, early childhood educators must have at least a bachelor's or master's degree in the field. A two-year diploma in early learning and child care is widely accepted as a bare minimum requirement.

In Alberta, only 43% of early childhood educators have a two-year diploma, and for a significant portion of this group, the diploma does not relate to early learning and child care. Forty per cent of early childhood educators have only a 54-hour child care orientation course. Most of Alberta's early childhood educators have few opportunities for ongoing professional development. All work for low wages in challenging environments—often without health or disability benefits, paid vacations or pension plans, and often with little respect for the important work they do.

This is not good enough. And it's not right.

The upcoming review of Alberta's child care licensing legislation provides an opportunity for positive change. Legislating higher qualification standards and supports for early childhood educators can help to build an effective, high-quality early learning and child care system that gives Alberta's children the best possible start in life.

The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta has three priorities for much-needed legislative changes that will support the province's early childhood educators:

1. raising education and education-related standards
2. legislating mandatory ongoing professional learning
3. adopting Alberta's early learning curriculum framework, Flight, within all licensed and approved early learning and child care programs in the province

This paper makes the case for quality and the case for change.

Quality early learning and child care generates exceptional returns on investment. Economic studies have calculated the cost–benefit ratio of such investment at between \$1.50 and \$17 gained for every \$1 spent. Investing in high-quality early learning and child care creates jobs, stimulates economic development and lays the foundation for a skilled, productive, innovative and globally competitive workforce. It is an important tool for eliminating poverty and for getting parents back to work.

Quality early learning and child care increases female labour market participation, which in turn promotes women’s status and equality, increases women’s income, shrinks the gender wage gap and reduces the number of women living in poverty. It reduces family stress and promotes social inclusion.

Quality early learning and child care lays the foundation for all future learning, so that children are less likely to drop out of school. Each year, Canadians pay more than \$1.3 billion for social assistance and criminal justice costs related to high school drop-outs—plus additional billions for health care and employment insurance costs (Hankvisky 2008).

Quality early learning and child care also facilitates early intervention to address any behavioural, cognitive or developmental issues children may have. This reduces the need for costly special education and remedial programs later on.

Research shows that quality early learning and child care is important for all children, from all socio-economic backgrounds. Research also shows that Alberta’s children are not doing as well as they should be. A 2014 study found that less than half of Alberta’s five-year-olds were developing appropriately in all five areas measured by the Early Development Instrument, the standard population-based tool used to monitor early childhood development across the country. The results suggest that “many children in this province are not getting the support

they need during their crucial early development years” (ECMap 2014, 30).

This is not right.

Children have a right to education—including early childhood education—that develops their “personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” and prepares them for “responsible life in a free society” (United Nations 1979, Article 29). They have a right to a quality early learning and child care system staffed by highly qualified early childhood educators who—like all Albertans—deserve fair wages, satisfying work and supportive working conditions.

Legislation provides an important foundation for a quality early learning and child care system, but legislation alone is not enough. Legislative change must be supported by sound policy. It must work hand-in-hand with a workforce strategy that builds a well-educated, well-supported and well remunerated early learning and child care workforce. And it must be supported by public investment.

Creating an effective, well-functioning early learning and child care system for Alberta will not happen quickly and will not come cheaply. But the investment is well worth the cost.

Investing in our children is an investment in our citizens’ short- and long-term prosperity and well-being.

Legislative change is an important first step. We need to get it right.

The recommendations in this position paper are intended as a starting point for discussion. AECEA welcomes all input and suggestions about how Alberta can build a professional workforce of early childhood educators to support a quality early learning and child care system.