

# "I'm more than 'just' an ECE": Decent work from the perspective of Ontario's early childhood workforce

## Introduction

With support from the Atkinson Foundation's Decent Work Fund, the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) in partnership with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) and the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development have planned and implemented the Professional Pay and Decent Work for All Project. The central goals of this project are:

- To develop a shared understanding and a shared vision of decent work in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector<sup>1</sup>.
- To document the lived experiences of the early childhood workforce with a specific focus on their human resource (HR) needs and challenges.
- To identify and nurture leaders in the sector in order to raise the collective voice of the early childhood workforce within the broader movement for decent work.

The project hopes to address the inadequate wages and working conditions experienced by Ontario's ECEC sector – a challenge that undermines program quality (Langford & Halfon, 2015). Issues of recruitment and retention in Ontario's early childhood sector are amplified by a widening 'professionalization gap' where the expectations and responsibilities of ECEs have increased through legislative and regulatory changes with very little improvement to wages and working conditions. Through eight community mobilization forums designed to be informative, engaging and inclusive of all professionals working in the ECEC sector we sought to uncover the possibilities of a strong and well-supported early childhood workforce in Ontario.

## Methodology

In this project, an action research approach was utilized to provide participants with tools and information to support their engagement with the Professional Pay and Decent Work campaign while also collecting qualitative data from the participants. Action research was an appropriate method because it provides participants with an opportunity for reflection and collaboration while documenting existing problems and exploring possible solutions (Creswell, 2009). The community mobilization forums provided resources and professional learning in a respectful and constructive space and provided opportunities for participants to adopt leadership roles within the movement for decent work. The forums also provided an opportunity to hear and share the concerns, perspectives, experiences and ideas of the early childhood workforce – a resource that will be helpful as we progress through the various stages of the project.

<sup>1</sup> Terminology: The Professional Pay and Decent Work for All Project uses the terminology "Early Childhood Education and Care" interchangeably with "Early Learning and Child Care" or "Early Learning and Care" to represent the early childhood sector in Ontario. Early childhood workforce refers to "Registered Early Childhood Educators", "child care workers" and "early years staff" to be inclusive of both trained and untrained professionals – everyone deserves decent work, no matter where they work in the sector.

## Participants/scope

Eight community mobilization forums were held across Ontario (Scarborough, Whitby (Durham), Mississauga (Peel), Sault Ste. Marie, Waterloo, Brantford, Kingston and Sudbury). Communities were selected based on requests for involvement and geographical appropriateness to capture a balance of both rural and urban populations. In total, 202 participants attended the forums and reflected the diverse services and programs that are part of Ontario's early childhood sector. Participants were employed in family resource centres, full-day kindergarten (FDK), licensed child care settings (home and centre based) and post-secondary institutions. Participants had a varied amount of experience ranging from students to senior educators and administrators. Outside of those working in FDK, very few of the participants worked in unionized environments. The majority of participants (98.2%) were female.

## Data Collection

Data was collected at each forum through a 'shift and share' activity where facilitators guided participants through small group discussions. The primary research question being addressed was: *what does decent work look like from the perspective of the early childhood workforce?* To answer this, facilitators focused the discussion on four key topics: wages and benefits, working conditions, professional learning, and public value. Together with the facilitators, research assistants<sup>2</sup> recorded and transcribed field notes and synthesized the information gathered to give us a clear indication of key themes that spanned all forums. Participants were also provided with an anonymous feedback form which was designed to gauge their understanding of the decent work movement and the role they play in advocacy for the early childhood sector. The feedback forms gathered throughout the process allowed the project team to make adjustments to the format of the forums in order to be inclusive of all participants while keeping information confidential.

## Voices from Ontario's early childhood workforce

### Wages and Benefits

Across all eight communities participants expressed dissatisfaction with low wages, which they felt did not reflect their level of training or experience in the sector. The majority of participants believed that in order to recruit and retain RECEs, the starting wage should be set at \$20 per hour or be equal to the starting wage of Designated Early Childhood Educators (DECEs) working in FDK programs. For example, a participant from Peel stated, "As educators, we set the foundation for children and deserve equal pay to teachers." The AECEO's regional wage scale discussion paper suggests using the wages and benefits currently paid by municipal programs and other unionized environments as a benchmark for wage scales in the province (AECEO, 2015). Higher salaries and better benefits paid by school boards have lead many RECEs to leave positions in licensed child care to pursue careers in FDK, resulting in a recruitment and retention strain in licensed child care. Discussions about wages and benefits in FDK vs. licensed child care led a number of participants to acknowledge feeling divided as a workforce. For example, a participant who worked as a DECE stated, "We will not be recognized as professionals if ECEs in FDK and child care continue to be against one another, we need to come together as a united workforce."

### *A developing vision for decent work*

**Our vision is for all Registered ECEs and the broader early childhood workforce to experience decent work through fair compensation, supportive work environments, a strong professional community, public recognition, and adequate representation and power in the process of change in the sector.**

**Our vision of decent work includes: decent wages; full-time, stable jobs; health benefits and pension coverage no matter where they work in the sector; working conditions that support staff to provide high quality programs including safe and healthy facilities, paid preparation time, lunch breaks and access to on-going training and professional learning opportunities.**

<sup>2</sup> Summer internship students from the Early Childhood Leadership Program at the George Brown College School of Early Childhood

Participants across forums noted that low wages and limited benefits had an impact on their job satisfaction and that many considered leaving the sector despite feeling passionate about the work. Furthermore, many participants made links between their low wages and their ability to pursue personal goals – most notable having a family of their own. For example, a participant from Brantford stated, “These very low wages make supporting a family considerably difficult, which is also creating a recruitment and retention issue as ECEs decide to leave the field due to low wages.” Similarly, another participant stated that, “Even in a dual parent household this wage is still too low to support the family.” Participants also made links between their financial instability and their ability to secure quality child care for their own children. Simply put, their low wages were insufficient to access the high quality, regulated child care they were providing to other people’s children. Most participants welcomed the Ontario Government’s Wage Enhancement Grant as a first step in addressing the issue of low wages in the early childhood sector but ultimately saw this as a short-term, “Band-Aid” solution. It is the AECEO’s position that the Wage Enhancement Grant does not ensure a fair and consistent salary increase for all staff and that it fails to take into account the wide variation in wages and working conditions across the sector (AECEO, 2015). Ontario’s Gender Wage Gap Strategy Steering Committee (2016) reported that wages in female-dominated sectors continue to be low “despite the fact that their work may require educational and professional qualifications”. Furthermore, the committee (2016) reported that students of early childhood education were “choosing not to continue their work after initial training because of low wages” and recommended, “the government should consult with relevant workplace parties on how to value work in female-dominant sectors using pay equity or other means”.

*“If my partner did not have a job with good benefits I would not be doing this work that I love.”*

Participants across forums stated that extended health benefits are fundamental – particularly when considering the working demands of the early childhood sector. Participants identified the work to be physically, mentally and emotionally demanding. Participants stated that the early childhood workforce should have access to dental coverage, medical and vision care, life insurance, short and long-term disability coverage, paid vacations, paid sick leave and pensions. Consistent

with previous studies of the early childhood workforce in Ontario many participants found the limited benefits offered to be a primary cause for ECEs and staff leaving the sector (Best Start Expert Panel on Quality and Human Resources, 2007).

A participant from Waterloo stated, “I am lucky enough to have a partner who has great benefits that can support both myself and my family.” This statement was echoed across forums as participants detailed that maintaining a position with low wages and benefits was only possible if they are subsidized by the wages and benefits of their partners.

The majority of forum participants did not belong to a union and had limited knowledge about unionization. In some communities participants noted feeling unsure about unionization even though they acknowledged the benefits of collective bargaining and advocacy. Participants also acknowledged the important role that unions play in advocating for a publicly funded system of early childhood education and care. Union density is low in the licensed child care sector but a larger number of RECEs are entering unionized environments through FDK. Participants across forums noted the increase in unionization as a result of FDK as a positive development but also noted that they expected to see more of an impact on the sector as a whole. Given some of the challenges of unionization in the early childhood sector participants discussed the idea of sectoral bargaining, or a union that is entirely dedicated to the rights of the early childhood workforce, similar to elementary teachers and nurses.

## *Working Conditions*

Participants reported experiencing various working conditions, extending from very good, to challenging, to poor, indicating inconsistent working conditions across the sector. Challenging working conditions impact staff satisfaction and well-being, with many participants stating that poor working conditions added to their stress level and detracted from their work with children. For example, a participant from the Peel forum stated, “sometimes I spend more time cleaning and repairing/moving furniture than I do interacting with children.” Participants across forums stated that improvements are necessary with many claiming that their basic human necessities are regularly unmet. For example, participants noted that washroom breaks are sometimes impossible for educators because of ratio requirements. Furthermore, paid lunch breaks and dedicated staff rooms were reported to be inconsistent across settings and “breaks” are often missed or used as planning time.

Participants working within a school environment reported tensions between ECEs in FDK and those working in before and after school programs. For example, a DECE participant explained that, “ECEs from the child care centre use our FDK classroom but they have to cart around all of their materials, I don’t think that it is fair.” Shared space (or lack of space) was discussed as one of the most challenging working conditions within a school setting. A participant noted that, “The shared FDK classroom that we use for afterschool programming is not sanitized at the end of the day, when I go in I spend the first 30 minutes cleaning.” The participating DECEs expressed that they often felt they were viewed only as caregivers and not as equal educators in the FDK classroom. DECE participants also reported a lack of materials, “makeshift” learning spaces and limited ability to make classroom modifications as common challenges that affect their ability to provide quality care and learning.

## *Professional Learning*

Professional learning was recognized as a valuable activity in each community. However, the way in which professional learning is administered and funded varies across regions and settings. This variance is influenced by municipal service system managers – the Consolidated Municipal Service Managers (CMSMs) and District Social Services Administration Boards (DSSAB) and by school boards. CMSMs and DSSABs have varied approaches of administering the provincial capacity funding established to support professional learning for early childhood educators in their service delivery areas. School boards also have different methods for providing professional learning to DECEs which can also vary based on collective bargaining agreements.

Participants in Durham reported being well supported by children’s services and thus were able to access professional learning opportunities through an extensive network of community providers as well as through the activities of the Durham Region Child Care Forum (DRCCF) and the Professional Education and Training Committee. Participants from Peel reported being well supported by agencies such as the Child Development Research Connection Peel (CDRCP), providing accessible professional learning opportunities among other services. This contrasts with some of the other communities where participants – specifically front-line ECEs working in licensed child care – expressed a great deal of frustration with their ability to access funds for professional learning opportunities. The mandatory Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) program was discussed when addressing professional learning for the early childhood workforce. As CPL is a new requirement from the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) many participants were unclear about what activities would be considered professional learning. Some also expressed concerns about the cost and availability of professional learning opportunities and how they would meet the requirements with limited support from their employer and/or community.

Numerous participants reported that their employer provided funding for staff to access professional learning both in external and in-house sessions. Others reported not having any financial support from their employer for professional learning. Participants across all regions noted that accessibility to professional learning opportunities was a common challenge – particularly around scheduling. It was noted that daytime sessions are difficult to attend due to lack of paid time off while evening sessions are challenging due to exhaustion and/or travel time. Participants reported that these obstacles have led to supervisors attending the bulk of professional learning sessions, as they have more flexibility to leave the centre. The participants who discussed this as an issue reported that, due to time constraints and other challenges, information was not always passed down to the benefit of staff. A participant from Kingston stated, “Supervisors need to pass on information they learn at these sessions, especially for part-time staff who rarely have access to professional learning”.

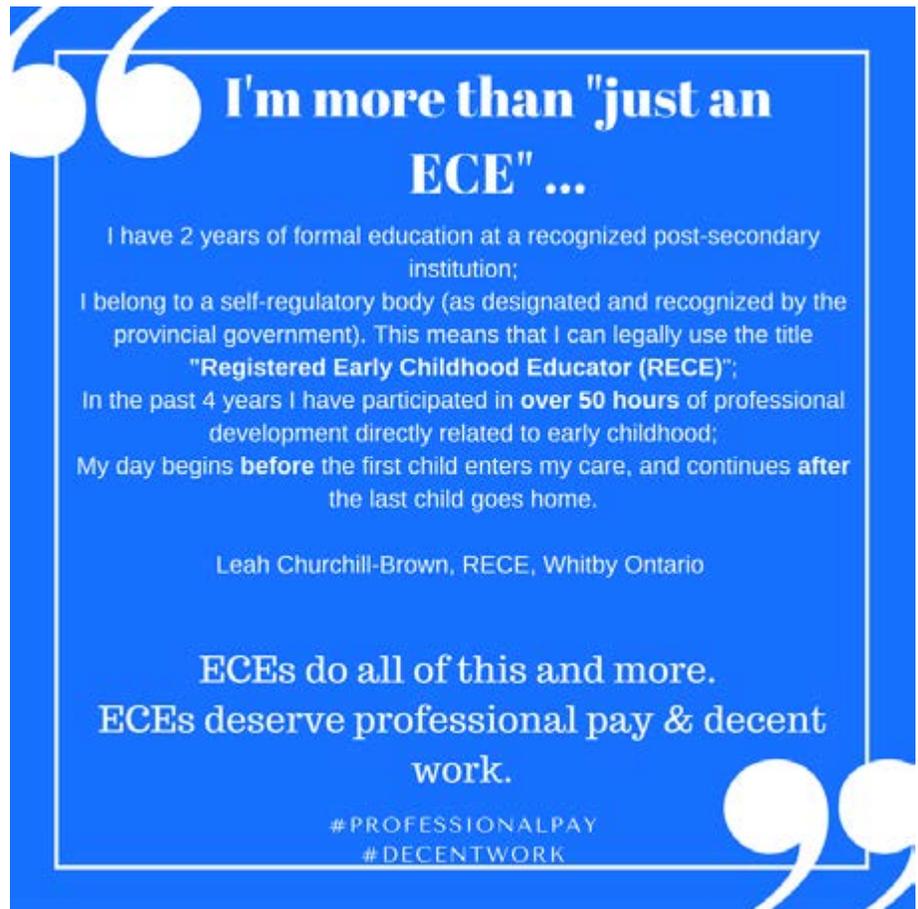
## *Public Value*

When asked “What do you wish the public knew about the value of your work as ECEs?” facilitators encountered the unanimous statement throughout at all eight forums: “We are not babysitters, we are educators.” Many participants reiterated that “We are educated and skilled professionals.” Three main themes emerged from the responses to this question: (1) RECEs are skilled professionals accountable to a Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice; (2) despite high parent fees, wages in the sector do not consistently reflect the value of the work; (3) the early childhood workforce needs the support of the public to advocate with us and for us. Participants discussed ways that they could share their knowledge and expertise to communicate the value of their work to the general public.

For example, following the Durham forum, a participant created a meme to educate the public about what she does as an RECE. She posted it to social media and gathered 466 likes and 490 shares, reaching a total of 60,000 people, attesting to the importance and power of motivated and empowered ECEs. Some participants noted a common misconception that ECEs get paid high wages because parent fees are so high. Participants believed that this misconception came from a lack of understanding that high parent fees are the result of the costs of providing care and education for young children coupled with a lack of public funding to non-profit and public early learning and care services.

Participants agreed that more action must be taken in order to reach outside of the early childhood sector in an effort to garner the support of the general public and of other movements for decent work and social justice. Participants responded positively to examples of advocacy initiatives established

in Australia through the Big Steps Campaign and in California's Raising California Together campaign. Participants shared creative ideas about how to amplify our message, such as, a video/commercial emphasizing who we are as a profession, a social media challenge, and partnering with nurses or teachers to learn from their professional journey.



## Conclusion



Overall, the Professional Pay and Decent Work community mobilization forums across Ontario were a vital first step in informing and empowering the early childhood workforce across Ontario. The forums provided insight and strength to the growing collective voice calling for professional pay and decent work for the early childhood workforce. With the recent appointment of a new Associate Minister of Education, Early Years and Child Care and with the opportunity of a federal early learning and child care framework, now is the time to mobilize as a united workforce. As the Ontario Government continues to work toward developing "a child-care and early-years system focused on quality, affordability, accessibility, parent choice and flexibility" (Office of the Premier, 2016) the early childhood workforce must raise its collective voice to call for the government to address the issues of recruitment, retention, low wages and challenging working conditions in early learning and care. We must speak up for a real system that puts decent work at its heart. The recent Ontario Throne Speech announcement of 100,000 new child care spaces can only be achieved through the work of educators and child care workers. The needs of the workforce can no longer be ignored.

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