

Early Learning and Child Care Workforce Initiatives

March 2021

The Need

For years, Alberta's early learning and child care (ELCC) sector has been challenged with meeting the demand for qualified early childhood educators (ECEs). Educationally prepared ECEs are essential to ensure ELCC spaces are of high quality, accessible and available in licensed settings that serve children and families. Quality ELCC supports employers, their employees, and the economy. Our economy relies on parents of young children participating in the workforce and their contributions to our tax system; indeed, it is imperative for Alberta's recovery. But it is much more than that. Children have a right to quality ELCC that helps lay the foundation for all of their future learning and contributes to positive health and social outcomes.

The Context

Alberta's early learning and care workforce remains unstable and has been that way for years. With high staff turnover rates and many of our educators unable to move beyond a Level 1 certification, many ELCC programs remain of modest quality and are unable to meet the diverse learning needs of all Alberta's young children, requiring expensive quality and inclusion supports. Licensed child care programs outside of Edmonton and Calgary find it particularly difficult to recruit and retain ECEs to meet regulatory requirements and the ECEs in the field have limited opportunities to access post-secondary education and quality professional learning in their regions.

Our system needs to be set up to ensure better learning, health, and social outcomes for all children – a system that allows children to develop, learn and thrive. Let us work together – community, post-secondary institutions, and government – to ensure our ECE workforce is well-prepared for the challenging yet rewarding work ahead of them. There needs to be a system that is sustainable now and well into the future.

Program operators are spending too much valuable time recruiting and trying to retain qualified staff. However, the low wages and limited benefits they can provide are deterrents. The federal government's recent announcement related to ECE workforce investments comes at the opportune time to help stabilize and strengthen Alberta's ELCC system in a new way.

As the Covid-19 pandemic has shown, ECEs are essential to Alberta's economic stability and recovery. And yet, they work with little support to do their critical work. Wages and working conditions remain priorities that need to be addressed in order to recruit and retain educators. However, AECEA and ALC propose two new ideas that can have a significant impact on quality, accessibility, and a more qualified and stable workforce. These ideas move beyond training initiatives and will help educationally prepare ECEs to undertake their complex role, especially at a time when children are presenting with more diverse needs.

The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA) is a member-based, non-profit society with over 1000 members, including ECEs, directors, operators, students, and associate members, including post-secondaries and other stakeholder organizations. The Alberta Early Learning and Care Leaders Caucus (ALC) comprises a knowledgeable group of leaders that convene stakeholders with an intent to think through strategies, inform and influence how early learning and child care is planned for, funded, delivered, and supported in the Province of Alberta. AECEA and ALC are well-positioned in the field to think about how to approach these workforce challenges in innovative and collaborative ways.

AECEA and ALC have engaged with ECEs in meaningful ways and have heard many educators express interest in advancing their education, with relevant supports in place. Over the past year, there has also been an abundance of interest in the Exploring Early Childhood Curriculum: Play, Participation, and Possibilities (MacEwan University's *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* course), with hundreds of interested ECEs being turned away.

While the province's current bursary support program will remain a critical piece of a broader workforce plan, educators' most prominent barrier to advancing their education appears to be time. We believe collaboration can bring us closer to a solution that addresses a variety of ECE workforce challenges.

Recommendations

AECEA and ALC would like to propose two ideas, using both federal and provincial funds to advance the ELCC workforce and system:

1. Developing and investing in an ELCC workplace education model.
2. Ensuring workplace supports for ECEs.

The workforce initiatives included here are to be inclusive of all certified ECEs working in Alberta, including those in licensed facility-based and home-based programs. We will need to think creatively on how the recommendations will work best in all types of licensed ELCC: child care centres, preschools, out-of-school care programs, and family day homes. The whole province must be considered, including smaller urban settings, rural, and remote areas.

AECEA and ALC know that Alberta's ELCC workforce is made up of predominantly women. It includes ECEs who are Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit), who were born in Canada, and are newcomers to Canada. ECEs' languages, backgrounds, and experiences are diverse and should be respected and valued. With suitable support, all these ECEs can gain an educational credential, build their capacity and confidence, and better serve Alberta's children and families who also come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse abilities. Every child has a right to education guided by ECEs who are well-prepared, valued, and supported for the important work they do.

Early Learning and Child Care Workplace Education Model

Now is the time to plan a workforce education model that builds foundational competencies, including understanding how young children learn and develop through an early years pedagogy, supporting children with exceptional abilities, caring ethically, working with families from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences, and linking research to policy and practice. Without ECEs having a foundation of theory supported by a variety of quality practice environments, the layering of additional training initiatives will not make up for the ELCC specific education ECEs require.

To increase the level of education of Alberta's ECEs and support them through the process, AECEA and ALC suggest creating an Alberta ELCC Workplace Education Model. This model would be similar to the Manitoba workplace training model that has successfully upgraded ECEs' education and increased retention in the field.

The ELCC Workplace Education Model would build ECEs competence, capacity, and confidence through advancing their education. It would

- allow ECEs to attend post-secondary education two days a week while receiving their full salary
- have ECEs complete their practicum requirements in their workplace or work with a partner ELCC program to exchange educators
- maintain the quality of life and mental well-being of ECEs who are returning to school by allowing them to attend during their workday
- develop a process to recognize prior learning and required gap education
- create jobs for ECEs who want to return to the field as substitute educators

The ELCC Workplace Education model would increase retention in the field. ECEs interested in participating must have worked at least one year in ELCC before commencement and will agree to a return service commitment of at least two years.

Supply-side funding would be sent directly to programs to cover the wages of replacement ECEs covering the shifts of ECEs who are upgrading their education (2 days per week). The program would remain responsible for ECEs salary while attending school. The funding for this initiative could come from a combination of federal and provincial investment. This new education model funding could be administered through current grant agreements with programs, with the only need being an avenue to provide preschool funding.

The ELCC Workplace Education Model will ensure a more qualified and stable workforce province-wide and reduce the administrative burden for operators. This includes improving human resource inefficiencies, reducing high staff turnover rates, and helping to lower non-compliances, all of which work towards the government's mandate of red tape reduction. Inclusive practices that value and respect all children's learning abilities, cultures, and languages and engage parents in meaningful ways would be strengthened. It is also part of a longer-term strategy that would see more qualified practicum supervisors mentoring post-secondary students, linking what they are learning to high-quality practice in the field and helping students see a viable career path for the future.

Early Childhood Educator Workforce Support Initiative

The ECE workforce remains very committed to the development of children, despite the many challenges they experience daily, including the limited time they have to engage with families or participate in reflective and collaborative pedagogical work.

These recommendations would provide supply-side funding to operators, specifically focused on providing ECEs with additional paid non-contact time within the workday, to participate in pedagogical work, including:

- Time for staff collaboration on the 'Guiding Principles' and 'Matters to be Considered' in their newly revised program plans. ECEs will need to bring these to life within their daily practice with

children and families and will need to reflect on them regularly to ensure ongoing quality improvement

- Time to engage with children, families, colleagues, and allied professionals in support of children's development.
- Time for implementation of *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework*, including time with pedagogical partners.
- Time for reflection, pedagogical documentation, and planning allowing ECEs to be co-learners alongside the children and create responsive environments.
- Time and ability to obtain foundational education in ELCC or participate in ongoing professional learning opportunities within their program helping them keep up with good practice or be mentored by more qualified educators.

AECEA and ALC propose that ECEs be provided 8 hours per month at their full hourly wage (including wage enhancement) to devote to non-contact pedagogical work. Currently, only the wage top-up is offered to programs that access it (8 hours per month). This new initiative could be administered through current grant agreements with programs, with the only need being an avenue to provide preschool funding. The funding for this initiative could come from a combination of federal and provincial investment.

The ECE Workforce Support Initiative's anticipated outcomes would be a more competent and supported workforce that can provide high-quality ELCC for Alberta's children and their families. It is also a strategy to keep educators in the field as they feel more confident, supported, and valued for the vital work they do.

Related ELCC Workforce Policy Change and Investment

Valuing early childhood educators

Recommendations:

- Create a policy statement that recognizes the vital role educationally prepared ECEs play in ensuring quality ELCC provision that meets all children's needs.

Certification and education levels

Recommendations:

- Phase-out Level 1 ECE certification (on a 3-year timeline)
- Add Levels 4 through 6 certifications to recognize ELCC education at a Bachelors, Masters and Ph.D. level.
- Phase in wage enhancements to address Levels 4-6 ECE certifications

Current professional development bursaries

\$1000 to \$1500/year in professional development bursaries is provided by the provincial government to ECEs working a required number of hours in child care and out-of-school care programs.

Recommendations:

- To support the ELCC Workplace Education Model, focus ECE bursaries, for the next three years, on post-secondary education (ELCC and management or pedagogical leadership) and increase to a maximum of \$3,000/year for this purpose
- Allow ECEs in licensed preschools, day homes and out-of-school care programs to access full bursary amounts if they are pursuing post-secondary ELCC education
- Track outcomes and the number of ECEs who have successfully upgraded their education and certification to a new level

Professional development funding is already planned for in the provincial budget and could be supplemented with new federal workforce funds.

Planning for a stable and sustainable ECE workforce in every region

Recommendations:

- Plan for the number of qualified ECEs the province requires in all regions, including smaller communities, rural and remote areas, and how to ensure post-secondary institutions are graduating the numbers needed in the certificate, diploma, and degree programs to meet the demand
- Require all ECEs to create a professional learning plan that includes ELCC post-secondary education, management, or pedagogical leadership courses
- Determine ELCC educational bridging pathways and investment necessary for ECEs who currently have equivalencies, are newcomers to Canada, or have English as an additional language and our Indigenous educators in urban, rural, and remote areas of our province. Taking the lead from our Indigenous partners and institutions, ECEs would have pathways to learn about their own histories, cultural practices, and languages from leaders within their communities, and we would also learn from them in the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation.

Data collection and analysis

There is a need for more data collection and sharing of collected data in the ELCC sector. This data would help the government and the sector mobilize around critical issues. Some of the information that could be collected or shared includes:

- Current workforce numbers
 - # newly certified and at what certification level (include equivalencies)
 - Regional numbers of working ECEs (include what type of program)
 - The certification level of working ECEs (certificate, diploma, or degree in ELCC or equivalency and in what field of practice)
 - Monthly movement between certification levels (improvement of education)
 - Certified ECEs who are no longer working in the field
 - reason for leaving
 - Staff turnover rates across programs and regionally
- Number of children in the province with working mothers – space planning
- Numbers of ECEs required to meet the demand in planned spaces
- Post-secondary ELCC graduation rate (certificate, diploma, and degree)
 - Regional numbers

- How many students entered the field upon graduation?
- How many remained in the field after one year
- Numbers of ECEs who have equivalencies returning to complete ELCC post-secondary education
- Certification levels of the ECEs who are taking the Possibilities for Practice (PfP) and *Flight* course
- % of ECEs who have *Flight* education through either the MacEwan course or in their post-secondary education
- Wages, salaries, and benefits offered by programs

Partnership with public post-secondary institutions

There will be a need for partnership with and investment in public post-secondary institutions to advance the ECE workforce's education. We will need to consider:

- Encouraging increased collaboration between public post-secondaries to share information and to put transfer agreements into place, allowing students to transfer to degree programs more efficiently
- Ensure all institutions offering ELCC certificates, diplomas, and degrees meet quality standards. This includes having educated faculty with a level of education at least one step above the students they teach. It also means incorporating *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* and Indigenous curricular resources into their courses.
- Further developing delivery options (including online-- self-directed, scheduled, or blended) for students that meet their learning needs, work schedules, and consider family responsibilities.
- Expand quality practicum placements supervised by qualified ELCC diploma or degree educated early childhood educators who have the competencies to provide a high-quality learning experience specific to that particular practicum.
- Increase spaces available in ELCC post-secondary programs
 - regional planning to ensure spaces are available in smaller communities requiring additional early childhood educators
 - post-secondary programs must have the capacity and enough well-qualified instructors to meet the demand

Conclusion

While there remains a great need to increase the number of high-quality, accessible early learning and child care (ELCC) spaces to meet the needs of Alberta's families, there are not enough ELCC educationally prepared ECEs in the province.

AECEA and ALC believe that the suggestions here are an innovative way to move forward the ELCC sector and provide a sound option for the government to consider. The sector needs more than just bursaries, and we need more than a simple recruitment or advertising strategy. Alberta requires a workforce strategy that works for all ECEs. Well-educated and supported ECEs can provide high-quality ELCC learning experiences for Alberta's children and families and act as the first line of accountability for safety, child well-being, and child development.

Appendix A

Red Tape & Inefficiency Reduction

The educational preparation of ECEs is instrumental to the quality of ELCC provided to children and families. In its final Professional Development Funding Report to the Ministry of Children's Services (2020), AECEA said that there could be a reduction in the amount of red tape in the sector if the education of ECEs increased. This red tape reduction could include:

- "Possible reduction of monitoring as educators with a diploma level of education or higher would have foundational competencies to work with children and families, provide pedagogical leadership, ensure sound management practices and understand what it means to work within a professional code of conduct and as a professional.
- Reduction in non-compliance orders as diploma educated graduates or above would understand how to provide high quality child care for children, keep children safe, use curricular resources, document a child's learning and be able to engage families in respectful and supportive ways. With AECEA's recommendation to increase the educational preparation of Directors to have management, leadership, or pedagogical leadership education, this would help ensure sound management practices and accountability.
- Research shows that ELCC educated staff members stay in the field for longer so a reduction in the 25% staff turnover rate could become a reality, an outcome government has been working on for many years. Those with no or limited education turn over at a higher rate so the number of new staff that need to be certified by the Alberta Child Care Certification Office could be reduced, focusing only on those who come into the field educationally prepared with a certificate or diploma level of education" (p. 7).