



FROM REOPENING TO RECOVERY

*A plan for child care reopening
in Ontario and moving to
a publicly funded system*

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Introduction

Licensed child care centres in Ontario have been temporarily closed by emergency order since March 17th in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. On May 19th, the Ontario government announced that “a gradual reopening of child care is expected to begin when the province is ready to transition to Stage 2 based on public health criteria”. While the Province has promised “robust safety protocols for the safety of Ontario's youngest learners and their staff”, the government’s weak record on early years and child care policy demands strong community advocacy.

Our goals are to ensure:

- A safe reopening;
- Adequate funding and support for educators and programs; and
- A strengthened child care system at the core of economic and social recovery.

The temporary closure period for licensed child care centres has been challenging for workers, children and families. Throughout, the Ontario government has been slow to respond and has failed to address the concerns of the early years and child care sector. The government’s approach to communication on child care related issues has included weekend press announcements, as well as unclear and contradictory memos and messages. This indicates their disregard for the sector. Sadly, this is consistent with the current government’s reckless record of child care cuts and deregulation since their election.

The value of the feminized and precarious early childhood workforce to children, families and communities has not been recognized. In many ways, the invisibility of the workforce has been amplified during the closure period. This is especially worrisome given the significant role that Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) and early years staff play in reopening and recovery, through their caring, professional, and pedagogical work.

The provincial government has refused to extend the \$4 per hour “pandemic pay” to educators working in emergency child care. Further, their recent “Child Care Sustainability Funding Approach” prohibits provincial funds from being used to pay wages for RECEs and child care staff while programs have been temporarily closed down – even for those staff that have continued to work, providing families with virtual programming and support during the pandemic. It also restricts child care operators from using provincial funding to top-up laid off child care staff.

There is also no new provincial money in the “sustainability funding”, instead the fund merely re-allocates the existing child care budget, but now attempts to cover fixed costs for an additional 20% of child care operators that were not in receipt of public funds before. Thus, despite the province’s stated intent for this funding, the impact of these funding restrictions threaten the future of many community child care programs, and is especially punishing to

decent work employers. Many decent work employers have tried to provide income security to their educators - in part to help retain educators who will be essential to reopening safely and in a way that provides professional, ethical care to young children.

Now, while continuing to face mounting deficits after months of closure, child care programs are being left to scramble to plan and prepare for reopening without any clear directives, sufficient financial support, communication or consultation with the provincial government - who has the primary responsibility to ensure the stability and safety of the sector. Ontario cannot work without us, and children and families deserve quality, meaningful and thoughtful care in safe and decent work environments as we slowly reopen Ontario. This is not possible without our early years programs and our early years workforce.

How we engaged the sector

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) have engaged in extensive consultation with the sector¹. Through wide-ranging dialogue we explored what reopening child care programs slowly and safely should look like in our province. Through the AECEO's online survey, we heard from nearly 4,000 RECEs and program staff about what concerns them most and what they need in place to feel assured in thinking of returning to work.

The AECEO's survey, *Returning to Work: RECE and early years staff perspectives*, was designed to better understand what was most concerning to the early years workforce in thinking about returning to work. Using a Likert scale, participants described their level of concern with a number of potential outcomes from the COVID-19 related temporary closure. As well, RECEs and early years staff were asked to what degree a variety of processes would reassure them about the eventual reopening.

Specific consultation and communications resources included:

- Two province-wide webinars;
- Weekly local Community of Practice calls with RECEs, early years staff, and operators;
- An online training series;
- An online survey of RECEs; and
- Direct conversations with our members, allies, emergency child care providers, and other sector stakeholders.

¹ We wish here to express our gratitude to the many RECEs, early years staff, operators, and families who took time to share their stories and experiences with us. Your care and dedication to the early years sector does not go unnoticed.

What we heard

RECEs and early years staff want to return to work but are highly concerned about what it will look like. They want to be confident that the necessary systems and supports are in place to ensure their health and safety, as well as that of the children, families and communities they serve and for whom they care. Some of their most urgent concerns are:

- Being able to protect themselves while at work;
- Having the appropriate staff, resources, and support to implement new health and safety protocols in their program; and
- Their program's ability to access supplies and implement new health and safety procedures.

Importantly, RECEs and early years staff were concerned about their ability to engage in ethical caring practice with more health and safety protocols in place, and having sufficient resources and staff to support children and families through the transition.

RECEs and early years staff indicated a number of mechanisms that, if put in place, would reassure them in thinking of returning to work. They reported that they require:

- Clear provincial sector-specific guidelines and training from public health;
- Increased paid sick and emergency leave days;
- Lower ratios and smaller group sizes; and
- Additional staff, supports and paid planning time before reopening.

Participants were also asked what they wanted the Ministry of Education to hear from them. In these qualitative responses a number of themes emerged, including, but not limited to: the urgent need for professional wages; ensuring health, safety, and meaningful pedagogical practice in caring environments by not rushing reopening; and a need for recognition and respect from the government.

An executive summary of the survey results is found in Appendix A.

Our position on reopening & recovery: a reimagined early years and child care system

The following position is informed by sector consultation, public health guidelines and recommendations, and a scan of the best available evidence from other jurisdictions.

The OCBC and AECEO believe that the sector holds innovative ideas and key expertise that is essential to any reopening plan. They are intimately aware of their program, staffing, financial needs, challenges, and opportunities when it comes to implementing any new health and safety protocols. In the absence of provincial leadership on this urgent issue, we are putting forward what is required from the Ontario government before and throughout the phased

reopening of early years and child care programs. Ensuring that these recommendations are enacted across Ontario will require concerted and determined community advocacy. We need every partner and ally to demand nothing less than a safe, supported reopening that protects children, families, educators, early years staff and programs.

But we cannot stop at reopening. Early learning and child care programs must be a priority for both economic and social recovery.

The economic recession triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic is disproportionately impacting women and feminized community members. Programs to support women's employment must be at the heart of Canada's plans for economic recovery. As economist Armine Yalnizyan has quipped, "There is no recovery without a she-covey. And there is no she-covey without child care".

Child care must also be at the core of social recovery. Any parent or caregiver who is helping their child(ren) through this pandemic knows firsthand how traumatic the current situation is for children. Not being able to see friends, grandparents, or their educators. Their reassuring routines upended. To properly support a generation of young children to recover from the trauma of the Covid-19 pandemic requires Canada to finally treat child care as a priority, rather than an afterthought. Our children and families – and the educators that support them – deserve no less.

Timeline

The government has stated that child care will begin to reopen in Stage Two of Ontario's economic reopening. According to the Ontario government's own *Framework for Reopening our Province*, Stage 2 should only begin once Ontario has achieved a number of criteria, as advised by Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health (See Figure 1). It is vital that our provincial government adhere to their own criteria both to ensure a safer reopening as well as to maintain public trust. These criteria include:





- A consistent two-to-four week decrease in the number of new daily COVID-19 cases and meeting the target of 16,000 tests a day.
- Availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) based on provincial directives and guidelines.
- A decrease in the rate of cases that cannot be traced to a source.
- A decrease in the number of new COVID-19 cases in hospitals.

In addition to these criteria, at his April 21st press conference, Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health stated that new daily community cases of Covid-19 should be in "at least the 200s if not lower" before easing public health measures.

Figure 1. Reopening must follow Ontario's own "Framework for Reopening our Province"

Determining When to Ease Public Health Measures

Ontario's Chief Medical Officer of Health will consider the following criteria to advise when the province can begin to ease public health measures:

 Virus spread and containment	 Health system capacity	 Public health system capacity	 Incidence tracking capacity
<p>Ensures loosening of measures is appropriately timed with the progression of the epidemic in Ontario.</p>	<p>Ensures there is an effective response to any potential case resurgence.</p>	<p>Ensures there is an effective public health response to any potential case resurgence.</p>	<p>Ensures that any potential resurgence in cases can be identified promptly.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A consistent two-to-four week decrease in the number of new daily COVID-19 cases. • A decrease in the rate of cases that cannot be traced to a source. • A decrease in the number of new COVID-19 cases in hospitals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sufficient acute and critical care capacity, including access to ventilators, to effectively respond to potential surges. • Ongoing availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) based on provincial directives and guidelines. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approximately 90 per cent of new COVID-19 contacts are being reached by local public health officials within one day, with guidance and direction to contain community spread. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing testing of suspected COVID-19 cases, especially of vulnerable populations, to detect new outbreaks quickly. • A shift to new and other ways of testing and contact tracing to promote widespread tracking of cases.

As the province eases public health measures, these criteria will also serve as the framework for ongoing monitoring of progress and identifying when a change in direction is required. For example, the Chief Medical Officer of Health may also advise reapplying certain public health measures to manage the risk of recurring surges, outbreaks or future waves.

Source: Government of Ontario. (2020) Framework for Reopening our Province, p. 7. Available online at: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/framework-reopening-our-province>

Reopening

Once the Stage Two criteria are achieved the sector will still need adequate time to prepare for safe reopening. There must be time for consultation and collaboration between public health authorities and the sector. There must be time and resources to make necessary changes to the physical environment, to recruit and train staff, etc. We cannot understate the importance of allowing time to prepare for reopening. We only have one chance to get this right and ensuring adequate time and support to prepare will help to make that happen.

Recommendations

Based on our extensive consultation with the early years and child care sector we believe the following recommendations must be put in place in advance to ensure a safe and healthy reopening:

- 1) A minimum of three weeks' notice before reopening, prior to which the sector must *already* have had access to sector-specific reopening guidelines, which specify new operating regulations and funding plans. Guidelines should be informed by an expert committee comprising both community and government, including public health;
- 2) A transparent, phased approach to reopening child care that meets current best practices in the funding and operation of Emergency Child Care (ECC). This includes:
 - a) Start reopening of child care centres with greatly reduced groups sizes and enhanced ratios (for example some ECC programs are operating with a 1:3 ratio and maximum group of six children);
 - b) Full base funding for all existing programs, including:
 - i) funding for additional staff for screening and transition to program, and consistent staff teams per location to avoid staff transferring between programs and groups.
 - ii) funding and support to Licensed Home Child Care Agencies to ensure full compensation commensurate with increased wages in emergency child care for licensed home child care providers who maintain smaller group sizes in alignment with recommended reopening ratios and group sizes.
 - c) Provincial guidelines on eligibility and priority of families;
 - d) Using family age groupings as appropriate to keep sibling groups together and reduce social bubbles;
- 3) Assurance by licensing and public health that programs have met a threshold of health and safety and decent work practices before reopening. Operators should have a plan approved that includes use of physical space;

- 4) Repurposing existing and available public space - including schools, recreation and outdoor public assets - to accommodate the increased need for physical space as a result of reducing group sizes and enhancing ratios;
- 5) Paid time for staff to return to prepare programs and to undertake training on sector-specific public health guidelines (for example: social distancing between rooms, protocols for food distribution, protocols for laundering and cleaning to reduce transfer between groups, etc.);
- 6) Clear health and safety guidelines for home child care providers, with increased funding to Licensed Home Child Care Agencies to support home child care providers in meeting increased health and safety procedures where no additional staff is available (i.e., provision and distribution of Personal Protective Equipment, increased virtual check-ins);
- 7) Training by local public health authorities on Personal Protective Equipment, screening, and health and safety procedures for staff, families, boards and operators;
- 8) Clear Covid-19 testing policy;
- 9) Funding for and organized access to all necessary Personal Protective Equipment, health and safety supplies, and laundering supplies, as defined by Public Health agencies. This should be provincially funded and efficient distribution should be organized through CMSM/DSSABs and licensed home child care agencies;
- 10) Immediately increase paid sick and emergency leave days for all RECEs and early years staff to at least 21 days;
- 11) Immediate extension of pandemic pay to all program staff, and funding to ensure a \$25 minimum wage for all RECEs;
- 12) Pedagogical support, including training on trauma-informed practice;
- 13) Clear provincial directives, guided by public health, on eligibility of vulnerable staff and providers to access adapted work or refuse to work, and ensure they continue to be paid;
- 14) Clear rules for families on: health screening, including requirements to disclose any symptoms and medication; emergency pick-up in case of illness; when and on what conditions children can return to program after illness;
- 15) Additional and dedicated support from local public health support authorities;
- 16) Additional funding for base-funded programs that are following strict health and safety protocols to cover increased liability/insurance costs related to any COVID-19 related expense, such as WSIB claims; and
- 17) Ministry and CMSM/DSSAB staff communication directly and regularly to operators when providing sector updates.

Recovery

As the province moves forward toward Stage Three and periods of lower risk, we must also be prepared to face the setback of a second wave of the pandemic. The early years and child care sector must be ready to respond nimbly to what could be more than 18-24 months of uncertainty (re-openings and temporary closures, low enrolment and sudden increased demand). To achieve this, we must move away from the old market model of child care with its heavy reliance on parent/family fees and full enrolment for the financial viability of individual child care programs. Also, as our understanding and public health responses to the virus continue to evolve, we must be ready to quickly make changes to operation in accordance with the most current advice. To do this well will require continued attention and support from the government.

Recommendations

Based on our extensive consultation with the early years and child care sector we believe the following recommendations must be put in place to ensure a safe and healthy recovery:

- 18) Continue to update provincial guidelines on eligibility, with clear communication on updates to the expansion or restriction of eligibility criteria;
- 19) Continue to expand use of public spaces and community hubs to slowly and safely bring more children back to programs;
- 20) Continue to base fund all existing programs, expand the system through the public and non-profit sector;
- 21) Ongoing sufficient funding for and organized access to all necessary Personal Protective Equipment, health and safety supplies, and laundering supplies, as defined by Public Health agencies;
- 22) Bi-weekly check-ins between operators and local licensing officers and LHCCA home visitors to update on health and safety and decent work practices, any changes in phased approach, and to troubleshoot;
- 23) Virtual or physical licensing inspections as appropriate for licensed child care centres and licensed home child care;
- 24) Continued updates on directives (guided by public health) on eligibility of vulnerable staff to have access to adapted work, refuse work, and ensure they continue to be paid;
- 25) Clearly communicated updates on rules for parents/families;
- 26) Ongoing and dedicated public health support; and
- 27) Ongoing training by public health on updates to PPE, screening, and health and safety procedures for staff, parents, boards/operators.

Funding the system

The old child care market relied on full enrolment and exorbitant parent/family fees. The pandemic has thrown family finances into disarray and the sector could be facing lower than usual capacity for months in response to the need for reduced group sizes or low enrolment.

Currently Emergency Child Care programs are operating on a fully base-funded model; there are no parent/family fees. Given the economic constraints facing many families today in response to the pandemic, this model must be expanded across child care programs in our province. The time for free child care is here.

Based on consultation with Emergency Child Care operators, we understand that expanding this model would mean at tripling the current child care budget. If child care is truly an economic and social priority, this is the financial commitment that we need from our federal and provincial governments.

Appendix A: Summary of Survey Findings

Returning to Work: RECE and early years staff perspectives

Since the temporary closure of licensed child care programs due to COVID-19, the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) has heard numerous concerns from Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) and early years staff. While initially the sector was focused on access to and negotiating new income supports, navigating decisions on personal safety and operating home child care programs, and adjusting to the uncertainty and sudden isolation, as we have moved through the closure periods, RECEs and early years staff have begun to think deeply about what it means to return to work and what their concerns are.

A large part of the context that adds to the concerns of RECEs and early years staff is a lack of communication from the Ministry of Education throughout the closure period. A predominantly female profession, RECEs in Ontario continue to be grossly underpaid, making an average of \$17.50 an hour and have been largely invisible in the public and political realm despite the social importance of their caring and relational work. In practicing early childhood education, ECEs build meaningful relationships, take on deep ethical work, and create potential and opportunity which benefit children in the moment, and into the future. These opportunities extend beyond early years programs as children and families engage as citizens in communities. RECEs and early years staff have long been deserving of respect and recognition, and importantly, professional pay and decent work which reflects the value of their work.

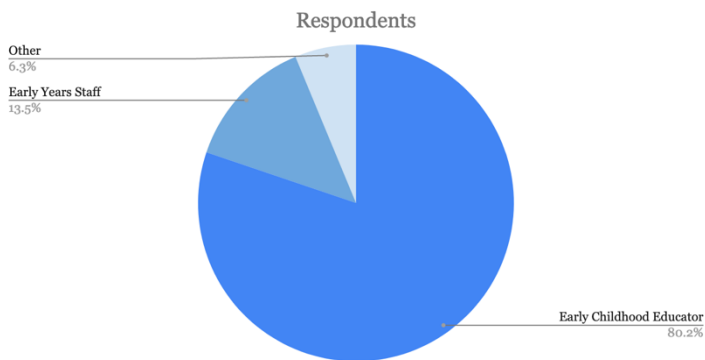
During the closure period, RECEs and early years staff have gone above and beyond to continue to engage with children, families, colleagues and their communities through mechanisms like live conferencing, social distance check-ins, and video storytelling – whether they have remained on payroll or not. They are spending this time engaging in professional learning, thinking ahead and pedagogically about the possibilities and what may be to come. They are concerned about being able to meaningfully and purposefully engage in their practice, and provide a caring and reassuring environment for young children as they return to program.

The following summarizes the key findings of the AECEO's sector survey, *Returning to Work: RECE and early years staff perspectives*. These findings were used to inform the *From Reopening to Recovery, AECEO and OCBCC's position and recommendations on child care reopening in Ontario and moving to a publicly funded system*.

Respondents

Of the 3735 respondents, 80.2% described themselves as RECEs, 13.5% as early years staff working in program with young children, and 6.3% as Other, including but not limited to cooks, directors, supervisors, and students. Two-thirds of respondents identified their place of work as a non-profit child care program, either stand-alone or multi-site operated, while one-third

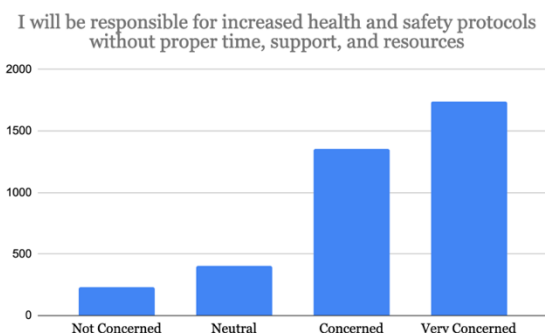
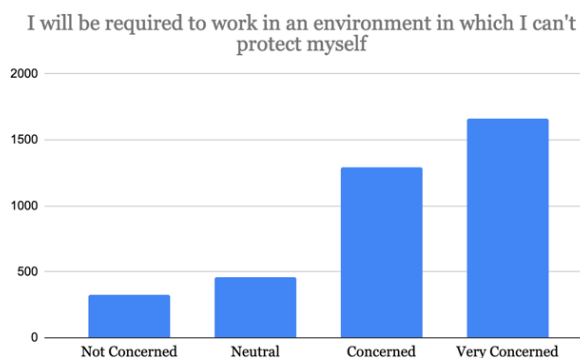
represented diverse sector perspectives inclusive of licensed home child care, EarlyON programs, Indigenous or Aboriginal Head Start Programs, and College lab schools.



Respondents were asked to disclose the degree to which they were concerned with a number of potential scenarios connected to returning to work. They were then asked, using the same method, to express the extent to which certain processes would reassure them in thinking about returning to work. The following present the key findings which informed the development of the AECEO and OCBCC’s policy and recommendations for reopening.

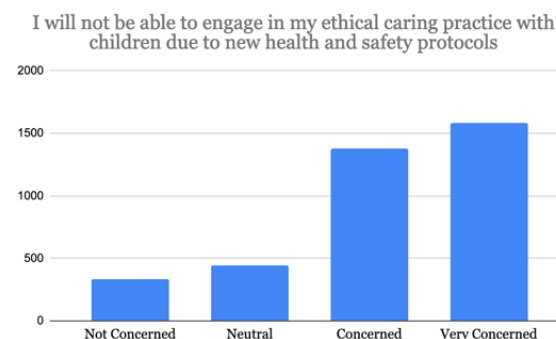
What concerns RECE and early years staff?

The most significant concerns held by RECES and early years staff are related to both their ability to practice early childhood education and their health and safety. 79% of respondents described they were either concerned, or very concerned, with being required to work in an environment in which they could not protect themselves. Similarly, 75% were concerned, or very concerned, with the prospect that their program will not have access to any necessary supplies for new health and safety protocols, while 73% were concerned, or very concerned, that their program would have difficulty implementing new health and safety procedures.



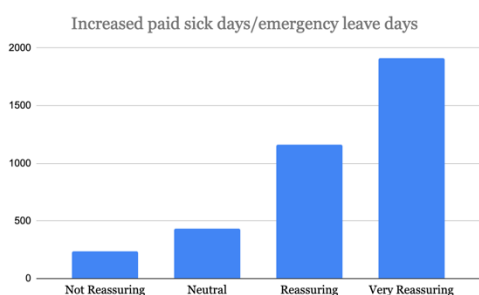
In line with this, an overwhelming 82% of respondents expressed concern that they will be responsible for increased health and safety protocols without proper time, support, and resources.

In speaking to their ability to meaningfully and purposefully support children and families in program, 75% of respondents are concerned, or very concerned, they will not have enough staff in program to truly support the needs of children and families in reintegrating to programs. As well, 79% of RECEs and early years staff expressed concerns with their ability to engage in ethical care with children due to new health and safety protocols.



What would reassure RECEs and early years staff?

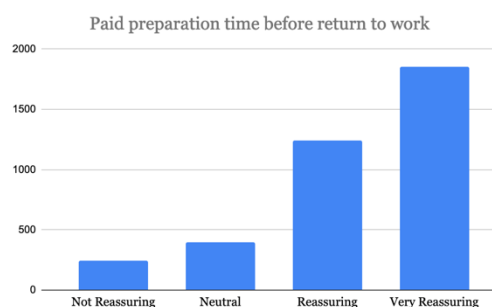
While RECEs and early years staff found all of the suggested supports somewhat reassuring, there were a few significant findings that should be prioritized in any reopening plan. One of



the most reassuring support for respondents was increased access for paid sick and emergency leave day, with 82% of respondents indicating this would be reassuring or very reassuring. Alongside this, 81% of respondents also indicated that having access to information on what to do if they felt unsafe at work would be reassuring, or very reassuring.

RECEs and early

years staff expressed that having paid preparation time before return to work was the most important support, with 83% responding this would be reassuring or very reassuring. Other significant findings also related to structural conditions that could be in place prior to, and during, reopening and recovery to support RECEs and early years staff, such as; additional staff to support increased health and safety protocols



(81%), smaller group sizes (76%), and lower ratios (75%). These conditions become even more important when we consider they are a foundation for the ability of RECEs and early years staff to engage in pedagogical and caring practice in program with young children. Alongside this, 74% of RECEs and early years staff suggested that access to trauma informed practice to support in reopening transitions would be reassuring, or very reassuring.

What else do RECEs and early years staff need to say?

We also asked respondents to share with us any further information they think the Ministry of Education should hear, and consider, in any reopening plan. Three major themes emerged in these qualitative responses.

Firstly, RECEs and early years staff were concerned with the level of preparedness in returning to program. Specifically, they noted that social distancing in ethical and caring practice with young children is not possible. As such, they expressed it would be prudent to be cautious about reopening and ensure robust health and safety protocols, created in consultation with the sector, which truly reflect the work of RECEs and early years staff.

“We need paid preparation time.”

“Work conditions in child care settings are very stressful and demanding without the threat of a virus. Illness is something we deal with regularly, and social distancing in a daycare setting is impossible ... and goes against our pedagogy as Educators ... Without Educators, there is no care.”

“Take a hard look at how opening too early will negatively impact our work, our young children will need a lot of emotional support when they return, this includes just the basic of needs-hugs! Our kids need our daycares and schools to be safe, loving, caring spaces. Please do the best you can to give that to the children of Ontario.”

“Please create a plan for ensuring safety of workers and children, and please consult early year professionals to create the plan.”

Secondly, RECEs and early years staff were concerned about appropriate conditions to ensure the health and safety of everyone in program. They expressed a pressing need for lower ratios and smaller group sizes, as well as assurances on access to Personal Protective Equipment when necessary.

“I’m concerned about going back to work and not [being] given the right preparation and materials to protect myself.”

“Childcare operators need access to PPE, whatever is required. We can’t be expected to each have to source our own equipment.”

“Keep in mind that the childcare sector is often an afterthought ... Childcare staff are entitled to safe work conditions ... So any legislation or protocols should ensure childcare staff are protected.”

Lastly, RECEs and early years staff overwhelmingly identified the immediate and urgent need to address persistently low wages in the early years sector. Given that RECEs and early years staff were chronically underpaid prior to the COVID-19 related closure, respondents suggested addressing unjust and inequitable wages is of immediate importance in any reopening plans.

“Do you finally recognize how important child care is in our world. And are you willing to pay registered early childhood educators what they are worth? I would say a starting wage would be \$25/hour”

“I strongly believe that all RECEs/ECEs/EAs have been underpaid for a very, very long time, and this pandemic is a reminder that our services and care of the population's children is one that is very much required within our communities. It is time that we are compensated for the work we provide, especially if we are going back to environments where we are risking our health and those of our own families.”

“Considering the educators who work tirelessly to care for everyone else's children, especially in a time when there is so much uncertainty, please think about raising the pay of early childhood educators who are so desperately needed to care for children and teach them.”

“I would ask our government to recognize RECEs for the professionals we are and pay us accordingly.”

What needs to happen?

The results of this survey made visible the priorities and concerns of RECEs and early years staff. They are overwhelmingly concerned with (1) the health and safety of everyone involved in reopening, (2) decent working and professional pay, and (3) their ability to engage in caring, relational, professional practice upon reopening.

The results of this survey provided the basis for our recommendations to the Ministry of Education, *From Reopening to Recovery: A plan for child care reopening in Ontario and moving to a publicly funded system*. We believe that ECEs and early years staff hold unique knowledge and experiences that can ensure we return to meaningful and caring environments post-closure; they hold the key to recovery through pedagogical and caring practice. Their engagement and relationships with children, families, and communities has been essential, and will be even more so as we transition through reopening and recovery. It is then, both necessary and urgent that ECEs and early years staff are provided decent work, safe environments, and professional pay.