



4

How publicly delivered child care services contribute to accessibility

Childcare Resource and Research Unit February 2022

About the series

One aspect of Canadian child care provision is that the supply of child care services is too limited to meet demand, unevenly distributed and inequitable in terms of location. The primary reason for this is that “creating” child care services in Canada has mostly been treated as a private responsibility. This private approach is in contrast to public processes where governments take responsibility for ensuring that child care services are developed where and when they are needed.

As Canada begins to fulfill a historic commitment to build a universal early learning and child care system, the challenge of limited, uneven, inequitable child care availability must be tackled systemically—a more publicly managed, planned, intentional approach based on greater public responsibility for ensuring the availability and determining the characteristics and distribution of regulated child care.

This series of short, topical papers covers the importance of designing effective child care expansion strategies and some elements that can contribute to developing them. The series is based on a longer publication, [*Moving from private to public processes to create child care in Canada*](#) (2020), and has been revised and re-developed in this more accessible series format to reflect current Canada-wide policy developments.

MOVING
FROM PRIVATE
TO PUBLIC
PROCESSES.

A SERIES ON
CREATING
CHILD CARE
IN CANADA

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What's the issue?

There is little doubt that the private initiatives Canada relies on to create child care services fail to meet the need. As a result, there are too few child care services to meet families' needs in all regions in Canada. This paper focuses on one of the roles played by local level governments in child care in many countries and to a smaller extent in several Canadian provinces: delivering public child care services. It offers an exploration of how public delivery of child care by local government entities can be a significant tool for increasing service availability and equity.

What is publicly delivered child care?

Publicly delivered child care services are operated¹ directly by a public government body such as a municipality or school board rather than by a private non-profit or private for-profit entity.² A City of Vancouver report defines public child care delivery as:

services operated directly by local or senior government agencies, such as school districts, municipalities, regional districts or public health authorities. The public agency holds the operating license and directly delivers the service to the community. Employees delivering the service are considered public employees. Public delivery contrasts with a non-profit delivery model, whereby the entity to hold the operating license and deliver a service is a non-profit organization. Employees delivering the service are considered employees of the non-profit operator (Gautreaux, 2019: 3).

1 In Canada, which uses a licensing, or permit system for child care services, "operating directly" assumes that the licensee or license holder is a government body such as a municipality or school board.

2 This definition of publicly delivered child care does not include ECEC services such as Canadian kindergarten or French écoles maternelles, also programs for children under elementary school age, that are part of public education systems.

In many European countries, most, or many child care services are publicly delivered, meaning that a public entity, usually the municipality, is the operator, or owner. This is the case in Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Denmark, France, Slovenia and others, although typically these countries also have at least a small number of private non-profit and for-profit services.

By contrast, in other countries (often those typically defined as liberal democratic, with more market-oriented welfare regimes), child care is mostly privately delivered.³ None of these countries—the United States, the UK, Australia, Ireland and Canada—that mostly rely on private child care delivery have evolved well-developed ELCC systems (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001, 2006). Gautreaux, writing on municipal child care in British Columbia observes that “research indicates that public delivery of child care (childcare operated directly by local or senior government agencies) is one necessary component of achieving a system of universal child care” (Gautreaux, 2019: 1).

In addition to publicly delivered child care that fits this description, many countries also have publicly delivered ELCC programs for children younger than elementary school age, usually down to age two or three years, that are part of public education systems. These include, for example, Canadian kindergarten⁴ and four year old kindergarten, Spanish escuelas infantiles and French ecoles maternelles, which are compulsory from age three. These tend to be conceptualized more as “education” than “care” but act as child care for working parents during school hours, as elementary school does. They are not overtly included as part of this discussion as they are provided as a matter of course by public school authorities, almost always at no fee to parents. Participation in public ELCC programs that are part of education systems may or may not be compulsory, as they are in France and in several Canadian provinces.

³ The idea of ideologically-defined social welfare regimes was developed by sociologist Gösta Esping-Andersen. For an explanation see his *Three worlds of welfare capitalism* (1989) or Friendly and Prentice, 2009.

⁴ Note that this is complicated by terminology: “kindergarten” refers to child care in some countries with integrated care and education systems like Norway, for example.

What's the context?

A number of ECEC policy specialists have commented on the benefits of publicly delivered municipal child care. Swedish ECEC expert Barbara Martin Korpi has described how municipal child care delivery was a key factor in the rapid growth of child care in Sweden beginning in the 1970s. Korpi also commented that publicly delivered child care brought benefits to Swedish municipalities, as the availability of quality child care strengthened the attractiveness as places to live for families (Korpi, 2007).

In an exploratory study, European ECEC scholars Mathias Urban and Clara Rubiano considered the process, conception and effects of privatization in 14 countries in Europe, North and South America and Asia. Using detailed case studies, it begins with the “a privatisation trend that threatens to overshadow public ECEC”. Urban and Rubiano’s study addresses the impact of privatization on pragmatic aspects of ECEC provision like quality and the situation of the workforce, as well as philosophical issues such as the understanding of equity and social justice (Urban & Rubiano, 2014).

Another concept relevant to public provision of child care is “steering”. Steering with regard to child care has been used by the OECD to mean linking planning and implementation more effectively than waiting for the market to respond. This can include initiating new services, addressing shifting age or cultural groups, addressing needs of hard-to-serve populations/areas, such as parents working non-standard hours or rural communities.

Historically, public delivery of child care services has been relatively limited in Canada compared to many other countries, especially those in Europe. Although public child care has diminished dramatically in Ontario – once its most established provider – new interest in public child care has arisen in British Columbia. An analysis commissioned by the City of Vancouver to explore public child care delivery in British Columbia used interviews with municipal stakeholders to identify potential benefits as they perceived them, as well as challenges experienced.

Identified benefits of publicly delivered services included:

- Consistent, reliable services to the community;
- Increased provision of quality programs;
- Financial advantages;
- Greater control and ability to leverage space for community needs;
- Greater staff integration and collaboration;
- Better wages and working conditions for ECEs;
- Greater integration of ECEs into the public sector (Gautreaux, 2019).

According to Prentice, “when child care is conceived of as a public good rather than a market commodity, its close relationship to social capital and social inclusion become obvious” (2005: 18). She notes that the idea of municipally owned, operated and delivered child care programs would reinforce the idea that ELCC is a public good that is good for children, good for women, and good for the economy.

What’s the current state?

In five of Canada’s provinces – Quebec, Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia – some child care services (a limited number except in Quebec) are operated by municipalities and school boards, both public entities.

Quebec

While Quebec child care services for children younger than school-age are all run by either private non-profit and for-profit operators, school authorities operate services for school-age children. School-age child care, which includes kindergarten-age children, is under the aegis of the Ministère de l’Éducation et de l’Enseignement Supérieur (MEES), not the Ministère de la Famille, which is responsible for child care for children 0-5 years. School authorities are required to provide school-age child care, charging a flat parent fee, when there is sufficient demand. Proportionately, Quebec has more child care for school-age children

than preschool-aged children, reporting more than 350,000 school-aged child care spaces in 2019 (Friendly et al., 2020).

Ontario

Public child care has been a key part of the child care picture in Ontario for more than 75 years, as many of the war-time day nurseries established during World War II in Ontario were operated by municipalities. When the war ended, and with it the first federal financial support for child care, many of these closed but a number of centres including some municipal centres were retained. In Toronto, the municipality operated most programs for preschool-age children while school boards were responsible for child care for older children. This participation by local government in the operation of child care programs was the first substantial publicly operated child care in Canada and was to play a significant role in future development of child care in Ontario. Initially supported through provincial/municipal cost-sharing, such funding as was available became federal/provincial/municipal with the coming of the federal Canada Assistance Plan⁵ in 1966 (Friendly & Prentice, 2009).

FIGURE 1 Municipally operated full and part time child care centre spaces in Ontario 1998 - 2019

	# of full and part time centre spaces	% of total full and part time centre spaces
1998	18,143	12.0
2010	10,230	4.0
2012	7,192	3.0
2016	5,305	1.4
2019	5,508	1.2

Data source: *Early childhood education and care in Canada*, 1998, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2019. These data were unavailable for all years. ([All ECEC in Canada publications](#))

Municipal child care in Ontario as recently as 1998 represented as much 18% of the province’s supply of centre spaces. As Figure 1 shows, this has diminished substantially, as provincial funds to some municipalities

⁵ The Canada Assistance Plan supported social welfare and preventative social service programs across Canada including child care through 50-50 federal/provincial cost sharing. It was ended in 1996 and replaced by a federal block funded, the Canada Health and Social Transfer, now the Canada Social Transfer.

were cut through “modernizing” the funding formula. Most recently, in 2021, Waterloo Regional Council closed its five well-regarded municipal child care centres.

Saskatchewan

In Saskatchewan, which has the lowest child care coverage in Canada on a per child capita basis, a number of municipalities have chosen to offer municipally connected child care on a voluntary basis. A survey of 12 centres⁶ identified as municipally connected or delivered by the provincial government found that of the 12 centres, three are operated directly by the municipality in that the municipality is the license holder and employer of the child care staff. These are located in the small rural centres of the Village of Vibank, the Town of Carnduff, and the Village of Hazlet, each with a population of no more than 1,100. All three of these centres were developed with the support of the local municipal government. In 2019, the Saskatchewan government reported that 116 child care spaces were municipally operated (Friendly et al, 2020). The other eight municipally connected centres are operated as non-profit organizations guided by a board of directors which holds the license and employs the staff.

Alberta

At one time, Alberta had a substantial publicly delivered child care sector. In the mid 1970s, Edmonton, Calgary, Medicine Hat, Red Deer and Grande Prairie, and some smaller municipalities operated 66 child care centres as well as home child care (Langford, 2011). By the mid 1990s, a variety of provincial and federal funding and policy changes had led to the demise of almost all Alberta’s municipal child centres.⁷ Although four other municipal governments—[Beaumont](#), [Jasper](#), Drayton Valley and the [Municipal District of Opportunity](#), a large remote area in central northern Alberta which is predominantly Indigenous—now support and/or operate child care centres, they no longer provide a critical mass of centres in Alberta as they once did. (A “spotlight” on

6 All 12 centres are in small rural municipalities.

7 Including the replacement of the cost-shared Canada Assistance Plan with the block fund Canada Health and Social Transfer.

Drayton Valley’s municipally operated child care is provided at the end of this paper).

British Columbia

British Columbia does not have the same long historic experience with public child care that Ontario and Alberta have; publicly operated child care is a relatively recent development in the province. In a report for the City of Vancouver, Michelle Gautreaux described it as “small but impactful component of the childcare landscape” (Gautreaux, 2019: 1). Currently in BC, publicly delivered child care is provided by municipalities, municipal parks and recreation departments and school boards.

Among the municipalities offering public child care are several urban-suburban communities and several rural communities of different types. Six of these provided full day or close to full day child care, six provide part day preschools and five offer school-age child care; several offer multiple child care services. Most are located in public buildings. The programs provide from 16 spaces to more than the 1,000 spaces provided in Surrey, in the Lower Mainland (Gautreaux, 2019).

A current provincial initiative in collaboration with the Union of British Columbia Municipalities (UBCM) that has motivated local planning and municipal needs assessments encourages local public delivery of services.

Spotlight on publicly delivered child care across Canada

Alberta: Drayton Valley Early Childhood Development Centre

Drayton Valley in central Alberta with a population of 7,000 had identified lack of quality child care as a barrier to attracting oil sands workers in 2006. A plan was developed by an outside organization that recommended the town establish a publicly delivered child care facility to address the need. Funding through a loan and capital funds from the Alberta government allowed an 88 space purpose built centre to be built in 2009.

Today it provides child care for children from 1-12 years of age. Staff are employees of the town. They are paid at union rates, though they are not unionized. Most of the staff meet Alberta maximum qualification requirements (Child Development Supervisor).

Drayton Valley does not experience the recruitment and retention of qualified staff challenges facing many other centres. Prior to becoming an ELCC site, the town contributed approximately \$200,000/year to keep the fees affordable for parents while ensuring good wages and benefits for staff. The centre works in close collaboration with the elementary school, and until the 2020 funding cuts for children with disabilities, served a number of PUF-eligible children in the child care centre. The centre freely shares all the operating policies, procedures and related documentation with other centres and when a new centre is being developed in the region, the licensing officer has often asked the centre manager to provide support, advice and mentorship to the new operation. The support of the municipality has helped ensure a stable and well qualified workforce to deliver quality care, and the financial security to remain operational in the current environment of provincial cuts and the challenges of COVID-19.

Ontario: City of Toronto

Toronto Children's Services, a department of the City of Toronto, currently operates and delivers child care at more than 50 municipal centres throughout the City. Toronto also directly operates a family child care agency which works with several hundred regulated family child care homes across Toronto.

Toronto's municipally operated services are located mostly in areas deemed to be "high need" and are likely to include child care for infants and toddlers and children with special needs. Centres are generally open from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

The City has a commitment to investing public money in public social services. Although the City holds the license to operate and deliver

services at the more than 50 centres, the centres are not always in municipally owned spaces.

Ontario school boards: Region of Waterloo, City of Ottawa and City of Toronto

The Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) currently operates and delivers before and after school programs for children in Junior Kindergarten to Grade 2. The Extended Day program is an optional, fee-based program led by early childhood educators using fully equipped kindergarten classrooms. The program is operated and delivered by Waterloo Region District School Board – not a third party provider.

The Ottawa-Carlton District School Board (OCDSB) operates Extended Day Programs before and after school at 65 schools in the district. Additional Extended Day Programs in this school board are run by licensed third party providers.

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) directly operates Extended Day Programs at 16 schools in TDSB for children in kindergarten through Grade 6 before and after school. These programs are delivered by TDSB staff, including a Designated Early Childhood Educator, and operate in accordance with the *Education Act*.

Conclusion

Publicly delivered child care provides the majority of child care provision in many countries. Indeed, most of the countries with accessible, quality child care that is responsive to parents' and childrens' needs mostly rely on public services to deliver their child care supply. Practically, public child care can enhance the supply of child care services relatively easily because local governments have the planning and

administrative tools to respond quickly. As they operate at the local level in a democratic mode, they are usually practiced at involving and responding to local residents such as parents.

In Canada, public child care services, although not numerous, operate in a number of provinces using a variety of models. As Canadian governments begin the sizeable task of building a universal, cross-Canada child care system, these successful models can be adapted to additional jurisdictions and communities.

Canada's historic project of building a child care system that began with the 2021 federal budget has embraced the idea that child care is an essential part of the social infrastructure and should be accessible to all members of the community. This is consistent with envisioning child care as a public service and beginning to consider public child care services as a key component of the expansion needed to create the new child care system.

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MOVING FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC PROCESSES

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