

Ontario's emergency roundtable highlights urgently needed change in the early childhood sector ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) and the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (AECEO), hosted an hour-long emergency Roundtable on December 15th, 2021 in response to the critical shortage of Early Childhood Educators (ECES) in the province.

The shortfalls in the supply of regulated child care in Ontario have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Alana Powell, AECEO's Executive Director, said, "since 2015, we have been sounding the alarm. Our market approach to child care is insufficient. It does not support decent work at all."

"In 2018, the Ontario government promised to develop and implement a wage scale by April 2020. The date has obviously come and passed, and this unkept promise has only fueled the fire of what we're experiencing today in terms of the workforce crisis," she added.

"The pandemic has shone a light on how necessary child care is. As of this week, we are the last province to sign on [to the federal government's Canada-wide child care initiative]," said Carolyn Ferns, OCBCC's Public Policy and Government Relations Coordinator.

Many ECEs who took part in the Roundtable noted that the workforce shortages have pushed child care and all who work in the sector to a breaking point.

"I can't even find ECEs to hire," said Franca Lombardi, a child care director. Child care Executive Director, Amy O'Neil, also said she cannot find qualified staff. Job postings for ECE positions go unfilled for weeks or are never filled because qualified candidates are not applying, she noted.

In a poll of webinar participants, 83 per cent said they had trouble retaining qualified staff and 89 per cent said they have seen higher levels of staff burnout.

In 2020, the Ontario government released a workforce strategy that was meant to address the problems in the sector. Sheila Olan-Maclean, the CEO of a large multi-site child care not-for-profit child care operator said, "what we anticipated from this strategy was higher wages, better benefits and working conditions, and a pension plan for our field. We didn't get that. What we got is an invitation to be more innovative and to take more professional development."

Many participants noted the lack of respect for paid care work, which is largely done by women, and accused the Ontario government of not understanding the value of their labour.

Several operators shared they have been forced to close rooms and cap enrollment due to the staffing shortage. Current child care spaces are being lost, and it will be difficult if not impossible to create new ones given the staffing situation.

With staff leaving positions, pressure has mounted on remaining educators to fill the gaps. "We're trying to do roughly the same amount of work as before, for twice the number of students and half the time," said one educator. One centre saw one of their ECEs serve as the centre's cook, supervisor, COVID screener, and break filler. This ECE worked from 6:30am-6:00pm every single day.

"The child care sector is at its breaking point. The impacts of the pandemic on mental health directly relate to issues of workload, stress management, and recognition. We do not need a pat on the back, but recognition in the form of a child care agreement with the feds and professional pay and decent work for the sector," said one of the webinar participants.

Education Minister, Stephen Lecce, has failed to address the issues plaguing the sector while simultaneously saying that he will create more child care spaces for families, noted another webinar participant. "The government cannot increase the number of accessible child care spaces for families looking for care if we are struggling to staff the spaces that are currently available".

Alana Powell says there is a clear solution for the sector:

"The OCBCC and AECEO released a roadmap to universal child care in Ontario. We need full and sufficient operational funding that allows

for publicly funded salary scales starting at \$25 an hour for everyone working in our sector, which includes a compensation package. We need decent work standards, including paid sick days and paid collaborative planning time as part of educator's workdays. We need access to communities of practice and professional learning that is meaningful, responsive and not a burden on educators. We need an early childhood workforce learning framework that addresses pathways to qualifications. We need to find job roles and career ladders that allow educators to enter this profession, and see themselves ending their careers in this profession," she said.

Carolyn Ferns ended the webinar by urging all participants to seek policy changes and made a special plea to policy makers observing the webinar.

"Thank you for listening to the voices from the front line, and I hope that you take these stories and arguments that have been made away with you and talk about the childcare crisis that we're facing in this province," she said

Region: Ontario ^[3]

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