

Why We Need A Child Care System

**Values,
goals,
curriculum**
(what we want
and what we
believe)

**Data,
research,
evaluation**
(collection,
information
analysis)

**Governance
& infrastructure**
(roles,
responsibilities,
legislation,
standards)

**Physical
environment**
(well-designed
space, first-rate
equipment)

Child Care System

**Public
management &
accountability**
(monitoring
and evaluation)

**Early
childhood
educators**
(well-qualified,
well-supported &
well paid)

Funding
(sustainable,
predictable
public
investment)

**Planning
and policy**
(research-based,
strategic and
system-wide)

So what do we mean by a system?

A system is simply a set of elements or pieces that work together in an interconnected network. Each interconnected piece is equally important and must be considered in relation to every other piece.

AECEA Association of
Early Childhood
Educators of
Alberta

Join us in speaking out for qualified early childhood educators and quality care.

www.aecea.ca

info@aecea.ca

780.421.7544

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What does an early learning and child care system look like?

Different organizations and jurisdictions use different models. AECEA's model is adapted from the [Quality by Design](#) project of the Childcare Resource and Research Unit at the University of Toronto.

What the circles mean

- Values, goals and curriculum define what we believe and what we want for our children. They define who the system is for and why quality is important.
- Governance and infrastructure defines roles and responsibilities for government, parents and the community. It includes legislated standards and guidelines and ongoing consultation and assessment.
- Public management and accountability includes ongoing monitoring and evaluation as well as mechanisms for quality improvement. It also includes accountability related to expenditures of public funds.
- Data, research and evaluation provide the foundation for planning and policy development.
- Planning and policy are strategic, grounded in research and developed from a system-wide perspective.
- Funding means sustainable, predictable, public investment to keep the system stable and support quality delivery.
- Early childhood educators have the educational qualifications and professional learning they need to provide quality early learning and child care. They earn decent wages in supportive workplaces.
- The physical environment includes well-designed indoor and outdoor spaces and first-rate equipment.

Why do we need a system?

[Canada's Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#) encompasses five principles:

- quality
- accessibility
- affordability
- flexibility
- inclusivity

In a world of limited resources and diverse social and political agendas, these principles can compete with one another. For example, offering flexible child care options is expensive, so how can we be flexible and still be affordable? How can we raise educational standards for early childhood educators without raising wages to a level that makes education attainable? How can we raise standards and wages and keep care affordable for parents and families?

We can't address any principle effectively unless we consider the various components of child care within the context of a system. We can't make the system work and we can't achieve the goals we want unless we plan each piece with consideration to its effect on every other piece.

The "system" is what connects the pieces. Each piece is interrelated and each functions within the context of the whole.

A piecemeal approach simply doesn't work.

For example, we know that many parents can't access quality child care and that many programs have wait lists. At the same time, government reports show that 20% of the province's regulated child care spaces are not being used. This statistic is misleading. Most programs are licensed for more children than their physical space and staffing ratios can actually accommodate. And while spaces are available on paper, they don't exist in communities where they are needed. System-wide planning would prevent such misalignments of needs and resources.

How do we build a quality early learning and child care system?

Building a system includes a number of interrelated steps. These steps repeat over and over again as the system adapts and evolves.

- defining what we believe
- research-based planning and policy development
- delivery, including a welcoming physical environment and a workforce strategy for early childhood educators
- governance and infrastructure supported by public management and accountability
- funding

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Defining what we believe

Creating a system starts with defining what we believe.

Do we value children and families? Do we respect children's right to quality child care and a good start in life? Do we value children for who

they are? Do we believe that every action we take must be in a child's best interest?

How we build our system reflects our beliefs.

AECEA believes that all children and their families deserve and have a right to accessible, affordable, high-quality early learning and child care.

We believe that high-quality early learning and child care is the cornerstone of a caring, thriving society. It is a public good that must be supported by public investment.

We believe that high-quality early learning and child care depends on highly qualified early childhood educators who—like all Albertans—deserve fair wages, satisfying work and supportive working conditions.

We believe that all Albertans have a stake in high-quality child care. Parents, families, communities, businesses, service agencies, governments and the public share responsibility for giving the children of our province the best possible early learning and child care experiences.

What we believe is translated into a vision, values and guiding principles for the quality early learning and child care system that is our goal. AECEA supports the vision of Canada's Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework:

“All children can experience the enriching environment of quality early learning and child care that supports children's development to reach their full potential.”

The values and guiding principles that guide early childhood educators' approach to children's learning and care are set out in Alberta's curriculum framework, [Flight](#).

Research-based planning and policy development

System-based planning is grounded in research and evidence-based best practice. Data collection, research and analysis, and ongoing evaluation drive continuous improvement in the delivery of early learning and child

care programs and services. The result is better outcomes for children.

Effective plans must be strategic. They must incorporate legislation and well-developed policy. And they must connect early learning and care with health care, the education system and other components of Alberta's social infrastructure.

Policy determines the components of a child care system and how they will be delivered. Plans and policies must be developed from a system-wide perspective because changing or neglecting one part of the system affects every other part. For example, the lack of public funding keeps wages low. Low wages make it difficult for programs to recruit and retain qualified staff. Low wages also make it difficult for staff to advance their education. This affects their ability to keep up with best practices and deliver top-quality care.

System-wide planning and policy development facilitates adaptability and speedy, coordinated responses to crises. Susan Prentice—a research associate with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives—notes that, when COVID-19 struck, Toronto's integrated, city-wide early learning and child care system made it possible to coordinate a timely, city-wide response. The current policy structure of Alberta's early learning and child care sector makes such system-wide coordination difficult.

In a quality early learning and child care system, plans, policies, program delivery standards and regulations are coordinated by one lead department. But they are developed in partnership with parents and the community. The community includes early childhood educators, legislators, government administrators, businesses, non-profit agencies, parents and the public—because quality early learning and child care affects everyone, in every sector of society.



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Governance and infrastructure

A quality early learning and child care system is supported by effective infrastructure., parents, communities, early childhood educators and the child care sector all have a voice.

Infrastructure includes practical, well-monitored regulations, standards and guidelines. These are legislated by governments or set by professional or regulatory agencies.

In a well-functioning system, roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. Governments, communities and parents all have a place at the table. Consultation is regular and ongoing. And formalized interorganizational relationships ensure that children and families can access an integrated, interdisciplinary suite of programs and services.

A seamless connection between early learning and child care and the education system is particularly important.

Families need support to provide their children with nurturing care. They need financial support such as paid parental leave. They also need access to health, education, nutrition, child care and child protection.

A well-functioning system connects children and families to the resources they need. Alberta's current approach is uncoordinated and inefficient. Numerous departments and ministries provide various bits and pieces of child and family support.

Delivery

A quality early learning and child care system is staffed by well-qualified, caring early childhood educators.

Recruiting and retaining excellent people means supporting the early learning and child care workforce.

It means providing fair wages and benefits. It means creating positive workplace environments. And it means respecting early childhood educators as caring professionals who are valued for the important work they do.

In a quality early learning and child care system, programs are delivered in inviting, well-designed child care settings.

Well-planned and well-equipped indoor and outdoor play

environments give children the confidence they need to learn and explore. They allow children to engage with their peers, with adults and with the natural world around them.

Funding

Accessible, affordable, high-quality child care is every child's right. Honouring this right requires a quality early learning and child care system. A quality system must be supported by long-term planning and long-term funding that transcend political ideologies and terms of office.

Today, child care in Alberta operates on a supply-and-demand-based market model in which parents purchase spaces. Low wages make it difficult for programs to attract qualified staff, but in a market model like Alberta's, programs can't raise wages unless they raise parent fees. And parents can't afford to pay more.

Today, the Alberta government funds wage top-ups for staff and fee subsidies for parents. These measures are a band-aid solution to the issue of low wages and high fees. Only a system-wide approach can ensure that child care is accessible and affordable over the long term.

Public funding to support a system for everyone must replace piecemeal funding given to individual families.

Only public investment can provide long-term sustainable funding that keeps the system stable, supports quality and meets the needs of all children and families. "Limited public funding virtually guarantees that high quality services will be generally unavailable and unaffordable for many families while preventing the good wages needed to attract and retain highly qualified staff" (Care in Canada by 2020: A Vision and a Way Forward, p. 14).

UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre recommends that developed countries should spend at least 1% of GDP on early learning and child care. Alberta's spending on child care in 2019–2020 was less than 0.1% of its GDP.

In 2015–2016, Alberta spent approximately \$2,422 for each regulated child care space. This was the fifth-lowest allocation among Canadian jurisdictions and well below the average of \$3,405 per space (Friendly et al, p. 169).

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Public management and accountability

It goes without saying that a publicly funded early learning and child care system must be publicly managed. Only public management can ensure accountability and adherence to standards.

However, public management does not necessarily mean public delivery. Alberta currently has a mix of private (for-profit) and non-profit early learning and child care programs. Both receive public funding. Both are expected to be accountable for this funding and to adhere to legislated standards.

Money talks

A quality early learning and child care system takes research, planning, infrastructure and people power.

*It also takes money.
Lots of it.*

But if we really value children, we need to set aside our ideological biases in favour of evidence-based research, best practices and best approaches. We need to create welcoming spaces in our communities. We need to value children for who they are and for the unique strengths, histories, cultural practices and traditions they bring to their communities. We need to give children and families a place to belong. We need to support parents as they seek out appropriate environments that support their children's learning. And we need to provide access to quality child care and to the full range of community services and resources that families need.

Achieving these goals requires public investment. But every child care dollar spent today can save many dollars tomorrow.

Today, Alberta's early learning and child care system is significantly underfunded, and recent cuts have made the situation even worse.

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

Tell the Alberta government that you value children. And that it's time to invest in a quality early learning and child care system.

Join AECEA and its partners in advocating for qualified educators and quality child care.

Tell the Alberta government that you value quality early learning and child care.

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

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