

# AN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE SYSTEM: KEY TO CLOSING ONTARIO'S GENDER WAGE GAP

Submission to the Gender Wage Gap Strategy Steering Committee

*COALITION ONTARIENNE POUR  
de meilleurs services  
éducatifs à l'enfance*



*ONTARIO COALITION FOR  
Better Child Care*

## INTRODUCTION

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) is Ontario's central advocacy group for a universal, affordable, high quality, public and non-profit system of early childhood education and child care.

Formed in 1981, the OCBCC is a member organization comprised of child care centres, local and provincial groups, and individuals from all across Ontario. Our members are ECEs, child care workers, parents, grandparents, centre directors, trade unionists and concerned citizens – most importantly we are people who care about child care.

As an organization that represents the perspectives of both parents and the child care workforce our approach to this issue is grounded in two realities make building a real child care system a key element in any strategy for closing the gender wage gap:

- 1) The lack of affordable, high quality child care continues to limit many women's opportunities to participate in full-time work, training or education;
- 2) Child care work is still a firmly entrenched 'female job ghetto' in which the almost entirely female workforce continues to experience a 'care penalty'. This workforce is underpaid and undervalued as determined by Ontario's pay equity process.

These are both critical barriers to closing the gender wage gap that are linked to a larger overarching issue: child care remains a private market not a system. The current child care market does us all a disservice as it limits government responsibility and leaves public planning and coherent delivery on the sidelines. To address Ontario's gender wage gap, we must move from a child care market to a comprehensive system.

## THE CHILD CARE CHALLENGE

The challenges caused by our inadequate approach to child care are played out daily across this province: when mothers struggle to combine work and family life without reliable child care arrangements; when staff struggle to pay child care fees for their own children on the wages that they earn; when mothers put their names on centre and subsidy waitlists as soon as they are pregnant only to reach the end of Parental Leave with no space or subsidy secured; when well-educated Registered Early Childhood Educators leave the field that they love because they cannot earn a living wage.

To illustrate these struggles, two of our members describe their personal situations:

*“I was a bit worried that my perspective wasn’t really universal enough to make me a ‘parent representative’. I did a straw poll of my friends with kids: ‘What do we want from the government?’ The answer was instantaneous and nearly shouted and it boiled down to three things: Affordability, Availability, and Quality.... Let me talk a little bit about what it means not to have access to high quality care - to have no access to quality child care because those first two key elements, availability and affordability, aren’t in place. As a parent it means making these terrifying and heartbreaking compromises and hoping for the best because there is no other option.... Affordability, availability and quality. We need them and we need them now.”*

**- Erin Filby, Toronto mother and Early Childhood Education student.<sup>1</sup>**

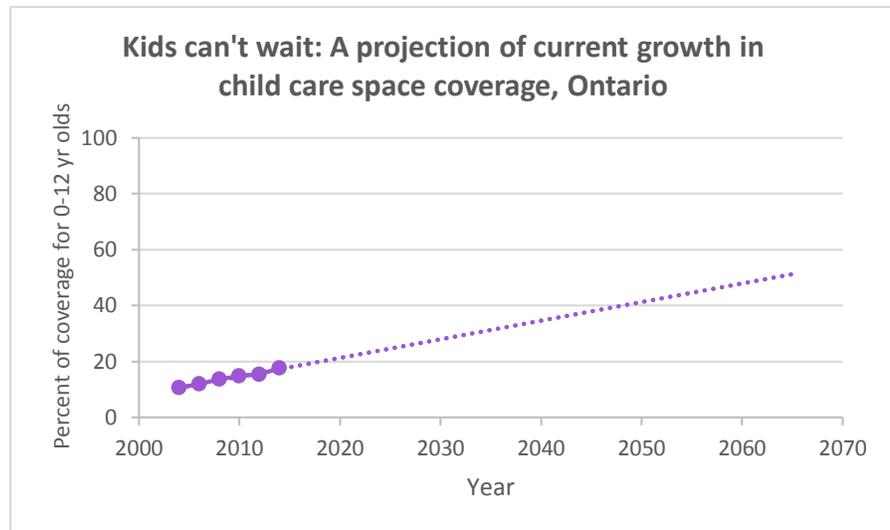
*“ECEs are the key to quality child care programs, and yet we are underpaid and many do not have benefits or a pension. In fact, less than half of the child care workforce have access to a pension. Many ECEs face split shifts or permanent part-time positions. How can any profession cultivate a quality workforce under such realities? The result is often burnout and staff turnover, which is not in the best interests of anyone looking to build a quality service. Without passionate ECEs who plan curriculum, teach it, and provide the emotional support young children need, where would child care be? Families count on us to help care and teach their children. The economy depends on us to provide parents with the ability to go to work. With ECEs being the key to quality child care, how can anyone be silent on the child care workforce?”*

**- Christie Saikaly, Ottawa RECE.**

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<sup>1</sup> Parent advocate Erin Filby, ECE Christie Saikaly and others are featured in: Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (2015). [Child Care Matters to Everyone: A Snapshot of Child Care in Ontario](#). Toronto: Author.

Regulated child care spaces continue to be too few in Ontario, with spaces for only 17.7% of children 0-12 years<sup>2</sup>. While space coverage has crept up incrementally each year, if we continue at the current rate of growth we will not have spaces for 50% of children until



2065 – in fifty years. There is disparity too in where spaces are located, with “daycare deserts” in places where it is not financially viable to operate. Financial viability also limits the number of infant spaces provided, leaving this a particularly under-served age group.

Child care is a labour intensive service and staff wages are directly tied to parent fees, as these are the primary funding source for services. Staff costs normally make up 80%-85% of a centre’s budget. As parent fees are already out of many families’ reach, fees cannot rise to cover the higher wages needed to close the child care workforce’s wage gap.

Since the 1980s, there have been piecemeal attempts to address the child care workforce’s low wages and the lack of affordable services. But the absence of a coherent, publicly funded system continues to make these efforts ineffectual and ultimately unsuccessful.

What is required is sustained public funding to operate and develop services and the development of a comprehensive system. To close the gender pay gap, Ontario must move from the current child care market approach that relies on private initiatives to develop, maintain and pay for child care services to a publicly funded, much more publicly managed early childhood education and care system.

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<sup>2</sup> Friendly, M., Grady, B., Macdonald, L. & Forer, B. (2015). [Preliminary data: Early childhood education and care in Canada 2014](#). Toronto: Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

There has never been a better opportunity to move forward on developing an early childhood education and care system. The recently elected federal government has committed to working together with provinces, territories and Indigenous governments to build an Early Learning and Child Care Framework. This commitment was confirmed in the Ministerial mandate letters of the federal Minister of Families, Children and Social Development and the Minister of Indigenous and Northern Affairs. This is the willing federal partner that Ontario has been waiting for. Ontario has an opportunity to be a leader on this framework and it is a chance we must seize.

In response to this federal commitment, the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada (our federal counterpart), Childcare Resource and Research Unit, Canadian Child Care Federation and Campaign 2000 recently developed, in collaboration with community partners from across the country, a *Shared Framework for Building an Early Childhood Education and Care System for All* (attached). This Shared Framework is designed to facilitate a collaborative intergovernmental and community process and serve as a foundation for a program that will grow, over time, to meet the needs of families, children and the child care workforce in all regions.

**We recommend that the Ontario government adopt the principles of the *Shared Framework for Building an Early Childhood Education and Care System for All* and immediately begin a process to transform Ontario's current child care market patchwork into a comprehensive system. We recommend that:**

- 1. The Government of Ontario builds an early childhood education and care system based on the principles of universality, high quality and comprehensiveness that:**
  - a. Recognizes that access requires both a supply of high quality services and fees that all families can afford (or no fee);**
  - b. Employs a well-compensated, well-supported, well-educated early childhood workforce, which is recognized and appreciated for the importance of their work;**
- 2. To build this system, Ontario must develop:**
  - a. a coherent policy framework with targets and timelines for expansion of early childhood education and care services;**
  - b. a long-term plan for sustained predictable public funding including both base funding to support affordable, high quality services directly and a capital infrastructure plan to expand and maintain services;**
  - c. an early childhood education and care workforce strategy, including a wage strategy.**