

Georgia Lavallee: \$10 a day child care is great, but we need more money for early childhood educators ^[1]

The pandemic revealed how essential child care is, but the primarily female workforce has seen very little recognition or emergency support.

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EXCERPTS

The Saskatchewan government has made two very significant announcements on early learning and child care (ELCC) over the last few weeks.

The first, on Aug. 11, was about lowering fees for families, making child care more affordable. The second, on Aug. 15, was about providing free educational opportunities and training for current and prospective Early Childhood Educators (ECEs).

Both are necessary as parts of building a quality ELCC system for Saskatchewan children and families. However, an essential part is being left out, on which the success of these announcements rests: fulsome actions, support and plans for the current Saskatchewan ECE and home/family/group provider workforce.

Without this urgent and necessary support, Saskatchewan's ELCC sector will not achieve its potential.

While this is important for Saskatchewan's economic development, what is urgently needed is to focus on the integral and essential role ECEs and providers play in supporting young children and their families during the most important years of their development.

ECEs and providers are qualified, educated professionals who affect young children's physical, emotional, mental, and social development. This means not only do ECEs help children develop physical competence indoors and outdoors, they also help children learn to express and self-regulate their emotions, develop their language and speech skills, adopt problem solving skills, improve social skills, and nurture secure and positive relationships.

These competencies barely skim the list of things that are instrumental in children's development, or why these things are important. Research over decades confirms how much it matters.

It is easy to understand the "care" component of ELCC, simply because most families require child care so they can continue to work. Without that child care spot, there would be a significant reduction in the general Saskatchewan workforce participation. That is a simple equation, in much the same way that child care allows labour market participation — especially for more women — which in turn creates more tax and consumption revenue for our communities, province and country.

What happens when ECEs and providers are not compensated and supported fairly (as all professions should be), or more importantly, respected, valued and appreciated for the important work they do? Unfortunately, they leave the ELCC sector.

Consequently, the quality of an ELCC program suffers greatly from the revolving door, and staff and children pay the biggest price. In a survey of Saskatchewan's child care sector, pre-pandemic, it was reported that almost 60 per cent of Saskatchewan's ELCC workforce had turned over in the year of that survey. And 37 per cent of Saskatchewan's ELCC programs required exemptions specific to Saskatchewan's ELCC legislation on staffing qualifications.

We know this situation has only grown since the pandemic.

Affordable child care, in principle, has been a positive outcome from the Canada-Saskatchewan ELCC agreement as a part of the Canada-wide child care plan. Families are starting to pay approximately 70 per cent of what they formerly paid in 2021. Unfortunately, ECEs and providers have seen little to no change when it comes to their own compensation (including salary, benefits, and pension), nor have their working conditions improved.

Though the pandemic revealed how essential child care is for society to function, the primarily female ELCC workforce has seen very little recognition or emergency and safety support — a second thought in terms of financial investments from the aforementioned agreement. They have been leaving the ELCC sector at an alarming rate.

It is a sector that is in crisis and on the brink of collapse, and spaces for child care will remain just that — empty spaces — without the ECEs and providers to staff them.

This is fixable.

Before any additional spaces in Saskatchewan are created, the province must focus funding to support the existing ELCC workforce and develop a robust ELCC workforce strategy, to include the funding and creation of fair wages and a provincial salary scale, providing benefits and pension plans, reviewing and improving current working conditions, and truly valuing ECEs and providers for what they do for our children, families and yes, our economy.

For the Saskatchewan-Canada ELCC agreement to succeed, our intention must be to create not just affordable spaces, but to build valuable early learning environments for children by supporting the very workforce that cares capably, competently, passionately and professionally for them.

Region: Saskatchewan ^[3]

Tags: child care ^[4]

workforce ^[5]

female labour force participation ^[6]

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