

Strategies to Improve the Total Compensation and Working Conditions of Certified Early Childhood Educators in Alberta



Acknowledgements

Ms. Nicki Dublenko and Ms. Jane Beach facilitated the focus group discussions with early childhood educators.

The Muttart Foundation, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and the Alberta Early Learning and Care Leaders' Caucus sincerely thank the early childhood educators who participated in the focus groups and shared their insights and observations on their compensation, access to benefits and working conditions. We also thank the children, families and educators who shared their photos of what high-quality early learning and child care looks like in various settings.

Prepared by
The Muttart Foundation
1150 Rice Howard Place
10060 Jasper Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
T5J 3R8
www.muttart.org
September, 2024

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background	3
Research Design	5
What Early Childhood Educators Say About Their Working Conditions, Access to Benefits and Compensation	7
Early Childhood Educators' Working Conditions	8
<i>Educators' Entry into the Field - The Orientation and Onboarding of New Educators</i>	8
<i>Educators' Working Conditions – Increasing Workplace Demands and Stresses</i>	11
<i>Educators' Workplace Resources and Supports</i>	17
<i>Student Educators' Observations on Educators' Working Conditions</i>	19
<i>Family Child Care Educators' Workplace Supports and Working Conditions</i>	20
Early Childhood Educators' Access to Benefits	22
<i>Centre-based Educators' Access to Benefits</i>	22
<i>Student Educators' Views on Benefits</i>	25
<i>Family Child Care Educators' Access to Benefits</i>	25
Early Childhood Educator Compensation	26
<i>Centre-Based Educators' Views on Compensation</i>	26
<i>Student Educators' Views on Compensation</i>	30
<i>Family Child Care Educators' Views on Compensation</i>	30
Strategies to Improve Early Childhood Educators' Working Conditions, Access to Benefits and Compensation	32
Improvements in Early Childhood Educator Working Conditions	33
<i>The Development and Funding of Orientation and Induction Supports for New Educators</i>	33
<i>Funding for Back-up and Relief Staff to Enrich Staff-to-Child Ratios</i>	33
<i>New Approaches to Educator Professional Learning and Education</i>	35
<i>The Provision of Paid Non-Contact Time</i>	37
<i>A Comprehensive Review of the Inclusive Child Care Program and Related Funding and Supports Provided through Other Ministries</i>	38
Improvements in Early Childhood Educators' Access to Benefits	38
<i>Design and Implementation of a Publicly Funded Province-wide Benefit Plan for Certified Early Childhood Educators</i>	39
<i>Design and Implementation of a Publicly Funded Province-wide Defined Contribution Pension Plan for Certified Early Childhood Educators</i>	39
<i>Early Childhood Educator Access to Paid Sick Days and Paid Personal Days</i>	40
<i>Early Childhood Educator Access to Paid Vacation Time</i>	40
Improvements in Early Childhood Educator Compensation	41
<i>Design and Implementation of a Publicly Funded, Province-wide Wage Scale for Certified Early Childhood Educators</i>	42
Conclusions	43
Appendix A: Early Childhood Educator Compensation and Working Conditions - Focus Group Protocol	44

Introduction

The federal government's Budget 2021 commitment to work collaboratively with provincial and territorial governments on Pan-Canadian early learning and child care (ELCC) system building presents a historic opportunity to transform child care provision across the country. The over \$27 billion in new federal investments for Canada-wide system building over five fiscal years provide the basis for developing more publicly funded and managed systems of early learning and care that better meet the diverse needs of young children and families. The further federal commitment of over \$2.5 billion in new investments for Indigenous early learning and child care provide support for Indigenous governments to design and advance distinctions-based early learning and care that meets the needs of Indigenous children and their families.

The five-year Canada-wide system building agreements the federal government signed with provincial and territorial governments share the common goals of making regulated child care more affordable and accessible for families, while also increasing the quality of services and making them inclusive.¹ The initial focus on reducing parent paid fees has resulted in significant progress in making regulated child care more affordable, with a number of jurisdictions already providing families with access to \$10 per day child care. Progress in expanding the provision of early learning and care, in advancing its quality and in supporting inclusion, however, remains more limited, a result of the longstanding challenges facing early learning and child care workforces across Canada.

At their July 2023 meeting in Iqaluit, federal, provincial and territorial ministers with responsibility for ELCC agreed on the importance of 'thriving' early learning and child care workforces to support system building and identified the need for improvements in early childhood educators' compensation and working conditions. They committed to develop a Canada-wide multilateral workforce strategy to help provinces and territories recruit and retain the large numbers of qualified educators needed to support the delivery of high-quality child care, while also seeking to advance the recognition of early childhood educators and the value of their work with children and families.²

The following report, prepared by The Muttart Foundation, in partnership with the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and the Alberta Early Learning and Care Leaders' Caucus within the Canadian Child Care Federation, presents the findings from focus group discussions with early childhood educators, held in fall 2023. The discussions explored educators' current working conditions, access to benefits and compensation and the improvements they see as required to support their work with young children. Educators talked knowledgeably and passionately about their work. They shared their successes as well as the challenges they face in creating the high-quality early learning environments in which children thrive.

The report includes four main sections. The first provides the background to the study. It presents an overview of the Alberta early learning and care workforce and a summary of the workforce investments during the first two years of the Canada-Alberta agreement. The second describes the research design

¹ Government of Canada. 2024. *Early Learning and Child Care Agreements*.

Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories.html>

² Government of Canada. 2023. *Federal, provincial and territorial ministers meet to advance shared priorities in early learning and child care, including the development of a multilateral workforce strategy*. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2023/07/federal-provincial-and-territorial-ministers-meet-to-advance-shared-priorities-in-early-learning-and-child-care-including-the-development-of-a-mult.html>

and the rationale for the research approach. The third presents the major research findings, with a focus on the views, insights and experiences early childhood educators shared. The fourth presents a series of strategies to support improvements in early childhood educators' working conditions, access to benefits and compensation, as part of early learning and child care system building. These improvements have the potential both to address the challenges that the early learning and child care workforce in the province faces and to help build its capacity to meet the goals set out in the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement.

It will not be possible to build a high-quality early learning and child care system in Alberta without significant improvements in educators' compensation, access to benefits and working conditions. The views and observations early childhood educators shared about their work with children and families, allied with the findings from previous research, provide important insights into the kinds of changes that governments and service providers will need to implement and support as they work together to provide all children and families with the high-quality early learning and child care they deserve and need. How early childhood educators view themselves and their work impacts their capacity to support children's development and well-being, as do the resources and rewards available to them to undertake this work. Educators' working conditions and well-being are critical factors that shape the capacity of programs and services to support children's learning and care and impact the ability of regulated child care providers to recruit and retain qualified staff.



Background

A large body of research documents the central role qualified and well-supported professional early childhood educators play in the delivery of high-quality early learning and care. Early learning and care is recognized as a specialized field, with high-quality educator practices contributing positively to children's experiences and development as well as family well-being. By contrast, poor or low-quality early learning and child care provides children with limited or no benefits and may even have the potential to do harm to those children who are most vulnerable.

To create the environments and sustained interactions that support children's learning, early childhood educators require comprehensive pre-service education, ongoing professional learning and supportive working conditions.³ Competitive and fair compensation and opportunities for career progression are further essential in ensuring that professional, qualified educators remain in a field that is demanding and which historically has been subject to high rates of staff turnover.⁴ More broadly, the provision of high-quality early learning and care requires competent systems to publicly plan, manage and support service delivery⁵ — something which is more difficult when services are privately delivered and shaped by markets.

Despite the importance of well-prepared and well-supported early childhood educators to the delivery of high-quality early learning and care, progress in building the capacity of child care workforces across Canada has been uneven and limited. The primary reliance on market-based approaches to organize, finance and deliver early learning and child care has left the predominantly female workforces commonly under-prepared and under-supported for their important work. It has further resulted in service providers struggling to recruit and retain the qualified educators needed to deliver high-quality and inclusive early learning and care.

The Alberta early learning and care workforce has much in common with parallel workforces across Canada. It comprises certified educators with different levels of education⁶ who work in a variety of licensed or regulated settings, including centre-based child care and family day homes. As of September 2023, the Ministry of Children and Family Services reports that 26,100 certified educators work in regulated child care, an increase of 8,000 from the 18,100 working in November, 2021.⁷ Just over half of the certified educators working in regulated child care hold a post-secondary credential, a proportion that has fallen since before the pandemic. It is anticipated that an additional 5,000 to 7,000 certified educators will be required by the end of the 2025/26 fiscal year to enable the provincial government to reach the ambitious space creation targets included in the Canada-wide agreement.

The Alberta child care sector's slow recovery from the pandemic, allied with the expansion of services as part of system building, have contributed to the demands on early childhood educators. The increase in the number of children with additional learning and care needs and the influx of large numbers of new, relatively

³ OECD. 2022. *Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Development: A Foundation for Process Quality*. OECD Education Policy Perspectives, Directorate for Education and Skills, Policy Brief No.54.

⁴ OECD. 2020. *Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce: Further Results from the Starting Strong Survey, 2018*. TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris.

⁵ Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Lazzari, A., Van Laere, K., & Peeters, J. 2011. *CoRe: Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care*. European Commission: DG Education and Culture. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED534599.pdf>

⁶ Government of Alberta, Ministry of Children and Family Services. *Early Childhood Educator Certification*. Retrieved from: <https://www.alberta.ca/early-childhood-educator-certification>

⁷ Government of Alberta, Ministry of Children and Family Services. *Early Learning and Child Care Vision*. Retrieved from: <https://www.alberta.ca/early-learning-and-child-care-vision>

inexperienced staff have led to more stressful and demanding working environments,⁸ with educators often struggling to access the resources and supports they need to provide high-quality care.⁹ Educators' low pay¹⁰ and their limited access to workforce benefits have further contributed to longstanding staff recruitment and retention challenges, with the rewards educators receive for their work falling short of the demands.

As part of the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide Agreement, the Government of Alberta committed \$306 million in new federal funding, over five fiscal years, to improve the quality of regulated child care.¹¹ The bulk of these monies were allocated to workforce initiatives with the broad goal of 'valuing' early childhood educators and providing them with training and development opportunities. The new workforce investments the Government of Alberta supported during the first two years of the Canada-wide agreement included increases to provincial wage top-ups and an extension of the number of eligible hours for which top-ups could be claimed; increases in funding for ongoing professional learning and education, including release time funding; and bonus payments to certified staff with continued service in the sector.¹² The government further committed, over the course of the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement, to explore other benefit considerations that would support the recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood educators.

During the first two years of ELCC system building, ELCC stakeholders across Canada have called for significant new investments in early childhood educator workforces. They have further advised governments that the planned expansion of affordable, high-quality, inclusive regulated child care services requires new strategies to build workforce size and capacity and identified some of the possible ways forward in a series of policy roadmaps.¹³ In 2022, The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA) began work with the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth and Families at the University of Alberta on the development of a compensation framework for certified educators. The framework is intended to provide a basis for establishing more equitable and competitive compensation for educators, that better reflects their education, experience and work responsibilities.¹⁴

8 The Muttart Foundation. 2022. *The Workforce Investments Required for Early Learning and Child Care System*

Building in Alberta: What Early Childhood Educators Have to Say. Retrieved from: <https://www.muttart.org/resource/>

[the-workforce-investments-required-for-early-learning-and-child-care-system-building-in-alberta-what-early-childhood-educators-have-to-say/](https://www.muttart.org/resource/the-workforce-investments-required-for-early-learning-and-child-care-system-building-in-alberta-what-early-childhood-educators-have-to-say/)

9 The Muttart Foundation. 2020. *An Examination of Regulatory and Other Measures to Support Quality in Early Learning and Child Care Alberta*.

Retrieved from: <https://www.muttart.org/resource/an-examination-of-regulatory-and-other-measures-to-support-quality-early-learning-and-child-care-in-alberta/>

10 Government of Alberta, Ministry of Children and Family Services. 2023. *Annual Report Children's Services 2022-23*.

Retrieved from: <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/476d1e4b-bdfa-4330-a88a-79bdacee1a9a/resource/1050cff2-098d-4295-940b-7df1c6265534/download/cs-annual-report-2022-2023.pdf>

11 Government of Canada. 2024. *Canada-Alberta Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement – 2021 to 2026*.

Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories/alberta-canada-wide-2021.html>

12 Government of Canada. 2024. Op cit.

13 Child Care Now, the Canadian Child Care Federation, The Muttart Foundation and the provincial associations for early childhood educators prepared system-building policy roadmaps for a number of provinces, including Alberta.

14 Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families.

2023. *CUP Impacts 2023*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ualberta.ca/en/community-university-partnership/cup-impacts-2023.pdf>; Association of

Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families. 2023. *The Alberta Compensation Framework Report: ECE Wage Grid Recommendations*. Retrieved from: <https://aecea.ca/sites/default/files/1-ECE%20Wage%20Grid%20Recommendations.pdf>

Research Design

The current study presents the findings from focus group discussions with certified early childhood educators, held in fall 2023. The research partners, The Muttart Foundation, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and the Alberta Early Learning and Care Leaders' Caucus (Alberta Leaders' Caucus) organized and hosted the discussions to hear from early childhood educators on their working conditions, access to benefits and compensation. The goal was to explore how these might be improved both to enhance the quality of early learning and child care and support the recruitment and retention of qualified staff. The Muttart Foundation worked with the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association and the Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Leaders' Caucus to organize similar focus groups with early childhood educators in Saskatchewan over the same period.

One hundred and twenty-two certified early childhood educators and student educators participated in the focus groups, which included three in-person discussions and eight virtual ones. The three in-person focus groups were held in Edmonton, Calgary and Grande Prairie with centre-based educators holding Level II or III certification. Two of the eight virtual discussions included centre-based educators with a Level I certification from different-sized communities across the province (larger cities, towns and rural communities), and two included centre-based educators with either a Level II or Level III certification. There were two virtual discussions with family child care educators from across the province and two virtual discussions with students completing post-secondary credentials — one with students completing degree-level studies at MacEwan University and Mount Royal University and a second with students completing diploma and certificate credentials at Bow Valley College, Keyano College, Norquest College and Portage College. A number of the post-secondary students who attended the two student focus groups were working in the field, while others had prior work experience.

Sixty-seven of the participants reported holding a Level III certification, 21 a Level II certification and 29 a Level I certification. Two of the students completing a post-secondary credential reported no provincial certification, while three participants did not disclose their certification level. Ninety-eight of the participants worked in facility-based child care (including 14 of the student educators completing post-secondary credentials), with two participants who worked in part-day preschool programs and one in a school age program. Seventeen of the participants worked in family child care.

Educators' work experience in regulated child care ranged from less than one year to 35 years, with an average of over nine years of work in the field. A number of those educators with longer work histories, five years or more in the field, reported working in either different facility-based programs or different types of regulated services (e.g. child care centres, school-aged programs or family child care). Some of the participants were immigrants who reported previous related work experiences before moving to Canada. One in four of the centre-based educators currently worked in a for-profit centre, while the majority worked for nonprofit organizations.

The Alberta Leaders' Caucus and the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta helped recruit educators to participate in the focus groups, as did the Child Care Association for Resources to Administrators and the YMCA of Northern Alberta. Post-secondary students were recruited with the assistance of university or college faculty. Where the number of eligible applicants for a focus group exceeded the group capacity, the research partners selected participants with differing levels of experience or from different geographic communities. Educators or students who attended a focus group received a \$50 gift card to thank them for their participation.

The focus group discussions considered a similar set of questions, albeit with some variations to accommodate the different working environments and experiences of family child care educators and post-secondary students, a number of whom had only limited work experience (see Appendix A for the focus group protocol). The discussions considered two main aspects of educators' work. First, their working conditions and how these might be improved to better support their well-being and the delivery of high-quality child care. And second, their compensation and access to benefits and the ways in which these might be improved to better reflect the demands and value of their work. A third related theme educators raised during the discussions centered on what they saw as a lack of value or respect for their work. As part of the background materials for the focus groups, participants received a summary description of the Alberta ELCC workforce, as well as information on the compensation framework developed by the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta.

The research partners used a focus group approach to help overcome some of the challenges of talking directly with front-line early childhood educators about their work and early learning and child care policy. Despite the work of professional associations such as the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, the Alberta Family Child Care Association and the School Age Care Directors Association of Alberta, early childhood educators have limited opportunities to talk about their own work and the policies and practices that impact them. The focus group approach gave them the chance to share their own views and experiences while also hearing those of their fellow educators. It further validated educators' voices, with the researchers committing to share the research findings with the federal and provincial governments, as well as other early learning and child care stakeholders.

As with all research methods, there are limitations with a focus group approach. While focus groups enable the researcher to better assess and understand the range and strength of participant views and experiences, the use of a qualitative design and a non-probabilistic sampling method means that caution is required in generalizing from the findings. There is also the possibility of response biases in group discussions, with some participants uncomfortable or unwilling to share their views or experiences, especially if they differ from those of others in the group. To help reduce these biases, the research partners recruited a skilled facilitation team and set out clear ground rules for the discussions with the participants. They further advised participants that the information and comments they shared would be anonymized in the reporting of the research findings.

What Early Childhood Educators Say About Their Working Conditions, Access to Benefits and Compensation

The following sections summarize early childhood educators' and student educators' observations and insights on their working conditions, access to benefits and compensation. As part of the focus group discussions, educators and student educators reflected and commented on their current and past work experiences in different types of programs and services, including large and small, for-profit and nonprofit centres and family child care homes, in urban and rural locations. While some educators and student educators were just beginning their careers others had many years of experience in the field.

Educators and student educators shared diverse views and experiences. Some felt well-supported in their work with young children and their families and had access to a range of workplace benefits, including health plans, paid sick days and paid vacation time, as well as professional development opportunities. Others described more challenging working conditions, had few workplace benefits and more limited access to resources and supports. The majority of educators and student educators were disappointed with, or discouraged by, their low compensation, which they saw reflecting the lower value placed on early learning and care work — especially in comparison to other related fields, such as public education. They commonly described themselves and their fellow educators as having a passion and motivation to work with young children, but struggling, at times, to stay in the field because of the demanding working conditions and low pay.

Educators advised that, for many of them, their participation in the focus groups was the first time they had been asked to share their work experiences and comment on the improvements in their working conditions and compensation that would support their work with young children and families.

The experiences educators and student educators shared underscored several common themes.

- 1. The importance of their working conditions:** While concerns about wages were prevalent, educators emphasized that working conditions and the overall work environment were equally, if not more, important in contributing to their job satisfaction and ability to provide high-quality child care. They described the negative impacts of poor or demanding working conditions on staff morale and the decisions of some educators to leave the field.
- 2. Dissatisfaction with wages:** Educators described their wages as too low, given their education, their responsibilities and the value of their work. They highlighted the continued challenge of qualified, experienced educators leaving the field because of low pay; the lack of financial incentives for taking on additional roles and responsibilities; and the limited rewards for years of service.

3. **Challenges resulting from the pandemic:** Educators described how supporting young children's learning had become more challenging since the COVID-19 pandemic, with an increase in the number of children with higher learning and care needs. They described how the loss of qualified staff and their replacement with inexperienced educators was increasing the stress on staff teams, while also highlighting challenges with the current staff-to-child ratios and group sizes.
4. **Lack of adequate support for children with additional needs:** Educators reported increasing difficulties in accessing additional financial and human resources to support the inclusion of children with additional needs, and the extended delays between referrals, assessments and interventions. They described managing more stressful working environments and the difficulties of working with increasing numbers of inexperienced staff who had no pre-service education or experience in working with children with additional support needs.
5. **Significant differences in educators' working conditions and access to benefits:** Educators reflected on the significant differences and inequities in working conditions and access to benefits between different programs and services. They described some of the factors they saw contributing to these differences, including an organization's size, funding, auspice and its management or leadership.

The major findings from educators' discussions of their working conditions, access to benefits and compensation are presented below, including quotes from individual educators.

Early Childhood Educators' Working Conditions

Educators emphasized the importance of good working conditions and well-resourced work environments, as well as the challenges they faced when these were not available. A number described how their working conditions had become more difficult since the pandemic, a result of the rising care needs of children and families and the loss of qualified staff. Broadly, they saw the increasingly challenging working conditions across much of the child care sector as one of the factors contributing to high rates of staff turnover.

Educators' Entry into the Field - The Orientation and Onboarding of New Educators

Educators described the ways in which centres orient and onboard new staff and, in the case of those educators with longer work histories, how these had changed over time. While some educators benefited from well-resourced and supported orientations, others received very few supports when starting work. Individual educators shared how initial work experiences, that were either challenging or not supportive, impacted their confidence and shaped their views of the field.

Educators who benefited from positive orientation and initial work experiences, some of which occurred well before the pandemic, emphasized the importance of a formal onboarding process, including coaching or mentoring from a senior staff member or experienced educator. They described the benefits of observing a program's learning and care practices, without being in ratio (for two days to a week in some instances), as well as the value of partnering with an experienced educator to guide and support them. Individual educators shared how completing a student field placement in a program before starting work there gave them a stronger understanding of a centre's early learning and care philosophy and work routines, as well as an opportunity to get to know the other educators. A number of educators reported accepting positions at centres

in which they had completed student placements and highlighted the benefits of supported transitions from post-secondary education into the field.

While educators found written materials helpful as part of an orientation, including information on program policies and employee handbooks, it was the coaching and support they received from senior staff or experienced educators that they found of most value. Educators also described regular staff or team meetings as important opportunities for new educators to feel part of staff teams and to get to know other staff members. Similarly, individual educators spoke to the value of having time to build relationships with the children in their care as well as access to information on their health and learning needs.

Something our centre does, we pair a new educator with a mentor – a previously employed educator. This is someone outside of the classroom that you are working with. It is someone that will help you build those relationships with the other educators but also a resource should your director not be available. (Level III Educator working in Edmonton)

Those educators who received more limited, or in some cases, no formal orientation when they started work described themselves as ‘thrown in’ and of feeling ‘really lost’, with little guidance or support. They found these experiences ‘overwhelming’, discouraging and disappointing, especially when supports that had been promised, such as guidance from senior staff, were not available. They reported feeling a personal sense of responsibility to ‘figure things out’ for themselves and of things being ‘up and down’ for the first year of work. In Grande Prairie, individual educators shared experiences of being hired and starting work shortly after an interview, with no dedicated time to get to know the other staff or the children in their care. They described being ‘rushed’ into the work of early learning and care and the resulting stresses this placed on them.

At my first centre I was thrown right into it. I was fresh out of high school and had no orientation and I was really lost. Unfortunately, it was a situation where they were looking for staff, just looking for bodies. (Level III Educator working in a mid-size community)

Across the focus groups, educators were roughly divided between those who experienced well-resourced and supported introductions to their work in the field and those whose orientations fell short of what they anticipated or required. Some educators with longer work histories and experiences working in different programs reflected on the variations they had observed and experienced in the orientation and onboarding new educators received. In the Calgary and Grande Prairie focus groups, individual educators advised that for-profit service providers were less likely to dedicate time and resources to orient and onboard new staff than nonprofit providers. They further emphasized the important role owner-operators and senior staff in nonprofit organizations play in determining the kind of orientation and supports new educators receive when they start work. Individual educators in Calgary suggested that new owner-operators would benefit from education and resources on how to successfully onboard or orient new staff.

I've noticed that nonprofit and for-profit is different. More of a sink or swim situation in the for-profit centre. You are going to lose a lot of people if you just toss them in. (Level III Educator working in Grande Prairie)

Educators in Edmonton saw the loss of experienced staff, the increase in the number of children with additional or more complex care needs, and the high rates of staff turnover as factors that made it more difficult for some centres to onboard and support new educators. They described the difficulties of mentoring and supporting new staff in busy working environments, with new educators often having to ‘learn along



the way.’ Educators in Grande Prairie similarly highlighted the growing shortage of qualified educators as making it more difficult for centres to bring on new staff, while educators in smaller communities drew attention to the challenges smaller organizations face in supporting new staff when experienced, qualified staff have already left and programs are short-staffed.

I have to say, in a rural centre, where you’re not pulling from a large number of staff, that sometimes you’re hiring because somebody has already left or someone’s on medical leave. Unfortunately, you can’t do the training to the level you want so you just do your best to support that staff while they’re in ratio. (Level I Educator working in a smaller community)

Student Educators’ Field Placements and Initial Work Experiences

Students completing post-secondary credentials also described facing a diverse range of experiences during their field placements and, in the case of students working in the field, their first educator positions. For students with no prior work experience, their field placements were typically their first introduction to child care working conditions, which for some were challenging or discouraging. Overall, students taking diploma or certificate credentials enjoyed more positive field placements than students completing degree credentials — although the quality for both varied significantly.

For me I have great support. I started as an international student and I am currently taking a diploma. I learned ECE in a gradual manner. The mentorship was beneficial to me and I recommend a mentorship program for those who aren’t students. (Level II Student Educator working in Fort McMurray)

Diploma and certificate students emphasized the important roles college faculty played both in preparing them for practicum placements and in supporting them in the field. International students, new to Canada and early learning and child care, found this preparation and support particularly useful. Degree students, who had poor or discouraging field placements, identified a number of factors that contributed to these limited learning opportunities, including the pedagogy and practices in a centre or program, which were either poor-quality or inconsistent with the approach a centre said it was using (e.g. ‘Reggio inspired’); the lack of time educators had to support or supervise students; and their assignment to cleaning or custodial duties rather than direct work with children. Some degree students advised that they would have benefited from more educational preparation in areas such inclusion before completing field placements.

Family Child Care Educators’ Initial Work Experiences

By comparison to centre-based educators, family child care educators generally reported more positive introductions and orientations to their work in the field. The previous work experiences of some educators either in a private day home or centre-based care provided them with a useful grounding in working with young children as well as a familiarity with licensing and regulation requirements. Educators also benefitted from the resources and supports licensed day home agencies provided them, including assistance with family referrals; information and guidance on pedagogy, equipment, toys and supplies; as well as practical advice on the operation of their day homes. Some family child care educators opened their regulated day home so that their own children would have access to regulated child care. Others were motivated by the access to wage enhancements and the ability to provide their families with access to lower cost regulated care under the oversight of a licensed day home agency.

I started my day home because I couldn’t afford to place my kids somewhere. I went through an agency, as a friend recommended I do, because I didn’t know where and how to start. So that’s why I trust the agency. They are there to support us and guide us for the policy and procedures. (Level II Family Child Care Educator working in a mid-sized community)

The personal working relationships family child care educators had with their day home consultants and with other family child care providers were valuable sources of support. Individual family child care educators reported some differences in the supports family day home agencies provide and emphasized the importance of educators finding a day home agency to work with that was responsive to their needs.

Educators’ Working Conditions – Increasing Workplace Demands and Stresses

Educators commonly described their working conditions as challenging or stressful, and for many increasingly so, due to insufficient staff-to-child ratios and large group sizes; an increase in the number of children with additional or higher learning and care needs; the shortage of qualified educators; long work hours with limited planning and preparation time; as well as the erosion of workplace cultures in some centres. Some educators were concerned that poor working conditions were contributing to staff burn-out and high rates of staff turnover, while others were frustrated by the difficulties they faced in meeting children’s early learning and care needs.

Educators saw the following interrelated factors as contributing to their more challenging or stressful working conditions.

Insufficient Staff-to-Child Ratios and Large Group Sizes

Insufficient staff-to-child ratios and large group sizes were two of the main factors centre-based educators highlighted as contributing to their challenging working conditions. They advised that the staff-to-child ratios, set out in regulation, often made it difficult for them to provide children with the one-to-one care they needed and described themselves as overwhelmed, ‘struggling’, ‘in survival mode’ and ‘too busy’ to meet children’s needs. Individual educators described children’s learning environments as ‘hectic’ and ‘chaotic’ and expressed fears that, at times, programs were ‘housing children’ rather than supporting their learning and care.

Sometimes I feel I'm just trying to get through the day, making sure everyone is safe. By the time they go home, I wonder if we even did anything that would benefit them. When you have a more intimate group, you have the time, you have their attention and you can interact with them which is the most important thing. (Level III Educator working in Fort McMurray)

Educators advised that centres with the resources to do so often enhanced their staff-to-child ratios. This helped staff better meet children’s learning and care needs and reduced educator burn-out. Educators cautioned, however, that centres were finding it more difficult to enhance ratios because of staff shortages and the tightening of program budgets. Individual educators found the infant and toddler staff-to-child ratios especially difficult to manage, while also highlighting the challenges of working with large groups of children, for example up to 16 three-year-olds and 20 four-year-olds. They advised that extra staff were often needed to help manage children’s social interactions and meet their individual care needs — which varied significantly depending on the ‘kind of day’ they were having. They further highlighted the additional stresses on educators when parents, who were unable to take time off from work, brought children who were sick or unwell into child care.

Individual educators shared examples of the challenges low staff-to-child ratios and large group sizes presented. In Calgary, educators reported that some classrooms were either too small or not well-designed to accommodate large groups of children. This resulted in noisy and crowded environments for children and staff. Educators working in smaller communities and in Fort McMurray shared examples of staff having to work one-on-one with a distressed child, leaving the second educator in a room to care for the remaining group of up to 15 children. Some educators in Fort McMurray shared feeling stressed and discouraged by their inability to effectively meet children’s individual learning and care needs.

With the higher ratios, it also becomes more stressful for the children. Quality care means lower ratios with more time for staff to be right on the floor with children. (Level III Educator working in a smaller urban centre)

Broadly, educators agreed on the need for improvements to staff-to-child ratios and reductions in group sizes, both of which they saw as reducing the demands on staff and improving the quality of learning environments for children. They argued that ‘more trained educators’ were needed ‘on the floor’ allied with smaller group sizes to create the ‘calmer’ environments in which young children learn and thrive.

An Increase in the Number of Children with Additional or More Complex Learning and Care Needs

Educators highlighted the increase in the number of children with additional or more complex learning and care needs. They reported working with more children with additional socio-emotional and behavioural needs, linked in part to the impacts of the pandemic, as well as more children with developmental delays or disorders (e.g. Autism or speech language delays). Some educators were concerned that they lacked the resources or supports they needed to work effectively with children with additional needs.

I would like more support for children with challenging behaviours or special needs, especially when they are young. In Fort McMurray it takes forever to get a diagnosis. By the time they get diagnosed they are off to school. So, as educators, we might be struggling for two years without getting the right support. (Level III Educator working in Fort McMurray)

Educators shared examples of the challenges they faced in supporting the early learning and care of children with additional needs, including dealing with long delays (sometimes of up to two years) for children to receive funding for specialized supports (including under the *Family Support for Children with Disabilities* program); children leaving or aging out of child care before additional supports or services could be put in place; children diagnosed with additional needs receiving only partial supports, for example, three hours a day of one-to-one care rather than full-day care (under *Program Unit Funding*); educators working with groups that included multiple children with additional needs, including children with Autism; centres struggling both to recruit and retain educational assistants or aides to work one-on-one with children because of low pay; and families' applications for funding support being declined and the demoralising effects this had on staff. Educators advised that individual centres, with resources to do so, were commonly assigning extra staff to support the inclusion of children with additional needs.

The rooms need more educators, and they need support. We're in ratio but we are only surviving, not thriving. We have children that need additional support and it just isn't available. The funding routes we've tried have all ended in dead ends. Educators are feeling really, really tired and they are doing their best. (Level III Educator working in Edmonton)

In both Edmonton and Calgary, experienced Level II and III certified educators were concerned that they did not have the specialized knowledge and skills they needed to work with children with additional or more complex needs, despite having completed post-secondary credentials. Edmonton educators further cautioned that new Level I certified educators, who did not have an early learning credential, frequently had no formal education on inclusion. Individual Level I educators described the challenges they faced in working with children with more complex needs, including managing behaviours such as biting and hitting, often without additional supports.

I am not a specialist in the different types of challenges that these kids have. I have six special needs kids in my room. I don't know what kind of care they need. I don't know where to send them or their parents to get them help. (Level I Educator working in Grande Prairie)

Individual educators were frustrated by the challenges they faced in providing high-quality early learning experiences for children with additional needs and discouraged by their lack of access to specialized resources or supports. They saw both as contributing to staff fatigue and burn-out.

A Shortage of Qualified Staff and High-Rates of Staff Turnover

Educators described the shortage of qualified staff (with Level II and III certifications) and high rates of staff turnover as making it more difficult for some centres to maintain adequate staffing levels — with no back-up or casual staff available to cover for staff absences. They advised that both experienced and newer staff were leaving the field, with the former struggling with fatigue and burn-out and the latter often unprepared for the physical and emotional demands of working with young children, including those with more complex needs. They shared examples of new inexperienced Level I educators leaving after short periods of employment, some with little or no notice.

Educators in Calgary and Grande Prairie were concerned that the shortage of qualified staff with a Level III certification was negatively impacting the quality of care. They advised that centres were now having to recruit new, inexperienced Level I educators to replace more qualified, experienced staff who had left the field and that this was placing additional pressures on staff teams. Individual educators advised that some centres were making efforts to ensure that each room (or group of children) had at least one Level II or III certified educator to help maintain the quality of care.

Sometimes you have 16 children and another adult with no education, no experience and you are teaching them as well. They don't have a lot of experience in the field. You still have all the children, and it feels like you are alone. (Level III Educator working in Edmonton)

Educators in Fort McMurray described increased instances of program supervisors working in ratio to cover for staff shortages, while in Grande Prairie educators reported some centres using administrative staff, with a Level I certification, to meet staff-to-child ratios when educators were off sick. Educators generally agreed that staff absences were now higher, leading to more service disruptions — even in well-resourced programs with some access to back-up or relief staff. They advised that educators frequently had to rearrange their work schedules or take on additional shifts, often at short notice, to accommodate for staff shortages.

If you have high turnover, you never get momentum. The attachment with children and educators is important and where there is disruption in the staff, the children feel it. (Level II Educator working in Grande Prairie)

Some Level II and Level III educators were concerned that new Level I certified educators did not have the pre-service education, or field placement experience, they needed to support children's learning. They described facing additional pressures to coach and mentor new Level I educators, while working in ratio — something they described as happening more often given the high rate of staff turnover. In a related vein, Level II and III certified educators in Fort McMurray and in smaller communities cautioned that some staff with equivalency qualifications (e.g. nursing credentials) did not have the motivation or experience required to work in early learning and care. They saw the certification of staff with equivalency qualifications as further adding to the workplace demands on qualified staff.

Something that must be improved is the quality of staff. Many of the staff we are getting are usually equivalencies. So they'll have a nursing degree but they don't have experience in child care. They're not really passionate about child care and they just want to do something until they are able to get into nursing — so we don't have any long-term staff. The ones we do have that like the field are getting so burned out that they want to leave. So, nobody really stays. (Level III Educator working in Fort McMurray)

Educators in Edmonton described difficulties in ‘selling’ or promoting the field to new staff and students because of the challenging working conditions and low compensation. They further cautioned that some longer-term educators were now also reconsidering whether they should stay in the field. Educators in both Calgary and Grande Prairie described the increased efforts of some centres to recruit students directly from post-secondary programs, including offering them the opportunity to complete workplace field placements, as one strategy to address the shortage of qualified staff.

Increased Workloads and Limited Planning and Preparation Time

Educators shared the stresses of working long hours, often with few breaks from direct care and described an increase in the number of staff feeling burned out, fatigued or ‘really tired’. They cautioned that in some centres the lack of casual or float staff, allied with reductions in centre budgets, was resulting in educators having to work longer hours and taking on additional responsibilities, often without additional compensation. In Fort McMurray, educators advised that, in some centres, staff no longer had time to meet with parents and families.

Right now, I always have to bring my work home to do it, because when I'm at the centre, I don't have time as I'm physically with the children and I cannot do anything else. I have to bring my work home and when my daughter falls asleep, I start work again. That's why we are burning out. (Level III Educator working in Edmonton)

While some educators had regular non-contact time for planning, documentation and team meetings, many did not. Educators in Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray and Calgary, as well as those working in smaller communities described their lack of planning and preparation time as challenging. Some tried to do program planning during children’s nap time, while others frequently had to give up their planning time due to staff shortages or absences. Educators in Fort McMurray and those working in smaller communities described taking work home on a regular basis and completing their program planning in the evenings. Other staff reported having to attend evening staff meetings and participating in professional learning after hours, both of which took time away from their families and were especially difficult for single parents to accommodate.

Staff shortages affect programming. I'm struggling to get programming and learning stories done during work hours. It's hard. Someone will come into ratio and then I can do planning, but it's rushed and randomly done throughout the day. It would be nice to have a set time, a couple of hours to do it instead of having to do it by dribs and drabs to get it done. (Level I Educator working in a smaller community)

Individual Level I educators reported having to take on additional cleaning duties at the end of their workday, because the centre at which they worked no longer employed janitorial staff. In Fort McMurray, educators shared how the shortage of staff resulted in toys and equipment not being adequately cleaned and sanitized.

Educators emphasized the importance of paid breaks, which some received while others did not, as well as the need for dedicated staff rooms so that they could take their breaks away from their working environments. Level I educators shared how even short breaks helped them manage the stresses of working in ratio, while educators in Edmonton advised how time out of ratio provided them with opportunities to engage with other staff members.

The Undervaluing of Early Childhood Educators and their Work

Some educators were concerned and discouraged with the continued undervaluing of early learning and care work, which they saw as negatively impacting staff morale. In Edmonton, individual educators cautioned that some experienced staff were becoming disillusioned with the lack of opportunities for career progression and questioning whether they should continue in the field. In Fort McMurray, educators were discouraged that early learning and care was still viewed as ‘babysitting’ rather than early education by some outside of the sector. Individual educators with Level II and III certifications working in smaller communities similarly advised that some community members did not value their work. Some were further concerned that the certification of educators with equivalency qualifications undermined the value of post-secondary early learning and care credentials.

Level I educators working in smaller communities expressed the strongest concerns that their work was undervalued. They described struggling with community perceptions that early learning and care was ‘just playing with children’, ‘easy’ and similar to being a parent. Individual educators shared their frustration that teaching school-aged children was still more valued and respected than working with younger children.

I feel like I get a lot of respect from my co-workers and the parents. They appreciate what we do. From outside communities and other people, they look down on day care workers. They say that it's easy, you just play with kids all day. It takes its toll. (Level I Educator working a smaller community)



Educators' Workplace Resources and Supports

Educators discussed the various resources (material and non-material) available to them to support their work with young children and families. They advised that these often differed between organizations, contributing to the inequities in staff working conditions across the sector. Educators shared examples of the types of resources and supports that helped them support high-quality early learning and care experiences for children and their families.

Professional Development and Opportunities for Ongoing Learning

Educators agreed on the importance of professional development and ongoing learning (including increasing their formal education) both for their own growth and development and the delivery of high-quality early learning and care. They described the professional development and ongoing learning they found most useful, while also identifying ways in which the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade could make further post-secondary education more accessible for front-line staff.

Educators in Grande Prairie and those working in smaller communities found dedicated professional development days, when centres closed, beneficial for staff teams. They described how dedicated professional learning days gave educators the opportunity to reflect on their work, to work together to improve practice and to build team skills. Individual educators reported participating in up to three professional development days a year, some of which included outside trainers coming into a centre to support staff learning. Educators working in smaller communities highlighted the benefits of pedagogical partners who worked directly with staff in programs and centres to help them build their knowledge and skills about *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework*. Educators in Fort McMurray found value in staff from different programs meeting together to share experiences and learnings, although they advised that these opportunities were limited because some centres saw themselves in competition with other programs for qualified staff. They also described the importance of mentorship for educators.

We close the last Friday of the month to have a professional development day. That has been great, to have the ability to have that reflective practice. Sometimes to do something fun too. (Level II Educator working in Grande Prairie)

Educators in publicly funded services described the benefits they received from access to tuition-free post-secondary education, while educators working at YMCA child care centres found value in staff from different centres participating in joint regional workshops. Educators in Calgary, Grande Prairie and those working in smaller communities emphasized the value of *Flight* training, while others shared how specialized education and supports for inclusion were important for their work.

Educators in Calgary and those working outside of the major centres highlighted the important role staff in leadership positions played both in providing front-line educators with information on professional learning opportunities and in encouraging and supporting their professional learning. They cautioned, however, that not all centres provided staff with the same level of information and support around professional development.

Level II and III certified educators working outside of major centres drew attention to the challenges some smaller organizations faced in supporting staff members' participation in professional learning during work hours, given the lack of back-up or casual staff to replace them. They also drew attention to the barriers (e.g. time, travel costs, family responsibilities) some educators faced in travelling to larger urban centres for courses or workshops. Educators working outside of major centres advised that, where possible, professional

learning should be funded and supported during working hours, as it is in related fields, including public education.

Individual educators were concerned about the delay in receiving reimbursement for professional learning costs they incurred. They reported sometimes waiting for up to six to eight weeks for reimbursement, which created a financial burden for some educators and discouraged others from pursuing professional learning. They further saw the high cost of post-secondary tuition fees for certificate and diploma programs as a barrier for some educators interested in increasing their pre-service education and advised that educators' low wages made it difficult for some to pay tuition fees in advance and then wait for reimbursement through professional development funding from the Ministry.

I'm not getting paid enough to go to school to take courses. I'm working two jobs. The way the funding is set up, I can't even start because from what I understand you have to pay for the course first, you have to pass the course, you have to submit it, then you get your money back. Someone like me, and I am not the only one, we don't even have the money to start the process — to get to that Level III. (Level I Educator working in Grande Prairie)

To provide staff with more equitable and timely access to professional learning, individual educators suggested that the Ministry provide staff with lists of approved professional development courses. They further suggested that the Ministry increase the number of pedagogical partners available to work with staff at their centres.

The Importance of Centre Leadership and Positive Workplace Cultures

Educators highlighted the important role owner-operators and centre leadership staff play in creating healthy working environments which value educators and their work. They further described the benefits of staff teams having opportunities to meet and work together to build strong workplace cultures and improve early learning and care practices. Educators described differences, however, in the support senior staff provide front-line staff and commented on the erosion of workplace cultures in some centres due to the increasing demands placed on front-line educators and high rates of staff turnover.

There are great programs and there are not so great programs — whether they are private or nonprofit. Often it depends on the leadership. It is determined by the culture, the leadership and not so much the corporate structure. (Level III Educator working in Calgary)

In Edmonton, educators emphasized the importance of a centre's leadership and senior staff listening and responding to the concerns of front-line educators, including advocating to government for resources to support their work. Level I educators similarly identified regular and respectful communications with senior staff as central to creating healthy working environments. Educators in Edmonton and Grande Prairie, as well as those working in smaller communities, advised of the important role centre management can play in supporting staff's growth and development, including providing educators with opportunities to develop their skills through working with different age groups of children, and taking on different roles and responsibilities. In Calgary, individual educators described the lack of support and respect some owner-operators showed front-line staff. They recommended that centre owner-operators be required to complete leadership training as a condition of receiving a centre license. Similarly, individual Level I educators expressed concerns about the ways in which some owner-operators treated front-line staff, which they found unsupportive.

Management is really important. Having someone that you know that you can voice your concerns to, that you are going to be heard. Who will advocate for you to get what you need. (Level III Educator working in Edmonton)

Educators in Edmonton, Grande Prairie and those working in smaller communities described how regular staff meetings and planned team building activities helped them feel part of a team. They spoke of the importance of staff teams having similar early learning and care philosophies and of educators supporting each other to relieve the stresses of isolation or burn out. Educators in Edmonton identified some of the challenges of building strong staff teams and workplace cultures in very large centres and acknowledged the erosion of team building since the pandemic as centres struggled with high rates of staff turnover and increases in children's care needs.

You can feel the difference when you have a good team. It affects the children and the families if there isn't a strong team. One day care I worked at, all you felt was the tension. Something wasn't cohesive with the staff. (Level III Educator working in Grande Prairie)

Level I educators working outside of major centres also found regular staff meetings and group social chats as effective ways for staff to connect with other each. They similarly saw value in educators collaborating and characterized supportive workplaces as those in which staff were comfortable in seeking assistance when they needed it. Level I educators working as casual staff emphasized the importance of all staff being included in team activities, while educators in Fort McMurray highlighted the benefits of staff members sharing their work experiences and feelings, both to relieve stress and to build workplace communities.

Grande Prairie educators emphasized the importance of front-line staff having autonomy over their work and working environments and the authority to make decisions on how best to support children's learning and care. They described this autonomy as contributing to educators feeling respected and valued and characterized positive workplaces as those in which educators worked as teams and senior staff trusted their knowledge and skills. Individual educators cautioned, however, that not all educators were given the authority to guide children's learning and care and described examples of working environments in which tensions between staff members negatively impacted the quality of care for children and families.

Student Educators' Observations on Educators' Working Conditions

Post-secondary students, a number of whom were completing their studies while working in regulated child care, shared many of the same concerns about working conditions as full-time educators. Degree students highlighted staff shortages and high rates of staff turnover as particular challenges they observed during field placements, commenting on the increased pressures on staff teams when educators either resigned or were away sick. Individual students described staff shortages and high rates of turnover as contributing to more hectic and unstable learning environments for children. They also remarked on the large number of children with additional learning and care needs and the demands this placed on educators.

It was definitely staff shortages. Being an observer, not in ratio, planning time was very scarce. Staff only had half an hour to plan for the whole week, sometimes a month — depending if they had relief staff. Even if you meet ratio, there are many children who require additional support. Without an extra hand it is very difficult for educators to mentor, let alone help children. (Student Educator, Mount Royal University)



Degree students were concerned about the limited time educators often had for program planning and preparation. They shared examples of staff trying to plan while in ratio; of staff having only very short periods to plan a week or month's activities (e.g. 30 minutes); and of staff leaving groups of children with float or relief staff so that they could plan program activities, resulting in disruptions to children's learning. Degree students described enriched staff-to-child ratios; dedicated staff planning time; regular staff team meetings and designated staff rooms as all factors that contributed to good working conditions for educators.

Students completing diploma and certificate credentials, most while working in regulated child care, also described observing and working in challenging conditions and environments. They shared examples of centres using poor learning practices; of not meeting staff-to-child ratios; of requiring staff to work extra unpaid hours doing cleaning and other custodial tasks; and of staff teams made up of educators with very different levels of knowledge of children's learning and development. Individual students were discouraged by the poor practices in some centres and the variations in the quality of educators' work with children.

I would have to say it's not all positive. Working with the kids is the positive thing. But the way the facility is run is really in the best interest of the owner, rather than in the best interests of the kids, unfortunately. So often we are over capacity. We don't have enough staff. We're literally just making sure that everyone is maintaining good behaviour. That's what it's been like. (Student Educator working in Edmonton)

Family Child Care Educators' Workplace Supports and Working Conditions

Family child care educators described their access to a range of supports and resources from family day home agencies, including information about and guidance with licensing regulations; supports for program planning and administration; professional learning opportunities and support in managing individual families' and children's special care needs. While some more experienced family child care educators advised that they mostly worked independently, and did not access a lot of support, others reported making much greater use of agency advice and resources, which they generally found beneficial.

Family child care educators reported positive relationships with day home consultants, who visited their homes and provided professional advice and support, as well as ‘mental health’ check-ins if required. Individual educators advised that the caseloads of some consultants had recently increased, resulting in some consultants spending less time with educators. They attributed this to the rapid expansion of regulated family child care.

A number of family child care educators identified other family child care educators as important sources of support — and ones they turned to both for advice on operating and managing their day home, as well as emotional support to help them manage the stresses and isolation of working alone. Educators spoke positively about the benefits of connecting with other family child care educators.

I would say my consultant is the best consultant ever. Whenever she comes, I feel so happy. I can discuss any issues with her — anything for guidance. She always refers me to workshops and for professional development. (Level III Family Child Care Educator working in Edmonton)

One area in which family child care educators identified the need for additional support was that of ‘back-up’ care — either for when they were sick or required time-off for personal or family reasons. They advised that most day homes were now full, making it harder for educators to refer families to back-up care, should the need arise. Individual educators reported delaying medical appointments and working when they were sick or unwell to prevent families from losing access to care. Some reported feeling that they let families down when they were closed, while others described actively coordinating days off or vacation time with the families they served.

Individual educators advised that some families were uncomfortable placing their child in back-up care, with family child care educators they did not know. Others described the logistical challenges of having a back-up educator come to their home to provide care. Family child care educators also highlighted the loss of income when their home was closed, a challenge they discussed more fully when talking about compensation.

In terms of back-up care, it would be very, very hard because all of the day homes in my area are full. So, I don't even think it's an option most days to get back-up care. If I was sick last minute, I don't think I would be able to find care for the kids. So usually, I don't close and thankfully I don't get sick. (Level III Family Child Care Educator working in a smaller community)

To help them manage their long workdays and compensate for their limited opportunities for time-off, individual family child care educators shared some of the strategies they used to reduce stress and ‘burn out’. These included scheduling ‘personal days’; providing families with advance notice of the days they would be closed in their service contracts; as well as advocating for their own well-being. Individual educators with day homes in smaller communities advised that their personal relationships with families provided them with more latitude to negotiate times when their day home would be closed.

We work from the time those children come in the door till the time they leave. We don't get a lunch break or a coffee break. We get our coffee and heat it 12 times a day. We do get to eat lunch with the children or while the children are eating. But there is no break. It's not like you can pop out somewhere or take a nap. (Level III Family Child Care Educator working in a smaller community)

Early Childhood Educators' Access to Benefits

Educators discussed their access to a range of benefits including paid sick days, paid vacation time, health benefits and pensions. They described significant differences in the benefits they received, which varied depending both on the type of organization for which they worked and the nature of their employment. While a minority had access to comprehensive workplace benefits, the majority did not, with some receiving few workplace benefits. Broadly, educators were concerned about their limited access to benefits, which some saw as contributing to burn-out and educators leaving the field for other sectors, including public education. Individual educators suggested that their limited access to benefits was one of the factors that contributed to some staff viewing child care as a short-term job rather than a longer-term career.

Centre-based Educators' Access to Benefits

Educators discussed their differing access to a range of workplace benefits, some of the factors that contributed to these differences, as well as the ways in which benefits supported their work. Educators working for either the YMCA of Northern Alberta or municipally supported child care centres had access to comprehensive workplace benefits, which supported their work, while other educators often did not. Some Calgary educators advised that for-profit centres were less likely to provide staff with benefits than nonprofit organizations, while others referenced the benefits their for-profit centre offered. Individual educators working outside of major centres also observed that some smaller nonprofits were unable to provide staff with benefits because of the high cost of group plans. Individual educators, including some new to the field, were uncertain of the benefits they had access to.

Knowing that I can access benefits, access to a health spending account — that is what is keeping me going. We all talk about how tired we are. Knowing that I can go see a doctor, get my eyes checked and access health services. I'm not going to burn out. (Level III Educator working in Edmonton)

As a for-profit centre we are offering full benefits. I feel that a lot of for-profit centres aren't offering that but we do. (Level III Educator working in Calgary)

Individual educators in Edmonton advised that some service providers were finding it more difficult to cover the cost of staff benefit plans and had either already reduced staff benefits or were considering doing so. Educators in Grande Prairie highlighted the important role the executive director in nonprofit organizations can play in advocating to the board for staff benefits, while individual educators described relying on their spouse's more comprehensive group benefit plan, rather than the limited benefits provided through their child care employer.

Some places have benefits but others don't. You have to figure it out in the interview whether they offer benefits. Every centre should have benefits. (Level III Educator working in Grande Prairie)

Educators in Edmonton, Fort McMurray and Calgary advised that because of their low pay some educators found the high cost of benefit plan premiums (ranging from \$160 to \$200 per month) a financial burden. Other educators, including Level I certified staff, shared the challenges they experienced in not being eligible for benefit coverage until they had completed an extended probation period (sometimes up to a

year in length). Those educators working part-time also drew attention to their ineligibility for benefits, as did educators working in casual positions. Educators working outside of the major centres shared examples of staff leaving to go and work for local school boards because of their more generous workplace benefits, while those in Grande Prairie described how providing benefits helped some programs retain staff.

Educators offered the following comments on specific benefits and how they supported their health and well-being.

Paid Sick Days

Paid sick days were one of the most important benefits educators received, although the number of paid sick days staff had access to varied, as did the ability of staff to take or use them. Some Level I educators received no paid sick days, while others with a Level II or III certification earned five or more paid sick days a year. A small number of educators earned upwards of ten paid sick days per year. Overall, educators considered their paid sick day entitlements as insufficient, given their regular exposure to children with symptoms of illness. Individual educators with young families further highlighted the additional difficulties they faced in trying to take time off from work (often unpaid) when their own children were sick.

As a single mom, I would love benefits, because I don't have any now. Sick time would be really beneficial. Children get sick all the time, which in turn, means we get sick. It's really difficult if you're making the choice whether to go to work sick or you are staying at home and losing out on money. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)

Some educators felt pressured to come into work when they were sick to enable centres to meet staff-to-child ratios. Others described feeling guilty when they took sick days, because of the additional pressures they knew would fall on the other staff members. Educators in Fort McMurray advised that the longstanding staff shortages in their region often resulted in staff coming to work when they were either sick or unwell.

My day care doesn't handle sickness very well. We just had COVID through our centre and none of the toys have been cleaned. When we are short-staffed, we are told we can't call in sick, even though the kids are sick and still able to come to day care. (Level I Educator working in a smaller community)

Individual educators described facing financial hardships when they were off sick and had already used up their complement of paid sick days. Staff new to the field reported having to work for extended periods before they earned paid sick days (up to one year in some cases) — periods during which they were most susceptible to catching children's illnesses and often off sick as a result. Educators generally agreed that staff required more equitable access to a sufficient number of paid sick days to better accommodate the demands of their work. Some argued that all educators should be entitled to a standard number of paid sick days.

Health Benefits

Health benefits were similarly important to educators, given the physical and emotional demands of working with young children. The health benefits they received, however, varied significantly, with individual educators highlighting limitations in their current benefits, including the lack of coverage for glasses. A small number of educators had no access to health benefits. Educators in Calgary and those working outside of the major centres with Level II and III certifications had access to health spending accounts, rather than more comprehensive health insurance coverage. Level I educators working in smaller communities described how some child care centres had joined together to provide their staff with access to a larger group plan,

with lower premium costs for both the employer and the employee. Educators in Calgary commented on the prohibitive costs of health benefit plans for smaller organizations, while those working in smaller communities drew attention to the importance of wellness days, or mental health days, to provide educators with some respite from the demands of their work. Level I certified educators also described the value of mental health or wellness days, although their access to these was generally limited.

I wish our centre would really take care of the well-being of the educators. We really need health insurance. We have to pay for all our dental and medical costs. (Level I Educator working in Fort McMurray)

Vacation Entitlements

Most educators received some form of vacation benefits, although, as with other workplace benefits, the nature of these varied. While many educators received paid vacation time, commonly between two and three weeks per year, others, including a number of Level I certified staff, earned vacation pay of between four to six percent, which was added to their monthly pay cheque. Individual educators expressed a preference for vacation time which provided them with a paid break away from their demanding work, rather than vacation pay. Broadly, educators were concerned that their paid vacation benefits were insufficient and much less than those received by staff in related fields, including public education.

I think that sick days and vacation days should be standard. Because this is a physically demanding job. It's also a mentally draining job and not having the ability to take vacation days to give yourself that break. I feel like all it's going to do is lead to burnout. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)

Some Level I educators reported having to take their vacation time during designated periods (for example, over the Christmas holiday period and during the month of August) when centres were either closed or managing lower enrollments. Other educators who were newcomers or former international students described the difficulties they faced in visiting their families overseas when they only received two weeks of paid vacation time. They reported either having to take unpaid leaves, which resulted in financial hardships, or delaying family visits. Individual educators recommended that all staff should have equitable access to increased vacation time.

Pension Benefits

Across the focus groups, educators were less likely to receive pension benefits than other benefits such as paid sick days and vacation time. Educators in both the Grande Prairie and Calgary focus groups advised that pension plans were absent across much of the sector, with individual educators highlighting the financial challenges this presented for experienced staff as they approached retirement age. The most common pension benefit educators received was an employer paid RSP contribution, which some staff matched with their own contribution. A number of Level I educators received no pension benefits. Experienced educators in Edmonton and Calgary, as well as those working in smaller communities, emphasized the importance of pension benefits, something which individual educators advised they had not considered when they were younger and starting out in the field.

I started right out of high school and didn't really think about a pension at the time. I am grateful that I have that now. (Level III Educator working in Edmonton)

A lot of us would like benefits, paid sick days, paid holidays and where there is a pension plan at the end of it. I've been working for 27 years and I don't have any of that. (Level I Educator working in a smaller community)

Student Educators' Views on Benefits

Student educators generally had less to say on benefits than educators working in the field. Students completing diploma and certificate credentials, a number of whom were already working in child care, generally agreed that all educators should have access to comprehensive benefit plans. Individual students suggested that educator benefits should be similar to those teachers receive. Students already working in the field highlighted the financial burden of limited paid sick days, while degree students suggested that providing all educators with access to comprehensive benefits would encourage them to commit to longer-term careers in the field.

Family Child Care Educators' Access to Benefits

As self-employed individuals, family child care educators had even more limited access to benefit plans than educators working in centre-based programs. They also commonly described finding it more difficult both to take days off and to schedule vacation time, despite indicating their need for both. Individual family child care educators advised that some family day home agencies provided educators with access to benefit plans, although the majority of focus group participants did not participate in one of these plans. The main source of benefits for family child care educators was a spousal benefit plan, with a smaller number of educators purchasing private health insurance (e.g. Alberta Blue Cross). Individual educators were eligible for government funded low-income benefits (e.g. dental care for their children), while others made RSP contributions to their own personal plans.

I'll be 60 next year. And so, retirement income is something I'm looking at and it's just CPP. That's really all I will have, with some RSPs that we've had to do on our own. When I look at my working life now, I see myself working quite a few more years. (Level III Family Child Care Educator working in Edmonton)

Family child care educators found it challenging both to schedule vacation time and to take time-off when they were sick. Some included vacation time (when their home would be closed) in their contracts with families and charged a standard monthly fee, which provided them with paid vacation time. Others did not, resulting in them losing income when they took vacation time. Educators agreed on the importance of scheduling vacation time given the demands of their work, although they acknowledged the challenges of doing so in ways that worked for both them and the families they serve. They advised that family day home agencies differed in whether or not they permitted family child care educators to charge families a fee for days when they did not provide care.

I don't invoice families for days I am away. If I'm closed, I don't get paid. For instance, I was at the hospital and I had to take days off. I didn't get paid for those days. I don't have any kind of sick day policy or vacation policy, or anything like that. If I'm not available, I don't get paid. (Level III Family Child Care Educator working in a smaller community)

Individual family child care educators expressed support for family day home agencies providing them with access to group benefit plans. They saw access to affordable group benefit plans as encouraging some family child care educators to remain in the field.

Early Childhood Educator Compensation

Much of early childhood educators' discussion of compensation centered on their low pay and the challenges this presented for them individually and for the early learning and child care sector as a whole. They were unhappy and frustrated that their wages did not reflect their education, level of responsibility or the value of their work. They highlighted low pay as one of the reasons educators left the field and a disincentive for some staff to increase their education. Individual educators drew attention to the inequities in compensation, with staff commonly not receiving pay increases for their years of service or for taking on additional responsibilities. A majority saw a publicly funded provincial wage scale as a way both to raise compensation and to more fairly compensate educators for their level of education, years of experience and roles and responsibilities. Students completing post-secondary credentials, some while working in the field, and family child care educators were also concerned about low pay.

Centre-Based Educators' Views on Compensation

In all of the focus groups, educators expressed their dissatisfaction with their compensation. They argued that their low wages did not reflect the demands of their work, nor their numerous responsibilities, including program planning, documentation and support for families. Some Level II and III certified educators saw their low pay as reflecting the undervaluing of early learning and care work. Grande Prairie educators described how low wages reinforced the view that early learning and care was not a profession, but rather work that anyone could do, with little or no formal education. Educators in smaller communities highlighted the need for improvements in both the valuing of early learning and care work and staff wages to help the child care sector recruit and retain greater numbers of qualified educators.

There are definitely times when we have really hard days and feel so defeated when you question why am I doing this for this much money? (Level III Educator working in Edmonton)



Level I educators shared the financial challenges they faced being paid only slightly above the provincial minimum wage and below a living wage. They described struggling to pay post-secondary tuition fees to increase their education and, in some cases, difficulties meeting their monthly expenses. Calgary educators highlighted the financial hardships international students faced who, despite paying significantly higher post-secondary tuition fees than domestic students (up to three times higher in some cases), received the same low wages. Individual educators in Grande Prairie shared examples of staff leaving the field for better paying jobs so that they could afford to do things like buy a house.

Some Level I and II educators advised that they did not consider it worthwhile to pursue further education, given the low pay more qualified educators receive. Other Level I educators were disappointed that their wages did not increase when they completed professional development courses and workshops. Some experienced Level I educators were frustrated because their wages were the same or similar to those of new staff entering the field. They further felt it was unfair that they were paid less than Level III certified educators, despite doing the same work and having similar responsibilities.

Level II and III certified educators in Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie, as well as Level I educators working in smaller communities, advised that some staff had second jobs to boost their incomes, while individual educators in Edmonton described the financial pressure they felt to take on a second job, despite already feeling tired by their work in child care. Educators in Fort McMurray highlighted the significant loss of income they experienced when the provincial government cancelled the Northern Living Allowance for child care staff in summer 2020. They described pay reductions of up to \$12,000 per year, which resulted in many staff leaving the field and severe disruptions for many child care programs and services. They advised that the continued payment of the allowance to staff in schools and other sectors made it more difficult for child care programs to recruit and retain staff and reinforced the views of some educators that their work was not valued.

Most of the staff have second jobs — a side hustle. They need other incomes coming in to sustain their families. I can't pay ECEs less than \$20 per hour, they also have to travel into town to come to work at our remote location. It's hard to retain staff. Wages are the biggest complaint I get from educators. Our wages don't match the work we do.
(Level III Educator working in the Grande Prairie Region)

Educators across the province shared examples of staff leaving the field because of the low pay, choosing instead to work in other sectors. Educators in Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray and in smaller communities described staff moving to school systems, while those in Edmonton reported educators taking on roles in other caring professions. Other educators noted that staff also left for higher paying jobs in the trades or service sectors — jobs with generally much less responsibility and stress than work in child care. Educators in Grande Prairie advised that the low pay contributed to some staff viewing child care as a 'stepping stone' to work in other related fields with better compensation, including teaching or social work. They further commented that educators sometimes moved between centres for relatively small increases in pay.

We lost three educators to the school system in September because they were higher paid and all the additional days off. We also have Level I's who don't make enough money to pay the money upfront to go to school, even though the government does provide PD funding. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)

Educators in Fort McMurray highlighted the difficulties centres faced in retaining staff given the higher wages in the region, including in the retail and service sectors. They advised that post-secondary students taking early learning and care credentials often did not consider work in child care, but rather looked for

employment in the school system because of the higher wages and the better benefits available. Individual Level II and III certified educators in Grande Prairie and in smaller communities reported that some centres reduced staff's paid hours when enrollments were low, further adding to educators' financial insecurity.

I am speaking on behalf of everyone in Fort McMurray. We felt the impact when we lost the Northern Living Allowance. All of our staff put in their resignations. It is so hard to hire people now because of the pay — especially Level I. We all know this is not an easy job. (Level II Educator working in Fort McMurray)

Centre-Based Educator's Views on Approaches to Compensation

As part of their compensation discussions, educators were asked about a provincial wage scale and whether this might help improve their pay. To support these discussions, educators were given information on the draft provincial wage scale developed by the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta. Some educators were not familiar with the idea of a provincial wage scale. Others raised questions about how it would be funded. Overall, educators saw merit in the introduction of a provincial wage scale, that would compensate them more equitably, taking into account their level of education or certification, their experience and work roles and responsibilities. They saw this approach as a fairer way to compensate educators than the current wage enhancements. Individual educators in Edmonton and Calgary indicated that some larger organizations already had wage scales in place.

I think the wage grid is great. It was long overdue that the top-ups were increased. But, there needs to be a base. Some programs are paying minimum wage for Level II's and III's and others pay them what they deserve to be paid. ECE's are definitely underpaid. (Level III Educator working in Calgary)

Educators identified some limitations with the current wage enhancements including the lack of additional wage top-ups for staff in leadership roles; the ineligibility of some worked hours for wage-top ups, including after-hours work, sick days and statutory holidays; the lack of an increase for years of experience; and the time lag between increases in the value of the enhancements. Individual Level I certified educators were dissatisfied with the lower wage enhancements they received, compared to Level II and Level III certified educators, despite having similar workplace roles and responsibilities. Those educators who received vacation pay rather than paid vacation time argued that it was unfair that they missed out on wage enhancements when they took unpaid leaves.

ECE's take extra classes, such as Flight courses, workshops, stay back for kids who get picked up late, or start early in a case where a child comes early to a centre. ECE's make the effort to gain more knowledge but their wage is not an accurate representation of their efforts. (Level I Educator working in a smaller community)

Educators highlighted the need for a provincial wage scale to fairly compensate staff for their education and experience. Level I educators with longer work histories expressed concerns that they were not compensated for their experience, but rather received the same hourly wage as new Level I staff entering the field (including the same wage enhancement). Educators in Edmonton argued that a provincial wage scale should include a sufficient number of 'steps' to provide staff with opportunities for wage increases over time. They cautioned that grids with too few steps would result in educators reaching the top of their pay scales relatively quickly, leaving them with limited opportunities for income growth. Educators in Calgary and Fort McMurray saw the need for a compensation framework to include different wage rates for staff in leadership or management roles to compensate them for their additional roles and responsibilities.

There are people who have pursued education as a way to increase their certification level. I think there should be some form of compensation for years of service. If you've been at a centre and have years of service there should be an increase in your wage. (Level III Educator working in Edmonton)

Educators in Calgary and Grande Prairie argued that a provincial wage scale should establish competitive starting wages for all educators that meet 'living' wage guidelines. They advised that some service providers currently paid their staff at or close to minimum wage. Educators in Grande Prairie who previously worked in one of the publicly funded early learning and child care centre pilot sites (\$25 per day child care) highlighted the benefits of the higher 'wage floors' included as part of the initiative. Educators in Calgary and Grande Prairie advised that a provincial wage scale should also extend to include staff in school-age programs.

Additional educator comments on a provincial wage scale included the following: individual educators in Grande Prairie saw the need for regional premiums to accommodate the higher cost of living in some areas of the province; those in Calgary and Fort McMurray cautioned that the provincial government would have to sufficiently fund programs and services to cover higher educator wages, with some concerned that this may not occur; while educators in Calgary advised that some private owner-operators would want to maintain control over staff wages and may be less supportive of a provincial wage scale than front-line educators.



Student Educators' Views on Compensation

Student educators shared many of the same concerns about compensation as centre-based staff. Students at Keyano College described the previous cancellation of the Northern Living Allowance as a continued problem for educators, given the high cost of living in the Fort McMurray region. Individual student educators drew attention to the financial insecurity Level I educators faced and argued that higher compensation would encourage more staff to increase their education and stay in the field. They further advised that some educators' concerns about their own financial well-being potentially impacted their ability to support high-quality learning environments for children.

When someone comes into the field, they should have a certain wage to keep them motivated. Higher wages help staff focus on the children, not oh my gosh it's the end of the month and I have to pay the rent. Yes, you have the passion, but at the end of the day you have to pay bills too. (Student Educator, Fort McMurray Region)

Individual student educators described the 'passion' for working with children as insufficient to overcome the challenge of low wages. They shared examples of the financial hardships educators faced including delaying starting their own families; educators who were single parents living precariously on one household income and of international students struggling to meet their living expenses because of the limit on the number of hours they were eligible to work. University students referred to the necessity for some educators to take on an additional part-time job to compensate for their low pay. Both college and university student educators commented on the undervaluing of early learning and care work, advising that low pay and the lack of benefits contributed to educators leaving the field. Individual student educators observed that some owner-operators did not appear to place value on staff increasing their formal education or experience.

Some university students were discouraged that they would not receive higher compensation for completing a degree credential. Individual students argued for the introduction of a Level IV certification, with higher compensation, to encourage degree-qualified educators to stay in the field. Some students were worried, however, that Level III educators would not support a new certification level, especially if it meant that they had to upgrade their own credentials.

I think it would be helpful to have a Level IV. A lot of classmates have gone on to get an Education degree, because that comes with more benefits and opportunities. I am paying a lot for this degree and when I finish, I am going to be making the same wage as when I started. It would be nice to have an additional top-up for a degree. (Student Educator, Calgary)

While university students saw merit in a provincial wage scale that compensated educators for their education and experience, college students saw increased wage enhancements as the quickest way to raise educator pay, which they argued needed to increase immediately to ease the financial burdens they faced.

Family Child Care Educators' Views on Compensation

Family child care educators shared the same concerns as centre-based staff about low compensation and, in some cases, their own financial security. They advised that despite working longer hours (more than 10 to 12 hours a day) their incomes were not keeping pace with rising costs. While family child care educators appreciated receiving wage enhancements, they noted that the cap on eligible working hours (181 hours per month) fell short of the number of hours they spent on direct care and after hours planning, preparation and administration of their business. Individual educators reported that their hourly rate of pay had fallen,

because of the longer hours they now worked. Their net incomes were similarly depressed because of higher operating costs.

I did the math the other day, and I am making \$16 hour and working 190 hours a month. And then, you take your groceries, your insurance and all those things. Right now, with the way inflation is, with mortgage renewals, and with interest rates, things are ridiculous. (Level I Family Child Care Educator working in a mid-sized city)

Family child care educators advised that they had to operate at full capacity to earn a reasonable income which, for some, also involved caring for their own children. They described the financial challenges of having vacant spaces, of providing part-time care rather than full-time care, and of taking time off for vacation or sick days. Individual educators who had previously worked in senior roles in centre-based care advised that their net income, after deductions for household and program expenses, was now lower. Some educators found the cap on parent fees and the limit on parent fee increases challenging and contributing to their incomes not keeping pace with their rising expenses. They suggested that the combination of lower or flat educator incomes and rising costs was potentially threatening the quality of care some family child care educators could provide.

It depends how full you are. Full is fabulous. But if I have a part-time kid or I take holidays, then it drastically changes. I am typically open 10 hours a day. But I don't think for the amount of education and the things we have to do that the pay is the right amount. And your income isn't a set amount. (Level III Family Child Care Educator working in a mid-sized city)

Overall, family child care educators appreciated the benefits of working as an independent contractor, including more autonomy over how they supported children's early learning and care and the ability to provide care for their own children. They highlighted, however, the challenges of operating a small business, including limited opportunities for income or career development and growth and the difficulties and isolation of working alone. Individual educators indicated that they would likely look to return to more regular paid employment when their own children aged out of child care.

Strategies to Improve Early Childhood Educators' Working Conditions, Access to Benefits and Compensation

The observations and experiences early childhood educators shared in the focus groups largely echoed the findings from previous research on educator working conditions, access to benefits and compensation. While educators affirmed their own motivations and commitment to work in early learning and care, they highlighted the challenges and stresses front-line staff face and the impacts of these on their well-being, staff turnover and the capacity of programs and services to deliver high-quality early learning and care.

The challenges educators described highlight the need for publicly funded, sector-wide strategies to stabilize the Alberta early learning and care workforce and provide the foundation for the longer-term task of building its size and capacity. These strategies will need to form part of a larger, more comprehensive workforce strategy that draws on successful policies and practices in other jurisdictions, while taking into account the current state and capacity of Alberta's child care workforce. Consistent with supporting the 'thriving' workforces federal, provincial and territorial ministers identified as central to system building at their July 2023 meeting in Iqaluit, the strategies required will need to provide educators with more equitable access to the resources and supports they need to deliver high-quality and inclusive early learning and care. They will also need to ensure that educators are more fairly and competitively compensated in ways that reflect their education, specialized knowledge, experience and the value of their work.

To help support educators, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade will further need to consider changes to child care policy, regulation and funding, with a strong emphasis on ensuring that the new funding formula, currently under development as part of the *Alberta Cost Control Framework and For-Profit Expansion Plan*, provides service providers with sufficient resources to recruit, retain and fairly compensate qualified staff. While there are actions service providers can and should take to improve educator working conditions, compensation and access to benefits at the individual program or service level, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade will need to provide leadership in developing and implementing the larger policy and funding changes required to ensure that improvements are substantive, sustained and consistent across the sector.

Improvements in Early Childhood Educator Working Conditions

Early childhood educators' working conditions shape both the quality of children's early learning and care and the capacity of the sector to attract and retain qualified staff. Poor or challenging working conditions characterized by a lack of resources and support, low staff-to-child ratios, long work hours with little or no non-contact time, and limited autonomy or self-efficacy can all negatively impact educator well-being, increase burn-out and contribute to staff leaving the profession. Less experienced educators, with lower levels of education, may further be more likely to leave the field after relatively short-periods of employment if they face challenging working conditions and receive insufficient support from owner-operators or centre managers. High rates of educator turnover disrupt stable relationships between educators and children, erode the capacity of staff teams and result in reductions in the quality of early learning and care children and their families receive.

In combination, well-resourced working environments; strong and respectful communications between front-line and management or leadership staff; effective supports for educator professional learning and development and collaborative workplace cultures can create the conditions necessary for the delivery of high-quality early learning and care. The historic reliance on market-based approaches and the limited public funding of regulated child care have resulted in challenging working conditions for many educators, with significant variations in the resources and supports available to them to deliver the high-quality early learning and care children need.

The following strategies are proposed to improve educator working conditions.

The Development and Funding of Orientation and Induction Supports for New Educators

The planned expansion of regulated child care services under the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement requires a significant increase in the number of new certified educators entering the field over the next two years and beyond. Many of these new educators will have limited formal education and little experience working in regulated child care, with some entering the workforce as newcomers to Canada. To help them transition into the field, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should work with the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement (ARCQE), the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA), the Alberta Family Child Care Association (AFCCA), the School Age Care Directors Association of Alberta (SACDA) and public post-secondary college and university faculty to design a series of orientation and induction resources for use in centre-based child care and family child care. The Ministry should further develop and establish guidelines for the orientation and support of new educators and require senior staff in centre-based child care and family day home agencies to complete formal training in the orientation and induction of new educators. As part of its service delivery funding, the Ministry should provide child care centres and family day home agencies with dedicated resources to support the orientation and induction of new educators.

Funding for Back-up and Relief Staff to Enrich Staff-to-Child Ratios

The current staff-to-child ratios and group sizes set out in regulation place significant demands on educators, especially those with little formal education or experience. Educators advise that they often struggle to

provide children with the one-to-one care they need and find it difficult to meet the learning and care needs of the large groups of children in their care. Educators cite particular challenges in working with groups of up to eight infants (13 to 19 months of age) and with large groups of toddlers and preschoolers.

To support educators in the short- to medium-terms, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should provide child care centres with dedicated funding for back-up or relief staff as part of the proposed new funding formula for regulated centre-based child care. Centres would use this dedicated funding to support periodic enriched staff-to-child ratios (more staff) and or the temporary relief of staff who are overburdened. The Ministry should also provide similar dedicated funding to licensed family day home agencies to support the provision of back-up or relief family child care.

In the longer-term, the Ministry should review the current staff-to-child ratios and group sizes set out in regulation for centre-based child care to ensure they are consistent with supporting the delivery of high-quality early learning and child care. The Ministry should complete a similar review of the number of children (and their ages) family child care educators can care for in their own homes (including their own children).

As part of the above review, the Ministry should further establish new 'staffing requirements' for 'primary staff members' at the group or classroom level rather than at the centre level. The goal of the new requirements would be to ensure that each group or classroom of children is supported, at all times, by a minimum of one 'primary staff member' or educator with either a Level II or III certification.



New Approaches to Educator Professional Learning and Education

Continuing professional learning for certified educators is important for the professionalization of the workforce and the delivery of high-quality early learning and care. Educators require equitable access to ongoing professional learning, including from pedagogical partners or other practice experts during regular work hours. This learning should be comprehensive and linked to their work with children, families and other educators. To support the effective professional learning and education of certified educators, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should work with AECEA, AFCCA, SACDA, ARCQE, public post-secondary college and university faculty, researchers and service providers to review the current grant funding programs in place for educator professional development. The review should consider educators' learning needs, including those of staff in senior leadership and management roles; provide educators with more equitable access to professional learning opportunities; support educators' on-site learning as part of staff teams; and provide educators with increased opportunities to increase their level of formal education.

The following strategies are proposed to support effective ongoing professional learning and education for educators.

Mandatory Professional Development in Pedagogical Leadership and Management/Administration for Staff in Leadership Positions

Centre leaders and managers and senior staff in family day home agencies play important roles in shaping the quality of educator working environments, including providing opportunities for their professional growth and development. Educators' working conditions currently vary on a program and service basis linked in part to the quality of centre or agency leadership and management. To increase the capacity of management and leadership staff in centres and family day home agencies to create high-quality working conditions for educators, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should work with ARCQE and public post-secondary college and university faculty to expand the current professional learning opportunities available for centre and family day home agency senior staff. These learning opportunities should focus both on pedagogical leadership and the management of programs and services.

Over time, all centre management and leadership staff (including owner-operators) and senior staff in family day home agencies should be required to complete designated pedagogical leadership and management training provided through ARCQE or public post-secondary colleges and universities to support their work with educators. This training should be available at no cost to centre and family day home agency management and leadership staff.

Designated Professional Learning Days

To provide educators with equitable access to professional learning during regular work hours, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should work with regulated child care providers, including family day home agencies, to establish the guidelines and provide the resources for sector-wide professional learning days. Child care services would close on designated professional learning days to allow certified educators to participate in approved professional learning either at a centre, family day home agency or regional level. The Ministry should work with ARCQE, public post-secondary college and university faculty, ECE professional associations (AECEA, AFCCA, SACDA), researchers and service providers to support the design and delivery of sector-wide professional learning days that meet the needs of early childhood educators. Educators would receive their regular compensation while participating in professional learning days.

Access to On-site Pedagogical Partners

To support improvements in educators' pedagogy and practice the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should increase its investments in the on-site Pedagogical Partner Support program provided through ARCQE. New Ministry investments should support an increase in the number of pedagogical partners to ensure that all regulated child care service providers, including family day home agencies, have equitable access to on-site pedagogical partners.

As part of the design of a new funding formula for regulated child care, the Ministry should explore options to include pedagogical partner positions in both centre-based child care and family day home agencies. These pedagogical partners with expertise in the provincial *Flight Curriculum*, could be shared by a number of service providers. The increased provision of on-site pedagogical partners would complement the increased pedagogical leadership knowledge of centre and family day home agency leadership and management staff.

Improved Pedagogical Supports for Family Child Care Educators

To increase the capacity of family child educators to deliver high-quality early learning and care, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should work with the AFCCA, family child care providers and public post-secondary colleges and universities to increase the number and proportion of family day home consultants who hold a Level III certification. Over time, the Ministry should amend the child care regulation to require all family day home agency consultants to hold a Level III certification.

Mandatory Ongoing Professional Learning

In parallel with the implementation of designated professional learning days, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should introduce a regulatory or policy requirement for all certified educators to complete a required number of approved professional learning hours in a designated period, for example up to 45 hours of professional learning every three years. The Ministry would require educators to renew their certification on a three-year basis, with renewal dependent on their completion of the required number of hours of professional learning.

To guide and support their ongoing professional learning, all certified educators should be required to develop a professional learning plan. The learning plan would include an educator's education and training goals and key areas for competency and skill development. Educators would be responsible for updating their learning plans based on self-reflection and discussions with their centre supervisor or, in the case of family child care educators, with their family day home consultant.

Access to Public Post-secondary Programs of Study

All educators benefit from completing formal post-secondary education. This education provides professional educators with the foundational knowledge and competencies they need to support the delivery of high-quality early learning and care. Educators working in the field and looking to upgrade their post-secondary education can face financial barriers which limit their access to post-secondary programs of study. Currently, educators are eligible for up to \$1,500 in professional development funding to cover the costs of tuition. This funding does not cover the full cost of programs of study (tuition and related fees) and educators advise that they face delays in receiving reimbursement for tuition fees.

To help reduce the financial barriers some educators face in completing post-secondary credentials, and to encourage educators to remain in the field, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should increase the

funding available to eligible educators to cover all, or substantially all, of the tuition and related fees for certificate and diploma programs at public post-secondary colleges and universities. To be eligible to receive support, early childhood educators would commit to work in regulated child care for a designated period of time after graduation (e.g. two years of service for every year of educational funding).

As an alternative to increased tuition funding, the Ministry should also explore options for student loan forgiveness for educators who complete public post-secondary early learning and care credentials followed by designated periods of employment in the field.

The Provision of Paid Non-Contact Time

Educators require equitable access to paid non-contact time to support their work with children and families. Non-contact time provides educators with opportunities to plan and document children’s early learning and to reflect individually, and in teams, on their work. Educators’ access to paid non-contact time can help improve the quality of early learning and care. To provide all educators with equitable access to paid non-contact time, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should amend the current early learning and care regulation to provide educators with dedicated paid non-contact time for program planning, reflection and administration as part of their regular workday. The Ministry should further work with the professional associations that represent educators (AECEA, AFCCA and SACDA), researchers and service providers to determine the amount of paid non-contact time educators should receive on a weekly and monthly basis. The new funding formula the Ministry is developing for regulated child care, as part of the *Alberta Cost Control Framework and For-Profit Expansion Plan*, should include dedicated funding for educator non-contact time as part of their regular workday.



A Comprehensive Review of the Inclusive Child Care Program and Related Funding and Supports Provided through Other Ministries

To support the inclusion of children with additional needs, certified educators require access to pre-service education, specialized resources, supports and allied professionals. The resources and supports currently available through the Provincial Inclusive Child Care (ICC) Program are often not sufficient to support the inclusion of children with additional learning and care needs. This is resulting in challenging working environments for educators, poor quality learning and care environments for some children and their families and, in some cases, the exclusion of children with additional needs from regulated child care.

To improve the inclusion of children with additional needs in regulated child care, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should undertake a comprehensive review of the Provincial ICC Program and the resources, services and supports it provides child care programs and educators. Ministry staff should also work with the Ministry of Seniors, Community and Social Services and the Ministry of Education to determine how funding through the Family Support for Children with Disabilities program and Early Childhood Services can be more effectively accessed and used to support the inclusion of children with additional needs in regulated child care programs. The Ministry should further work with the Ministry of Advanced Education and public post-secondary colleges and universities to provide educators with further pre-service education as well as dedicated professional learning on the inclusion of all children and families in regulated child care.

In conjunction with the above review and work, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should provide dedicated funding for inclusion as one component of the proposed funding formula for regulated child care under development as part of the *Alberta Cost Control Framework and For-Profit Expansion Plan*. This dedicated funding should be provided to both centre-based and family day home care service providers.

Improvements in Early Childhood Educators' Access to Benefits

Educators' access to workplace benefits forms an important part of their total compensation and contributes both to staff well-being and staff recruitment and retention. Early learning and care work is physically and emotionally demanding and educators' close interactions with children regularly expose them to infections and viruses. The primarily female workforce also commonly has caring responsibilities outside of work for young children or other family members, which may further result in them needing additional time away from the workplace.

Benefits such as paid sick time, personal care days, health and dental benefits, paid vacation time and pensions can help support educators' work with children and families. The more limited public funding of child care prior to the Canada-wide system building investments and the primary reliance on private organizations (for-profit and nonprofit) to deliver services has resulted in educators having less access to workplace benefits than staff in related fields. It has further led to inequities in the benefits educators receive, with individual business owners and nonprofit organization boards determining the benefits to which educators have access.

In December 2023, the Nova Scotia provincial government announced the introduction of a province-wide benefits and pension program for early childhood educators. As of January 1, 2024, all employees have

access to an Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) and beginning in May 2024 were enrolled in group benefits and pension plans.¹⁵ The group benefits plan includes medical, dental, orthodontic, vision, life and long-term disability coverage, EFAP, and emergency travel coverage, through the nonprofit Health Association of Nova Scotia. The defined benefit pension plan is provided through the CAAT Pension Plan, also a nonprofit. The provincial government provides a grant to family home child care providers to source their own benefits and contribute to a registered retirement savings plan. Plans will follow employees as long as they remain eligible and are employed by a provincially licensed and funded child care centre or family home agency in Nova Scotia.

The following strategies are proposed to improve educators' access to benefits.

Design and Implementation of a Publicly Funded Province-wide Benefit Plan for Certified Early Childhood Educators

The Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should work with the professional associations representing early childhood educators (AECEA, AFCCA and SACDA), early learning and child care researchers, large insurance providers, and service providers to research, design and implement a comprehensive, publicly funded, province-wide benefit plan for certified educators. The Ministry should seek advice and input from educators and service providers on the proposed benefit plan, including from those service providers which currently provide their staff with access to benefit plans (e.g. the YMCA of Northern Alberta).

The provincially funded benefit plan would provide educators with equitable access to health, dental, disability and life insurance benefits. The provincial government would work with educator professional associations to determine how best to administer the new plan and to ensure that premiums are affordable for educators. The provincial government should work with the AFCCA to ensure that family child care providers have access to equivalent benefit plans or supports that align with their status as self-employed individuals.

All regulated child care providers receiving funding under the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement would be required either to support their employees' access to the province-wide plan or provide them with similar coverage under existing plans.

Design and Implementation of a Publicly Funded Province-wide Defined Contribution Pension Plan for Certified Early Childhood Educators

The Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should work with the professional associations representing early childhood educators (AECEA, AFCCA and SACDA), early learning and child care researchers and pension fund experts to research and design a defined contribution pension plan for certified early childhood educators. The Ministry would seek input and advice from early childhood educators and service providers on the proposed benefit plan, including from those service providers which currently provide their staff with access to a pension plan (e.g. the YMCA of Northern Alberta).

All regulated child care providers receiving funding under the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement would be required to support their employees' access to the provincial defined contribution pension plan or provide them with similar pension benefits under an existing plan.

¹⁵ Child Care Nova Scotia. *Pension and Group Benefits*. Retrieved from: <https://childcarenovascotia.ca/benefits>

Early Childhood Educator Access to Paid Sick Days and Paid Personal Days

The Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should work with the professional associations representing early childhood educators (AECEA, AFCCA and SACDA) and early learning and child care researchers to develop new province-wide guidelines for paid sick days and paid personal days for certified early childhood educators. The Ministry should seek input and advice from service providers on educators' access to paid sick days and personal care days.

The Ministry should set out in policy and or regulation the minimum number of paid sick days and paid personal care days certified early childhood educators would be eligible to receive. All regulated child care providers receiving funding under the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement would be required to provide their employees with the minimum number of paid sick days and personal care days set out in regulation or policy. Service providers would have the discretion to exceed the minimums set out in regulation or policy.

Early Childhood Educator Access to Paid Vacation Time

The Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should work with the professional associations representing early childhood educators (AECEA, AFCCA and SACDA) and early learning and child care researchers to determine new minimum requirements for paid vacation days for certified early childhood educators. The Ministry should also seek input and advice from service providers on educators' access to paid vacation time.

The Ministry should set out in policy and or regulation the minimum number of paid vacation days certified early childhood educators would be eligible to receive. All regulated child care providers receiving funding under the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement would be required to provide their employees with the minimum number of paid vacation days set out in regulation or policy. Service providers would have the discretion to exceed the minimums set out in regulation or policy.

Improvements in Early Childhood Educator Compensation

Most certified educators remain modestly paid and there are significant differences in the compensation educators receive depending on their employer. The generally low wages across the sector continue to make it challenging for programs and services to recruit qualified staff; negatively impact educator well-being and morale and contribute to high rates of staff turnover, including the loss of qualified, experienced educators.

The majority of provinces and territories have committed to develop wage scales or grids for certified educators as part of their Canada-wide early learning and child care system building work. Six jurisdictions have implemented wage grids, in some form, following consultations with stakeholders. Publicly funded wages scales can help provide educators with fair and equitable compensation that reflects their level of pre-service education, years of experience and the roles they play in the delivery of regulated child care. They can further help to ensure that educators are competitively paid and have opportunities for future income growth. AECEA has completed preliminary work on a provincial wage scale for certified educators in Alberta and held initial consultations with stakeholders to consider the scale. AECEA's initial scale provides a useful starting point for the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade to develop and implement a comprehensive, publicly funded province-wide wage scale for educators.



Design and Implementation of a Publicly Funded, Province-wide Wage Scale for Certified Early Childhood Educators

The Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should work with the provincial associations that represent early childhood educators (AECEA, AFCCA and SACDA), early learning and child care researchers and labour market experts to design and implement a province-wide wage scale for certified early childhood educators. The scale should fairly and equitably compensate educators based on their level of pre-service education, experience and work roles and responsibilities. The Ministry should seek input from service providers on how the proposed wage scale can support the recruitment and retention of qualified educators and the delivery of high-quality and inclusive early learning and child care.

To support the development of a provincial wage scale, Ministry staff should review the design and implementation of similar wage scales for certified educators in other provinces, as well as province-wide wage scales for staff in related fields (such as public schools and health care). The Ministry should take a number of factors into account in developing the grid including whether the wage scale should include 'regional allowances' to fairly and competitively compensate staff who live and work in higher-cost regions of the province; how the wage scale will accommodate educator compensation that either exceeds the wage amounts set out in the grid or which is established as part of collective agreements; whether the wage scale should set a higher rate of compensation for educators who hold four-year early learning and care degree qualifications; and how the wage scale or an equivalent approach to compensation would be implemented for family child care educators. To ensure that the wage scale remains current and reflects increases in the cost of living and changing labour market dynamics, the Ministry should commit to review it on a periodic basis.

To support the implementation of a provincial wage scale, the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade should ensure that service providers receive sufficient and equitable supply-side funding through the proposed new funding formula currently under-development as part of the *Alberta Cost Control Framework and For-Profit Expansion Plan*. Funding provided through the formula should reflect the different composition of centre staff teams (number of staff certified at different levels and those with supervisory and management roles and responsibilities) and accommodate increases in educator compensation as staff increase their level of education, gain more years of experience and take on more senior roles or greater responsibilities.

All regulated child care providers receiving funding under the Canada-Alberta Canada-wide agreement would be required, at minimum, to compensate educators in line with the amounts set out in the provincial wage scale. Service providers may choose to provide educators with higher compensation than that set out in the provincial wage scale.

Conclusions

The Canada-Alberta Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement provides the opportunity to transform the provincial child care sector to better meet the needs of children and their families. New workforce investments will be central to this transformation, given the foundational role qualified, well-supported early childhood educators play in the delivery of high-quality, inclusive early learning and care.

The historic reliance on market-based approaches to organize and deliver child care in Alberta and across much of Canada, allied with the relatively low levels of public funding support, have contributed to the undervaluing of early childhood educators and their work, and resulted in workforces that are often fragile, unstable and under-resourced. Educators' working conditions remain challenging and stressful and their access to benefits and compensation limited compared to that of professional staff in related fields, such as public education. Further, there are significant variations within the sector, with individual private for-profit and nonprofit service providers allocating resources in different ways to support educators and their work.

The findings from the current focus groups align with those from previous research on early learning and care workforces and highlight the need for new province-wide strategies to improve educator working conditions, access to benefits and compensation. The increasing demands on early childhood educators require a comprehensive workforce strategy to help stabilize the workforce and provide the firm foundation necessary for early learning and child care system building. The findings from a large body of previous research, allied with the examples of promising approaches from other provinces, can help inform how the Government of Alberta invests in early childhood educators.

The Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade might also look to the education sector for direction on the kinds of strategies and approaches required to ensure that early childhood educators have more equitable access to the supports, resources and rewards they need to deliver high-quality, inclusive early learning and care. While the demands on public school teachers are significant, and increasing, they nevertheless have access to competitive salaries, comprehensive benefits and paid professional learning and non-contact time. Public schools and teachers further have the support of larger system infrastructure which ensures a greater consistency of service delivery through public funding and management. The improvements needed to advance early childhood educator compensation, working conditions and access to benefits require new investments and strategies supported and managed at the provincial level, with significant leadership from the Ministry of Jobs, Economy and Trade to ensure that all educators are equitably resourced and supported for their important work.

Appendix A

Early Childhood Educator Compensation and Working Conditions - Focus Group Protocol

The research team made minor modifications to the protocol to support the discussions with family child care educators and students completing post-secondary credentials.

Introduction

The current focus group is one of a series of groups the Muttart Foundation, the Association of Early Childhood Educators and the Alberta Leaders Caucus are hosting with early childhood educators to gather your advice on the improvements in educator compensation and working conditions that will help build a high-quality ELCC system in Alberta.

The results of the discussions will be compiled into a report that will be shared with the provincial and federal government and with other ELCC stakeholders.

A. Employee Working Conditions

Facilitator introduction (approximate text)

We would like to begin by asking you some questions about early childhood educators' working conditions. The phrase 'early childhood educators working conditions are children's learning conditions', speaks to the importance of making sure that early childhood educators' working conditions support their work with young children.

Facilitator Questions

1. Thinking back to when you first started working in child care, what did you find the most useful in terms of helping you begin your work in a specific centre or program? For example, did you receive an orientation or written materials from your supervisor/director which were helpful?

Follow up: Are there other orientation activities or resources that would have been helpful?

2. Thinking of the position you have now, what resources and supports are available to you to help you provide quality care?

Follow up: Are there any other resources and supports that add to the quality of your working conditions?

3. Apart from wages and benefits (which we will discuss later) what changes, if any, would you like to see at your centre to improve educators, working conditions?

4. Do you have any other thoughts or suggestions that you would like to share about working conditions in child care in general and how they might be improved?

B. Employee Benefits

Facilitator Introduction

We would now like to ask you some questions about employee benefits.

Employee benefits form an important part of the compensation early childhood educators receive. Previous studies indicate that early childhood educators often have access to fewer workplace benefits, such as paid sick time, health and dental benefits, life and disability insurance and pension benefits than staff in other education and caring field. The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta offers its members access to a group health benefit plan, although they can only access it if their employer is an AECEA member.

Facilitator Questions

5. Based on your experiences in your current job, which of the employer-paid or employer-employee cost-shared benefits that you receive are of most value or importance to you?

Follow-up: What makes these particular benefits important to you?

6. Are there benefits that are currently not available to you that would make a difference to your work or your well-being?
7. Are there any final thoughts or comments you would like to share on early childhood educators' access to workplace benefits before we move on?



C. Compensation (Wages and Salary)

Facilitator Introduction

To conclude the focus group, we would like to ask you some questions about early childhood educators' wages or compensation. In Alberta as in the rest of Canada, early childhood educators' wages or salaries are relatively low when compared to staff in related fields or professions with similar qualifications.

8. Based on your experiences, what changes are needed to early childhood educators' compensation to better reflect their work responsibilities, education and work experience?

Approach to ECE Compensation

Facilitator Introduction

We would like to ask you some questions about how the Alberta government might best support fair and reasonable wages for early childhood educators that reflect their education, experience and work responsibilities.

At present, the Alberta government relies on wage-tops, combined with employer paid wages, to compensate certified educators. Other provincial governments have implemented or plan to implement provincial wage scales for early childhood educators, which set out the minimum hourly wages for early childhood educators across the province, based on their level of education, their work experience, and the role they play — director/supervisor or front-line staff. The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta has developed a draft provincial wage scale for educators, which it is currently reviewing with early childhood educators.

9. Based on your experience working in the field, how do you think the Alberta government can best support fair compensation for early childhood educators? Should it continue with its wage top-up approach combined with employer paid wages or should it look to develop a provincial wage scale for early childhood educators?
10. What do you see as the potential strengths and challenges of these different approaches?
11. Are there any additional things you would like to say on early childhood educator compensation?

Concluding Focus Group Question (time permitting)

Facilitator Introduction/Question

We have covered a lot of different topics this evening on working conditions, benefits and compensation. As we end our discussions, I would like to ask each of you what you think the federal and provincial government should focus on to improve educators' compensation and working conditions.

12. What one or two specific pieces of advice would you give them?

AECEA

Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta



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