



Roadmap

to Universal Child Care in Ontario

Program Profile 1

Reimagining Quality Project

July 2023

COALITION ONTARIENNE POUR
*de meilleurs services
éducatifs à l'enfance*



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Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario: www.aeceo.ca

Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care: www.childcareontario.org

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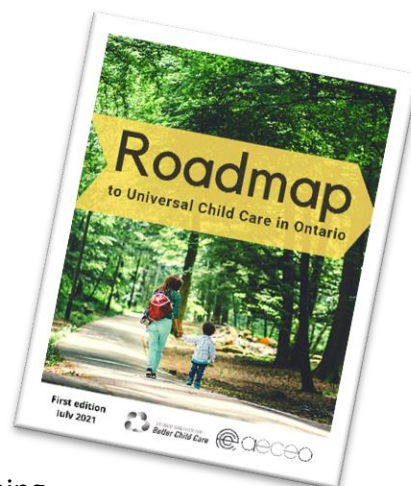
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INTRODUCTION

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 our 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 in Ontario.



In the *Roadmap*, we described how, “a growing number of early childhood education and care theorists and philosophers have called for a rethinking of dominant, technical approaches to defining and monitoring quality” and that, “there is an emerging recognition that it is the important role of well-educated early childhood educators with decent work who bring ‘quality’ to life through caring relationships and pedagogy with young children and families.”

The dominant narrative of quality is that it is universal, objective, and measurable through standardized evaluations, however, we know this is not the case. Quality is subjective, it is relative, and it can look completely different in different contexts. With that in mind, we would like to introduce the Reimagining Quality Project taking place in Dufferin County in partnership with the Seneca College Lab School.

REIMAGINING QUALITY PROJECT

PROGRAM INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

The Reimagining Quality Project began in Dufferin County, the second smallest of Ontario’s 47 Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSM) and District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSAB) responsible for local management of child care services. The Reimagining Quality Project first began through the [Raising the Bar program](#): a community initiative that aims to promote and support early childhood educators in their continuous commitment to excellence in early learning and child care programs. They do this by engaging educators in ongoing reflective practice, leadership opportunities, and offering continuous professional learning.

Located in the City of Toronto, Seneca College’s ECE Lab School found close allies and shared values in nearby Dufferin County’s approach and work. Seneca’s Lab School has been a site of research and innovation and is part of Seneca’s School of Early Childhood Education. While the Lab School’s journey in reimagining quality began while they were providing care to toddler and preschool aged students, they now operate as a studio space of exploration and discussion for student educators and community members. The team at the Lab School has been committed to providing inspired, creative, innovative environments, having quality relationships, and creating a deep sense of belonging.

It was through these values of collaboration and believing in creating safe spaces that led to a true, warm, authentic relationship with Dufferin County. The shared values of companionship and belonging brought these teams together. Both Dufferin County and Seneca Lab School were at a place of reimagining quality and entered into a partnership to explore this idea together. They began to have big, sometimes difficult, conversations, considering what “quality” could be when we centre relationships, belonging and community. Having a space where educators can feel safe and supported in having deep conversations about these values and all of the work being done at the centre has been critical to the Reimagining Quality Project.

IDEAS AND APPROACH

For years, educators at Seneca’s Lab school had been questioning and wondering about what *has* to be done versus what educators felt they *should* be doing. They began an intentional collective process of thinking together about what is important to them pedagogically and what values they wish to work towards. It was important as a team to define what they valued and were committed to. Prior to the pandemic, the group began to question and challenge their quality assurance measures, thinking about what quality *could* look like. Educators began to think: “What *is* quality?”, “How do we measure quality?”, “Can we really even measure it?” and “What is missing?” Their quality assurance checklists did not seem to align with their values and



pedagogy and they wondered about what could happen if they gave themselves permission to try something else. These educators understood that quality seen through universal measurements was not capable of considering the context and place beyond the measurement and the checklist.

These conversations were not always easy, but it was through thinking about the value of these discussions that the term **pedagogical security** came to be. Both Seneca Lab School and Dufferin County recognized that the key to their pedagogical exploration was this ability to collaborate and share, and to develop a sense of identity together. Coming together regularly to have real, thoughtful conversations takes effort and vulnerability, but are absolutely necessary to develop a deep sense of belonging and relationship. One example of this coming together took place after visiting a professional learning event as a group, and creating time afterwards to share and discuss their experiences.

The concept of belonging has continued to come up in these conversations as a central principle. Educators understand the benefit of the children and families they care for having a sense of belonging and this benefit can extend to educators. By coming together and really discussing themselves and their work and recognizing these conversations as a space of identity formation and belonging, early years staff can regain the energy, hope, and curiosity that allows them to keep going. This is a lifelong journey; there is no end goal or objective. This sense of belonging and community spreads as others become engaged. Leading with love, respect and companionship helps to foster the sense of community.



CONNECTION TO THE ROADMAP

If we ever want to truly combat the retention issues in the Early Learning and Child Care sector, we need to focus on living well together. We need to create and maintain a sense of belonging. We need to have spaces where we can critically examine our pedagogy, with pedagogical security. When these spaces of belonging are held with the highest value, we are able to create more connections, we have more energy, and we are restored both professionally and in life.

Dufferin County and the Seneca Lab School primarily ascribe their success to creating a culture that: values belonging and space; allows questioning to be the norm; invites deep pedagogical conversations; and provides the pedagogical security to do those without fearing repercussions. They acknowledge that this is a space that is created every day and a commitment to ensure that every single person feels a sense of belonging is the key. There are also some tangible systems in place that help to make this work possible, and which connect to the *Roadmap*.

PROVISION OF DAILY, COLLABORATIVE, ON-SITE PAID PLANNING TIME

It was essential that all staff were provided paid time to complete this work, and ample planning time overall. Seneca Lab School ensured the paid planning time was time spent alongside team members to develop relationships and slow it all down to really think together, not just in short individual time slots. Building these relationships was a commitment made by all of the staff at the centre, and it took, and continues to take, effort. Space was created specifically for dialogue and documentation, and to create a sense of wonder together.



PAID, NON-CONTACT TIME TO ACCESS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Professional learning opportunities also began to be offered for everyone to do together. Previously, these experiences were split up between the staff members, who would then return and report back on what they had been taught. However, allowing all educators from the centre to engage in learning together was a foundational change, and transformed professional learning from a presentation of one individual into a collaborative space of exploration and relationship building. Professional learning opportunities that aligned with the vision of the centre were selected through careful consideration. This shift was felt in monthly staff meetings which moved away from logistical planning to intentional time to think and imagine together.

PROFESSIONAL PAY

Staff at the Seneca Lab School are unionized with the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU). Using the OPSEU wage grid for post-secondary lab schools, decent wages are the norm. Respect and professional pay have led to educators remaining at the centre for decades. The Seneca Lab School deeply respects their educators. We often think of *How Does Learning Happen* (HDLH) in relation to children, but the Seneca Lab School has reminded us all that a sense of belonging, of expression, well-being, and engagement are just as important for the educators in a centre as well. Professional pay, decent work, and a sense of belonging together form the intersection of retention.

OPPORTUNITY FOR INNOVATION

Lab schools are sites of innovation. Those there understand they are often provided with additional leeway to try new things and to question their work. While not everyone is in this position, it is a way that the lab school could be involved as leaders in this work. This also tells us that there needs to be a willingness from all levels to let go of the things we have done before and the tools that no longer serve us – to break a new path.

ROLE OF MUNICIPAL PARTNERS

Municipalities in Ontario play an important role as service system managers for early learning and child care. Through the support of the County of Dufferin, the Lab School has been able to share their learning with the broader community and develop new relationships with other centres in the municipality. By demonstrating their commitment to questioning existing quality assurance standards and exploring new ways of being, the County models these values to other centres and spreads a sense of belonging with those relationships. The early learning community in Dufferin County knows they too can take these risks, and explore their philosophies while being supported by their service system manager.

CONCLUSION

In the *Roadmap*, we articulated both the necessity to rethink the dominant discourse around quality and the crucial role of decent work in building the early learning system for all. Decent work principles are absolutely necessary to engage in work like the Reimagining Quality Project.

When decent work standards are commonplace, it allows space and time for educators to focus on pedagogy, relationships, community, and belonging. Seneca Lab School has done exactly this, supported by Dufferin County. Seneca Lab School has been able to retain educators for decades by: leading with the heart and valuing relationships, community and a sense belonging above all; providing professional pay and decent work including paid programming time and team access to professional learning; and recognizing the need for educators to have a strong sense of identity. They have provided the foundation needed to delve into deeper thinking about pedagogical practice. This directly follows Policy Recommendation 14 from the *Roadmap*: Develop and establish Decent Work Standards to support pedagogical practice. By ensuring pedagogical security, educators are recognized as the experts they are and are able to provide quality on a different level than those following standardized checklists that may or may not represent the communities within which educators are working. By empowering and uplifting educators and truly creating and maintaining a community of recognition, value, and deep belonging, Seneca and Dufferin have positioned the educators as leaders in their contexts, aiding retention within the sector.

