

New ECE wage supports are well-deserved, but not enough and not what was promised ^[1]

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Excerpts

Despite their indispensable role in nurturing the cognitive and social foundations of BC's children, ECE professionals in our Province and across the country have long been undervalued and underpaid.

This has driven a recruitment and retention crisis that continues to destabilize the sector, and holds back \$10aDay child care expansion.

Existing programs struggle to operate at capacity, and there are examples of new facilities sitting empty – despite the dire need – because of a shortage of qualified educators.

BC's recent announcement of an additional \$2/hour in ECE wage enhancements (on top of the current \$4/hour) and a new "ECE Specialized Certification Grant" (a.k.a. annual bonus) of \$2,000 to \$3,000/year are well-deserved and will certainly help.

However, ECE compensation likely still won't be high enough to attract and retain the number of educators we need. Specifically, BC says the latest top-up will raise the median ECE wage to \$28/hour (i.e. half of ECEs will earn less than this, and half more). By contrast, our latest analysis shows that ECE wages need to start at \$30/hour (rising to \$40/hour with qualifications and experience) in order to be competitive with wages for Strong Start Facilitators and Educational Assistants in K-12, with leading public sector ECE wages, and with average wages for all BC workers with similar levels of education.

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Not only is BC's new top-up and annual bonus insufficient to raise ECE compensation to competitive levels, we are now falling further and further behind the seven provinces and territories that have begun implementing the *real* solution: a publicly-funded ECE wage grid.

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BC's system of one-off top-ups creates a number of problems.

For starters, when every ECE gets the same top-up amount this creates unfair differences in wages between different providers. BC's decision to exclude "public sector" ECEs from the latest \$2/hour has been communicated as designed to reduce these kinds of disparities, but creates its own issues. What about public sector ECEs that aren't earning high wages, and who deserve the new top-up?

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The other problem with BC's continuing system of one-off, flat rate top-ups is that it doesn't provide a predictable or consistent reward for upgrading credentials or remaining in the sector.

BC's new annual bonus, funded through ECEBC, attempts to address this last point somewhat: if you have an Infant Toddler and/or Special Needs Certificate and have held those while working in the sector longer than a year, you can receive an extra \$2,000 - \$3,000. For a full-time ECE with their basic certificate, this translates into a maximum total incentive to upgrade of under \$2.00/hour. That's something, but it's not huge, particularly compared to what we're seeing across the rest of Canada, where the average incentive to similarly upgrade – where one exists – is more than \$4/hour. It also doesn't do anything to reward ECEs with many years of experience.

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Effective wage grids do three key things: (1) they ensure consistent, transparent and fair wages across the whole sector; (2) they give educators a clear path to grow their earnings, with wages that rise in a guaranteed way with additional qualifications and years of experience; and (3) they are regularly evaluated and adjusted to incorporate inflation, gender equity goals and other factors to ensure they remain fair and equitable.

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After the release of the 2020 Next Steps report, the BC government committed to an ECE wage grid and to create a timeline for its

implementation, but the promised timeline has not yet arrived.

The delay means that BC is falling further and further behind the rest of the country. Seven other provinces and territories have already implemented sector-wide ECE wage grids, as shown in the following chart.

Of course for a wage grid to work – to recruit and retain all of the ECEs we need – the wages in it have to be high enough. They need to be competitive with wages for Strong Start Facilitators and Educational Assistants in K-12, with leading public sector ECE wages, and with average wages for all BC workers with similar levels of education.

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This past summer the Coalition and ECEBC released a study showing that for BC's promised ECE wage grid to be competitive, its wages would need to be at least \$30 - \$40/hour, depending on qualifications and experience.

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An underreported element of the Province's October announcement was that – at last – government is actually starting to test an early version of an ECE wage grid (within an associated funding model). But apparently the test only involves 50 programs, and publicly available details are slim.

After six years of testing various approaches to funding \$10aDay sites, it is not clear why BC is unable to test an ECE wage grid and associated funding model at scale. One could speculate a number of reasons – including both technical and budgetary – but whatever the reasons, BC needs to figure out a way to escape this long standing pattern of small-scale tests and stop-gaps.

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The BC government needs to make child care expansion, and its key building blocks like an ECE wage grid and associated funding model, a top priority. It needs to allocate sufficient funding and implement these improvements at scale/sector-wide.

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Related link: Next step: A competitive, publicly funded provincial wage grid is the solution to BC's ECE shortage [3]

Region: British Columbia [4]

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