

The state of Canadian early childhood education and care in 2024^[1]

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Author: Friendly, M., Beach, J., Aruran, G., Cossette, A., Lillace, J., & Forer, B.

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As of mid-2024, transformation of Canadian child care has been underway for three years. The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiative is Canada's first federal/provincial/territorial/Indigenous child care plan to be sustained long enough for governments to begin putting child care provision for all children and families in place. Thus far, significant changes have been made in the existing child care landscape but many more are needed as Canada tackles building a publicly funded system for the first time.

This report provides a brief overview of the state of Canadian child care, taking up where the previous edition left off in late 2022. For a broader historical overview of Canadian child care provision – including an examination of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and a description of the historic introduction of CWELCC in April 2021 – see ECEC in Canada 2021.

Getting started

Three years after the notable commitments in the April 2021 federal budget, ELCC system-change has been set in motion Canada-wide. Building on the federal budget commitments, bilateral agreements with all provinces/territories, and first phase action plans executed with all jurisdictions, Canada's first federal child care legislation to become law made its way through Parliament and received royal assent on March 19, 2024. Bill C-35, An Act Respecting Early Learning and Child Care, is intended to “establish a permanent, legislated commitment to federal funding for early learning and child care.” The legislation sets out principles for the transformed ELCC system, identifying affordability, accessibility (service availability), quality, and inclusivity as the touchstones for the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care initiative.

Affordability

Making child care affordable has received the most detailed treatment, with the federal government setting a target of a 50% reduction in average fees for all families by the end of 2022 and an average \$10/day parent fee by 2025 – 2026 for all regulated child care spaces for 0 – 5 year olds. In response, child care fees for children younger than school-age in a number of provinces/territories fell even more precipitously than the first target. By mid-2024, parent fees in six provinces/territories were set by the jurisdiction at the \$10/day target. Some have exceeded this figure, some use it as an average and in several, \$10/day represents the maximum fee. Research conducted in 2023 shows that all jurisdictions achieved, or came close to achieving, an average 50% fee reduction, the first target. While regulated child care may not yet have become affordable for all families, it has inarguably become more affordable for many more than before CWELCC, when the high cost of child care was a key barrier to access for many families.

Accessibility

Although Canada's high parent fees had long been one of the main barriers to accessibility, it was not the sole barrier. Making child care available to all families is identified as a key goal for CWELCC which must be met by expanding the supply of regulated child care over time. Research from 2023 showed that close to half of Canada's children younger than school-age lived in a “child care desert,” defined as a postal code in which more than three children compete for a single preschool child care space. This is intensified by, but not limited to, living in a rural or remote community. As the federal government explicitly stated that CWELCC expansion would be “primarily public and non-profit,” this is an expectation of the approach to making child care provision more available.

Full- and part-day (nursery school/preschool) spaces in centres for children younger than school-age (0 – 5) in 2023 reached 678,024 spaces despite higher commitments to expansion targets identified in each province/territory's action plan. This represents an increase of 50,691 full- and part-day spaces in regulated child care for 0 – 5 year olds between 2021 and 2023. Note that 0 – 5 year olds are also in before- and after-school programs and in regulated family child care, but the number of spaces and enrolment data for 0 – 5 year olds are not consistently available across jurisdictions. It is noteworthy that coverage remains much lower for some groups, especially infants.

Child care expansion across Canada depends in part on the availability of a qualified child care workforce. Canadian child care's low pay, poor working conditions, lack of respect for the work and the workers, and less-than-adequate qualification requirements had been well documented by the 1990s. But although the issues were documented, they were never solved. Following the child care crisis during the

COVID-19 pandemic, which led to many child care staff being laid off, centres across Canada found they were unable to hire qualified staff as the pandemic abated. This situation persists in 2024.

A 2024 report summarizes the wide range of child care workforce initiatives that have been taken or are underway under CWELCC as all provinces/territories have committed to improving child care workforce issues. For example, by mid-2024, six provinces and territories had introduced 3 wage grids of some kind and five others are working on them, while others have introduced pensions and other retirement benefits or wage enhancement. Professional development has been strengthened and new certification initiatives are underway. Nevertheless, despite a federal/provincial/territorial meeting on the topic in July 2023, child care workforce issues continue and staff shortages remain a factor holding back ELCC expansion. Consistent data on child care staff wages, benefits, and working conditions are not available.

Quality

The intention that the Canadian child care system developing under CWELCC will be high quality is stated explicitly as a principle, with the term “giving children the best start in life” often used as part of the description of the initiative. The principle of “high quality” is included in the new child care legislation, Bill C-35, and appears in the federal/provincial/territorial agreements and action plans. However, attention to quality in the initial phase of CWELCC implementation has been more general than specific and has mostly centred on the importance of a qualified child care workforce. Quality in ECEC programs is a complex, multi-faceted concept, with interpretations and conceptions of quality covering a wide range of philosophies and approaches. While qualified, well-employed early childhood educators are known to be the primary factor in determining whether or not child care is high quality, other structural factors – such as ratios, pedagogy, physical facilities, ownership, and professional development – are also important, as are ongoing strategies to enhance quality. It should be noted that all federal agreements and action plans explicitly state that expansion of services under CWELCC should be “primarily public and non-profit,” and for-profit ownership has been shown to be a predictor of poorer quality. Nevertheless, the data in this report show that for-profit expansion has continued in most jurisdictions, exceeding public and non-profit expansion in a number of provinces/ territories. Current or recent data on the quality of Canadian child care provision in most jurisdictions is not available.

Inclusivity

The idea of “inclusivity,” a fourth CWELCC principle, signifies that child care services shall be available and responsive to all children and families, including those who are marginalized, racialized, newcomers, and those with disabilities. All provinces/territories maintain funding and policy intended to include children with disabilities in regulated child care, and all except Quebec use individual parent fee subsidy systems to help eligible low-income families cover child care fees. In the federal/provincial/territorial bilateral agreements and action plans, all provinces/territories committed to more equitable, or enhanced, provision of child care to “under-served” populations. Although definitive data showing this are not available outside Quebec, a 2023 analysis suggests that access to regulated child care is inequitably distributed; available data show that low income, newcomer, racialized, and other more marginalized families are less likely to be using child care. Thus, a more inclusive approach to ELCC calls for ensuring that barriers to access are addressed through concerted policy focus.

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