The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (AECEO) was first established in 1950 as the Nursery Education Association of Ontario (NEAO). In 1989, the organization, which changed its name in 1969 to better reflect the scope of its work, spearheaded the establishment of a Legislative Recognition committee to advocate for the creation of a professional regulatory body for ECEs in Ontario. Almost twenty years later as a result of the passage of the Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007 the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) was established. The province of Ontario now has a College of ECE (CECE) and a professional association for early childhood educators (AECEO).

Background:
Confusion regarding the difference between a professional association and a professional college is common. Registered early childhood educators (RECEs) are licensed to practice the profession of early childhood education in Ontario. If you are entitled to this designation then it is important to understand the difference between an association and a regulatory college. Prior to the establishment of the CECE, early childhood education in Ontario did not meet the criteria of a profession. One could practice as a professional with a commitment to demonstrating professionalism but it was only with the professionalization of the sector that it became a true profession. There is now a regulated code of ethics and standards of practice. It is the responsibility of the ECE professional to understand the complexities of their chosen profession; associations and colleges exist for very different reasons. Each functions differently in terms of its purpose and one is not interchangeable with the other.

What is the Difference? A professional College has as its primary goal the responsibility to protect the public. Membership in a College is obligatory to practice the profession and use the title of ECE. This is the same for early childhood educators in Ontario as it is for many other professional fields. The CECE does not exist to advance the interest of the profession; it is there for the interest of the public. The CECE functions to protect the public from incompetent or unethical early childhood educators who may abuse their professional position. As a regulatory body, the CECE sets requirements for individuals to enter the profession and for the practice of the profession. Like other Colleges, the CECE is expected to regulate the practice of the profession, to govern its members in accordance with the legislation under which it was formed, assuring the public of the knowledge, skill, proficiency and competency of its members.
The CECE is not an academic institution. Organizations with regulatory status are considered to be “Colleges”. In Ontario, academic institutions like community colleges and universities provide the training to practice as a registered professional but license to practice is obtained through application to the regulatory College. As a regulatory body the CECE is responsible for developing and maintaining disciplinary processes and procedures for evaluating the ongoing competence of its members. Registration with the college is mandatory for an individual to obtain licensure to practice and use the title of RECE.

A professional association acts in the interest of its members, who are usually also members of a professional College. The AECEO’s mission is to serve and act on behalf of early childhood educators in Ontario. Most associations advocate on behalf of the profession they represent. Associations develop and provide professional development opportunities through the coordination of conferences, institutes and workshops. The AECEO has a long standing history of supporting the professional growth of early childhood educators through the provision and promotion of ongoing professional development, training and promotion of ethical practices. The AECEO supports its members in their pursuit of competent and ethical practice. Membership in an association is voluntary. This is a fundamental difference between an association and a regulatory college. Another significant difference between associations and regulatory colleges is their purpose. Associations represent member interests and Colleges represent public interests.

Associations are free to focus on professional activities, promotion of the profession and advocacy, including such issues as compensation and professional image. There is only two professional associations for early childhood educators in Ontario; one anglophone, the AECEO and one francophone, Association Francophone à l’éducation des services à l’enfance de l’Ontario (AFÉSEO). Membership with the AECEO is not a requirement for an individual to practice the profession. Associations like the AECEO are self-governing with a board of directors comprised of members. Associations are not governed through legislative authority.

Associations and regulatory Colleges are different. As a professional RECE being a member of both is a way of demonstrating your commitment to ethical practice. The CECE will continue to function in its role to represent the public interest. The AECEO will continue its role representing the interests of the profession; to promote the profession of early childhood education in Ontario.