

A Rough Two Months and a Worrying Future

In recent months, early learning and child care (ELCC) programs in Alberta have expressed increasing concerns about the effects of the fourth wave of COVID-19 and what the future holds for them. To better understand these concerns, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA) conducted a survey of ELCC programs in Alberta. 430 responses were received, representing nearly 28,000 spaces (about 20% of the total licensed spaces in Alberta). Three main concerns emerged from the survey:

3 of 10

programs had at least one COVID-19 case in a child in August or September.

Health of children. About 3 in 10 programs reported at least one COVID-19 case among children in August or September, and 70% were concerned about how COVID would affect the mental or physical health of the children in their care in the coming months. This concern is made more salient given that a vaccine for younger children (below age 5) remains unavailable.

Health and morale of staff. About 2 in 10 programs reported at least one COVID-19 case among staff in August or September, and 75% were concerned about how COVID would affect the mental or physical health of their staff in the coming months. Nearly half of programs were concerned about staff morale, and a third were concerned about staff leaving their positions in the next two months. As Alberta has lost 4,000 licenced early childhood educators (ECEs) since 2019, these trends are disturbing.

75%

of programs were concerned about the health of staff in the coming months.

31%

of programs reported a September enrollment of 50% or less.

Program viability. The median September enrollment rate among programs was 67%, considerably below pre-COVID levels of about 80%, and 31% of programs reported enrollment of 50% or less. The majority of programs (60%) had concerns about enrollment in the future, and about half of programs anticipated negative effects from the end of the federal Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy, which ended on October 23.

Taken together, these concerns suggest that the Alberta government should take two actions:

- 1. Immediately act to stabilize the sector and protect children and educators.** The province should provide direct funding to all ELCC programs so they can keep their doors open, their educators employed and ensure quality programs for children. The province should also expand recruitment and retention incentives to encourage ECEs to stay in the field, and to reflect that they are spending their days with entirely unvaccinated groups of children. The province should also act to protect the physical and mental health of both children and staff by providing funding for cleaning and personal protective equipment, additional educators and mental health supports.
- 2. Sign a Canada-wide ELCC System Building Agreement, as soon as possible.** A [good](#) agreement will transition ELCC in Alberta from being a sector, like food service, to a system, like public K-12 education that places children at the forefront of all decisions. Such an agreement would have a coherent vision, integrated set of principles and goals to produce a publicly planned and managed system robust against future shocks, whatever they may be.