

Child care wages and workforce strategies – Looking at Australia: What do they have that we need? ^[1]

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Excerpts

Canada has a crisis on its hands – a child care workforce crisis. Already, child care operators across the country are unable to find staff; rooms are closing and centres are closing because of the inability to attract and retain early childhood educators. That's BEFORE the estimated need for 60,000 new early childhood educators as we move to \$10 a day child care.

Australia is not the first country that springs to mind when looking for child care policies to emulate. For instance, Australia funds child care with vouchers that encourage the growth of the for-profit sector and lead to ever more expensive child care services. This kind of funding has made the buying and selling of child care real estate into big business.

However, Australia does have a wage grid and a strategy for workforce development, which jurisdictions in Canada do not have. We can learn from their example.

Australia has something called a Fair Work Commission whose job it is to design the wage grid and set the minimum wages and minimum conditions of employment in different sectors. Children's Services is one of those sectors, and the award made by the Fair Work Commission is a legal document that child care employers have to follow. Employees can bargain for more than the minimum, but employers cannot pay less than the minimum award rate.

Here's a link to the Fair Work Commission award for Children's Services workers updated in November 2022. There's a detailed classification structure of qualifications and responsibilities that forms the basis of the wage grid. The wage grid lays out the minimum hourly and weekly rates that can be paid for different classification levels in children's services occupations. The two most frequent qualification levels are for staff with a Certificate III in Children's Services (typically a 6-month course) and a Diploma in Children's Services (typically an 18-month course). The current award sets the starting hourly rate for less qualified staff (Certificate III) at \$24.76 per hour and for qualified educators with a Diploma at \$29.17 per hour. Wages rise above these starting rates with increased experience. Minimum hourly rates for a Director of a child care centre (called long day care) range from about \$35 to \$40 depending on the size of the centre and experience.

The Children's Services Award covers many but not all ECEC employees – most others are covered by the Educational Services (Teachers) Award. That award sets out the wage grid for Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) who have a Bachelor degree qualification (typically a 4-year course) or higher. All ECEC services in Australia must engage or have access to an ECT for a particular amount of time per week, determined by the number of children in attendance. Entry-level pay for an ECT is \$32.20 per hour and increases with experience.

Since late 2019, Education Ministers across Australia have led a process involving extensive consultation to develop a ten-year strategy to build up and support the children's education and care workforce. It lists 21 actions – short, medium and long term – to be implemented over the ten-year period. There is an implementation and evaluation plan to shape and ensure progress of this workforce strategy.

On top of all that, Australia is collecting detailed data about its workforce from all service providers (response rate of 99%). There is a National Workforce Census, which is a population survey of early childhood education and care service providers across Australia. It collects data on service usage, children with additional needs, access to programs and staffing. On the workforce specifically, the census collects information about hours of work, qualifications, exemptions from qualification requirements, experience and tenure, professional development, gender, age, and Indigenous status of staff members. The survey also collects data about whether these staff members earn the award-level wage (as determined by the Fair Work Commission) or a higher wage, and if higher by how much. So, for instance, in the 2021 Workforce Census report we find that 57% of contact staff in child care centres earned the award rate, 34% earned above the award rate and for 9% of staff the wage rate was unknown.

None of this is perfect, of course. Early childhood educators in Australia still receive low wages relative to many other workers and there is a movement for an immediate wage rise to keep educators in the sector. However, many of the elements necessary to know about and improve wages and working conditions are in place in Australia. I wish I could say the same about Canada.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

Source URL (modified on 25 Nov 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/22/11/child-care-wages-and-workforce-strategies-%E2%80%93-looking>

Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/22/11/child-care-wages-and-workforce-strategies-%E2%80%93-looking> [2]

<https://childcarepolicy.net/child-care-wages-and-workforce-strategies-looking-at-australia-what-do-they-have-that-we-need/> [3]

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