

An open letter from the Association of Early Childhood Educators and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care: Premier Ford, protect and respect early childhood education and care

The Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care are calling on the Ontario government to protect and respect the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector:

- Increase funding to ensure the safety and well-being of educators, children and families;
- Prevent the further loss of early years and child care programs;
- Ensure transparent communication and collaboration with the sector.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, early childhood educators (ECEs) and early years staff in licensed home- and centre-based care, Kindergarten classrooms, and early years programs across the province have been providing high quality care and learning to Ontario's children, while doing whatever possible to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children, families and staff. They have done this in spite of continued inaction and a lack of support from the Ontario government that has challenged pedagogical practice and viable operations, and created uncertainty for educators, parents, operators, providers and school boards. The Ontario government continues to disregard, disrespect and devalue the incredible work of the ECEC sector.

Many of the issues identified by the community as being critical to their programs - including base funding, paid sick days, decreased cohort sizes - continue to go unaddressed, despite consistent demands since the beginning of the pandemic. In May 2020, after consultation with the ECEC sector, the AECEO and OCBC released "*From Reopening to Recovery*", which made 27 recommendations to the Ministry of Education on how to safely reopen early years and child care programs and ensure their stability. The Ontario government ignored most of these calls.

Children, families, and educators thrive when we have safe, supported, early years programs in communities and schools. Chronic policy shortfalls have led to increased educator burnout, low enrolment and left many programs on the brink of collapse. Given the continuing challenges experienced by educators across the ECEC sector and the uncertainty child care and early years programs face, we now need immediate government action:

1. Increase funding to child care and early years programs through a permanent base-funding model to:
 - a. raise wages to ensure a \$25 per hour minimum wage for ECEs, early years staff and child care providers to address the current staffing crisis and long-term recruitment and retention challenges;
 - b. hire new/additional staff for screening and transition to program, consistent staff teams per location to avoid staff transferring between programs and groups, and to support Licensed Home Child Care Agencies in supporting home child care providers;
 - c. allow for enhanced ratios and smaller group sizes;
 - d. provide affordable child care to families and relieve uncertainty from fluctuating enrollment and capacity;
 - e. ensure no child care or early years program closes due to financial shortfalls.
2. Immediately increase funding to schools, to:
 - a. increase staffing;
 - b. raise wages to ensure a \$25/hr minimum wage for all education workers to address current staffing needs and long term recruitment and retention

- c. lower class sizes;
 - d. address ventilation issues, including in co-located child care spaces;
 - e. provide training and support for ECEs and co-teachers in virtual learning;
 - f. ensure equipment to make learning possible for all.
3. Publish data analytics for child care, early years programs and schools by region and align with a demonstrable and transparent threshold for temporary closure.
 4. Provide permanent paid sick and emergency leave days as called for by the Decent Work and Health Network to allow staff to stay home when sick and caring for others without a break in income.
 5. Develop and implement a clear plan for COVID-19 asymptomatic testing policy in consultation with the early years and child care sector.
 6. Organize access to all necessary Personal Protective Equipment, health and safety supplies, and laundering supplies, as defined by Public Health agencies and as requested by early years programs to meet their needs. This should be provincially funded and efficient distribution should be organized through CMSM/DSSABs and licensed home child care agencies.
 7. Include ECEs, child care providers, and early years staff in the priority list for Phase 2 of Ontario's vaccination roll-out.
 8. The Ministry of Education, Ministry of Colleges and Universities, and post-secondary institutions should collaborate to create student placement guidelines that align with COVID-19 health and safety requirements and support the well-being of ECE and ECA students.
 9. Clearly communicate the rationale behind policy decisions affecting ECEC directly to the sector to build trust and confidence. Create an Expert Committee, comprising both government and community representatives, to coordinate and inform the next phases of child care and school reopening and recovery.
 10. Work collaboratively with the federal government, alongside the ECEC sector, to create a public ECEC system for all.

Sincerely,

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