

An open letter from child care operators: We cannot be forgotten and staff retention is the key

The Ontario child care and early years community welcomes you to your new position as Assistant Deputy Minister of Child Care and Early Years. We are looking forward to working with you and the child care and early years community to ensure the best for children, families, and communities. We also are eager to work with you on the federal child care agreement to ensure our new system provides affordable fees for families, decent work and pay for educators, and enough quality public and non-profit spaces for all.

As you come into this role, we also want to support you in understanding the reality of what the sector has been experiencing, and share our vision of a new path forward. This letter outlines both challenges and solutions that we have heard from the sector. We are bringing these concerns and solutions to you as ADM, as we know that together we can ensure that child care operators are better supported moving forward. They have been working behind the scenes to ensure that children, families, staff and communities are supported, and it's time to ensure their concerns are addressed.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made visible the importance and necessity of early childhood education and care to children, families, and communities across Canada. In Ontario, early childhood educators and child care workers have been overworked and underpaid, and families have been paying the highest fees in the country to send their children to quality care programs, if they are able to find a space.

Child care providers have been working above and beyond their typical job duties to ensure that all regulations are being followed and to support the well-being of the staff, children and families in their care. While continuing to manage the ongoing operation of their facilities and programs -- already a full-time job -- child care operators have been facing a staff retention crisis, a shortage of qualified staff wanting to join the sector, fluctuating enrollment numbers, and the added challenge of supporting families through the Covid-19 pandemic. Further, keeping up with constantly changing, inconsistent, Friday afternoon updates from the Ministry of Education and Public Health Units has added to operators' stress and unreasonable workload.

Child care operators in Ontario know what their biggest challenges are:

- Retaining enough staff for full operation of their programs due to burn-out, low salaries, and necessary time-off, which is leading to reduced operating hours, room closures, and requesting families send children part-time to ensure ratios are met each day;
- Finding and retaining supply staff to ensure ongoing operation of programs, especially challenging during the pandemic when staff are absent more often and for longer time periods;
- Fluctuating enrolment of families;

- Supporting personal mental health and the health of staff, children, and families throughout Covid-19 without additional resources or supports;
- Trying to keep up with inconsistent and frequently changing updates from Public Health and the Ministry of Education;
- Increased workload without any increased remuneration, recognition, or time.

Child care operators report feeling unprepared and unsupported in juggling the multiple new roles the pandemic has placed on their shoulders. Reporting to health officials, supplying testing kits and monitoring results, as well as assessing symptoms and relaying health and safety guidance related to the pandemic are only a few of the added responsibilities operators are working through.

Qualified and experienced early years professionals are leaving the field, and pre-service ECEs are not entering the field. The College of Early Childhood Educators (2021) reports that ECEs are, on average, leaving the profession within 7 years, however that is reduced to 3 years for those working in licensed child care. Operators are feeling the strain of trying to keep staff, and to provide consistency for relationship building with children.

Operators know how to fix these issues long-term. A fully detailed plan was laid out in The Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario and The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care's [Roadmap to Universal Child Care](#) in Ontario.

Child care operators also know the solutions they need to feel better supported:

Financial Support:

- Continuing Covid-specific funding as the burden of extra Covid-specific expenditures has not stopped and many federal programs have ended;
- Increasing base funding to operate without worry of fluctuating parent fees and enrolment;
- Funding to assist with administrative duties, for example hiring additional administrative staff;
- Additional provincial funding directly for staff wages to address heightened retention crisis.

Clear Guidelines:

- Consistent messaging from the Ministry of Education that aligns with Public Health;
- Memos and other communications that are sent with mental health and well-being in mind (e.g., not sent on a Friday afternoon with short turn-arounds, not creating deadlines that consistently require working evenings and weekends);
- Increased notice for policy changes and ample time to fulfill these changes.

In a recent webinar with child care operators, many participants shared their concerns and solutions and spoke about their desire for greater and more meaningful consultation. Operators indicated that the Ministry of Education should “listen to our concerns/voices”, “consult with us”,

“include an ECE in internal discussions”, “have a roundtable with operators to voice our concerns”, and to “listen to us, ask our experience, decide on policy with us in mind”.

Given the wide agreement across the child care sector on the need for better consultation with the sector by the Ministry of Education, we are requesting:

- (1) An immediate public consultation with the child care and early year community to directly hear their concerns and solutions; and
- (2) The creation of a permanent Advisory Commission to ensure consistent consultation with the child care sector and create an opportunity for ongoing open dialogue that is transparent and accessible.

We welcome the opportunity to move forward together and collaborate to provide the best care and learning for Ontario’s children and support for families and communities.

Thank you,