

A Workforce Strategy For Early Childhood Educators

Quality early learning and child care supports Alberta's children and families. It's the foundation of a strong economy and a vibrant democratic society.

Quality early learning and child care can only be delivered by caring, competent early childhood educators.

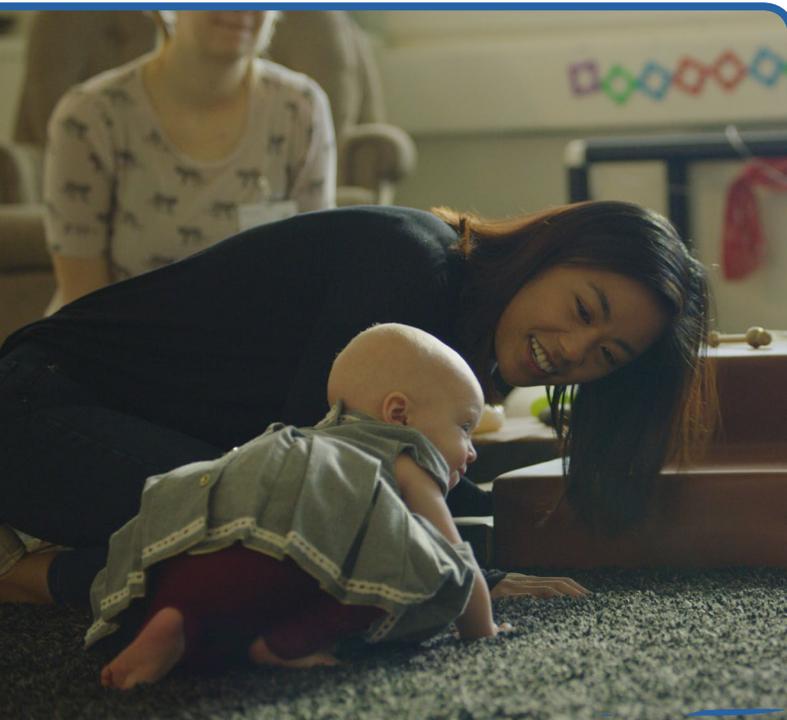
A workforce strategy supports early childhood educators in delivering quality care.

Why do we need a workforce strategy?

A workforce strategy ensures that early childhood educators have the [qualifications](#) they need to support children's learning and development. It ensures that early childhood educators can earn [fair wages](#) that provide a decent living. It supports [positive working conditions](#) that help keep people in the field.

Qualifications, wages and working conditions are interrelated. This is why they must be planned and managed together—as part of a workforce strategy.

Low wages and poor working conditions make it difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff. And they make it difficult for early childhood educators to upgrade their education or pay for professional development. When qualification standards are low, it's difficult to justify raising wages. The cycle of low standards, low wages and poor working conditions continues—and a quality early learning and care system remains out of reach.



What are the parts of a workforce strategy?

QUALIFICATIONS

Canadian and international studies show that better-qualified staff provide higher-quality early learning and child care. Staff with higher qualifications and specialized training in early childhood development are more likely to provide stimulating environments that boost children's well-being. They are also more likely to interact with children in warm, supportive ways that develop their literacy, numeracy, behavioural and social skills.

Many countries require early childhood educators to have bachelor's or even master's degrees. A two-year diploma in early childhood education is widely accepted as a minimum standard.

In Alberta, only 41% of early childhood educators have a two-year post-secondary diploma; 16% have a one-year post-secondary certificate and 43% have a single course. By comparison, kindergarten teachers in Alberta require at least a four-year degree.

“The work society expects from early childhood educators is just as important and valuable as the work expected from teachers. Early childhood educators need to be as well educated as teachers—and as well paid.”

—Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, Getting It Right, p. 67

An additional concern is that many of Alberta's early childhood educators have certification based on educational equivalencies. This means that their post-secondary education might be in kinesiology or disability studies or some other field that is unrelated to early learning and child care. The lack of specialized education has a direct impact on early learning and child care quality.

Early childhood educators need a solid educational foundation to develop the specialized teaching approaches and sophisticated competencies they need for their work. Required competencies include the ability to link research to practice and to work with resources such as Alberta's curriculum framework, [Flight](#).

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The Alberta government is expanding access to courses and coaching on Flight. Flight is a complex and comprehensive document designed to be used by a well-educated workforce. Staff will need training and support to help them follow the framework.

Education and training must be planned and delivered as part of a multi-pronged workforce strategy.

AECEA continues to advocate for legislated education standards that require all early childhood educators to have, at minimum, a two-year diploma specifically in early childhood education. AECEA also advocates for legislation that requires early childhood educators to undertake ongoing professional learning as a condition for continued certification. Early childhood educators who have access to ongoing learning tend to stay in the field and are better equipped to deal with the demanding, complex work they do each day.

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.

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 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. Early childhood educators in Alberta earned one-third less than educational assistants and significantly less than Alberta's elementary school teachers, who earned an average of \$41.01 per hour.

Ongoing low wages make it very difficult for child care operators to recruit and retain qualified staff. Staff turnover in the early learning and child care sector is estimated to be as high as 25% per year. High staff turnover is costly for program operators. And it has a negative impact on children and families who rely on stable, trusting, long-term relationships with early childhood educators.

Low wages also mean that there is a shortage of qualified staff to work in regulated child care settings. 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. Alberta's Occupational Outlook for 2019–2028 forecasts a shortage of 4,600 early childhood educators by 2028.

WORKFORCE SHORTAGES WILL PERSIST AS LONG AS WAGES REMAIN LOW.

Another consequence of low wages is that early childhood educators can't afford to upgrade their education. And they can't afford the time or money for professional learning that helps them stay current with the latest research and best practices in the field. 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.

WAGE ENHANCEMENTS ARE A BAND-AID SOLUTION

Alberta's early learning and care wages are low in spite of government support. This takes the form of wage enhancement top-ups that range from \$2.14 to \$6.62 per hour, depending on staff qualifications.

Wage enhancements are much appreciated by early childhood educators, but—at best—they are a band-aid solution. They do not address the underlying system-related factors that support job security and competitive wages for a well-educated workforce. The result is that qualified early childhood educators continue to leave the field for higher-paid positions in other sectors.

WAGE GRIDS ARE A BETTER SOLUTION

Manitoba, Quebec and Prince Edward Island have implemented publicly funded wage grids to help address the issue of low wages. Early childhood educators in British Columbia are calling on their province to follow suit.

Wage grids acknowledge the essential and valuable work of early childhood educators. They set wage standards that recognize staff qualifications and experience. They ensure that wages earned by early childhood educators are competitive with wages for other positions that have similar requirements and responsibilities.

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, p. 79).

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AECEA and its partners continue to advocate for fair wages for early childhood educators. In the short-term, AECEA calls on the Alberta government to increase wage enhancements, restore the staff attraction grant program and provide operational funding to support fair, competitive salaries and benefits. In the long-term, Alberta cannot build a quality child care system without a competitive wage grid that also provides pension and other benefits.

An effective wage grid must be part of a workforce strategy that also addresses working conditions, professional development and education for early childhood educators.

WORKING CONDITIONS

Like all Albertans, early childhood educators deserve fair wages and benefits, satisfying work and supportive working conditions.

Early childhood educators typically work long hours with few breaks and demanding workloads. The lack of core funding for programs leads to high levels of job insecurity. And there are few opportunities for advancement.

For early childhood educators to be effective in their role, they need a broad range of workplace supports, including paid prep time for developing individualized programming for each child. They need paid non-contact hours for engaging with families and with other professionals. They need workplace-based pedagogical leaders who provide feedback, guidance, training and support.

Early childhood educators need financial support to help them advance their educational qualifications. And they need support from their workplaces so they can take time off to study. They also need access to flexible, easy-to-access post-secondary education.

Manitoba offers an accelerated post-secondary diploma that early childhood educators can complete while they continue to work. The Manitoba government covers the cost of substitute staff for the two days per week when regular staff attend classes. Regular staff continue to earn their usual full-time salary as they pursue their studies, and employers can afford to pay substitute staff to replace them.



How do we build a workforce strategy?

Well-qualified, well-paid, well-supported early childhood educators are a key piece of a [quality early learning and child care system](#). An effective workforce strategy must be planned and executed as part of that system. This means it must be supported by system-wide planning and policy, solid infrastructure and substantial public investment.

Alberta's early learning and child care programs need operational funding to provide better wages and benefits. Without this support, programs can only raise wages by increasing fees—and the cost of child care is already prohibitive for many Alberta families.

Increasing wages for early childhood educators means increasing qualification standards. To increase qualifications, Alberta will need more post-secondary programs, more program spaces and more qualified instructors. Post-secondary

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institutions will need to expand their capacity, hire additional staff, deliver new programs and develop flexible delivery models, including online and part-time options.

Alberta will need to invest in the necessary post-secondary infrastructure. It will also need to provide scholarships, bursaries and financial support. This will help experienced early childhood educators advance their qualifications and attract new people to the field.

In New Zealand, aspiring early childhood educators receive scholarships to cover tuition plus a grant of \$10,000 NZD (6,000 EUR). In Denmark, early learning and child care training is free. Students get a salary for their practical placements and receive a monthly grant during their studies.

Developing a workforce strategy requires political will, public support and significant investment. But the current situation is not acceptable.

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 well-paid early childhood educators can provide.

IT'S TIME FOR CHANGE.

A workforce strategy must include public education to raise awareness about the importance of quality child care and the importance of qualified early childhood educators.

“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, Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8, p. 479

Check out the videos and publications on www.aecea.ca/quality

Join AECEA and its partners in advocating for early childhood educators

Early childhood educators deserve to be respected as professionals. Too often, however, their work is perceived as low level and trivial. This lack of respect translates into public tolerance of the low wages and challenging working conditions that early childhood educators have put up with for too many years.

But you have the power to change this. Because when people talk, governments listen.

Tell the Alberta government that you value quality early learning and child care. And that it's time to invest in the qualified workforce that provides quality care.

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