



**DISCUSSION PAPER
ON HUMAN RESOURCE CHALLENGES
IN CHILD CARE**

December 2021



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1) DISTRIBUTE FUNDING SUPPORTS EQUALLY AMONG ALL LICENSEES
- 2) INCREASE THE NUMBER OF ECE GRADUATES
- 3) REDUCE BARRIERS FACING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND FOREIGN-TRAINED PROFESSIONALS
- 4) REDUCE PAPERWORK BURDENS AND RED TAPE
- 5) CONSIDER THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF OTHER POLICY DECISIONS

OVERVIEW

In recent months, a number of Canadian provinces have entered into agreements with the federal government to expand access to child care. It is anticipated that Ontario will soon follow suit. While the specifics of Ontario's child care deal may be somewhat different than those in other provinces, it is expected that by making licensed child care more affordable to Ontario families, the demand for licensed child care will increase. Currently, many centres across the province have facilities that are underutilized. This isn't because there aren't enough families wanting services: it's because there aren't enough qualified child care staff available to hire. Action is required to ensure that Ontario's ability to offer more families access to licensed care through the Canada/Ontario child care agreement isn't unnecessarily constrained by the very limited number of RECEs currently available in the province.

Often, staffing challenges in Ontario's licensed child care sector are defined as being solely about wages, benefits and working conditions. These items, while critically important, are only part of the picture. There are other factors as well, for instance, the uneven distribution of Provincial funding to licensees by some municipal children's services departments, not enough programs accredited to award ECE diplomas, and barriers that prevent international students who do their co-op placements in Ontario child care centres from staying to build careers here. Similar barriers often face those with foreign-obtained credentials in child development from quickly entering Ontario's child care workforce. Excessive paperwork and red tape, and the cumulative impacts of policies in other sectors can play a role as well.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also taken its toll. Most RECEs/ECA's go into the field because they enjoy the daily interactions that go along with caring for and educating young children. Much of the joy they normally experience at work through these interactions has been lost with the mandatory use of hazardous material suits, face masks and shields. Yes, they provide everyone with protection, but they also limit the level of engagement that is possible. Fortunately, this challenge will one day come to an end.



DISTRIBUTE FUNDING SUPPORTS EQUALLY AMONG LICENSEES

Almost all Provincial funding for licensed child care in Ontario is distributed through its upper-tier municipalities. There are numerous funding streams accessed by licensees, each with a specific purpose. It has been many years since the Province has required municipalities to distribute these funds equally among licensees based on enrollment, or in the case of the Wage Enhancement Grant, based on employment numbers. As a result, there are often winners and losers within communities. Some centres receive disproportionately large amounts of funding or are allowed to keep increasing parent fees, while others receive almost no funding or are directed to keep their fees below the rate of inflation. Provincial policies should be aimed at ensuring greater equity among centres based on enrollment and employment numbers, so that all centres are able to pay competitive wages and benefits to staff. Shifting to a more standardized, province-wide funding framework, combined with routine compliance monitoring by the Ministry of Education would ensure that all centres are being funded equally, based on enrolment and employment numbers.

In addition to stabilizing the sector as a whole, striving for greater equity in these matters is vital for ECE recruitment and retention. It provides our child care professionals with a wider variety of settings in which to pursue meaningful careers. Just as we say not every centre is right for every child, not every centre is right for every child care professional. It may also be helpful to introduce policy measures that make it easier for RECEs working in licensed centres to purchase those centres as the current owner/operators retire. Loans, tax credits and other measures could help facilitate this and keep long-time employees engaged as owners.

INCREASE THE NUMBER OF ECE GRADUATES

Ontario is not producing enough ECE graduates to replace the RECEs who retire, let alone enough to keep pace with the child care demands of a growing population. To avoid long waiting lists for licensed spaces supported by the \$10/day program, we need to accredit more publicly funded colleges to grant ECE diplomas. Ontario could address its child care staffing challenges even faster if it also increased the number of private colleges offering accredited ECE diploma programs. We also need to focus on making it more convenient and affordable for individuals working “on director’s approval” in licensed centres to obtain their ECE credentials. This is particularly important in rural and northern areas.

REDUCE BARRIERS FACING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND THOSE WITH FOREIGN-OBTAINED CREDENTIALS

There are large numbers of international students enrolled in the ECE programs offered by Ontario’s publicly-supported colleges. They do their co-op placements here in Ontario and are often offered permanent positions by their co-op employers. Yet, even if they wish to stay, they face numerous federal and provincial policy barriers that keep them from doing so. These barriers need to be addressed



and removed. Child care professionals with foreign-obtained credentials also face barriers when they seek to join Ontario's child care workforce. The process by which they can get their credentials recognized, so they can be certified as ECEs, is simply too complicated, arduous and expensive. Too many of them just give up and wind up working as unlicensed, homebased care givers rather than pursuing careers in the licensed sector. The Province, child care employers and the Ontario College of ECEs could form a task force to develop and support practical solutions for this.

REDUCE PAPERWORK BURDENS AND RED TAPE

Nobody goes into the child care field because they enjoy doing paperwork. Licensed child care has always been a highly regulated industry, requiring both owner/operators and their staff teams to comply with numerous documentation and reporting requirements. In recent years, however, municipal paperwork burdens have increased exponentially. Each municipality has its own requirements of licensees who receive Provincial funding. The Ministry of Small Business and Red Tape Reduction could lead an initiative and work with stakeholders to require all of these requirements to be standardized province-wide and then simplified down to only what is absolutely necessary to ensure the health and safety of children and staff, and fiscal accountability for Provincial funding received. The goal would be to reduce the amount of time child care staff have to spend doing paperwork, so they can focus on the parts of their work that they find the most rewarding—interacting with children and parents.

CONSIDER THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF POLICY DECISIONS

Licensed child care doesn't exist in a vacuum. It can be easily impacted by policy decisions that seem unrelated. For instance, staffing shortages in Ontario's licensed child care sector reached crisis levels during and right after the roll-out of the government-run full-day kindergarten program. The requirement of an ECE and a teacher in every classroom meant the mass migration of ECE staff out of independent licensed child care centres and into the public school system.

Most recently, decisions made by Public Health Ontario and local public health units have had tremendous impacts on staffing levels in licensed child care centres. Greater consultation between public health agencies and child care stakeholders may help resolve some of these challenges.

Unintended consequences can also be positive. For instance, as families demand more flexibility in licensed care, Provincial policies that facilitate children's part-time enrollment could actually increase access to care, without requiring dramatic increases in ECE numbers.

NEXT STEPS

The anticipated Ontario/federal child care agreement is an opportunity for a reset on many of the policies of the past. Our collective focus must now shift to increasing access to care and ensuring we have enough well-qualified people to provide all of Ontario's children and families with positive experiences in the new \$10/day program. ADCDO looks forward to engaging with the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders to further discuss any or all of the above recommendations.