



Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario

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# AECEO Submission to Ministry of Education, Early Years Division's Consultation on Early Years and Child Care Strategy

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## **Introduction**

The AECEO is the professional association for Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) in Ontario. We support ECEs in their professional practice and advocate for the recognition and appropriate compensation of the profession. Our members are working throughout Ontario in programs for young children and their families, including regulated child care, full-day kindergarten, family resource programs and support services for children with disabilities, among others.

As ECEs, we support the government of Ontario's commitment to transforming the way early years and child care/early learning programs are delivered in the province. As studies have shown, investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) through accessible, quality, and affordable options has significant positive economic implications for individuals and for society<sup>1</sup>. The AECEO has long called for a publicly funded, high quality, universal child care system in Ontario – one that is affordable for all families and that ensures professional pay and decent work for the early childhood (EC) workforce. MPP Indira Naidoo-Harris, Minister responsible for Early Years and Child Care has referred to the government's commitment as Ontario's opportunity to be **transformative**, to be **groundbreaking** and to be **visionary** (Toronto Consultation, December 7<sup>th</sup> 2016). The AECEO applauds this significant commitment and we look forward to working with the government in addressing barriers to EC workforce advancement. We also applaud the government's commitment to the consultation process, as consultation with the early years and child care sector is a vital component of this transformation. The AECEO requests that the Ministry of Education release a summary of what they heard from the community through the consultation process as we work together to "get this done right" (Toronto Consultation, December 7<sup>th</sup> 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> Bartik, T. J. (2009). Why universal preschool is actually a labour market program. *Employment Research*, 16(3), 8.; Alexander, C., & Ignjatovic, D. (2012). Early childhood education has widespread and long lasting benefits, *Special Report: TD Economics* (pp. 1-9). Toronto, Ontario: TD Bank Group; Marope, P. T. M., & Kaga, Y. (Eds.). (2015). *Investing against evidence: The global state of early childhood care and education*. Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; Heckman, J., & Masterov, D. (2004). The productivity argument for investing in young children. *Working paper 5, Committee for economic development*.

## Advancing the Early Childhood Profession

The AECEO is focused primarily on the necessity of a well-trained, well-educated and well-paid EC workforce in “transforming the way we deliver early years learning and child care in Ontario”. It is the AECEO’s position that a well-supported EC workforce is the structural foundation upon which the four key pillars can be achieved. By the Ministry’s own calculations, 100,000 new child care spaces would create roughly 20,000 new jobs for ECEs and early years staff. However, the EC workforce is still faced with persistently low wages and inconsistent working conditions including limited access to benefits, pensions and ongoing professional learning<sup>2</sup>. We know that 24% of Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECE) earn less than \$15/hour and it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit and retain RECEs<sup>3</sup> in licensed child care. Retention of qualified staff in licensed child care and family resource/support programs is a critical component of quality because we know that learning happens through the establishment of positive, responsive relationships with children and their families<sup>4</sup>. With regard to retention of qualified staff in the sector, the AECEO has identified the presence of a ‘professionalization gap’ which is recognized as a system level barrier to workforce advancement (i.e., retention of highly skilled professionals). The professionalization gap highlights a period of rapid professionalization wherein the EC workforce in Ontario has experienced ongoing extension of expectations and responsibilities (professionalization) with limited increases in workforce support (compensation, working conditions or access to collective bargaining).

To create a provincial early years and child care system that is successful, EC workforce advancement must be a top priority. More specifically, the AECEO would like to highlight the fact that a robust body of literature illustrates that the EC workforce is best supported through a well funded system of public and non-profit early years and child care/early learning programs<sup>5</sup>. Based on empirical comparative policy evidence from other jurisdictions within and beyond Canada, we further recommend the following mechanisms be put in place to support the EC workforce:

- 1) **Establishment of a regional wage scale** to equitably raise the wages and moral of all ECEs and staff no matter where they work in Ontario’s early years and child care sector. A wage scale should be developed overtime within the development of a comprehensive workforce strategy because we know that workforce advancement requires various supports further to compensation.
- 2) **A consultation process with the EC workforce** (including RECEs, ECE students and early years staff) to address ongoing challenges in the immediate work environments (for example, the downward pressure on staff:child ratios, changing curricular/pedagogical expectations/precarious work – i.e., split shifts). AECEO would be eager to further support the Ministry in consultations with the EC workforce as we are active on various sector tables concerned with workforce advancement.
- 3) **Guaranteed pedagogical planning time** during the work day to support ECEs in fulfilling their professional roles and responsibilities outlined within *How Does Learning Happen?*
- 4) **Paid time off for professional learning** and equitable access to affordable professional learning opportunities in order to support RECEs in meeting their Continuous Professional Learning<sup>6</sup> goals. This will help to support the increased professional expectations of the EC workforce in Ontario.
- 5) **Further integration of early years and education systems are vital.** As ECE professionals continue to take up work within Ontario school boards<sup>7</sup> it is critical to address existing structural inequities between educational staff. If the Ministry of Education agrees that early years and child care *is* education (regardless of the child’s age) then educators should be valued equally regardless of what age groups they are working with.

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<sup>2</sup> AECEO (2015). Response to Wage Enhancement Grant

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Education (2015). The 2015 Licensed Child Care Survey

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Education (2014). How Does Learning Happen? Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years

<sup>5</sup> Halfon, S & Langford, R. (2015). Developing and supporting a high quality child care workforce in Canada: What are the barriers to change?

In *Moving beyond baby steps: Building a child care plan for today’s families, Our Selves, Our Schools*, Centre for Policy Alternatives, 24(4), 131-145.

<sup>6</sup> Continuous Professional Learning Program is a requirement of the College of Early Childhood Educators beginning 2017

## Access

### **What does access to early years and child care programs mean to you?**

A modernized and renewed early years and child care framework that is groundbreaking will be one that attracts and retains the most skilled and highly qualified early childhood educators. Effective early years and child care systems must have “well-qualified, motivated staff” and “requisite structural features” such as adequate investments in human resources and infrastructure<sup>8</sup>. Such investment involves:

- An integrated, seamless system for children, ideally located in schools and/or purpose-built facilities;
- Accessible to all children and families with welcoming and inclusive learning environments;
- Support for professional preparation and ongoing professional learning;
- A well-educated workforce that can provide a wide range of services in an inclusive environment (thus reducing the need to specialized external consultants);
- All those working in early years and child care should be RECEs or have some level of training to work with young children and families.

A seamless delivery of early childhood education through integrated early years and child care programs improves access. Furthermore, having early years and child care programs connected to schools helps reinforce that early years and child care programs are *also* education.

Anchoring early years and child care programs in schools gives families consistent support for children birth to 3 in their community. The pedagogical continuity that we hope to see in the renewed approach to integrated early years and child care programs requires qualified early childhood educators to be part of every program. The professional benefits of seamless programs for children is, also, that EC professionals have the opportunity to engage with one another – and to really bring to life the theory and principles of Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years, through their daily professional collaboration and dialogue which ultimately benefits children and families.

Accessibility also means that early years and child care programs that are located in schools are actually counted into the funding formula of the Ministry of Education that school boards receive. This would address some of the current inequities between early years and child care and public education. Child care programs located in schools need to be counted into school utilization and overall budget allocations so that child care programs are no longer required to pay rent for spaces in schools.

### **In your experience, what are the strengths of the current system and what are the biggest barriers to parents accessing licensed early years and child care programs in your community?**

One of the most notable strengths of the current system is the dedicated EC workforce that strives to provide high quality programs and services to Ontario’s children and families. It is beneficial to children and parents that licensed child care programs are staffed by early childhood educators; with ratios made explicit in legislation and regulation (see further comment on ratios under quality section). This promotes the individualized engagement and support of young children during a critical period of emotional, intellectual, physical and social development. Another very notable strength of the current system is *How Does Learning Happen.? Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years*. In short, these directives from the Ministry of Education mean that every Ontario ECE professional in every early years and licensed child care program will be required to understand and articulate the content of *How Does Learning Happen.?*; to use it to guide practice; and, to reflect on its value in strengthening program quality, ultimately, for the purpose of fostering “children’s learning, development, health and well-being” (Ministry of Education, 2014, p.12). As has been indicated

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<sup>8</sup> Bennett, J. (2004). *Curriculum issues in national policy-making*. Keynote address. Paris: Organization for Economic and Co-operation and Development at the European Early Child care Education Research Association (EECERA) Conference, Malta, 2 Sept. as cited in eceLINK (Summer

however, an educated and therefore well-remunerated workforce is needed to implement these holistic pedagogical goals.

There are various barriers which make it difficult for parents to access licensed early years and child care programs. These barriers include: long waiting lists for licensed spaces, costs that are unaffordable to most parents, lack of available options for parents who work nonstandard hours and families in rural communities, lack of spaces for children with disabilities and a system which is difficult for parents to navigate. Furthermore, parents very rarely have access to **high quality** early learning and child care environments given the majority of regulated child care centres meet only the minimum licensing requirements to operate (i.e., contain the most number of children with the fewest permissible number of staff, have staff educated at the minimum levels). It is our position that parents deserve access to high quality child care services and that an absolutely foundational element of quality is the recruitment and retention of well-educated EC professionals. Parents aren't just interested in a place for their children to exist while they are working. They want high quality, rich and stimulating care and learning environments that their children enjoy. This is what a well-funded system of child care, with a focus on supporting the workforce, may provide.

### **In your experience, what can be done by governments, communities, employers and providers to increase access to early years programs and licensed child care?**

In Ontario there is no question that access to licensed child care is a major concern. However, the AECEO takes the position that increasing access to existing and new child care spaces cannot be pursued without a heightened focus on quality – mainly through a well-educated and remunerated workforce. In fact, failing to address this core structural issue could be a liability for the government as we know poor quality programs and/or high enrollment in unregulated child care homes results in poorer child outcomes (and in the case of Ontario, several infant and toddler deaths). The early years and child care sector is in need of urgent capital and operational funding that can go towards both reducing fees for parents and hiring and retaining qualified staff in existing child care centres as well as creating new high quality child care spaces. In the OECD's review of early childhood policies and services in Canada (2003) they recommend that "earmarked operational grant funding seems to be a surer means of ensuring more highly qualified personnel and enriched learning environments in the centres – both of which are strong indicators of quality and learning."<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, if the issue of access is limited to adding more "spaces" without regard for funding quality (i.e., supporting and advancing the EC workforce), it could negatively impact not only the predominantly female EC workforce but also young children and their families.

### **Responsiveness**

#### **Do parents have the early years and child care options they need?**

No. Parents do not currently have the early years and child care options that they need. There are only licensed child care spaces for 23% of children 0-5 years of age<sup>10</sup> which means that, for too many families the option of quality licensed child care is out of reach. This reality is further exacerbated for families working non-standard hours, families living in rural or remote areas, families experiencing disability and for Indigenous children, families and communities. Furthermore, Indigenous families and communities often do not have the option of culturally safe and appropriate programs that are well resourced to meet community needs.

Ironically, parents who are employed in the early years and child care sector may experience the fewest child care options. In recent interviews, one REECE articulated: "... very low wages make supporting a family considerably difficult, which is also creating a recruitment and retention issue as educators decide to leave the field due to low wages". Another ECE expressed that "...even in a dual parent household this wage is still too low to support the family." Early

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<sup>9</sup> OECD (2004). Canada Country Note (p.8).

childhood educators who are parents or who hope to become parents consistently grapple with their own financial instability and their ability to secure quality child care for their own children. Simply put, the low wages earned through caring for other people's children rendered them unable to afford to access the very service they provide. This workforce issue was highlighted in the Gender Wage Gap Steering Committee's final report where they pinpointed the issue of low wage female dominated sectors such as early years and child care.

### **What are the strengths of the current system and options available? What can be done to provide families with more choice and flexibility?**

When programs are available full time, parents have more choice in the hours of care that best suits their families' schedules. When early childhood educators work full time, they are much more likely to receive benefits, and have better, more predictable working conditions. Piecemeal approaches to program delivery (i.e., split shifts, alternating days, etc.) are less supportive for families, and have limited impact on child development – and, unfortunately, they also correspond with poorer working conditions for ECEs and staff. The renewed framework for the early years and child care system should reinforce full time availability of programs for the sake of children and families – reflecting parents' actual work life; and for better retention of the highly skilled workers in the early years and child care sector.

### **Affordability**

#### **What does an affordable child care system look like to you?**

An affordable child care system is one that recognizes the range of family's ability to pay for services. Too many child care programs in Ontario are under-resourced because they cannot increase the financial burden on individual families. While some families in Ontario may have access to a full or partial subsidy, the majority of families do not have this support. Furthermore, access to subsidies and access to child care spaces are not currently coordinated in Ontario leaving the most vulnerable families navigating an incredibly complex "system". A truly affordable child care system would operate on a sliding-fee scale which is supported through operational funds directly to centres.

#### **What are the strengths and weaknesses of the subsidy model in Ontario?**

Ontario has the highest parent fees for licensed child care in the country - the median fee for an infant space in Ontario was \$1,152/month in 2016<sup>11</sup>. When monthly child care costs are equal to (or more than) a family's mortgage it means that licensed child care is unaffordable even for families who do not qualify for subsidy. In some cases parents who do qualify for subsidized child care may be placed on a long waitlist forcing them to pay full fees for a period of time before they receive any funding.

There is good evidence to suggest that Ontario's fee subsidy system is not the best way to address affordability<sup>12</sup>. The provincial government should shift to a more sustainable funding model to provide long-term operational funding to child care centres coupled with an affordable, geared to income, sliding fee scale to address affordability in a more systems approach way that would promote more equitable access to a range of quality early years and child care programs.

#### **What are the most important things governments, communities, providers and employers should do to make early years programs in Ontario more affordable?**

The only way child care in Ontario will become more affordable, more accessible and higher quality is through focused supply-side funding models. Making the transition from a market to a system approach of early years and child care

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<sup>11</sup> Macdonald, D. & Friendly, M. (2016). A growing concern: 2016 child care fees in Canada's big cities. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

<sup>12</sup> Cleveland, Krashinsky, Colley and Avery-Nunez (2016). *City of Toronto Licensed Child Care Demand and Affordability Study*. Available online at:

delivery is a long-term goal that is absolutely essential to implementing a **transformative, groundbreaking and visionary** system for all children and families in Ontario.

## Quality

### **What does a high quality early years and child care program look like?**

High quality early years and child care programs depend on two things: better funding and better policy. One without the other will not achieve the quality that provides positive experiences for children and their families and fulfilling careers for ECEs and early years staff. This idea is best summarized by Friendly & Beach (2005):

“A system made up of a series of linked elements is the best way to ensure that high quality early learning and child care (ELCC) programs are the norm rather than the exception, according to research and comparative analysis. These elements — ideas, governance, infrastructure, planning and policy development, financing, human resources, physical environment, data, research and evaluation — that make up the system need to be taken into account together. Considered individually, their potential to have a positive impact will be weaker.

Research shows that the common obstacles to high quality in ELCC programs are often structural weaknesses — lack of adequate financing, unfavourable staff:child ratios, poorly qualified and inadequately paid staff, and poorly developed and implemented educational theory. These characteristics are determined by public policy” (Friendly and Beach, 2005, p.1)

A high quality early years and child care program begins (and ends) with well-educated and remunerated early childhood educators. Early childhood educators have a foundation of theoretical knowledge in child development and education. Quality in an early years and child care system – that can be measured at the program level – is predicted by the compensation, working conditions and the professional preparation of the early childhood educators and early years staff that make up the EC workforce. Also essential to a high quality early years and child care programs is a comprehensive professional learning *system* for pre-service and in-service educators.

An ECE is said to reach a good level of experience to effectively practice early childhood education at about six years in the field. However, when ECEs are poorly compensated (and have low morale as a result), they leave the field before this milestone. In Manitoba, where they have comprehensive recommended minimum wage standard for early childhood education staff working in licensed child care, child care staff have worked an average of 15 years in the field – and the majority anticipates to still be working in the field in three years’ time.<sup>13</sup> In Ontario, in the current early years and child care context, we can only dream of retention levels that are this consistent and high. The renewed framework for the early years and child care system could provide the basis for a much higher quality system by addressing the workforce challenges that are holding back quality in early years and child care services in this province.

### **What role should the province play in ensuring high quality early learning and child care programs?**

The provincial role is substantial for ensuring quality. It starts with higher levels of base funding distributed to the municipal authorities across the province; which they, in turn provide to program operators through operating grants that hold operators responsible for delivering high quality programs. The province can turn our current system on its head – so that ECEs do not fund the renewed early years and child care system (or fund reductions in parent fees) with their wages. A provincially established, annually indexed, regional wage scale<sup>14</sup> along with annually indexed base funding for child care and other family resource programs has the ability to equitably raise the salaries, working conditions and morale of all early childhood educators and early years staff and to strengthen recruitment and retention in the sector.

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<sup>13</sup> Probe Research Inc. (2016). Manitoba Child Care Association Parent Survey Final Report. Winnipeg: Manitoba Child Care Association.

A standardized wage rate in the early childhood education and care sector will ensure staff with equivalent education and work responsibilities are paid a similar rate of pay no matter where they work. These initiatives would further contribute to higher and more consistent quality across programs. The Government of Manitoba announced a wage scale program on January 12, 2016.

The province can do much more to ensure high quality early years and child care programs for children and families by moving away from the flawed market model towards a funded system of public and non-profit early years and child care services. The current market model is problematic for ensuring high quality child care because “the model fails both working mothers who have limited access to high quality care and the women who educate and care for their children”<sup>15</sup>. We understand that this transformation is a long term goal but the province can actually improve quality in early years and child care by first addressing current barriers to quality, such as:

- **Staff:child ratios** – ratios could be improved so that ECEs and early years staff are better supported to fulfill their professional roles within the early learning environment and could greatly improve staff moral. An RECE from Ontario posted a call out on social media on January 23, 2017:
  - “Do any of you ever feel like our job as RECEs is just too much?! I really love working with children but honestly when you have a group of 10-15 toddlers or 16-24 preschoolers I feel like all I do is crowd control, transitions, and managing behaviour and hardly enjoy my day at all... Feeling discouraged right now and not sure if I can stay in this career forever.”
  - Her post received over 40 comments from ECEs across Ontario echoing her feelings and responding with similar stories and challenges. Improved ratios would ensure higher quality programs for young children as educators would have more time to support play, inquiry and development.
- **Professional preparation** – All those who work in early years and child care programs should have ECE qualifications/background to support the education and care of children 0-12 years of age and to ensure that families are further supported by knowledgeable and competent ECEs.
- **Moratorium on new licenses to for-profit operators** – The AECEO supports the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care’s recommendation for a moratorium on the licensing of any new for-profit child care programs. As the province continues to transform the early years and child care system it is the AECEO’s position that public dollars only be directed to public and non-profit provisions.

### How should we measure quality in our early years and child care programs?

It is our position that the concept of quality early years and child care cannot be discussed outside of a well-educated and well-remunerated workforce. Much child development research attests to the importance of consistent, stable, responsive relationships between caregivers/educators and children<sup>16</sup>. A key marker of quality would thus be to observe the retention of ECEs and early years staff both within centres and within the broader sector. It is also important to track the education levels of the EC workforce as well as the training requirements of post-secondary institutions providing educational and professional preparation. We strongly feel that quality **cannot** be measured through observing individual child outcomes. Rather than focusing on superficial markers of development (i.e., pre-

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<sup>15</sup> Halfon, S & Langford, R. (2015). Developing and supporting a high quality child care workforce in Canada: What are the barriers to change? In *Moving beyond baby steps: Building a child care plan for today’s families, Our Selves, Our Schools*, Centre for Policy Alternatives, 24(4), 131-145.

<sup>16</sup> Muttart Foundation (2014). The Educational Preparation and Professional Development of Alberta’s Early Learning and Care

literacy/numeracy skills), assessments of quality must focus on the program and system level as we strive to build a system that encompasses values of equality and democracy<sup>17</sup>.

## Conclusion

The bottom line to the AECEO's response is that we can't build a high quality early years and child care system without a high quality early childhood workforce. Yes, affordable, regulated child care spaces are urgently needed. But affordable spaces without quality care/education experiences for children are not what parents, children, ECEs/early years staff or the government ultimately wants. We applaud the government's focus on early years and child care and will support your efforts to actualize policies that build not only more child care, but high quality early years and child care. Fundamentally, a supply-side funded, child care system whereby an educated and adequately remunerated EC workforce sets the foundation is needed.

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<sup>17</sup> Moss, P. (2014). Transformative change and real utopias in early childhood education. A story of democracy, experimentation and