

Report back on emergency child care workforce crisis roundtables ^[1]

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Excerpted from report:

Ontario's early years and child care workforce has faced challenges long before the Covid-19 pandemic. These challenges have only been exacerbated over the last two years. Early Childhood Educators and other staff and providers are leaving the sector for less demanding jobs with better wages and working conditions. Directors, supervisors and administrators are stepping outside their job descriptions to work in ratio, cover absences, and do their best to support educator wellbeing during these difficult times. Families are being impacted as programs are reducing operating hours, closing rooms, or shuttering their doors entirely.

The child care and early years sector has been sounding the alarm throughout the pandemic that the workforce crisis is worsening. We know that child care and early years programs can only do so much without additional funding and support from the Ministry of Education, and that need has yet to be answered. The 2020 Federal Fall Economic Statement committed \$420 million for 2021- 2022 "to support attraction and retention of these workers, such as through grants and bursaries for students studying early childhood education." In many provinces, Manitoba, BC, and others, these dollars were directly injected into the sector; given as one-time wage top-up payments to Early Childhood Educators and Child Care Workers or rolled into their Federal-Provincial bilateral agreements. While the funds are meant to support recruitment and retention, in Ontario their use is being restricted and cannot be used for compensation. We know there are barriers and challenges with one-time funding but what matters most is that this funding should directly benefit and support the ECE workforce, acknowledging and valuing the work they have done over the last two years. This moment calls on the Ontario government to fulfill its responsibility to Ontario's children, families, and educators by providing increased support to the early childhood sector - including funding that makes decent work and professional pay a reality.

In response to growing frustration in the sector, the AECEO and Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) co-hosted an Emergency Roundtable on the Child Care Workforce Shortage in December 2021. We heard from students, educators, supervisors, and operators about their experiences working during the pandemic and the impact of the workforce crisis on their programs, pedagogy, and lives. We heard stories from attendees of not having enough staff to open rooms, of not being able to secure supply staff to cover absences, and staff feeling as though they could not take a day off, sick or not, because there was no one to care for their groups of children while they were away. For many, being able to come together and discuss the challenges they have faced was a positive experience, building solidarity and the knowledge that they aren't alone. Given this, we decided another opportunity to come together was necessary, and we planned a follow-up discussion.

On January 12th, the AECEO and OCBCC hosted the 2nd Emergency Roundtable on the Child Care Crisis. The event was again widely attended by early childhood students, ECEs and child care staff/ providers, supervisors, operators, media, and Members of Provincial Parliament as well as the Assistant Deputy Minister of Early Years and Child Care, Holly Moran, and a representative from Education Minister Lecce's office. During the event, participants were given the opportunity to engage in small group discussions with the focus question being, "What do you need from the Ministry of Education?" The notes taken during those discussions speak loud and clear in describing the current state of child care and what is needed to address the workforce crisis and ongoing concerns related to the pandemic response.

In commenting on the workforce crisis, participants noted that they "don't have anyone to support when a staff member is away", that outside the sector there are "lots of jobs with less responsibility and the same or more money", and that there "needs to be something done for staff retention". It has now become, "impossible to find anyone who want[s] to work as [an] ECE". One operator stated, "We have continued to lose staff throughout the pandemic. And as operators in addition to the additional work of operating through a pandemic, we have been faced with the never ending process of interviewing and hiring new staff." The workforce crisis has now become so bad that children and families are being impacted. Participants reported they are, "Struggling to cover staffing so having to tell parents and families they cannot be accommodated" and that the constant turnover of staff "affects relationships with children". Those in the sector know what is needed to address these issues. We "want a plan from [the] Ministry of Education to increase our staffing capacity and to put measures in place to retain our staff, [a] workforce strategy that attracts and retains good people to offer our sector some hope".

We know that providing professional pay and decent working conditions is the foundation for attracting and retaining ECEs and early years staff/providers. During the Roundtables, there were many comments from participants that highlighted what we know is true; those working in the sector know what is needed to address the staffing challenges. Participants agreed that for educators, there is “no incentive to come into the field because you aren’t paid a living wage for a hard job, long hours, predominantly female”. “We are drawn to the profession through our heartfelt interest.” Those who work in or are affiliated with any part of the care sector know it is not only in early childhood that a predominantly female workforce is not paid a professional wage. Participants also wondered, “What about people who want to have children? They can’t afford to be an ECE.” It feels absolutely preposterous that those providing child care cannot afford to have their own children. RECEs “need better pay” and “fair wages”. They also know that “paid sick time is definitely needed for ECEs - even prior to the pandemic, this was a challenge. We need health days and paid sick days on top of the wages and benefits”. The solutions are here, “we need a cohesive workforce strategy. The biggest piece is wages, retirement, benefits, etc.” ECEs and child care staff/providers, operators, and supervisors are working double time. They “need resources to ease the burnout and need to feel safe at work”. One participant reported feeling as though they were the mayor of a small town with all of the decisions they had to make and work they had to do to run their program. Another wrote, “As an ECE working in child care prior to COVID I was already burnt out - and now the situation has been amplified”. This is what happens when an entire sector is understaffed and overworked, undervalued and overlooked.

There was an overwhelming consensus that there is a lack of respect and recognition from the Ministry of Education. Many participants expressed that it felt as though child care was an afterthought for the Ministry of Education. Educators long to be recognized for the work they do, requesting; “true recognition by [the] provincial government”, “acknowledgement from the Ministry”, “respect and recognition from the government”, and “recognition of the importance of the work and what it takes”. “The sector simply wants to be heard, recognized for the issues that are going on”. Those who work in the ECE community have the knowledge and experience to show the way forward - they know what educators, children and families deserve and what is required to provide that. By working with those in the sector, ongoing issues and concerns could be more directly, innovatively and positively addressed. “We need respect - consultation with our sector. We know what we need, so just listen to us!”

These two Emergency Roundtables made visible the pressure the ECE community has been feeling after 2 years of pandemic-response and a worsening workforce crisis. Providing decent work and professional pay is fundamental to a strong, robust, quality profession and workforce - and is the foundation of quality child care and early years programs. We had hoped the workforce dollars provided by the federal government for 2021- 22 would have been used as an opportunity to acknowledge and value the incredible work that has been done over the last two years, to give child care staff and providers the recognition they deserve, and we will continue to call for this with our collective advocacy.

We are grateful that the ECE community came together to raise their voices and share their stories directly with decision makers, media, and community members. It is these stories that tell us how policy and funding decisions impact the everyday experiences of those in our ECE communities. Policy and funding is lived by children, families, and educators, and our advocacy and collaborative work must center these experiences. We know there are opportunities on the horizon and we must work together to ensure that the opportunities truly meet the needs of our sector.

These Roundtables provided an opportunity to make public the challenges the sector has been facing and bring your voices directly to key stakeholders, but our strategy doesn’t stop there. In our ongoing work as your professional association, we are continuing to bring your concerns to the Ministry of Education through ongoing meetings. We are engaging with the media and other partners to amplify your calls and create ways for the public to hear directly from you. We are working to develop and advance concrete policy responses that are driven by community and guide the way forward. We are strategizing and planning to create more opportunities to work with you for a Federal-Provincial deal that meets the needs of our sector and keeps decent work and professional pay at the center. We continue to need your help - this work is collaborative, our voices must be collective, and we are stronger and more visible together. Thank you to all who participated in the Roundtables and recent advocacy initiatives, and our members and donors for your ongoing support - you make this work possible. If you want to get more involved, please connect with your local Community of Practice (https://www.aecce.ca/communities_of_practice) or our Community Organizers Erin Filby (efilby@aeceo.ca) and Jess Tomas (jtomas@aeceo.ca).

Region: Ontario ^[6]

Tags: child care workforce ^[7]

wages and working conditions ^[8]

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