

Next step: A competitive, publicly funded provincial wage grid is the solution to BC's ECE shortage ^[1]

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Excerpted from executive summary

BRITISH COLUMBIA will require an additional 12,000 early childhood educators (ECEs) to achieve government's commitment to universal child care. Higher wages are required to retain qualified staff, recruit qualified staff into new programs, and encourage people to enter the field.

To support these goals, this project considered the design and implementation of a wage grid for certified educators working in centre-based child care programs. The project team conducted a literature review, interviewed key informants, and evaluated wage grids and ECE wage policies across Canada. We analyzed the results to determine the current state of ECE wages in Canada, including efforts to increase ECE wages, and the best practices in developing an ECE wage grid. Based on these results, we made specific recommendations for BC.

Key observations, analysis, and findings

- Child care quality depends upon qualified and well-compensated ECEs. Evidence shows that educators with higher pay and higher qualifications are more likely to interact with children in a stimulating and sensitive way, and that poor compensation can lead to high staff turnover, making it more difficult for staff and children to develop nurturing relationships.
- ECEs in Canada generally earn low wages. The most recent national study of educator wages and working conditions, conducted in 2012, found that the median wage for child care program staff in Canada was \$16.50/hour, or 69% of the average wage for all employees. One quarter earned below \$14/hour, and almost 25% reported working at a second job, mainly because they need additional income. In BC, median wages were \$17/hour, or 68% of those of all employees in the province. Between 2012 and 2017, ECE wages in BC declined relative to all wages.
- Competitive, publicly funded ECE wage grids are key to solving the ECE shortage. Most Canadian provinces have introduced public funding to increase ECE compensation. In 2019, for example, BC joined Alberta, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador in providing wage enhancements for educators, applied on top of existing wages. While important, these wage policies have not solved the problem. ECE wages remain largely uncompetitive and qualified staff continue to leave for higher-paid positions elsewhere — often in the education sector. To address these concerns, experts consistently recommend competitive, publicly funded wage grids.

Effective ECE wage grids:

- Incorporate best practices. An ECE wage grid should be founded in a compensation philosophy that describes the compensation objectives and values. An ECE compensation philosophy for BC should affirm that recruiting and retaining a well-qualified, fairly compensated ECE workforce is essential to meeting government's child care goals, and advancing a range of related social and economic objectives.
- Integrate policy and funding to create a child care system. Appropriate ECE wages cannot be addressed in isolation. It's critical that the cost of implementing a wage grid does not lead to increased parent fees or compromised quality. An ECE wage grid needs to be part of comprehensive child care policy, including public funding to pay for increased wage costs, standard or capped affordable parent fees, and a human resource strategy that addresses not only compensation, but also working conditions, professional development, and ECE education.
- Recognize staff qualifications and experience. Wage grids reward qualified and experienced staff with higher wages. They incorporate different levels for different qualifications as well as steps within each level for years of service. This increase in pay between levels should be an incentive for ECEs to pursue additional education in order to achieve international benchmarks for quality.
- Set and maintain competitive wages. Wages need to be competitive with other positions with similar education, experience, and responsibilities. Further, since the overwhelming majority of ECEs are women, wages must promote gender equity and reduce the gender pay gap. Competitive and equitable wages can be achieved by: benchmarking against positions in other sectors where child care competes for staff; basing wages on the qualifications, skills, and responsibilities required for a position (and not on the job title

or gender of the person in the role); and updating wage rates regularly to reflect changes in inflation and other factors.

The BC government should act now to implement an ECE wage grid. ECE wage grids used in Manitoba, Prince Edward Island, and Quebec provide examples to learn from. They have levels based on qualifications, with increased wages for higher qualifications. They also have steps within each level based on years of experience. Child care programs in both Quebec and Prince Edward Island receive funding to pay required wages while charging parent fees established by the province. Implementing an ECE wage grid in BC would provide multiple benefits – for educators and child care providers, for children who benefit from high quality early care and learning, and for our economy as universal child care unfolds. Government can address some existing challenges with an implementation plan that strengthens human resource practices across the sector and keeps educators and child care providers well-informed and engaged.

Recommendations for an ECE wage grid for BC

We recommend that the BC government develop and implement a province-wide, publicly funded, competitive ECE wage grid.

Existing provincial wage grids in the health, education, and community social service sectors provide useful benchmarks in developing ECE wages. These grids apply to some ECEs in BC, as well as to comparable positions. Along with the wage grids under development for child care programs in Indigenous communities, they provide a base from which we can expand to include all ECEs working in licensed child care.

Government must first affirm its ECE compensation philosophy. This should focus on the need and urgency faced in recruiting and retaining qualified ECEs.

ECE wages should be at or above a living wage, comparable to positions in other sectors with similar credentials and competitive with the \$26/hour median wage of StrongStart facilitators and education assistants in BC public schools. Coupled with accessible, affordable ECE education, the pay levels encourage educators to upgrade their certifications.

We recommend the following step 1 wages in a BC ECE wage grid (in 2020 dollars):

- ECEA (ECE Assistant): \$20/hour;
- ECE (one-year college certificate): \$26/hour; and
- ECE+ (two-year college diploma): \$29/hour.

A systemic approach is essential to implement a province-wide ECE wage grid. This can be supported by the community social services and education sectors. These sectors are aligned with child care and have had publicly funded wage grids in place for over 20 years.

Government should establish an ECE task force with the mandate and funding to implement the ECE wage grid.

We recommend that the provincial government work with the ECE task force to:

1. Fund and implement the step 1 wages promptly, as part of an overall strategy that includes public funding to lower parent fees, welcome all children, and offer programs consistent with recognized early learning frameworks.
2. Fully implement a publicly funded, equitable ECE wage grid within five years, starting with the recommended step 1 wages, followed by determining wages for the bachelor degree level. The grid will include additional steps for each level except ECE Assistant, to encourage assistants to obtain their ECE certificate quickly.
3. Resolve barriers to system building. Given the substantial public investment a wage grid will require, barriers that may prevent systemic action must be resolved. One potential barrier relates to program facilities, and whether they are privately or publicly owned. Before more public funds are provided to programs in privately owned facilities, the implications of taxpayer dollars supporting the acquisition of private assets must be addressed.

Conclusion

Inadequate wages have led to the challenge we now face recruiting and retaining qualified ECEs. Current wage enhancements have not significantly or equitably increased wages. Further, the federal government and most provincial governments, including BC, are committed to expanding access to child care – which will require even more qualified ECEs. Clearly we need a different approach. A competitive, publicly funded provincial wage grid not only raises wages, but provides consistency and recognition of the essential and valuable work of ECEs. We have foundations in place to help us build this ECE wage grid in BC. And our recommended wages provide an immediate next step since higher wages are needed now. Our ECEs and the families and children they serve cannot wait.

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