

Access to early childhood education services varies widely across Canada ^[1]

Report calls for expansion of early learning in publicly-funded education systems.

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EXCERPTS

Ontario is tied for third place with New Brunswick in a new report on early childhood education services in Canada that reveals a patchwork system of varying quality and availability.

For the first time, Prince Edward Island has surpassed Quebec for first place in the assessment developed by researchers at the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

"Quebec's family policy is now 20 years old . . . but it is now tired. Its facilities and workforce need attention," says the report, being released Wednesday.

"Central to this is replacing the idea of child care as a service so parents can work with a system formally linked to public education and covered by the same broad principles of universal and free access," says the analysis, conducted every three years by the centre since 2011.

Although most provinces and territories have moved responsibility for early childhood education into their education ministries and are providing publicly funded school-based programs for younger children, the divide between education and child care persists, the report notes.

"As more children participate in kindergarten and pre-kindergarten, child care is left to top and tail the school day and fill in during holidays," the report says. "This is a poor model that leaves too many families on wait lists for child care, destabilizes child care operators and creates split-shift, precarious jobs for early childhood educators."

Toronto parents Jill Hutchison and Matt Hiraishi and their daughters Norah, 4, and Sybil, 11 months, are struggling to navigate fragmented early years services in their east-end neighbourhood.

Hutchison, who is on maternity leave with Sybil, enrolled Norah for before- and after-school care a year ago during kindergarten registration.

But the child care program in Norah's school is full and can't offer her a space when Hutchison returns to work later this month. Community-based child care programs in the area have no room either.

"Fortunately, a stay-at-home dad whose child also goes to our school offered to pick my daughter up too," she said. Baby Sybil will start child care in a non-profit centre downtown, near Hutchison's work.

"It's really frustrating all of these services can't be provided at school for everyone who needs them," she said.

A Toronto District School Board report is recommending a fee-based "extended-day program" to be offered in classrooms from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. and staffed by full-time early-childhood educators employed by the board.

If approved by trustees at their board meeting Wednesday, the needs-based program will be offered in September, starting in schools where no care before and after classes exists.

The Atkinson Centre's analysis measures the oversight, funding, access and quality of Canada's early years services including child care, school-operated kindergarten and pre-kindergarten as well as Aboriginal Head Start and parent and child programs.

Provinces are evaluated using a 15-point scale based on standards set by the European-based Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Although the report uses the same categories as the OECD, thresholds are rooted in Canadian experience, said co-author Kerry McCuaig.

"Our view is that if one province or territory has been able to achieve the benchmark, others should be able to meet it too," she said. "It is a

made-in-Canada tool for those interested in what's happening in early childhood services across the country.”

Wednesday's report, based on data current as of March 31, 2017, shows provinces and territories spent a record \$11.7 billion on early childhood education programs that reached more than half of the country's preschoolers.

Since the last analysis in 2014, there is less fragmented provincial oversight, more publicly funded programs and improved wages for educators, researchers found.

But services continue to vary widely across the country with 73 per cent of 2- to 4-year-olds in Quebec attending an early childhood program while only 37 per cent do so in Newfoundland, the report says.

In Ontario, 54 per cent of children in this age group attend some form of early childhood education.

“The big improvement is that jurisdictions are recognizing they can't provide this service without qualified staff and they have to pay more to get them,” said McCuaig.

However, in most jurisdictions, kindergarten teachers still earn almost twice as much as early childhood educators, the report says.

“Kindergarten for 5-year-olds is Canada's only universal early years program and the only preschool program most children will experience,” the report notes. Nine of the 13 jurisdictions offer full-day kindergarten for that age group.

P.E.I.'s consolidation of early childhood services under the provincial education ministry as well as its mandatory inclusion of children with special needs gave it the edge over Quebec in the rankings, according to the report's 15-point evaluation scale.

Former Ontario early learning adviser Charles Pascal, whose groundbreaking 2008 report set the stage for full-day kindergarten for 4- and 5-year-olds, said the Atkinson Centre's ranking of provinces and territories keeps up the pressure.

“The report is catching people doing things right,” he said. “It's a report that provides really solid information where each province can do better based on the various benchmarks. And provinces actually have responded, for the most part, in very positive ways.”

Ontario is proud of its third-place standing — up from fourth in 2011 — but is striving to do better, education ministry officials say.

Over the next five years, the province is adding 100,000 licensed child care spots for kids under 4, starting with \$1.6 billion in capital funding to build 45,000 new spaces in schools and other public and community buildings, said ministry spokeswoman Heather Irwin. Ontario is also working to improve staff wages and has commissioned an expert review to recommend ways to lower parent fees, she added.

“We will continue to make bold moves that will put our province on a firm path to having the best child care system in the country,” Irwin said in a statement.

Across the country, funding for early childhood education increased by almost \$1 billion since 2014, with Ontario and Quebec accounting for more than half of that amount, according to the report. But the share of provincial funding varies widely across the country.

Young children make up between 5 per cent and 13 per cent of provincial and territorial populations, but only Ontario and Quebec spend more than 3 per cent of their annual budgets on early childhood programs, the report's benchmark. No other province or territory reaches 2 per cent, the researchers found.

In most OECD countries, spending on early childhood averages 5- to 6-per cent of annual budgets, the report notes.

Spending is expected to increase in 2018 when many provinces will likely match up to \$540 million in new federal child care funding announced last year. But since provinces are prohibited from using Ottawa's money on workforce development and wages, McCuaig fears programs will continue to have trouble attracting qualified staff, a key component of quality.

“Non-profit (child care programs) won't expand if they don't have funding for qualified staff,” she said. “So I think we will see the commercial sector picking up the expansion dollars.”

There are more than 1 million child care spaces across Canada with more than half in the commercial sector already, McCuaig said.

“It's why we will be focused in 2020 on looking at the expansion of commercial care and on how many of these programs are operating without qualified staff,” she said.

So far, Ontario, P.E.I., New Brunswick, Nunavut, Newfoundland and Labrador, and Nova Scotia have signed bilateral agreements with Ottawa under the federal government's 10-year, \$7 billion multilateral early learning and child care framework.

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