

Opinion: Early childhood educators at the forefront of B.C.'s recovery ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

"There will be no recovery without a she-covetry, and no she-covetry without child care."

Canadian economist Armine Yalnizyan put it plainly and we have heard it echoed across the country. Business and labour leaders, economists, B.C. Premier John Horgan and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau confirm that child care is needed to restart our economy by supporting parents, especially women, to return to work.

COVID-19 has made it abundantly clear that child care is an essential service, a critical component in emergency planning and vital to the operation of health, transportation and other essential services. On the frontlines are the sector's "essential workers," early childhood educators (ECEs).

Yet, we entered the pandemic with a serious shortage of the qualified ECEs required to provide child care, primarily due to low wages. Like others in the caring workforce, the ECE sector is comprised predominantly of women, often racialized and underpaid.

If we want a full economic recovery in B.C., the provincial government should act now to raise the wages of early childhood educators through a competitive, publicly funded provincial wage grid with a clearly defined fair pay structure across the sector.

Our study released this week shows that, while low wages are a concern across Canada, ECE wages are particularly low in BC, and an additional 12,000 ECEs are needed to achieve the provincial government's commitment to universal child care.

In 2019 B.C. joined several other provinces in providing ECE wage enhancements. While this was an important first step, wage enhancements have not solved the problem anywhere in Canada. ECE wages remain uncompetitive, and qualified staff continue to leave for higher-paid positions elsewhere — often in the K-12 education system. To really solve the problem, experts consistently recommend competitive, publicly funded wage grids.

An ECE wage grid would reward qualified and experienced staff with higher wages, encouraging ECEs to pursue the additional education required to meet international benchmarks for quality. Wages must be competitive with other positions that require similar education, experience, and responsibilities.

Since the overwhelming majority of ECEs are women, a wage grid would also help reduce the gender wage gap and is consistent with the B.C. government's commitment to action on gender equity. Competitive and equitable wages must also be adjusted regularly to reflect inflation and other factors.

The study demonstrates that ECE wages should be set to at least \$20 to \$29/hour minimum, based on qualifications. For example: ECE assistant: \$20/hour; ECE (one-year college certificate): \$26/hour; and ECE+ (two-year college diploma): \$29/hour.

Finally, 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. For example, B.C.'s evidence-based, widely-endorsed \$10-a-Day Child Care Plan incorporates public funding for raising ECE wages and education while establishing affordable parent fees.

The provincial government should establish an ECE task force with the mandate and funding to fully implement an ECE wage grid within five years, starting with an immediate move to match ECE wages with comparable positions in the K-12 education system. Federal funding is also required to support the goal of a respected, well educated, and fairly compensated workforce.

Implementing an ECE wage grid will provide multiple benefits for educators and child care providers, children who benefit from high quality early learning and care, and for our communities and economy as universal child care unfolds.

We have strong foundations to help us move forward. We can build on existing wage grids and policies currently in place in other provinces, in B.C.'s Indigenous communities, and in our health, education and social services sectors. Raising early childhood educators' wages now will recognize their essential work and accelerate our province's economic recovery.

Our ECEs and the children and families they support cannot wait.

The report *Next Step: A Competitive, Publicly Funded Provincial Wage Grid is the Solution to B.C.'s ECE Shortage* was published by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and Early Childhood Educators of B.C. It is available to read at ecebc.ca [3]

Related link: *Next step: A competitive, publicly funded provincial wage grid is the solution to BC's ECE shortage* [4]

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