



# FORGOTTEN ON THE FRONTLINE

A survey report on Ontario's early years and child care workforce

ALANA POWELL, CAROLYN FERNS & SHEVAUN BURRELL



ONTARIO COALITION FOR  
*Better Child Care*



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Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario

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Powell, Alana; Ferns, Carolyn; Burrell Shevaun

Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario: [www.aeceo.ca](http://www.aeceo.ca)  
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## INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on Ontario's early years and child care sector. From temporary closure, developing emergency child care for essential service workers, implementing new health and safety procedures, Early Childhood Educators and child care workers have been vitally important to keeping our communities safe and supported. But little is known about the impact of the pandemic on the early years and child care workforce, how it has changed their work life and their well-being.

In an effort to learn what current challenges are facing the workforce, the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care carried out a survey of Ontario's early years and child care workforce in February and March 2021, with questions exploring current working conditions, mental health and well-being, as well as perspectives on vaccination.

Overall, a vast majority of respondents reported increased levels of anxiety, work-related stress, and a decrease in mental well-being and job satisfaction. While many of the described challenges existed prior to COVID-19, our survey specifically addressed changes to these conditions since the onset of the pandemic. The results demonstrate that there is an increasingly urgent need to better support the early years and child care workforce by providing fair compensation, decent working conditions and mental health support.

This report will present highlights of the survey findings along with direct quotes from respondents describing their experiences and perspectives. We then present "Stories from the Frontline", in which we draw out themes that emerged through qualitative analysis of the respondents' comments. Finally, we present conclusions and recommendations for government.

## WHO WE HEARD FROM

Of the 1,875 total respondents: 77.3% reported working in a licensed child care centre; 9.3% in the kindergarten program; 2.9% in EarlyON and family supports programs; 2.7% in licensed home child care; and the remaining 7.8% of respondents reported working in diverse settings such as pre-service education, government, Special Needs Resourcing/Inclusion Supports, unregulated home child care or indicated they were currently students.

Across these diverse work settings; 68.3% of respondents reported their job title as Registered Early Childhood Educators; 16.5% reported to be directors, supervisors or administrators; 5.6% reported being early years staff, including but not limited to cooks, early childhood assistants, and program staff; 2% indicated they were current ECE students; 1.7% reported being a licensed home child care provider; and the remaining 5.7% included, for example, EarlyON facilitators, resource teachers/consultants, faculty/professors, and pedagogical leaders.

Respondents reported working in 43 of Ontario's 47 Consolidated Municipal Service Manager/District Social Service Administration Board regions, with the larger proportions of respondents from Toronto, Peel, Waterloo, Ottawa, London, Durham, Peterborough, Wellington, Hamilton, Sudbury and Kawartha Lakes.

Respondents were provided the opportunity to self-report their racial or ethnic identity. In this survey, respondents self-identified with 46 different racial or ethnic groups. This component of sector demographics is important, and often neglected in data collection in the early years and child care sector.

We know there are systemic racist and colonial issues that marginalize and oppress Black, Indigenous, and Racialized educators and workers in our sector - yet, in Ontario, there is no data to articulate this. As such, we will continue to provide the opportunity for respondents to share their racial and ethnic identity, and we will continue to identify systemic issues and oppressions and work to dismantle them.

## WHAT WE HEARD

We asked participants to self-report changes since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic to key working conditions including wages, work hours and planning time. These working conditions have been previously identified by the child care workforce as key to their experience of decent work in their workplace and are described in the AECEO's definition of Decent Work in Early Years and Child Care<sup>1</sup> and have been articulated in policy recommendations to the provincial government. While previous governments have taken on responsibility to address these long-standing issues, the current provincial government has chosen not to implement the Ontario Early Years and Child Care Workforce Strategy or any of the recommended policy solutions. Many of the pre-existing challenges have been exacerbated during COVID-19.

## JOB SATISFACTION

Over half (54%) of respondents reported decreased job satisfaction over the past year, with a common concern being that cleaning and sanitizing responsibilities are taking away from meaningful time spent engaged with children. Forty-three per cent of respondents reported that they have considered leaving the sector since the onset of the pandemic. Of those who reported decreased job satisfaction, 80% indicated they had at least somewhat considered leaving the sector, with 54% actively or casually looking for work outside the sector.

*"While trying to implement a high quality program, we are making sure our space is clean with many extra cleaning protocols, which takes a lot of time away from the children. **Stress is high, so is exhaustion and staff burnout.** We at times are going through the motions to get through the work day without the love and passion we once had for our careers."*

*"Severely increased stress, deterioration of mental health, money stress (missed work to quarantine) **increased duties due to lack of staff, but fewer hours to save the company money.**"*

*"**Not being able to do parts of the job that I love, like singing;** wearing masks which make it more difficult to hear soft voices and also make it difficult for young learners to hear me. An obscene amount of sanitation in the classroom."*

## JOB-RELATED STRESS

Our survey asked about levels of job-related stress in early years and child care settings. A large majority (89%) of respondents reported an increase in job-related stress. While stress due to the pandemic could be expected, many respondents mentioned sector-specific stressors, including: lack of communication and mixed messages from the Ministry of Education, local public health units and local children's services departments, and the stress of carrying out new and unclear policies. Several respondents mentioned feeling anxious, burned out and depressed.

*"As a supervisor the constant unknown with the Ministry updates, constant school closures and the constant mixed messages between the Ministry and local health units have caused **significant stress in my job.**"*

*"Stress, miss interacting with my coworkers due to cohorts, no staff meetings and dinners together, increase in duties, worried about getting sick, **worried about doing something wrong with PPE or policies.**"*

*"High anxiety, high stress, faster approaching and **more intense feelings of burnout**, more feelings of situational depression."*

## WORK HOURS

The early childhood workforce has traditionally faced challenging hours, including split shifts. For many, the lack of full-time hours results in working at multiple sites/programs and putting together precarious, piecemeal solutions to fill their hours and increase their income. Anecdotally, we also know the rise of precarious work most often marginalizes racialized women in the early childhood sector who also face lower wages and a lack of benefits and job protection.

The impact of COVID-19 on staff work hours varies across the province. While 57.5% of respondents report no change in work hours, 20% have seen work hours increase and 18% have seen work hours decrease. Of the respondents reporting an increase to work hours, only 9.3% reported an increase in wages while 57.8% report a decrease in job satisfaction.

*"More work with lots more cleaning and disinfecting, **longer hours and no pay increase.** No recognition from the government being an essential worker."*

*"**As a director, the stress has been overwhelming at times.** Expectations from the City to complete required documents without notice or clear guidance has added to the enormous weight carried on our shoulders at this time. As director it has been really hard to review the public health guidelines, create and then support reopening our program. The staff and families rely on me to reassure them everything is going to be fine. It's unfortunate that the same support is not sent back from government officials."*

*"Longer days for myself as a supervisor: ensuring staff are feeling okay, supporting the team, children and families...**Very little time left in my day for my family and myself.**"*

## PLANNING TIME

Planning time is an important condition of decent work for early childhood educators and early years staff that enables them to think, reflect, collaborate, and respond to emerging issues in a program. Access to planning time is critical for educators to be able to do pedagogical work with children and is a condition that makes quality care and education possible.

Over 36% of respondents reported a decrease in planning time since the COVID-19 pandemic began, while only 12% indicate an increase in planning time. Of the respondents who reported a decrease in planning time, 71% reported a decrease in job satisfaction and 96.2% reported an increase in job-related stress.

***“We have no more planning time yet we were given more work to do and I’m not just talking about increased cleaning and sanitizing....There is also no space to spend your unpaid lunch hour as only two people can be in the staff room, so we are forced to sit in storage rooms on floors.”***

***“Extremely overworked and still underpaid. So much stress throughout the day with **zero time for programming. No programming makes us feel as though we truly are just babysitters.**”***

***“There is no extra time allotted and very little time for planning, documenting and doing Hi Mama [parent communication app]. We just finally are getting the half hour prep a week that is the time we were getting before all the extra work and demands were added from Covid. This prep is only for one classroom educator a week, however the expectation is that all classroom educators add to the plan and do documenting weekly.”***

## WAGES

Low wages are not new for the child care and early years sector, and have been cited as a reason for high rates of staff turnover and ongoing recruitment and retention issues. Many early childhood educators and child care staff equate low wages to the value society places on their work. During the pandemic, while the child care and early years sector has been more publicly appreciated, this has not been met with policies or funding to ensure appropriate compensation for the workforce. Unsurprisingly, 81% of respondents reported no change to their wages, with only 6.4% reporting an increase in wages and 9% reporting a decrease in wages. Of respondents reporting no change in wages, 21% also reported their work hours have increased. 65% of respondents who reported decreased wages also reported decreased job satisfaction, compared to only 49% of those reporting increased wages and 56% of those who reported no change to wages.

***“Stress level for me as an administrator/supervisor has increased tremendously while wages have remained the same.”***

***“Even as COVID-19 has hit us, we have been placed on the back burner. **I have had my wages cut and am now staying home** due to unstable wages and no schooling for my children.”***

***“The stress and amount of work expected of our field without increase in **pay is actually deplorable**, especially since ECEs are essential to rebuilding the economy.”***

## STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINE

Our survey included open-ended questions that asked respondents to describe what impacts the Covid-19 pandemic has had on them, their work life and well-being. Following a qualitative analysis, three themes emerged from the respondents' answers: a sharp decline in mental health and well-being; changes to professional role and autonomy; and poor working conditions and a worsening staff retention crisis. The following stories from the frontline offer a look inside what has been the most challenging aspects of working in the early years and child care sector during the pandemic.

### MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The first story is one of worsening mental health, heightened stress levels, and negative impacts on the well-being of early childhood educators and early years staff. Responses indicate that this has been caused by factors such as rigorous cleaning schedules and constant use of PPE with few breaks, leading to bleeding, cracked hands and skin conditions as well as more frequent headaches and vision problems. Early years staff have also described mental health impacts with increased levels of anxiety, depression, sleep problems, occupational burnout, and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, often with expectations to 'just deal with it'. Others have reported experiencing mental health concerns and stress levels so intense that they have needed to take medical leave. Furthermore, many supervisors of child care centres feel that they must take on counsellor roles in order to help support early years staff. Supervisors, in turn, have reported feeling increasingly isolated and unsupported in addressing their own mental health challenges.

*"There is so much stress of not knowing current rules and regulations. They are always changing, what seems to be daily. My mental health and anxiety has increased a lot. **Crying on the job, overwhelmed with no support.**"*

*"The PPE required and provided is inadequate. Visors are foggy and horrible. It makes it very stressful to work all day. We need to be provided with more appropriate glasses/goggles that don't add stress to us. The visors are of poor quality and put great strain on my eyes and cause me stress headaches on a regular basis. I am concerned that it will cause me continuing eye issues long after the pandemic. I understand the need for protection, but it's been a year and by now we could be offered better quality shields or glasses. I feel this will add a strain to WSIB in the future as this is a workplace injury. **We are important too. I feel we are the forgotten frontline staff.** Nobody is taking care of our concerns and rights."*

*"There are not enough staff to cover people when they're sick. **I'm in a constant state of panic,** constantly sanitizing and washing my hands to the point of them cracking and bleeding, breathing problems from wearing a mask all day. Not enough money to pay bills because I'm not getting enough hours even though I have a full-time contract."*

*"It's been extremely exhausting keeping up with the ever-changing protocols and guidelines, cleaning, safety measures, and constant wearing of PPE while at work. I've found it difficult to be positive at work, as well as feeling uninspired and unmotivated in my field. **It's hard to feel all of these stressful emotions and try to hide it in front of the children.** Emotionally, I have been struggling more and more as the months go on. Mental health has been a challenge for me in general each year, but this year has been the worst yet. It feels like a never ending battle to keep up with the flood of obstacles covid has brought into our field of work."*

## PROFESSIONAL ROLE AND AUTONOMY

The second story highlights the negative impact the pandemic has had on early childhood educators' and early years staff's professional role and autonomy. While many respondents described existing challenges of the professionalization gap (increased professional responsibilities without increased pay), the pandemic has exacerbated these problems. Early childhood educators and early years staff describe a profession that has been gravely impacted by inadequate funding and operating guidelines from the Ministry of Education that do not respect Early Childhood Educators' professional role.

Planning time, too rare before the pandemic, has become non-existent for many educators. Planning time is a crucial aspect of early childhood education, but it has been replaced with intensive cleaning schedules, leading educators to feel as though they are cleaners, not Early Childhood Educators. Educators are often prevented from engaging in the meaningful, important, and pedagogical aspect of their profession, which is providing high-quality early childhood education and care for young children. Educators' role in providing support and inclusion for families, another crucial part of their work, has been impacted due to the physical separation of families from child care centres – drop-offs and pick-ups now happen at the door. Educators are also isolated from each other, taking away the collaborative aspect of the profession, which is key to meaningful, responsive, and quality pedagogy and programs.

Educators also feel a sense of helplessness and uncertainty due to a lack of information and control of their professional situation. Early years staff describe conflicting and confusing information and guidelines from all levels of government. Important memos and guidelines being regularly being released on Fridays has cut into much needed personal time on the weekends, especially for supervisors who are responsible for updating program policies and procedures. As there is no direct communication from the Ministry of Education to educators, many report finding out about important changes second or third hand or via social media.

Perhaps the most common thread throughout early childhood educators' and early years staff's experiences has been a feeling of a lack of respect and support for the important work that they do for children, families, and the community.

*"It's been made clear by the parents and the government that **we are not respected the same way that many other professions are** and that we are merely babysitters so people with "real jobs" can keep the economy going."*

*"I feel like the cleaning takes over the time to teach and be present with the children ... activities have also been extremely limited due to restrictions. **I leave work every single day feeling exhausted, hopeless, frustrated and emotional.**"*

*"I was aware that I was committing myself to an underpaid and undervalued field, but it has never been more obvious than now. **My focus has shifted from quality education and experiences, to sanitization and cleaning.** I have adapted accordingly to curriculum requirements, with no real recognition from the government, and no hope for hazard pay."*

## WORKING CONDITIONS AND THE RETENTION CRISIS

The third story of the early years and child care workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic is also related to the lack of respect for the sector. Early childhood educators and early years staff are overworked and underpaid, even more so now during this crisis, and even as they are labelled as 'essential'. Many educators reported feelings of burnout due to increasing workload without adequate or fair financial compensation. This, combined with less time for the most fulfilling aspects of their job, has led to decreasing job satisfaction within the sector. Educators whose wages already did not reflect their professional work are now being asked to do more work or work more hours without additional compensation.

At the same time many other educators also reported losing hours or even their jobs as their program struggled to deal with the financial impacts of the pandemic. Many educators are thinking about leaving the sector for other jobs that offer better pay and benefits; many have already left or retired. Tied to the lack of financial compensation is also the fact that educators are putting their lives on the line as they continue to care for children who cannot wear masks or socially distance. Many educators feel as though the risk to themselves and their own families at home is not worth the benefits, even if they love working with children and families.

*"It boils down to the fact that being in this field means being **underappreciated, underpaid, overworked, every day until you retire - it's degrading.** This type of work is simply not sustainable if you are to lead a semi-prosperous life that includes job satisfaction."*

*"I left working for licensed childcare in February because of the stress and workload. I now work as a school bus driver."*

*"I've taken a one-year unpaid leave of absence from my \$20/hr job in an EarlyON site (with no WEG), as I fear bringing covid home to immuno-compromised family members. **I have 32 years in the field and have watched as our profession is ignored and dismissed by the Ford government.** When we do get a mention, Lecce has a hard time remembering our legally protected titles. 32 years in the field. I have an ECE diploma, an ECS Hon. Degree, Autism/Behaviour Science training, and Self-Reg/Mehrit certification. I left a job as Director to go to a less stressful and lower paid position at EarlyON and cannot get over how little respect we've received during this pandemic. **In my unpaid year off, I've discovered I can make more with my little woodworking hobby than I made as an experienced RECE in my field. I doubt I'll return.**"*

*"It feels impossible to put to words because I don't want to inaccurately represent just how exhausted and anxious I am. I have never endured such stress and agony on my mind and body. Our centre has little to no resources and management/families treat us like we are beneath them. Invisible. To our own bosses, to the board of directors, to the families, and to the government itself. Babysitting robots without human emotions and needs. Our centre is falling apart and **I feel like so much of this could be prevented if ECEs were more protected - decent pay, safer working conditions, universal childcare for all instead of treating it like a business.** I couldn't be more unhappy and this field is my passion, my life's purpose. And yet I want to quit because I can't take it anymore."*

## CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The responses to our survey paint a bleak picture of an early years and child care workforce at a breaking point. Immediate and significant support is needed to address the challenges that respondents have identified. Failure to do so will deepen the retention crisis facing the sector and compromise the quality and stability of child care programs. Already supervisors have reported having to reduce programs hours and close rooms due to a lack of staff. If there is not meaningful action on the part of the provincial government to support the early years and child care workforce, we anticipate further instability and program closures.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The federal government's 2021 Budget has pledged \$30 Billion to transform Canada's early years and child care system into one that is affordable for families and provides decent work and pay for educators. It is estimated that the promised federal funding could more than double Ontario's child care budget – making a huge difference for programs, educators and families. But the success of the federal plan is dependent on provincial governments signing funding agreements. We urge the Ontario government to move swiftly to unlock this funding, by collaborating with the federal government to meet targets for affordability, quality and workforce support in licensed child care.

Working collaboratively the federal government and provincial government must:

### *Respect and value early years and child care professionals*

1. Commit to increasing operational funding to raise wages and implement a wage grid that ensures a \$25 per hour starting wage for ECEs, early years staff and child care providers. This will address the current staffing retention crisis and long-term recruitment challenges.
2. Work with the early years and child care sector to develop and establish Decent Work Standards to support pedagogical practice. Decent Work Standards should align with the AECEO's Decent Work Charter and include:
  - a. the provision of daily, collaborative, on-site paid planning time;
  - b. permanent paid sick and emergency leave days;
  - c. engagement in communities of practice;
  - d. paid time for professional learning;
  - e. an Early Childhood Workforce Learning Framework that ensures meaningful professional learning opportunities, mandates Anti-Racism training, commits to Truth and Reconciliation, and enhances pathways to acquiring and upgrading qualifications.
3. Create practitioner roles and identify educational requirements alongside a career ladder that will strengthen program quality while formally recognizing the value of credentials and experience. This initiative will support the recruitment and retention of registered early childhood educators and provide a greater incentive to make early years and child care a life-long career.
4. Work with the early years and child care sector to form an Advisory Committee that is representative of the early years and child care workforce, including Black, Indigenous and Racialized educators, to coordinate and inform policy development.

### *Provide immediate Covid-19-related supports*

5. Provide additional funding and operating guidelines that protect ECEs' professional role during the pandemic. For example, adequate funding should be provided to hire enough staff for

screening, cleaning and transition to program, or lower ratios, rather than expecting ECEs to do additional work on top of their regular responsibilities.

6. Provide enhanced operating funding to stabilize child care programs, prevent program closures, provide fee relief for families and ensure no educator loses their job.
7. Provide additional pandemic-related sick days, self-isolation days and time off for vaccination appointments.
8. Organize access to all necessary Personal Protective Equipment, health and safety supplies, and laundering supplies, as defined by Public Health agencies and as requested by early years programs to meet their needs. This should be provincially funded and efficient distribution should be organized through CMSM/DSSABs and licensed home child care agencies.
9. Ensure healthy workplaces by funding upgraded ventilation and air filtration systems and other necessary retrofits.
10. Undertake a community consultation to understand the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and well-being of the early years and child care workforce and develop a long-term, funded response plan.

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<sup>i</sup> Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (2017). [Transforming work in Ontario's Early years and child care workforce. Workforce Strategy Recommendations](#). Presented by the AECEO's Decent Work Task Force to the Ministry of Education November 30, 2017.