

Reopening Early Learning and Care Centres in Alberta: Key Questions and Options

Robert Buschmann and Jeffrey Bisanz
Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care

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The Alberta Ministry of Children's Services announced on May 6 that it would support the reopening of early learning and care centres and out-of-school centres by providing funding in three phases: \$6.7M in one-time grants to cover costs such as rent and utilities; \$3.2M in grants to cover cleaning and sanitation supplies and to help with recruitment and training of staff as centres reopen; and \$6.9M in grants for centres open after three months to cover other operational costs.¹ The Ministry also announced that centre-based early learning and care services can reopen with limited capacities on May 14.

These grants could be helpful for reopening centres, but critical questions remain for operators of early learning and care centres and for families with young children. As in other sectors of the economy, there is considerable uncertainty.²

- Directors of child care centres often are not sure whether their staff will be willing or able to return to work. For example, staff members may have school-aged children who are out of school and need parental care at home, and staff members may be concerned about returning to work, contracting COVID-19, and infecting members of their own families.
- Directors also cannot assume that demand for spaces in their centres, or that the capacity allowed by provincial rules, will be sufficient to ensure enough revenue to cover costs.
- Parents are concerned about whether their children might contract COVID-19 in centres and whether safety precautions will prevent centres from providing the kinds of social and cognitive interactions that are important for high-quality early learning and care.

For the Edmonton Council on Early Learning and Care, two key questions stand out.

Question 1: Will these grants be sufficient to enable centres to reopen and offer affordable child care? Alberta has close to 2200 child care and out-of-school care centres. No financial analysis has been provided to indicate whether these grants will be sufficient for enabling centres to reopen while providing reasonably affordable early learning and care.

¹ *Relief for the Child Care Sector*. Retrieved 4 June 2020 from <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=71285388C2A58-EBFA-E8E6-0CEDD4EDF6EB6965>.

² See, for details, *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Early Learning and Child Care Programs in Alberta* by the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, retrieved 4 June 2020 from <https://aecea.ca/impact-covid-19-pandemic-early-learning-and-child-care-programs-alberta>.

The grants are intended to cover “the remaining portion of expenses not covered by funding under federal programs,” but no evidence has yet been provided to suggest that the grants will actually accomplish that goal. Assumptions about the extent to which federal funds are or can be used by early learning and care programs may be misleading, especially without evidence about possible barriers to using those funds and about actual uptake of these programs in the sector. For example, the Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance requires the participation of landlords, and there is some indication that the complexity of this program may lead to low participation rates.³ Has this requirement, or other aspects of the program, affected its uptake in the early learning and care sector and, if so, are alternative sources of funding available to help centres pay rent?

If the grants are not sufficient for centres to sustain operations financially, will the consequence be that centres will raise their fees or simply not reopen? Either of these options will adversely affect families’ access to affordable early learning and care in Alberta.

Options. One option is for the Ministry to undertake analyses to determine (a) whether these grants are sufficient for helping programs reopen and sustain their operations, and (b) the ongoing financial impact of the grants on service providers and families, especially Alberta’s most financially vulnerable families. These analyses should be designed with meaningful input from both providers and families.⁴ Such analyses would identify needs for further investment to help programs survive while COVID restrictions still exist, and assist in planning post-COVID measures to improve affordability.

Another option is for the Ministry to study the extent to which centres are able to make use of federal programs. The outcome of this work could provide important input to the financial analyses described above and useful feedback to the federal government as it adjusts its COVID-related programs.

Question 2: What is being done to assure that early learning and care is high in quality?

Alberta is committed to early learning and care that is high in quality as well as affordable.⁵ Quality refers not only to matters of immediate health and safety, but also to characteristics of early learning and care that contribute to positive child outcomes, such as strong socio-emotional and cognitive development. In the past a process known as accreditation was a primary means in Alberta for supporting high levels of quality in licensed early learning and care centres, but as of April 1, 2020, accreditation was discontinued. The extent to which those programs that have reopened during the crisis are providing high-quality early learning and care

³ *Rent-relief program confusing — and too risky for landlords, broker says*. Retrieved 04 June 2020, from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/commercial-rent-relief-program-too-confusing-and-risky-1.5583670>.

⁴ See, for example, the questions and recommendations made by the YMCAs of Alberta at <http://northernalberta.ymca.ca/CWP/media/YMCAofNA/Documents/Advocacy%20and%20Letters/YMCA-Questions-Recommendations-to-Reopen-Alberta-Child-Care-05-05-20.pdf>.

⁵ *Ministry of Children’s Services, Business Plan, 2020-2023*. Retrieved 4 June 2020, from <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/childrens-services-business-plan>.

is unclear, though financial stress during the COVID-19 crisis may well have forced some to consider, and implement, measures that reduce the quality of child care. Such measures could include, as examples, reducing the number of experienced, well-qualified staff in favour of staff who are less qualified or less experienced and hence less expensive, and reducing or eliminating professional development opportunities for staff members. This same financial stress likely will apply to programs considering reopening in the coming months, and programs may thus continue to be faced with trading quality for cost savings as they attempt to survive until all COVID-19-related restrictions are lifted.

Options. As centres reopen, high-quality early learning and care should be encouraged and actively supported. Such measures may include guidelines for centres, information for parents, and training for early childhood educators focused on best practices under pandemic and post-pandemic conditions. The Ministry could also immediately institute methods for monitoring and improving quality and safety within reopened programs. Finally, the Government of Alberta could designate early childhood educators as essential workers so that they, like other essential workers during the pandemic, become eligible for wage enhancements. Doing so would enable centres to attract and retain well-qualified professional staff, which is an essential ingredient for ensuring high quality. The pandemic should not inadvertently become a cause to pause Alberta's pursuit of high-quality early learning and care.

Looking Ahead

The Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care believes that increasing access to affordable, high-quality early learning and care is a key element in our community's effort to reduce and eliminate poverty. The Ministry is also committed to affordable, high-quality child care. By addressing the questions and considering the options described above, steps can be taken to ensure that these commitments are not compromised as we emerge from the COVID-19 crisis.

Finally, the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care also believes that three steps are important for the future of early learning and care in Edmonton after the COVID-19 crisis:

- a review of the experiences of early learning and care professionals, parents, and government decision makers during the COVID-19 crises;
- documentation of the lessons learned from these interactions; and
- initiation of system, policy, and regulatory changes in response to the review and lessons learned.

Implementing these steps would help to ensure that Alberta is well prepared for future crises that could affect the availability, affordability, and quality of this essential service.

Rob Buschmann is Research Associate at the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families at the University of Alberta. Jeff Bisanz is professor emeritus at the University of Alberta. Both are members of the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. Correspondence can be sent to rob.buschmann@ualberta.ca.