

Early learning and child care in Alberta: Results from a national survey during the COVID-19 pandemic ^[1]

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Excerpted from introduction

Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta: Results from a National Survey During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In mid-March, the majority of provincial and territorial governments, including the government of Alberta, moved quickly to close centre-based early learning and child care in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Family child care homes were permitted to remain open in Alberta, as they were in other regions of Canada; although there was a significant decrease in the number of children accessing care as families withdrew their children for a combination of health and financial reasons.

In the following two months, provincial and territorial governments took very different approaches in their support for early learning and care.¹ Most put in place some form of regulated child care for the children of those workers deemed essential. All provincial governments, with the exception of Alberta, provided some form of public funding support to services either required to close or that remained open but operated at significantly reduced capacity. For its part, the federal government rapidly introduced a series of measures to help individuals and organizations respond to the financial impacts of the economic shutdown, although it stopped short of dedicating specific funds for early learning and care sectors.

The following summary report uses data from a national survey, undertaken in mid-May, to compare the pandemic experiences of service providers in Alberta with those of service providers in other parts of Canada. The comparisons are important given the government of Alberta's decision not to provide any direct financial support to either child care centres required to close or those family child care homes that remained open but with lower enrolments. Indeed, with the exception of providing emergency child care for essential workers, the government of Alberta approached the early learning and child care sector in much the same way as it did other sectors of the economy. It declined the requests from early learning and care stakeholders for the kind of emergency funding provided in all other provinces. Instead, it directed service providers to the various funding programs the federal government introduced for businesses and individuals.

The impacts of these government decisions are reflected in the survey results summarized below.

The Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Sector Heading into the Pandemic

The Alberta early learning and child care sector entered the pandemic in the midst of a provincial economic slowdown, while at the same time still adjusting to newly introduced changes in provincial funding and support.

In the final quarter of 2019, the Ministry of Children's Services announced the discontinuation of KinCare and the stay-at-home subsidy for parents whose children attend preschools. Further reductions in funding and supports were announced in the first quarter of 2020, including discontinuation of the long-established provincial accreditation process, cancellation of benefit contribution grants for service providers and elimination of the Northern Allowance for early childhood educators in the Wood Buffalo region.

These cuts took place against the backdrop of continued uncertainty surrounding the future of the 122 Early Learning and Child Care demonstration sites across the province, introduced under the previous government. The first phase of these sites was set to conclude at the end of June, 2020, with the second phase of 100 sites, funded primarily through federal investments under the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework Agreement, set to conclude at the end of March, 2021.

The provincial budget for 2020/21 fiscal year, introduced in February, estimated child care expenditures of \$394 million, a decrease of \$28.7 million (7%) from the forecast expenditures of \$422.7 million in 2019/20. The Ministry Business Plan reported the allocation of \$180 million for child care subsidies; \$123 million for wage enhancements, other staff incentives and staff certification; and \$10 million for specialized child care supports for children with unique needs.² The Business Plan did not provide information on how the balance of forecast expenditures would be used.

Related link: Canadian child care: Preliminary results from a national survey during the COVID-19 pandemic

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[2] <https://www.muttart.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/The-Pandemic-and-Early-Learning-and-Child-Care-in-Alberta.pdf>

[3] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7859>

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