

Strategy Support for Legislative Change

Recommendations for an Early Learning and Child Care Workforce Strategy for Alberta

“The early care and education workforce is at risk financially, emotionally, and physically, subject to a vicious cycle of inadequate resources, low qualification expectations, low education levels, and low wages that is difficult to break. Appropriate income, resources, support, and opportunities for career development are essential for bringing excellent candidates into the workforce, retaining them as they further develop their knowledge and skills, and ensuring that they advance their knowledge and skills through professional learning opportunities.”

—National Research Council (2015b), *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8*, p. 479

One of the three expected outcomes outlined in the 2019–2023 business plan for Alberta Children’s Services is that “the growth and development of children is supported through accessible, affordable and quality child care” (Government of Alberta 2019c, 17). Quality child care can only be delivered by caring, competent early childhood educators: they are the foundation of a quality early learning and child care system.

Alberta needs an early learning and child care workforce strategy that supports early childhood educators in providing quality early learning and child care. Quality care in turn supports Alberta’s children and families. It is the foundation of a strong economy and a vibrant democratic society.

A workforce strategy for early childhood educators must address three key issues:

- education
- fair pay and benefits
- working conditions

These issues are interrelated and they must be addressed through comprehensive system change. This will require political will, public support and significant investment. Status quo is not acceptable. Without system-wide change, early childhood educators will never attain the fair wages and respect they deserve, early learning and child care programs will continue to be plagued by the challenges of recruiting and retaining qualified staff and Alberta's children will continue to be short-changed. Alberta's early learning and child care system will remain unstable, quality will remain modest or low, and positive child and family outcomes will be compromised.

Education

Early childhood educators must be well-educated, highly-competent professionals

Early childhood educators need in-depth specialized education.

The majority of early childhood educators in Alberta's early learning and child care system are significantly undereducated and underqualified for the important work they do. As shown in Table 3 on p. 67, only 43% hold a two-year diploma—which many experts consider to be a minimum standard—and among this number, a significant proportion are certified on the basis of equivalencies rather than specialized early childhood education. This is not acceptable.

There is no question that raising qualification standards for Alberta's early childhood educators will lead to higher-quality early learning and child care for Alberta's children. Legislative change to increase minimum education requirements is an important first step. But legislation must be supported by policy and financial support—for early childhood educators themselves, for their workplaces and for the post-secondary education sector.

In the short term, increasing educational requirements may exacerbate staff shortages because the cost of education may keep people from entering the field. It may also be difficult to accommodate large numbers of new students within existing post-secondary early learning and child care programs.

In the long-term, increasing educational standards for early childhood educators will have significant benefits on all fronts—for the workforce, for employers, for Alberta families, for the province’s economy, and most importantly, for Alberta’s children and for society as a whole.

Raising minimum standards for early childhood educators will require substantial public investment. AECEA’s position is that the benefits far outweigh the costs. Alberta’s early childhood educators deserve fair wages and the respect due to well-educated professionals. And Alberta’s children deserve high-quality early learning and child care that only well-educated, well-respected and properly remunerated early childhood educators can provide.

Implications for early childhood educators

High standards for education are critical for a host of reasons. At the same time, raising qualification requirements “can be a barrier to entry into the profession for people who lack financial resources” (OECD 2019, 20). The lack of financial resources and the lack of access to education can also be barriers for early childhood educators who are already working in the field. AECEA’s 2018–2019 survey of Alberta’s early learning and child care workforce confirms these observations. Survey respondents noted the need for tuition support and for flexible part-time and online learning options.

Early childhood educators are poorly paid, and they will need financial support to help them further their training and professional development.

In 2019–2020, the average tuition for full-time undergraduate students in Alberta was \$6,463 (Statistics Canada 2020). For tuition alone, it would cost approximately \$6,500 for a child development assistant to upgrade to the new interim minimum certification as an ECE I, and an additional \$6,500 to upgrade to an ECE II level. These costs are prohibitive for staff who don't earn much more than minimum wage.

Aspiring early childhood educators will also need financial support. From 2011 to 2019, Alberta offered an Early Learning and Child Care Career scholarship program to support high school graduates who wanted to become early childhood educators. The scholarship provided up to \$2,500 for first-year tuition—a relatively modest amount. By comparison, New Zealand provides aspiring early childhood educators with scholarships to cover tuition plus a grant of \$10,000 NZD (6,000 EUR). In Denmark, training is free and students get a salary for their practical placements. They also receive a monthly grant while studying and can take out a loan if they need to (OECD 2019).

AECEA recommends that the Alberta government provide scholarships, bursaries and financial support to help early childhood educators upgrade their education and help new staff enter the field.

Implications for workplaces

In addition to financial support, early childhood educators will need support from their workplaces so that they can take time off to study. They will also need access to flexible, easy-to-access educational programming. Manitoba's highly successful Early Childhood Education Workplace Training Program offers an interesting and effective model that supports both early childhood educators and their workplaces in raising the quality of the early learning and child care system.

Manitoba's program is an accelerated post-secondary diploma that students can complete while they continue to work in licensed early learning and child care programs. The Manitoba government covers the

cost of substitute staff for the two days per week when students attend classes. Students pay their own tuition and related costs and complete their practicum placements in the centres where they work. A staff replacement grant provided to their employers means that students continue to earn their regular full-time salary as they pursue their studies, and employers can afford to pay replacement staff while their regular staff are in school.

AECEA recommends that the Alberta government provide direct financial support to early learning and child care programs so that they can provide their staff with paid release time to upgrade their education.

Implications for Alberta's post-secondary system

Increasing qualification standards for early childhood educators will have a significant impact on Alberta's post-secondary education sector. Alberta will need to invest in post-secondary infrastructure to increase the capacity of post-secondary education institutions to graduate more diploma-level students. Approximately 6,500 child development assistants and 2,700 child development workers will need to upgrade their education to meet the new recommended minimum standard of a two-year diploma in early learning and child care. At least 9,200 post-secondary spaces will be needed immediately—for current staff to upgrade. This is far more than are currently available.

Alberta will need to invest in more post-secondary programs, more program spaces and more qualified instructors in order to meet the needs of two groups of students—(1) early childhood educators who are upgrading their education and (2) new students who are entering the field.

In 2016–2017, an estimated 525 to 550 Alberta students graduated with a one-year early learning and care certificate (or its equivalent), and were eligible for certification as child development workers. A further 340 to 360 students graduated with a two-year diploma and were eligible for certification as child development supervisors (Muttart 2019).

In addition, if Alberta’s early childhood educators are to become a professional workforce, the province’s public post-secondary institutions will need to expand their early childhood education offerings to include bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees. This will provide early childhood educators with career paths that will help to keep them in the field.

In addition to increasing capacity and program options, post-secondary institutions will need to develop flexible delivery models, including online and part-time options. Prospective students who responded to AECEA’s 2018–2019 workforce survey (Buschmann and Partridge 2019) indicated a strong preference for part-time online education. Early childhood educators who were already upgrading their education also preferred online delivery, with a slight preference for full-time rather than part-time education.

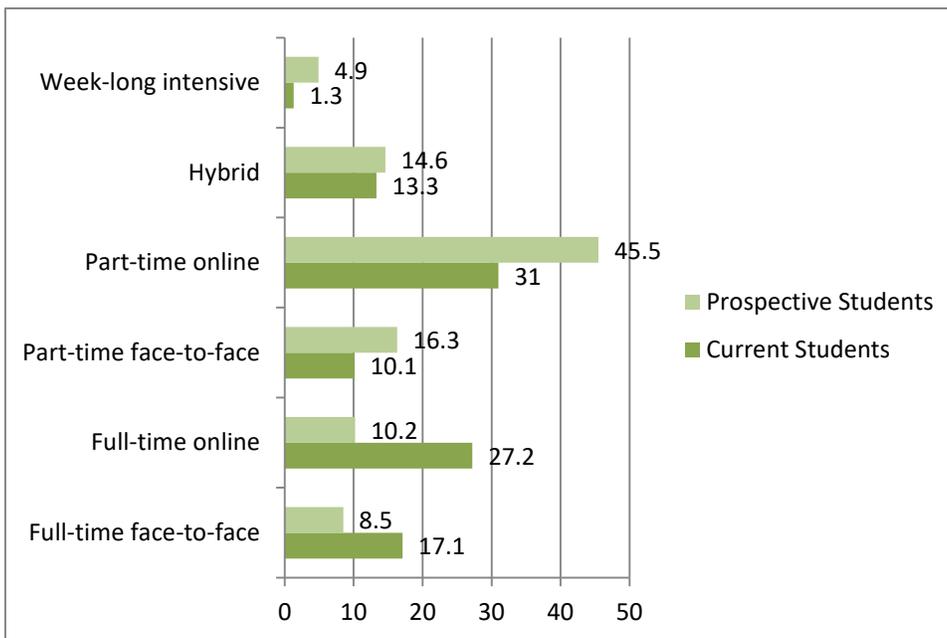


Figure 4. Early childhood educators’ education delivery preferences (as reported in Buschmann and Partridge 2019)

As Alberta builds new public post-secondary infrastructure to support early learning and child care, it must also develop program and quality standards that are comparable across delivery systems. This will allow

students who begin a program at one Alberta institution to transfer credits and complete their studies at another institution in the province. Alberta must also ensure that the instructors who teach in public post-secondary early childhood education programs are well-qualified specialists in this specialized field.

AECEA recommends that the Alberta government provide post-secondary institutions with funding for staff, program development and infrastructure to support the new minimum standards and meet the needs of students in the field of early learning and child care.

Early childhood educators need access to ongoing professional learning and opportunities for career advancement

The bilateral agreements in support of Canada's Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework show that other provinces are increasing their investment in professional development for early childhood educators.

Supporting early childhood educators in ongoing professional learning is integral to high-quality practice and better outcomes for children and families. This is why AECEA has recommended legislative change to make professional learning a requirement for certification, as it is in many other provinces. This change must be supported with adequate funding.

AECEA recommends that the Alberta government provide adequate funding for ongoing professional learning. This funding must be accessible to all early childhood educators, including preschool teachers, early childhood educators in approved family child care programs and early childhood educators who work in licensed and approved First Nations and Métis Settlements early learning and child care programs.

AECEA also recommends that the Alberta government provide funding support to workplaces to help them support their staff in pursuing ongoing professional learning.

Fair Pay and Benefits

“A large body of Canadian and international research demonstrates a strong correlation between the compensation of early learning and child care staff and the quality of services delivered.”

— Child Care Human Resources Sector, What Factors Influence Wages and Benefits in *Early Learning and Child Care Settings?*, p. 2.

Quality early learning and child care can only be delivered by a well-educated, well-supported, well-qualified workforce that stays current with the latest research and best practices in the field. Earning educational qualifications comes with a price. If early childhood educators are to undertake the education expected of a professional workforce, their investment of time and tuition dollars must be properly compensated with professional-level wages.

In Alberta and across Canada, early childhood educators are poorly paid, and many lack workplace benefits such as medical insurance, paid sick leave and pension plans. The *2017 Alberta Wage and Salary Survey* (Government of Alberta 2018a) found that the average hourly wage for early childhood educators in Alberta was \$16.81. By comparison, the average hourly wage across all industries was \$28.39—69% higher.*

Nearly one in 10 respondents to AECEA’s 2018–2019 workforce survey had to work outside the sector to supplement their income (Buschmann and Partridge 2019).

* Statistics Canada’s 2017 *Labour Force Survey* (as cited in the Government of Alberta’s *2017 Alberta Labour Force Profiles: Women*) reports that the average hourly wage in Alberta was \$30.01. The *Labour Force Survey* also reports that average hourly wages for Alberta women were \$26.86 compared to \$32.91 for men.

The difference between the average wages reported in the *Labour Force Survey* and the *Alberta Wage and Salary Survey* is attributable to different survey methodologies. The *Labour Force Survey* reports an annual average; the *Alberta Wage and Salary Survey* reports estimates from a specific point in time. In addition, participation in the former survey is compulsory, while participation in the latter is voluntary. *Labour Force Survey* data is therefore more reliable.

As shown in Table 6, early childhood educators earn significantly less than other education sector workers with comparable training. Early childhood educators earn one-third less than educational assistants—even though both occupations typically require at least one year of post-secondary education. Early childhood educators must also be certified. Certification is not required for educational assistants, and there is no legislation regulating this profession.

Table 6. Comparison of average hourly wages for early childhood educators and educational assistants, as reported in the Government of Alberta's *2017 Alberta Wage and Salary Survey*

Industry	Average Starting Salary	Overall Average Salary	Average Top Salary
Early Childhood Educator	\$14.62	\$16.81	\$19.33
Educational Assistant	\$18.22	\$22.19	\$26.20
Difference	24.6%	32.0%	35.5%

Early childhood educators also make significantly less than Alberta's elementary school teachers, who earn an average of \$41.01 per hour. On the other hand, teachers have at least four years of post-secondary training, while many early childhood educators are underqualified for their work. The unfortunate fact that a significant portion of Alberta's child care workforce is poorly educated is a direct consequence of poor wages in the sector.

Low wages, the lack of professional development and career opportunities, and limited understanding of the importance of early childhood education make it difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff. The recent cancellation of Staff Attraction Incentive Grant funding will make the situation even more challenging.

Staff turnover in the early learning and child care sector is estimated to be as high as 25% per year (Muttart 2019), and there is a shortage of qualified staff to work in regulated child care settings. High staff turnover is costly for program operators. It also has a negative impact on children

and families who rely on stable, trusting, long-term relationships with early childhood educators.

The *2017 Alberta Wage and Salary Survey* reports that 62% of employers of early childhood educators had to recruit staff in the last two years. Of these, nearly 30% reported facing hiring difficulties and 6% had unfilled vacancies of over four months. The recent cancellation of the Benefit Contribution Grant cuts will hurt programs with better-educated staff proportionally more than programs with staff at certified at lower levels. Loss of grant funding may force programs to hire less-qualified staff to make up the shortfall.

A 2013 study found that 15% of the directors and 23% of the staff in Alberta child care programs were actively looking for new jobs (Flanagan and Beach 2016, citing the 2013 *You Bet We Still Care!* study). For directors, this was the highest proportion in the country. For staff, it was the second-highest proportion—below Ontario.

Low wages are a direct cause of high staff turnover. High staff turnover has significant social and economic cost, and it affects the quality of children’s early learning and child care experiences. Children need continuity of care to form the close, trusting relationships essential for healthy development.

Addressing the issue of low wages requires public investment to provide early childhood educators with fair wages and benefits. Alberta’s wage enhancement program provides wage top-ups to help employers recruit and retain staff, but this program falls far short of what is needed. Even with top-ups, early childhood educators are still paid much less than most Albertans.

“Without appropriate remuneration and benefits, recruitment and retention of qualified workers will remain a problem, and the overall quality of [early learning and child care] will suffer” (Pasolli 2019, 79). Prince Edward Island has recently introduced a wage grid to help address

the issue. The previous Ontario government also made a commitment to a wage grid as part of its plan to support high-quality early learning and child care.

Appropriate remuneration for early childhood educators requires far-reaching system-wide change supported by substantial public investment. Over the long term, this means that Alberta’s early learning and child care education system for preschool children must receive the same level of public funding as the province’s education system for school-aged children. Without such support, it is unlikely that Alberta’s early childhood educators will ever earn the living wages and benefits they deserve.

AECEA recommends that the government increase wage enhancements, restore the staff attraction grant program and provide operational funding that will allow early learning and child care programs to provide their staff with fair, competitive salaries and benefits.

Over time, it may be possible to replace Alberta’s current wage enhancement program with a salary grid that includes pension and other benefits. For now, wage enhancements are critical for the viability of the early learning and child care sector.

AECEA proposes that wage enhancements be increased as workforce education standards increase. The proposed new certification level—ECE IV—will require wage enhancements commensurate with the level of education that is required.

Working Conditions

Like all Albertans, early childhood educators deserve fair wages and benefits, satisfying work and supportive working conditions. Early childhood educators also deserve to be respected as professionals. Unfortunately, there is a lack of public awareness and understanding of the important, complex role early childhood educators play—both in nurturing children’s development and well-being and in building a democratic society. Too often, the work of early childhood educators is seen as low level and trivial. This lack of respect translates into public

tolerance of the low wages and challenging working conditions that are early childhood educators' lot.

A workforce strategy for early childhood educators must include public education to increase awareness of the importance of quality early learning and child care. Public recognition of the immeasurable value of early childhood educators and their work is critical for garnering public support for the investment needed to build a quality early learning and child care system.

AECEA's 2018–2019 workforce survey found that, while more than 90% of respondents felt respected by parents, only 58% felt respected by the public.

Early childhood educators who did not feel respected by parents were twice as likely to work outside the early learning and child care sector than their colleagues who felt respected. Early childhood educators who worked in out-of-school care programs were less likely to feel respected by parents than their colleagues in centre-based programs, family day homes and preschools.

Early childhood educators with *more experience* were less likely to feel *less respected* by the public. At the same time, older early childhood educators were more likely to feel respected. The significance of this finding is unclear. The survey analysts propose that respondents with more experience might have accumulated more experiences of being demeaned as mere babysitters.

Early childhood educators certified at the highest level were less likely to feel valued by the public than their colleagues. This may suggest that “those certified at the highest level may feel some sense of frustration that, despite their efforts to educate themselves, these efforts were not recognized or rewarded publicly” (11). These results suggest that “there is still a long way to go in promoting the importance of the...[early learning and child care] profession in Alberta.