

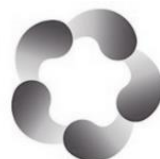
Roadmap

to Universal Child Care in Ontario

Program Profile 3 Windsor-Essex Registered Early Childhood Educators Mentorship Program

May 2024

COALITION ONTARIENNE POUR
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Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario

Roadmap to Universal Child Care in Ontario. Program Profile 3: The Windsor-Essex Registered Early Childhood Educators Mentorship Program

May 2024

Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario: www.aeceo.ca
Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care: www.childcareontario.org

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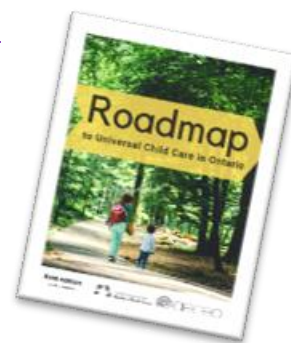
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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In July 2021, the first edition of the [*Roadmap to Universal Child Care in Ontario*](#) was released by the Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare (OCBCC) and the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO). The *Roadmap* set out our vision and shared path forward but did not delve deeply into each area of transformation needed. As we develop, and to inform, the second edition of the *Roadmap*, we are releasing policy briefs that discuss specific issues in more detail, and program profiles highlighting innovative practices and programs across Ontario.



PROGRAM INTRODUCTION

The Windsor-Essex Registered Early Childhood Educators (W.E.R.E.C.E.) Mentorship Program is a formalized and comprehensive mentorship program for early learning professionals in the Windsor-Essex region. The program’s pilot round began in September 2022 as part of the City of Windsor’s multipronged Workforce Funding Initiative to recruit, retain and enhance a high-quality early years workforce. With the support of the Service System Manager, Connection’s Early Years Family Centre – a multiservice non-profit agency – created and continues to manage the program. The program was designed and implemented through consultation with community partners, early learning professionals, and research into existing mentoring models.

The pilot round of the program welcomed 87 professionals from across the sector. A second round was launched in June 2023, this time with over 120 participants. The program itself has a 6-month duration, in which participants are paired, or placed in small groups. The pairs or groups then complete 75 hours of professional development, which includes mentoring, networking, workshops, independent exploration, and reflection. The culminating program is an opportunity for educators to experience belonging, well-being, engagement, and expression among their community of peers.

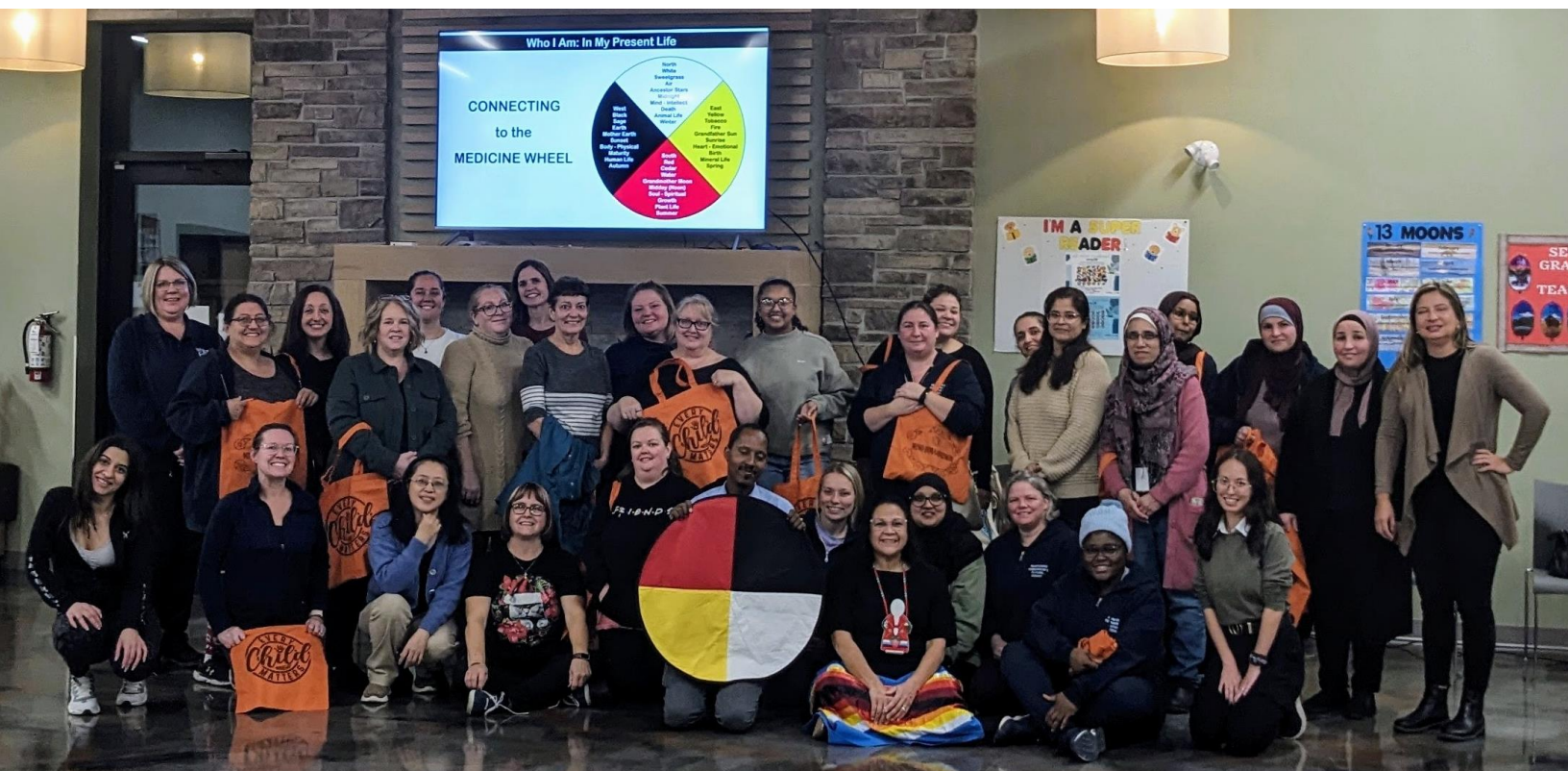
PROGRAM APPROACH

The W.E.R.E.C.E. Mentorship program is open to Windsor-Essex early years professionals working in various capacities in the child care and early years sector, including RECEs, Early Childhood Assistants, supervisors, administrators, preservice educators, students, and resource consultants. Mentorship Program staff arrange partnerships based on professional goals and areas of interest that are indicated in the application process. Tools and ongoing support are provided to help participants develop a professional association in which they can feel safe asking questions,

sharing ideas and furthering their capabilities from within the context of their relationship. These mentoring relationships are the primary pillar of the program.

The concept of ‘mentorship’ is flexible within this program: while some partnerships take on the appearance of a traditional mentoring dichotomy of mentor/mentee, others form a relationship of peer-support, reverse-mentoring, or group mentoring. Participants are focused on the skills needed to engage effectively in a mentoring relationship as opposed to centering on the titles and roles associated with being a mentor or a mentee. In other words, they are free to explore what mentoring means to them, and to seek out the type of support that they need currently in their professional journey. The ultimate objectives of the program are: for participants to form meaningful professional relationships from which learning, growth, reflection, and a sense of wellbeing can occur; and fostering a connected and engaged community of early years professionals.

I have learned that there are other [people] within my community who want to connect, who want to engage and who want to talk about hard things we all face day to day. Being part of this mentorship has reignited the passion I had in the beginning of my role as a supervisor once again. I don't feel alone within my field and I have learned that giving myself an opportunity to learn and grow through development and talks with others is possible and that being an RECE is an ever ongoing experience. (Anonymous W.E.R.E.C.E. Mentorship Participant)



Participants are not expected to adhere to any set schedule or method of communication when connecting with their mentoring partner. At the outset of the program, partners discuss the level of support they are looking for from their partner and create a plan that honours their professional needs, but also the commitments and/or barriers that they may have outside of the mentorship program. Some partners enjoy the routine and predictability of meeting at the same time and place every week, whereas others prefer to send emails or have a phone call whenever they have a thought or question for their partner.

The second pillar of this program is community building. Beyond the scope of the mentoring partnership itself, opportunities for gathering and networking for all participants in the program are available on a weekly basis throughout the duration of the program. As described by an anonymous participant: “I have been able to have very meaningful conversations about what it means to work with children and have been able to hear so many wonderful opinions that others have that have helped me better understand what it means to become an ECE.” Fostering this connectedness to the greater community of early learning professionals creates a greater sense of belonging for the individual educator and helps to build a network of understanding and support for Windsor-Essex early learning professionals. Week to week, participants were invited to come together through communities of practice, workshops, make-and-takes, site tours, and more.



The third pillar is meaningful learning opportunities. Participants have a chance to engage in hands-on learning and experiences, which serve not only to stimulate understanding, but also to facilitate connections between participants through shared experiences. Some areas of focus include learning more about the land on which we live and work and local history, as well as empowering those within the community to share their knowledge with others. Participants are also encouraged and supported to shadow their partner(s) in their places of work to experience new spaces, programs and pedagogical practices. Participant interests are met with responsiveness – following the curiosity of the educators allows for opportunities that are engaging and lead to more discussion, reflection, and curiosity.

I had begun to find myself eager to join professional development opportunities, both interactive Zoom meetings and (especially) in-person activities. These brought with them the sense of community that was driving me forward, helping me thrive in a professional capacity. A universal truth is that children thrive when they have a community in their lives. The connection within the classroom community plays a huge role in their development. We as educators have not– and will never– outgrow that need for community and belonging. (Rhiannon Parker, RECE and Mentorship Participant)



CONNECTION TO ROADMAP

PROVISIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Through this project, educators are given time and space on a regular basis to meet and interact with their peers for the sole purpose of sharing thoughts and inquiries about their professional practice. As educators are given space and opportunities to network with others, individuals are naturally creating their own networks based on shared passions and areas of curiosity.

PAID NON-CONTACT TIME TO ACCESS MEANINGFUL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Educators are able to follow their interests; working with the educators, program facilitators and the Service System Manager allows for development of meaningful professional development sessions based on what the educators are motivated to explore further.

Notably, participants in the W.E.R.E.C.E. Mentorship Program are given an honorarium commensurate to the 75 hours they invested into the program. Individuals can rest assured that their time engaging in professional learning is compensated.

REIMAGINE AND ENHANCE PATHWAYS TO ACQUIRING AND UPGRADING QUALIFICATIONS

Although this program is in no way a replacement for a diploma or degree, lived experience and investment into one's own learning and development are valuable. Because of the flexibility of the program, participants have an opportunity to upskill (especially soft skills such as communication, leadership, etc.) in a way that is less impeded by systemic barriers. The Mentorship Program creates a safe space where they can be innovative and push their own boundaries. Participants are invited to exercise their leadership skills in different ways that they may not be able to in their own workplaces, as well as engage in networking and shadowing to explore career possibilities. Career advancement opportunities is an area of need as indicated by the [2022 workforce report published by the Atkinson Centre](#).

An additional layer of support that is provided to participants is system navigation of the various programs that are available in the province for upgrading qualifications. Additionally, guidance and technological assistance are available to support participants to take advantage of these programs, which creates a more equitable opportunity for advancement. Identifying goals on an individual basis to identify the steps needed to obtain the goal and how to make it happen.

BREAKING DOWN SILOS

This program is designed to be welcoming for early years professionals in any capacity or role across the early years sector. This creates a grassroots approach to breaking down silos by connecting educators and administrators from across the field to engage in conversation. Through this connectedness, a culture of sharing can begin to form between those invested in early learning, leading to idea-sharing and building a stronger early years community for children and families.

An important aspect of this is the ongoing communication and collaboration that occurs with the Service System Manager. Through partnership, the relationship between the community of early years professionals and the Service System Manager is strengthened.

