

Professional Pay for Professional Work

HOW DO WE GET THERE?

By Rachel Langford, RECE, AECEO President

The AECEO's success in establishing a regulatory college for Ontario early childhood educators and creating a legislated professional credential for ECEs was a fundamental achievement in our mission to improve compensation and career opportunities for all early childhood educators in the province. Now, with the Ministry of Education's focus on modernizing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ontario, the time is right to initiate the next steps in resolving these long-standing issues.

The recent *"You Bet We Still Care"* report substantiated the need for better wages for ECE professionals if we are ever to tackle the issue of recruitment and retention. Yet there are many challenges ahead and varying opinions on what, and how, the issue of professional pay for ECEs should be addressed.

When the AECEO board decided to focus its advocacy work on *Professional Pay for Professional Work*, we knew that we would face many challenges. Some of these challenges might be called distractions.

In the case of claims for *Professional Pay for Professional Work* and a drive towards realizing this goal we will be challenged by both distractions and possibly driven to distraction by some roadblocks.

The dictionary meaning of a distraction:

Something that distracts one's attention. A related definition of to drive somebody to distraction means a constant irritation that reduces somebody to a state of nervous agitation.

We have identified three distractions that many of us have been vulnerable to and some of which AECEO board members have discussed. Some of these distractions may be hard to hear but it is important to put them on the table for discussion.

We are often asked to produce more and more data because it is never quite right and never quite enough. This elusive search for the perfect data about ECE wages in Ontario can become a real distraction. Rightly many questions related to what data exists and what other data is needed will be raised. Of course, we need data about wages. Some will maintain that we have sufficient data. Front line staff will say that they have all the evidence they need based on their weekly pay. But others will say more data is needed before action can be taken. This particular statement may be said repeatedly. But finding the right data to convince policy makers of the rightness of our claim of *Professional Pay for Professional Work* is a distraction that will likely keep us in a state of nervous agitation, keep us from acting and permit government not to act. Peter Moss, a British early childhood theorist, describes our often desperate need to find the best evidence to prove a claim as a distraction because the search prevents us from seeing that the claim is really value driven and is concerned with ethics and social justice. In other words, a claim for *Professional Pay for Professional Work* is ethical and Ontario early childhood educators are entitled or have a right to professional recognition, status and worthy wages because of the important work they do.

A *Professional Pay for Professional Work* campaign will begin to address a long-standing problem of gender injustice in our field. Therefore a combination of data and the value of gender justice must drive our advocacy work.

A related distraction could also create a climate of fear among ECEs. The following questions are being raised for example:

What will happen to the ECEs who are paid very well if a province-wide wage grid is developed? How will the cost of living in different parts of the province be addressed? These are legitimate questions that need to be answered but could easily distract and immobilize us. While we have to be aware of how changes affect individual early childhood educators, in the end we have to put foremost the best interests of all Ontario early childhood educators.

The second distraction that may set a *Professional Pay for Professional Work* advocacy campaign off course is simply stated this way: *It is unprofessional, selfish, inappropriate, downright bad for ECEs to focus on getting paid more.* Does this statement drive you to distraction? The fact is that we are a profession of predominantly women and we are uncomfortable talking about wages and demanding higher compensation. But another fact is that as women Ontario early childhood educators have subsidized and supported families' ability to pay child care fees with their low wages. A major distraction could be that as women and as early childhood educators we continue to hold that our central focus must always be on children and families and that we cannot be a part of that focus. It is not unprofessional to talk about pay; teachers do it, doctors do it, nurses do it, many of whom are women, and ECEs should do it too.

We often hear that the nature of ECE work, the poor quality of ECE programs and lack of ECE professionalism does not warrant better wages for ECEs. This distraction is most pernicious because it cuts to the heart of what we do and how we act. We cannot allow ourselves to be distracted by these views. We know ECE work is complex. We know that research shows that the quality of ECE programs is associated with the wages of the workforce; in other words, if staff wages are adequate the quality of an ECE program will be good. And we also know that the establishment of the College of Early Childhood Educators signals that we are a profession and professionalism is central to our work.

A fundamental question we have to ask ourselves is: *How is it that the Ontario ECE workforce, considered professionals with a complex set of Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice as regulated by the College of ECE, can experience a decrease in average wages over the last decade as reported by the You Bet We Still Care Study?* Here is where data combined with values is helpful.

We must be alert to these three distractions, discuss them, be conscious of when they are affecting us and reflect on how we respond to them.

STRATEGIES FOR MOBILIZATION

The AECEO proposes three strategies for mobilizing ECE, garnering public support for our advocacy work and shifting the distracting perceptions of ECEs' professional work. Some key advocacy messages combined with constructive collaboration will help to move our campaign forward.

- **ECE work as a good job**

This message may seem completely counter-intuitive, even contradictory, after talking about low ECE wages; indeed we know ECEs in early childhood programs are struggling in a changing system landscape and are leaving the field for better positions. But we must persist with this public message because when we communicate that ECE is a good job, when we say that our professional work is a source of pride, then we are also saying that this work is worthy of a good wage. Conversely if we say that ECE work is a bad job, nobody wants it; we are communicating it is not worth the public investment.

This is strengths and assets based approach to demanding *Professional Pay for Professional Work*. We need to profile programs, agencies and post-secondary institutions who have well-compensated professionals, who are often unionized, where there is career mobility and other benefits, and provide us and the government with concrete examples of what is possible if we work together to address low wages. We need these successes to inspire us to work without distraction and towards the goal of *Professional Pay for Professional Work*. With all due respect to our male early childhood educators, this campaign must focus on elevating women in a highly gendered and currently marginalized profession.

- **ECEs are professionals**

This advocacy message uses our professional "status as women" to move forward towards improved wages. We need to reinforce that ECE is a profession with educational qualifications, a regulatory college and professional learning requirements. We need to elevate our professional preparation and our work. We need to pose the question: *What are the educational qualifications of early childhood*

How much does an ECE make?

You Bet We Still Care¹ = \$17.29/hr (median)

Ontario Government Licenced Child Care
Questionnaire (2012)²

= \$15.67/hr (lowest range median)

= \$19.19/hr (highest range median)

Estimated average = \$17.47/hr

1. www.ccsc-cssge.ca

2. www.edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/ChildCareQuestion.pdf

educators, their registration in a regulatory college and professional learning activities worth to employers, parents, society and to ECEs themselves? We know the answer- they are worth a decent wage. This strengths-based focus on the professional preparation, the competencies and professionalism of Ontario ECEs should lead the demand for Professional Pay for Professional Work.

- **Constructive collaboration**

We need to build on existing support for our campaign and also find new allies to help create a network that will continue to support us during the highs and lows of our advocacy work. An AECEO special committee will collectively work with a range of stakeholders: the Ministry of Education, Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, unions, multi- service agencies and others, towards early childhood education and care human resource solutions. We will also seek professional allies, groups and associations: teachers, nurses, doctors, social workers, for example, with whom we now share common professional traits. All of these professions have struggled for recognition, status and worthy wages during their history. Their membership consists of many working parents. They are therefore natural allies who can speak, write and mobilize with us. The Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and the Early Childhood Educators of BC, through their “\$10 a day child care” campaign, provide us with an excellent example of the value of connecting with diverse groups to successfully build support.

We know this work will be hard and challenging. It is difficult to decide which issue to prioritize and it is difficult to foresee which policies in our field will remedy other issues. The AECEO has launched this initiative to begin what we expect will be a contentious though very welcomed debate, and advocacy work which we believe is in the best interests of our members and the Ontario ECE profession.