

Transforming work in Ontario's early years and child care sector

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Workforce strategy recommendations, prepared by the AECEO's Decent Work Task Force

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Introduction

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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