

Policy Support for Legislative Change

Legislation that supports a highly qualified workforce is an important step in building a well-functioning early learning and child care system. But for legislation to be effective, it must be supported by system-wide planning and policy.

Accessible, Affordable Child Care

Raising strong, healthy children is a goal in which all sectors of society have a stake—parents, families, communities, businesses and governments. It follows that providing children with quality early learning and child care programs is a responsibility that all sectors must share. In Alberta today, parents and families bear the brunt of the burden.

Alberta's regulated system does not provide families with enough early learning and child care spaces to meet demand, and the high cost of regulated spaces makes them unaffordable for many families. A recent report by UNICEF (cited in Philpott 2019) noted that 60% of Canadian families pay as much as a third of their income for child care, and that 44% of Canadian children live in areas where quality early learning and child care is in short supply. Families who live in rural or remote parts of the province and families who have children with special needs face additional challenges in finding suitable early learning and child care. In addition, the changing world of work means that families need flexible child care options beyond the traditional 9-to-5 workday.

Public investment is needed to create accessible, affordable, high-quality early learning and child care spaces. And investments in spaces must come with sufficient dollars for staffing, programming and operational support.

Public Investment

“Two things are unequivocally critical for shaping ...[a high-quality early learning and child care system]: substantial, well-directed public funding and robust public policy. Limited public funding virtually guarantees that high quality services will be generally unavailable and unaffordable for many families while preventing the good wages needed to attract and retain highly qualified staff. At the same time, delivery of funds through ineffectual mechanisms and insufficient public management make it difficult to effectively ‘steer’ towards better integration of care and education and towards delivering the right mix of high quality affordable services that families want and need.”

—ChildCare2020 (2014), *Child Care in Canada by 2020: A Vision and a Way Forward*, p. 14

Alberta’s investment in early learning and child care is well below the national average and well below international standards. The province’s early learning and child care system is significantly underfunded, and recent and impending cuts will make the situation even worse.

- The UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (Adamson 2008) recommends that developed countries should spend at least 1% of GDP on early learning and child care. GDP was \$336.3 billion in 2018 (Government of Alberta 2019e). One percent would be \$336.3 million.
- In 2015–2016, Alberta spent approximately \$2,422 for each regulated child care space. This was the fifth-lowest allocation among Canadian jurisdictions and well below the average of \$3,405 per space (Friendly et al. 2018, 169).
- Alberta’s spending per regulated child care space increased by 87% between 1992 and 2015–2016—from \$1,290 to \$2,422. By comparison, Newfoundland and Labrador’s spending per child care

space increased by 1029% in the same period—from \$468 to \$4,818. In 2015–2016, Newfoundland and Labrador ranked highest in Canada for spending on regulated child care spaces (Friendly et al. 2018, 169).

- Alberta provides subsidies to help low-income families cover child care fees. But child care affordability is a significant issue for modest- and middle-income as well as low-income families. The *Developmental Milestones* study found that, in 2018, annual child care fees in Edmonton and Calgary ranged from \$10,020 to \$13,200 per child (Macdonald and Friendly 2019).*
- Research shows that providing funding directly to parents is not an effective way to build a high-quality child care system. Parents, especially low-income parents, often choose child care for convenience or proximity rather than quality. (Howe, Jacobs, Vukelich and Recchia, 2013). In addition, quality early learning and child care may not be available in some communities, so parents may have to make other choices.

Many factors are needed to build a quality child care system in Alberta. Having subsidies go directly to parents will not create a sustainable system or support quality child care spaces.

- The Alberta Federation of Labour (2018a) reports that Alberta’s child care fees in Alberta are third highest in Canada.

“Several studies show that the benefits of early childhood education far outweigh the costs....While governments at all levels are in no position to boost program spending at this time given budget constraints, this is one area that they should consider making a high priority...”

—TD Economics Special Report (2012), *Early Childhood Education Has Widespread and Long Lasting Benefits*, p. 1.

* This is reduction from the \$10,600 to \$15,000 per child Macdonald and Friendly reported for 2017. The expansion of Albertas \$25-a-day program pilot accounts for the difference.

Ongoing Research and Evaluation

“What gets counted, counts.”

—ECMap (2014), *How Are Our Young Children Doing?*, p. 33, citing Clyde Hertzman of the University of British Columbia’s Human Early Learning Partnership

There is a serious lack of current, detailed statistical data about Alberta’s (and Canada’s) early learning and child care workforce. There are significant gaps in what we know about the composition of the workforce and about the strengths, challenges, needs and concerns of the province’s early childhood educators. Workforce-related research needs to be conducted regularly and systematically in order to identify changing needs and trends, to identify areas of concern and opportunities for innovation, and to ensure accountability within the system.

Alberta also needs ongoing research about how its children are doing. Research data provides a foundation for evidence-based best practices. It ensures that program dollars are invested where they are most needed and where they will do the most good. It is important for Alberta to continue to collect and analyze standardized Early Development Instrument data as part of a comprehensive, province-wide early childhood development monitoring system.

Good data supports good decision-making

“Consistent collection of ECEC data is vitally important to ensure the best policy and program design, services planning, accountability of public funds, and evaluation of program effectiveness. The lack of good quality ECEC data means that meeting these objectives is increasingly difficult today.”

—Carolyn Ferns and Martha Friendly (2015), *The State of Early Childhood Education and Care in Canada 2012*, p. 21

Public Awareness and Understanding

There is a need for public education to increase Albertans' understanding of the importance of the early years and the importance of high-quality early learning and child care. There is also a need to increase public understanding of the important role early childhood educators play—both in nurturing children's development and well-being and in building a democratic society.

Building a high-quality early learning and child care system for Alberta means recognizing early childhood educators as respected, valued, well-educated professionals who earn a fair wage for the important work they do.

There is still a long way to go.

The 2013 provincial benchmark survey conducted by the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research found that “the average Albertan’s knowledge about early development is still quite low” (ECMap 2014, 35).

Community-based Partnerships

“It takes a village to raise a child.”

The well-being of a community influences the well-being of its children. The community coalitions created through Alberta's Early Child Development Mapping Project engaged community members and facilitated communication across all sectors committed to the well-being of young children. The coalitions “became central to planning responses to the data and were a valuable source of information on local needs, strengths and gaps for policy-makers and decision-makers” (ECMap 2014, 2014).

Recent funding cuts have forced the dismantling of community coalitions. This is an unfortunate setback in Alberta's commitment to build an effective, integrated early learning and child care system. Improving early

childhood outcomes will not happen without community-based planning mechanisms that engage children, families and other stakeholders in what early learning should look like. It is these individuals who best know what their communities need.

Parental Engagement

The ability to engage parents as partners in their children's early learning and development is an important competency for early childhood educators. But parents need additional support if they are to be effective teachers and champions of their children's learning.

Since 2004, Alberta's Parent Link Centres have provided accessible, affordable, community-based resource programs to support parents and families in raising healthy, well-adjusted children. Core services provided through the centres encompassed parent education, early childhood development, family support, developmental screening, and information and referral services.

The Alberta government recently announced that current contracts for the province's network of 130 Parent Link Centres will be replaced with a new model of delivery and funding. The new, collaborative Family Resource Network will standardize the types of services that are provided. Current Parent Link Centres will need to apply for funding under the new structure.