

Powell and Ferns: Children's wellbeing depends on wellbeing of child care workers ^[1]

We need properly staffed programs with decent work and professional pay for ECEs and early years staff.

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EXCERPTS

COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on the child care crisis. When child care centres across Ontario closed by emergency order, parents, their employers and government started to realize how important child care is to today's social fabric. But in all the talk about child care being essential to economic recovery, there is still a penny that hasn't dropped: there is no child care without the child care workforce.

Early childhood educators (ECEs) are well-educated professionals who work across Ontario's in home- and centre-based child care programs. Through the COVID-19 emergency order, this feminized profession has been resilient and flexible, supporting children and families remotely and in programs. And they have waited patiently for this work to be recognized, valued, and appropriately remunerated.

ECEs and early years staff receive unjustly low wages, many earning only \$14 to \$20 an hour, and working more than one job in order to make ends meet, despite post-secondary degrees and diplomas and membership in a professional regulatory college. Too common in Ontario's privatized child care market are poor working conditions, no health benefits, paid sick days or emergency leave days.

But why, in the middle of a pandemic, when countless Ontarians are facing financial insecurity and uncertainty, is it so important that we talk about the wages and working conditions of ECEs and early years staff? It is simple. We cannot talk about the wellbeing of children without talking about the wellbeing of the early childhood workforce.

It is critical that children are welcomed back to an environment supported with the time and resources required so that educators can prioritize building supportive, meaningful relationships that allow deeply ethical care and pedagogy to occur. We know that parents and families need to return to work but let's not forget that child care programs do not only exist solely for economic reasons; they hold deeper meaning and purpose. Caring relationships and pedagogy create spaces and opportunities for children, families, communities and educators to collaborate and learn, to create and to be, to compose the present and the future. Caring relationships and pedagogy take time and resources that prioritize well-being and community. This is something we will need as we move through the complexities of this pandemic.

And ECEs' working conditions are children's learning conditions. For decades before the pandemic, educators have faced challenging working conditions and an overwhelming sense of being undervalued. Imagine what would be possible for educators if they had access to paid planning time to collaborate and think pedagogically, or if they could stay home and rest when sick, or if they were paid appropriately for their work. ECEs are well-educated, competent, responsive, thoughtful and purposeful in their practice and pedagogy even under these challenging and inequitable circumstances. But imagine what becomes possible if this were otherwise, and then imagine what becomes possible for children.

In other care professions, such as long-term care, we see how staff are overworked, poorly treated, and money is directed at profits and shareholders instead of into the care and well-being of staff and residents. Child care programs are not immune to the potential for poor care despite the best efforts of staff.

While Ontario has many high-quality public or non-profit programs that run penny-tight budgets to reinvest and prioritize staff well-being as a marker of a quality program, there is a growing commercial sector whose priorities often lie in the pockets of investors and owners. When money flows up, it does not flow down. This means that the child care workforce is at risk of being further overworked as these people return to work with necessary, but more time-consuming, cleaning and health and safety protocols.

If we want high-quality care and learning for Ontario's children, we need properly staffed programs with decent work and professional pay for ECEs and early years staff, full stop. This will require a serious investment from the federal and provincial governments and a child care workforce strategy that prioritizes decent work and pay. Early Childhood Educators can't work or care well for Ontario's children without it.

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Coordinator at the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care. They recently authored the report From Reopening to Recovery.

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