

# TRANSFORMING WORK IN ONTARIO'S EARLY YEARS AND CHILD CARE SECTOR

Workforce Strategy Recommendations  
Presented to the Ministry of Education  
November 30, 2017

Prepared by the AECEO's  
Decent Work Task Force

## **Introduction: Making Decent Work**

Our vision is for all of Ontario's children and families to have access to quality affordable early years and child care programs where registered early childhood educators (RECEs) and staff are well supported with professional pay and decent work. This vision is founded on the assumption that early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a public good and a human right, not a commodity.

The following policy recommendations focus on advancing the early childhood profession as one of the key supports in expanding access to early years and child care programs in Ontario while also enhancing quality. The Task Force acknowledges that RECEs work in a wide variety of programs that support young children and families, with this in mind we endeavored to develop recommendations with a broad sector lens. The recommendations aim to inform the Ministry of Education's workforce strategy that was announced in Ontario's Renewed Early Years and Child Care Policy Framework.

Quality, Affordability and Access are the critical and interrelated parts of a thriving system of early years and child care programs and services. Quality is foundational. High-quality programs support a child's social, emotional and educational development in the here and now and build a foundation for lifelong learning. Access to high-quality ECEC is dependent on building enough comprehensive services so that families can not only find the kind of care that they need but also services that they can afford and trust.

We now know from research and experience that high-quality ECEC is directly linked to well-educated and qualified early childhood educators. The compensation and support available to staff must recognize the essential role that they play in a child's days, months and years, and in their future outcomes. Fair and appropriate wages and working conditions cannot be based solely or primarily on parent fees. Staffing costs are likely to be 80-90 per cent of the cost of maintaining a high-quality early childhood program. To remove affordability as a barrier to access to early childhood programs, the cost to parents must be significantly supported by public funds.

An early years and child care system with increased and more stable funding can employ a well-educated, well-compensated, well-supported early childhood profession, which is recognized and appreciated for the importance of its work.



Greater public funding will improve the recruitment and retention of Ontario registered early childhood educators (RECEs) through appropriate wages and good working conditions. Turnover is much lower in a stable system where wages and working conditions are prioritized. Research shows that good working conditions contribute to job satisfaction and ultimately to better outcomes for children and families. Improving recruitment and retention is critical with the anticipated demand for RECEs as more child care and EarlyON spaces are created.

Ontario RECEs have specialized knowledge of child development and curriculum in the early years. They design rich, inclusive early learning environments that are inquiry based. The 2013 You Bet I Still Care study shows that Ontario early childhood educators want to upgrade their knowledge and qualifications. However, they lack the supports to engage in professional development opportunities, or to upgrade their credentials. Any comprehensive workforce strategy must include a plan to enhance training opportunities, professional learning and career advancement opportunities for registered early childhood educators (RECEs) and early years staff.

We support the government's ambitious plans to transform the early years and child care system in Ontario. With a comprehensive workforce strategy, we believe that the implementation of the early years and child care policy framework has the potential to strengthen the early childhood professions' ability to consistently deliver high-quality programs. We recognize that the framework is complex and requires a strong collaboration between the Ministry of Education and the sector. With a clear vision anchored in an evidence-based framework the early childhood profession in Ontario *can be* renewed and transformed—it's in the best interests of children, families, the early childhood profession, and the province of Ontario.



## Summary of Recommendations

1. Develop a new base funding approach to early years and child care programs in Ontario that will ensure quality, affordability and access. A new system of base funding will include substantial increases to operational funding to keep services affordable while ensuring professional compensation, good working conditions and supports for registered early childhood educators (RECEs) and early years staff.
2. Implement a provincial wage scale with a \$25/hr minimum for RECEs and a benefit package, including paid sick and personal leave days, for registered early childhood educators. The wage scale must inform base funding, while recognizing the level of education and years of experience for RECEs and staff in accordance with pay equity principles. In the interim, maintain and immediately extend the Wage Enhancement Grant/Home Child Care Enhancement grant to establish a minimum wage of \$25/hr for all RECEs.
3. Develop and implement an Early Childhood Workforce Learning Framework which will enable such quality-related staff supports as paid time for professional learning and expanded opportunities for acquiring and upgrading qualifications.
4. Create practitioner roles and identify educational requirements alongside a career ladder that will strengthen program quality while formally recognizing the value of credentials and experience. This initiative will support the recruitment and retention of registered early childhood educators and a greater incentive to make ECEC a life-long career.
5. Change the positions of full-time Designated Early Childhood Educators working in the publicly-funded school systems to year-round and salaried status with compensation commensurate with other full time educators in the public education systems.
6. Commission an external review of the Full-Day Kindergarten educator team and classroom conditions to inform future planning and development.



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## **Policy and infrastructure that support RECEs and other staff to provide quality programs must be a central part of the government's workforce strategy.**

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- 1. Develop a new base funding approach to early years and child care programs in Ontario that will ensure quality, affordability and access. A new system of base funding will include substantial increases to operational funding to keep services affordable while increasing professional compensation, good working conditions and supports for registered early childhood educators (RECEs) and early years staff.*

The way programs are funded matters. Without stable, consistent funding that includes accountability measures and is based on determined parameters such as capped parent fees, staff compensation and supports for good working conditions, programs remain unstable and are forced to constantly negotiate between quality and access.

The need for inclusion and administrative supports, safe and healthy environments, more planning time, and a more manageable workload through improved ratios/group sizes and additional staffing were prominent themes in the responses to the AECEO's consultation survey. The risk of staff burnout is very high and a new base funding approach that responds to these and other issues (e.g. split shifts) will ensure programs can provide quality, affordability and access for all children and families while improving working conditions for staff. This concern is supported by the early childhood workforce, as was demonstrated in the Decent Work Task Force's consultation survey. Base funding at a level that will allow employers to operationalize the principles set out in the *Ontario Early Childhood Sector Decent Work Charter* and supporting documents without increasing fees must be a priority in the government's workforce strategy.



- 2. Implement a provincial wage scale with a \$25/hr minimum for RECEs and a benefit package, including paid sick and personal leave days, for registered early childhood educators. The wage scale must inform base funding, while recognizing the level of education and years of experience for RECEs and staff in accordance with pay equity principles. In the interim, maintain and immediately extend the Wage Enhancement Grant/Home Child Care Enhancement grant to establish a minimum wage of \$25/hr for all RECEs.*

Recruiting and retaining a high-quality workforce is the foundation for providing responsive and stimulating education and care experiences for young children<sup>1</sup>. Persistently low wages are an issue in Ontario. The median wage for a registered early childhood educator (RECE) in Ontario is \$17.29/hr<sup>2</sup>, while two thirds of RECEs make less than \$20/hr<sup>3</sup>. The evidence tells us that low compensation drives high rates of staff turnover, is linked to poorer quality care, and serves as a disincentive to enter the field or upgrade skills<sup>4</sup>. The Decent Work Taskforce supports Ontario's initiative to increase the minimum wage to \$15/hr and is encouraged by Ontario's action to support early years and child care programs' capacity to provide the new minimum wage. Based on the Wage Enhancement Grant cap and responses to the AECEO's consultation survey, a \$25/hr floor is recommended to contribute to greater stability within the early childhood workforce, retaining and attracting qualified professionals<sup>5</sup>.

A wage scale is an effective way to communicate potential trajectories for career growth, while offering commensurate remuneration based on qualifications, years of experience and/or other defined criteria. This is especially necessary in the context of a market based child care system, where without government support, staff salaries are dependent on parent fees and owner or board of directors' discretion. As a result, there is a broad spectrum of wages and working conditions, the worst of which destabilizes the workforce and undermines quality of education and care delivery.

In keeping with the current provincial government's commitment to the early childhood profession, evidence-based policy-making, closing the gender wage gap, and investing in children and families to create a better and fairer Ontario, there is a pressing urgency to give early childhood educators the recognition and compensation that has demonstrated social merit.

Access to benefits, paid sick leave, personal days, and vacation time remains low in the ECEC sector compared to other workers with comparable levels



of education<sup>6</sup>. Reform on these important elements of professional working environments must constitute an essential part of Ontario's workforce strategy.

Ontario has had several iterations of government intervention that sought to mitigate the market's impact on wages and working conditions for early childhood educators. The Direct Operating Grant, the Wage Enhancement Grant, and the Home Child Care Enhancement Grant are all examples. However, analysis has found that, "the advancements made through the DOG/WEG/HCC grants were significant but undependable and short lived".<sup>7</sup>

We recommend that the Wage Enhancement Grant be phased out incrementally, as arrangements are put in place for base funding that will support a province-wide wage scale that will elevate early childhood educator wages to those of comparable professions. During this time, the Wage Enhancement Grant/Home Child Care Enhancement Grant should be made inclusive of all RECEs and staff in early years programs, such as Ontario Early Years Centres (EarlyON Centres) and should be redesigned to help bring all RECEs up to a minimum wage of \$25/hr.

**3. *Develop and implement an Early Childhood Workforce Learning Framework which will enable such quality-related staff supports as paid time for professional learning and expanded opportunities for acquiring and upgrading qualifications.***

The Decent Work Task Force applauds Ontario's Early Childhood Educator Qualifications Upgrade and Leadership Program, providing financial assistance to select early childhood educators to upgrade their qualifications. Improving accessibility to educational programs is key to ensuring greater participation in the Qualifications Upgrade Program. Improving participation in this program will help to alleviate the current reliance on un-trained staff to fulfill ECE roles under directors' approval.

Evidence tells us that early childhood educators hold positive attitudes towards professional learning yet face a number of barriers related to access and motivation due to the disparity between upgrading skills and knowledge, and the financial return<sup>8</sup>. Increased knowledge, skills and qualifications must go hand in hand with opportunities for career advancement and increases in compensation, as demonstrated with a wage scale.

Expanded access to a variety of quality professional learning opportunities will be critical as the province moves to create new centres of excellence announced



in the Canada-Ontario bilateral agreement. Ensuring access in regions that are currently underserved should be prioritized.

The government's action to provide two provincially funded professional learning and leadership days per year for RECEs and staff is a step in the right direction. The establishment of a Framework can ensure that new initiatives to support ongoing professional learning in the sector are equitable for all RECEs and staff, no matter where they live and work. Release time to attend provincially funded and/or other professional learning opportunities is needed so that RECEs and staff can attend during their regular work day.

*4. Create practitioner roles and identify educational requirements alongside a career ladder that will strengthen program quality while formally recognizing the value of credentials and experience. This initiative will support the recruitment and retention of registered early childhood educators and provide a greater incentive to make ECEC a life-long career.*

The report produced by the Expert Panel on Quality and Human Resources (2007) proposed expanded roles for ECE professionals, with corresponding educational requirements<sup>9</sup>. The Decent Work Task Force maintains the relevance and utility of this recommendation. While many post-secondary institutions in Ontario offer diploma, degree and masters degree credentials, there are limited options for roles in the early years and child care sector that represent commensurate opportunities and pathways for career growth—leading many with credentials to use them as stepping stones into other fields.

The Task Force recommends building on the Expert Panel's proposal to foster a career ladder in the sector. Roles such as these could include Pedagogical Consultants with a degree or equivalent experience serving a number of child care centres and home child care providers, at once boosting program quality and supporting the profession. Prescribing ECE degrees for Supervisory/ Executive Director positions is also recommended over time.

Ontario should offer more professional opportunities to keep qualified professionals in the field, while raising quality standards and keeping pace with international trends towards the need for a well-educated early childhood profession. Doing so would contribute to the sustainability of the field and to program quality that educators, children and families deserve.





**5. *Change the positions of full-time Designated Early Childhood Educators working in the publicly-funded school systems to year-round and salaried status with compensation commensurate with other full time educators in the public education systems.***

Significant professional disparities persist between educators of young children and those of school age children. In order to begin to close this gap, it is important to appropriately recognize and value early childhood educators within Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK) classrooms. Stronger policies are needed to minimize implicit and explicit professional differences between the DECE and the school teacher.

It is our recommendation that full-time Designated Early Childhood Educators (DECEs) in FDK should be full-year salaried positions and that their wages not be diminished and spread over 12 months but adjusted fairly and accordingly. Currently full-time DECEs are not paid over the summer months and must apply for Employment Insurance during this time. As a function of this, they cannot leave the country nor do they have many options to work over the summer, not to mention the disruption in income. These caveats infringe on what it means to have decent work and dignity as a professional. Establishing a full-time salaried position with compensation commensurate with their teaching partners for full-time DECEs is a step in the right direction toward creating a more equal partnership within the educator team, while appropriately compensating DECEs for their meaningful contributions to the classroom.

**6. *Commission an external review of the Full-Day Kindergarten educator team and classroom conditions to inform future planning and development.***

While the blended staffing model of one registered early childhood educator and one certified teacher in Full-Day Kindergarten has been in place for 7 years, a full review has yet to be undertaken. An examination of best practices in Full-Day Kindergartens is pertinent, including the management of shared spaces. The educator team was conceived as a, “strong and equal partnership”<sup>10</sup>. However, anecdotally there appears to be an emerging disparity between DECEs and teachers<sup>11</sup>. Researchers have found that lack of planning time allocated for DECEs had a significant impact on opportunities for collaboration, with possible negative repercussions on working relationships and classroom dynamics and weakened professional partnerships<sup>12</sup>. In order to ensure that both the DECE and the teacher can optimally apply their respective areas of knowledge and expertise in a truly equal partnership, a review and examination of best practices is a priority.



## **Mobilizing the Early Years Workforce: Community Voices on Decent Work in Early Childhood**

### **Task Force Members:**

**Bernice Cipparrone-McLeod, RECE** is the Atkinson Centre's representative to the Professional Pay and Decent Work project and chair of the Task Force. Bernice has been in the early years sector for over thirty years holding positions at various levels in childcare and children's mental health.

Bernice has been with George Brown College for the past sixteen years, first as an instructor in the department of continuing education before becoming full-time faculty in 2011 in the School of Early Childhood. Bernice was cross-appointed as the Executive Director of the Atkinson Centre from 2014-2016. She continues to teach and represent the Atkinson Centre, collaborating with the AECEO and the OCBC on the Decent Work Project.

**Wendy Cuthbertson, PhD** has served as a senior civil servant with the Ontario Ministry of Finance and the Ontario Pay Equity Commission. She has also worked as a senior official with the Canadian Auto Workers Union and the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations. She has a background in educational publishing and television and holds a PhD in history from the University of Toronto. Her book, "Labour Goes to War: The CIO and the Construction of a New Social Order, 1939-1945" was published in 2012.

**Monina Febria** is the Ontario Non Profit Network's Decent Work Project Lead. She knows the sector and network building well, coming most recently from the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council connecting over 100 professional immigrant networks, community agencies and other stakeholders in the immigrant employment landscape. Monina has an MA in Globalization & International Development (Specialization in Gender Studies) from the University of Ottawa.

**Natalee Johnson, RECE** has been a Registered Early Childhood Educator for over 10 years. She currently works in Full Day Kindergarten. Natalee holds a diploma in Early Childhood Education, a degree in Child and Youth Work and a degree in Professional Studies in Education. Natalee is also an author of



the children's book, "My Magnificent Hair". In the past Natalee has served as a Union Representative in Peel, representing Early Childhood Educators within the school board.

**Rachel Langford, PhD** is an Associate Professor in the School of Early Childhood Studies at Ryerson University. She is a co-editor of a UBC Press edited volume, *Caring for children: social movements and public policy in Canada*. She served for ten years as an AECEO Board member, advocating for a comprehensive human resources strategy for the early childhood education and care workforce in Ontario.

**Elise Larsen** is currently a research officer with the Childcare Resource and Research Unit. She has a degree in Early Childhood Studies from Ryerson University, having earned the Colleen Roulsten Award for Research. She is also an Ontario Certified Teacher and has led a number of programs connecting children to nature in and outside the city of Toronto.

**Lyndsay Macdonald, RECE** is the Coordinator of the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) and has an MA in Early Childhood Studies from Ryerson University. Her experience includes working with young children in a variety of programs, teaching at the post-secondary level, and working as a policy researcher and advocate.

**Sarah MacMillan (MacVicar), RECE** works at a non-profit Child Care Centre. She received her ECE diploma in 2016 from Sault College where she served as President of the Sault College Early Childhood Education Chapter Class of 2016 and Vice Chair of Sault College Advisory College Council 2014 – 2015. She is currently studying toward a B.A. in Psychology and has been a volunteer Leader with the Girl Guides of Canada since 2014.

**Ronna MacPherson** is the Human Resources Manager at Andrew Fleck Child Care Services (AFCCS). She provides the HR support and services to the 145+ employees of AFCCS. Typically, AFCCS has over 50 external and internal hires each year.

**Julie Mathien** has worked for both local and provincial governments to develop policy to increase and improve programs for children and families and experienced ELCC first-hand as a parent. Julie has been involved in a number of studies related to ELCC and taught public policy in the Department of Early



Childhood Studies, Ryerson University. From 2007-2012 she was the Director of Early Learning and Child Development at the Province of Ontario during the policy development and implementation of full-day early learning and kindergarten.

**Alana Powell, RECE** holds an HBA in Political Science from the University of Toronto. She is currently in the Masters of Arts in Early Childhood Studies program at Ryerson University where she is co-chair of the Ryerson Student Childcare Advocacy Association. She is a facilitator on the AECEO's Decent Work and Professional Pay campaign and has recently joined the AECEO's Board of Directors. She is currently a contract lecturer at George Brown College, in the ECE Diploma program.

**Laurel Rothman** is the Interim Public Policy and Government Relations Coordinator for the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and their representative to the Professional Pay and Decent Work project. A long-time child care advocate, she was the Director of CAW Child Care Services, an early president of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and served for many years as the National Coordinator for Campaign 2000: End Child Poverty Now. In 2013, she was honoured to be named the inaugural recipient of the Canadian Mothercraft Society's Bill Bosworth Memorial Award recognizing leadership, innovation and unwavering commitment to children and families.



(Endnotes)

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