

# Early Learning and Child Care in Saskatchewan:

## Results from a National Survey During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Muttart Foundation



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The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March had a dramatic impact on daily life in Canada. Provincial and territorial governments ordered the majority of businesses and public services to close to reduce the risk of the coronavirus spreading and introduced measures to maintain some level of community and economic well-being. The federal government provided significant leadership and investments through a series of national benefits and supports to help organizations and individuals weather the resulting economic storm.

Early learning and child care sectors were hit particularly hard by the economic and social disruptions brought on by the pandemic. In the two months following the shut down of much of the economy and community life, provincial and territorial governments took different steps to support their economies in general and their early learning and care sectors in particular. The Saskatchewan government, in common with most other provinces, introduced emergency child care for the children of essential workers. It also, like eight of the nine other provinces, provided some government funding for services that remained open as well as those that decided to close. This funding provided organizations with some revenue in the face of the dramatic fall in fees as parents withdrew their children from child care for a combination of health and financial reasons. Unlike eight of the provinces, the Saskatchewan government did not require community-based child centres to close at the onset of the pandemic. The other province to do the same was British Columbia. This resulted in most child care centres in Saskatchewan remaining open for at least a period of time after mid-March, although many subsequently closed due to low enrolments and the fall in parent fee revenues.

The following summary report draws on data collected in a national survey of early learning and child care services undertaken in May. It focuses specifically on the experiences of Saskatchewan early learning and child care service providers, six weeks into the pandemic, with survey findings from the neighbouring provinces of Alberta and Manitoba, as well as from British Columbia, included for comparison purposes. The survey results for different provinces reveal, in part, the differing impacts of the policies and supports provincial governments put in place during the initial phase of the pandemic, as well as the varied strengths and capacities of early learning and care sectors prior to the pandemic.

## **The Saskatchewan Early Learning and Care Sector Prior to the Pandemic**

The Saskatchewan early learning and care sector has much in common with sectors in other provinces, outside of Quebec. It comprises child care centres, the vast majority of which are incorporated as non-profit organizations, as well as family child care and group family child care homes, both of which are individually licensed and operated by providers in private residences.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the pandemic, there were approximately 17,500 licensed child care spaces in the province, which is amongst the lowest level of supply across Canada based on spaces per child. Over the last decade, the Ministry of Education has supported the development of child care centres in school sites which has helped to integrate child care and early education services. It has also increased investments in publicly funded part-day prekindergarten programs in schools which now serve over 5,000 vulnerable children in more than 300 programs across the province. The *Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care* bilateral agreement, signed in March 2018, directed federal investments towards

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<sup>1</sup> ECEC in Canada. 2018. Childcare Resource and Research Unit.

accessibility, inclusivity and quality, including initiatives to expand the number of family child care spaces. There were also investments in education and training for early childhood educators.

The Saskatchewan early learning and child care sector entered the pandemic facing the same larger challenges that confront sectors across the country relating to the availability, affordability and quality of services for young children and their families. A 2019 study identified the limited availability of regulated or licensed child care services across the province as well as challenges with affordability, especially for lower income families eligible for subsidy support. It also reported significant pressures on the workforce linked to the modest pay and education levels of early childhood educators.<sup>2</sup> The report made policy recommendations for improving the quality, affordability and accessibility of services.

#### The Government of Saskatchewan's Pandemic Response Timeline (March to May)

The provincial government's approach to early learning and care during the initial phases of the pandemic showed some variation from that taken in most other provinces. In mid-March, the government of Saskatchewan closed child cares in schools for regular use, but allowed community-based child care centres to remain open. Saskatchewan and British Columbia were the only two provinces in which the majority of centre-based child care programs were not required to close as part of broader health restrictions to limit the spread of the virus. As in a number of other provinces, including neighbouring Alberta, the provincial government permitted family child care and group family child care homes to remain open.

After a short period of mandated closure for regular use, child care centres in schools reopened to provide emergency child care services for the children of health care staff and other essential workers, albeit with new enrolment and health and safety guidelines in place. The province made up to 2,300 emergency child care spaces available, although enrolment levels remained low, as they did in other provinces.

Child care centres outside of school settings which remained open were also required to follow the above new enrolment and health and safety guidelines. Enrolments in these centres fell significantly during the first six weeks of the pandemic, however, and a number made the decision to close voluntarily.

The Ministry of Education continued to provide licensed child care services with their regular government grants during the initial phase of the pandemic, regardless of whether they remained open or temporarily closed. In addition, child care centres, which saw significant decreases in their revenues, were eligible to apply for funding support through *The Saskatchewan Small Business Emergency Payment Program*, implemented in early April. Some early childhood educators further qualified for wage increases through *The Saskatchewan Temporary Wage Supplement Program*, which boosted the wages of lower-paid staff working in essential services.

On April 23, the government announced the provincial reopening plan which included five phases of reopening, with phase one commencing on May 4. Child care centres were included in phase three of

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<sup>2</sup> Carlberg, C. & Budney, J. 2019. Saskatchewan's Failing Report Card on Child Care. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

the reopening. At the end of May, the government advised that the preliminary date for phase three reopening of child care services would be June 8, albeit with health and safety guidelines in place to reduce the risks of virus transmission. These guidelines included a maximum group size of 15 children per designated space within a centre.

## **The National Canadian Child Care Survey**

The Childcare Resource and Research Unit, the Canadian Child Care Federation, and Child Care Now distributed an online survey to regulated child care centres and family child care homes, in English and French, in May.<sup>3</sup> The survey gathered information on the state of service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic for the reference week of April 27 to May 1. Respondents were also asked to describe their application for or use of federal supports as well as any challenges they anticipated around reopening.

Nationally, there were over 6,500 valid survey responses that commented on close to 8,300 services (69% child care centres and 31% family child care homes). There were responses for over 300 Saskatchewan services (67% child care centres and 33% family child care or group family child care homes).

The Saskatchewan child care centres that responded to the survey provided full-day child care, part-day preschool and part-day out-of-school care. They served children from below 18 months to those of school-age. A number of the centres reported that they were part of a multi-service organization offering either centre-based child care and family child care or child care and other family and social services. The vast majority of centres (95%) were incorporated as non-profit organizations.

The family child care and group family child care responses came from providers who also served children from below 18 months to school-age. The majority of family child care homes (94%) reported that they were individually licensed.<sup>4</sup>

## **Delivery of Child Care During the Pandemic**

The majority of respondents from Saskatchewan child care centres reported that their centres were open (67%; question 7 on the national survey) during the survey reference week (April 27 to May 1), this compares to the much smaller proportion of centres open nationally (28%). The proportion of centres open in the provinces of Manitoba (34%) and Alberta (15%), where most centres were required to close, was much lower. In British Columbia, where centres were permitted to remain open, 57% of centres were open during the reference week.

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<sup>3</sup> Friendly, M., Forer, B., Vickerson, R. & Mohamed, S. 2020. Preliminary Results from a National Survey During the COVID-19 Pandemic. Child Care Now, Canadian Child Care Federation & Childcare Resource and Research Unit. Retrieved at <https://www.childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/20/07/canadian-child-care-preliminary-results-national-survey-dur>

<sup>4</sup> The Government of Saskatchewan individually licences family child care providers and group family child care providers.

Among the one third of Saskatchewan centres that were closed, just over half (52%) reported that they were mandated to close by the provincial government (question 15). This is much lower than the similar rates in Alberta (98%) and Manitoba (83%) and above the rate in British Columbia (13%).

The majority (74%) of centres that remained open reported that their hours of operation were similar to those before the pandemic (question 8). These centres provided care to a much smaller number of children, however, with a median enrolment of only 8 children compared to a pre-pandemic median enrolment of 45 (question 10). Among the one in four centres (26%) which reported different opening hours, almost all (97%) indicated that their hours of operation were shorter (question 9).

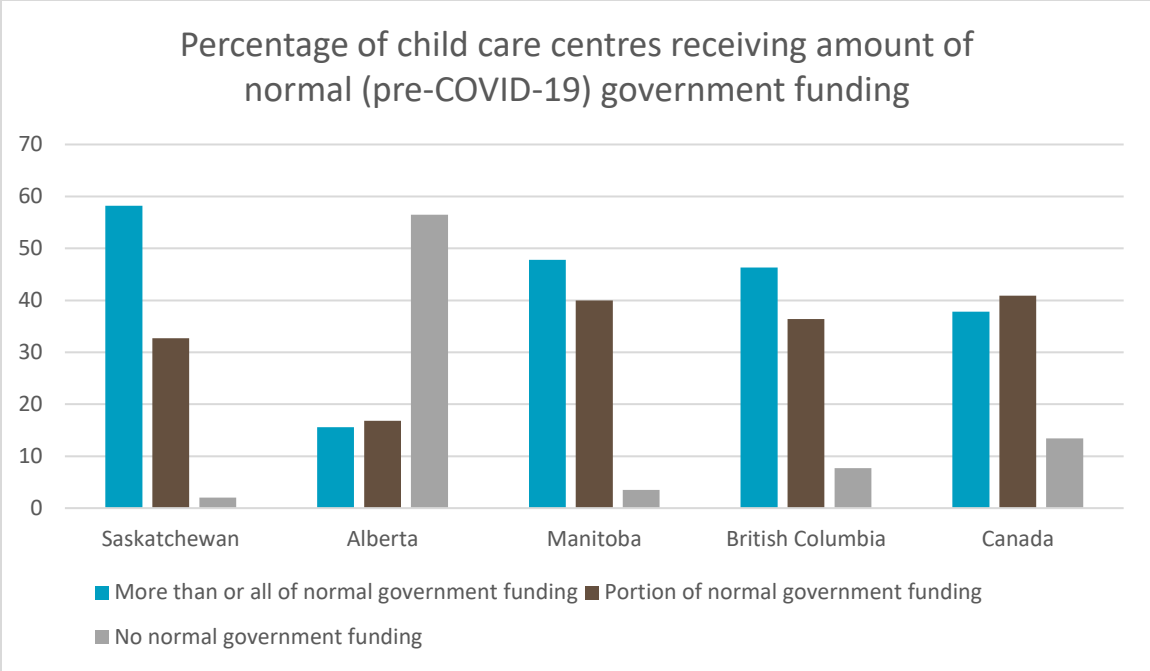
Unlike in most other regions of Canada, the Saskatchewan child care centres that remained open did not restrict their enrolments to the children of essential workers (question 11). Only one in three child care centres (35%) reported such restrictions, compared to two-thirds of centres in Manitoba (67.5%) and British Columbia (64%) and 94% in Alberta.

The majority of family child care/group family child care homes were open (80%; question 37) during the reference week, although the median number of children enrolled (three) was much lower than the pre-COVID median enrolment of 10 children (question 40). Four out of five family child care/group family child care homes that were open (78.5%) reported maintaining the same hours of operation as before the pandemic (question 38).

### **Provincial Funding Support for Child Care During the Pandemic**

The Ministry of Education continued to provide regular child care funding grants to centres whether they remained open or closed, although the amount of funding provided was lower than in some other provinces, including British Columbia which implemented a temporary emergency operating grant. Alberta was the only province that did not provide centres required to close with some type of direct funding support.

During the survey reference week, over half (58%; question 20) of child care centres reported receiving 'all of' or 'more than' their normal government funding, significantly above the national average of 38%. By comparison, 48% of centres in Manitoba and only 16% of centres in Alberta reported receiving 'all of' or 'more than' their normal government funding. In British Columbia, the other province that did not require centres to close, 46% of centres reported receiving 'all of' or 'more than' their normal government funding.



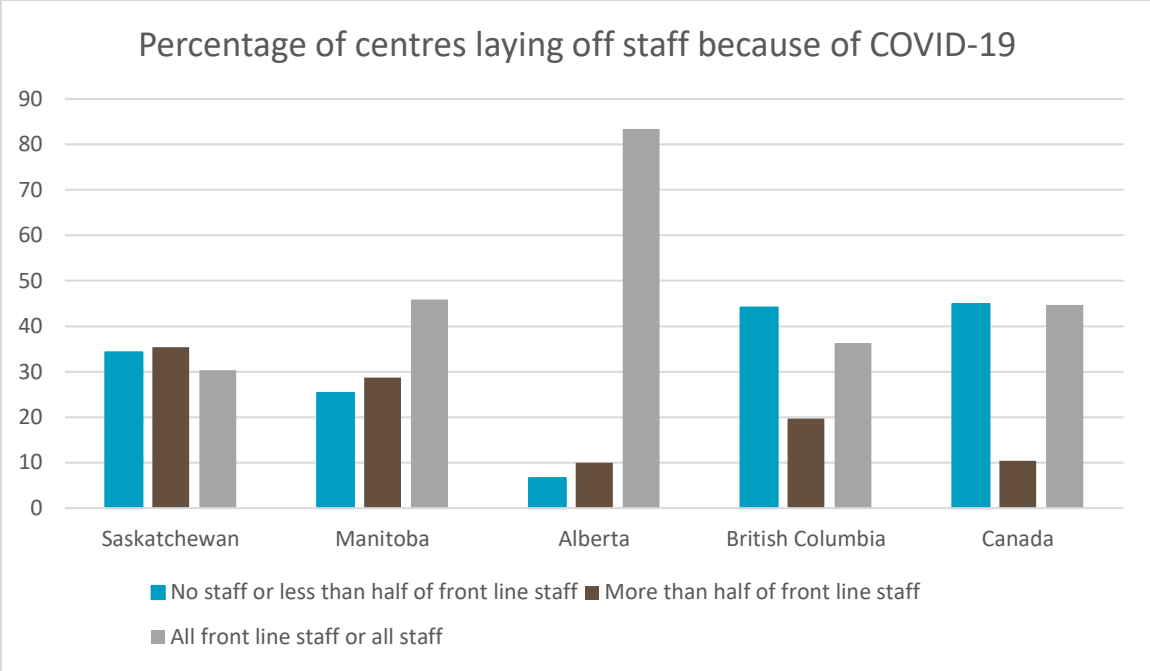
Forty-two percent (question 50) of family child care or group child care providers in Saskatchewan reported receiving ‘all of’ or ‘more than’ their normal government funding during the reference week. This compares to 65% in Manitoba, 45% in Alberta and 44% in British Columbia. Conversely, only 9% of family child care or group child care providers in Saskatchewan reported receiving none of their normal government funding, similar to the rate in British Columbia (9%) and below the rates in Manitoba (15%) and Alberta (21%).

**Child Care Centre Staff Layoffs and Family Child Care Provider Applications for Benefits**

The provincial government’s decisions to allow community-based child care centres to remain open and to designate school-based centres as sites for emergency child care for the children of essential workers resulted in centres keeping a portion of their staff teams in place during the first six weeks of the pandemic. Two-thirds of Saskatchewan centres, however, reported laying off more than half of their staff, a proportion that was similar to centres across Canada.

Close to one third of Saskatchewan child care centres (30%: question 21) reported laying off either ‘all of their front-line staff’ or ‘all of their staff including directors/supervisors/managers’. This compares to 83% of centres in Alberta, 46% in Manitoba and 36% in British Columbia. Nationally, 45% of centres laid off either ‘all of their front-line staff’ or ‘all of their staff including directors/managers/supervisors’.

Just over a third (34.3%) of Saskatchewan centres reported laying off either no staff or less than half of front-line staff as compared to 25% of centres in Manitoba, 7% in Alberta and 44% in British Columbia. Nationally, 45% of centres reported laying off either no staff or less than half of their front-line staff.



Close to two-thirds of Saskatchewan centres (63%; question 23) with staff still working reported that staff had the same working hours as before the pandemic, while one in four (24%) reported staff had reduced working hours. The comparative rates in Manitoba were 59.5% and 18% respectively and 50% and 25.5% in Alberta. In British Columbia, where centres were also permitted to remain open, 50% of centres reported that staff working hours were unchanged, while 27% reported that they were reduced.

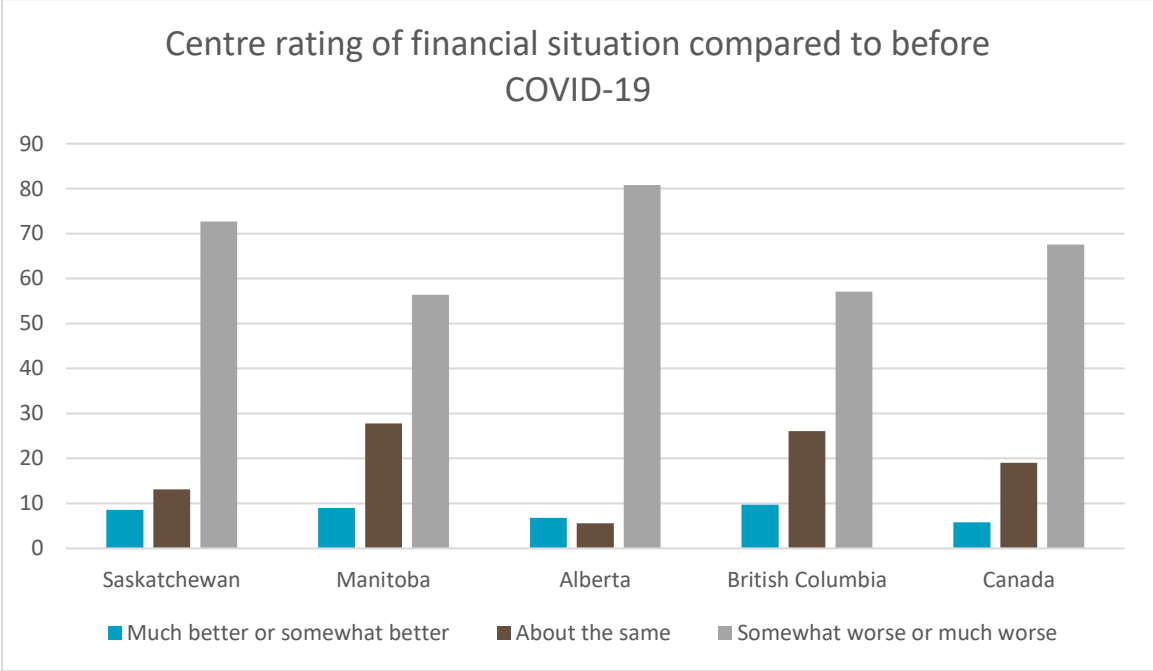
The majority of centres which laid off staff (86%; question 22) reported that these staff had applied for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). A smaller proportion (53%; question 22) reported that laid off staff had applied for Employment Insurance (EI). The proportion of centres which reported that laid off staff had applied for the CERB was similar to that reported by centres across Canada. The application rate for EI, however, was lower than the national rate of 64%.

Over half (52%) of family child care providers reported applying for the CERB (question 51). This is a higher proportion than in the neighbouring provinces of Alberta (32%) and Manitoba (29%), as well as higher than the rate in British Columbia (43%).

**Child Care Centre and Family Child Care Home Finances**

Despite being permitted to remain open, the majority of Saskatchewan child care centres reported that their financial situation was either ‘much worse’ or ‘somewhat worse than before COVID-19’ (73%; question 25) as parents withdrew their children from centre-based child care. This is above the national average of 68%.

The percentage of centres in Saskatchewan that reported their financial situation was ‘much worse’ (41%) was higher than in Manitoba (31%) and British Columbia (29%) but lower than in neighbouring Alberta (62.5%), which reported the highest rate across Canada. The national average was 38%.



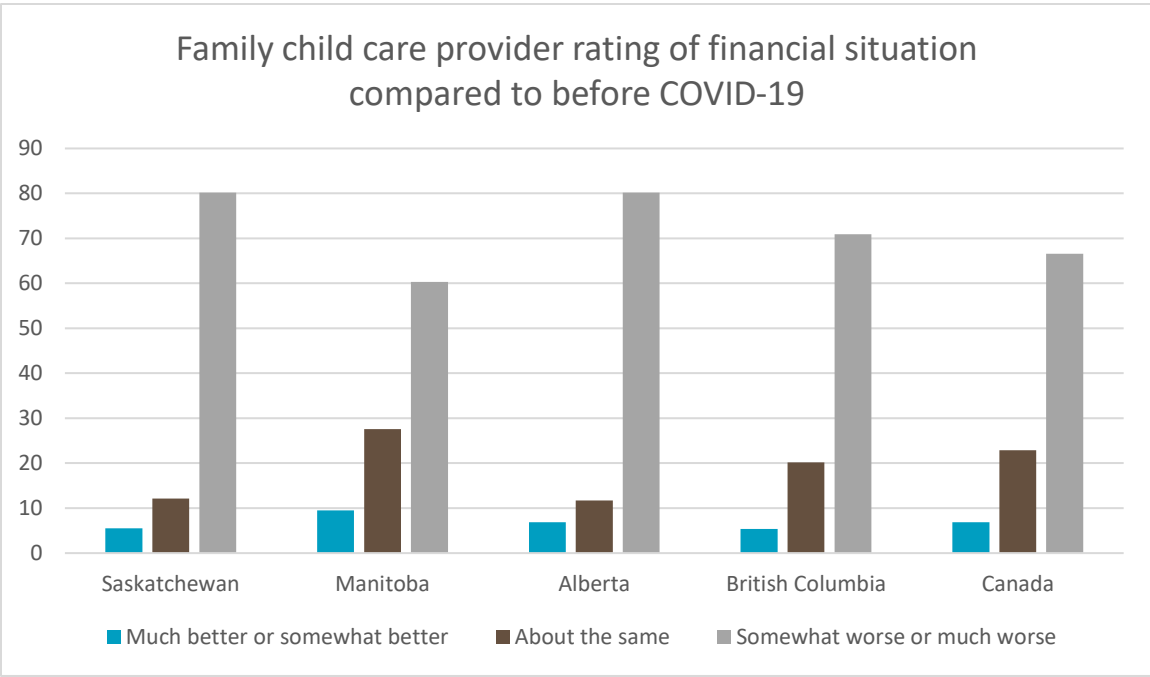
Nationally, among child care centres that reported their financial situation as either ‘somewhat worse’ or ‘much worse’ than before the pandemic, the loss of parent fees was the main reason for their poorer financial position (question 26). All of the Saskatchewan centres in a worse financial position reported the reduction or loss of parent fees as a contributing factor, a finding consistent with centres across much of Canada.

Twenty-two percent of Saskatchewan centres also reported the reduction or loss of government funding as a contributing factor to their financial difficulties; this is lower than the rates in neighbouring Manitoba (31%) and Alberta (68%) as well as in British Columbia (32%).

Among the three in four Saskatchewan centres reporting that their financial situation was worse than before the pandemic, the major area of difficulty they reported (question 27) was ‘meeting wage/salary costs’ (52%), a rate that was similar to that reported by centres in Alberta (52%) and Manitoba (48%), but higher than that reported by centres in British Columbia (37%).

Eight in ten (80%) Saskatchewan family child care providers reported that their financial situation was either ‘somewhat worse’ or ‘much worse’ than prior to the pandemic (question 52). This was higher than the rate among family child care providers in Manitoba (60%) and the same as the rate in Alberta. In British Columbia, 71% of family child care providers reported that their financial situation was either ‘somewhat worse’ or ‘much worse’.





Fifty-two percent of Saskatchewan family child care providers reported that their financial situation was ‘much worse’ – this was the highest rate among the provinces and significantly above the national average of 34%.

**The Possibility of Permanent Closure**

Among the one third of Saskatchewan centres (33%) closed during the reference week, close to three-quarters (73%) reported that they would ‘definitely reopen’; this compares to 67% in Manitoba, 56% in Alberta and 70% in British Columbia (question 17).

The percentage of Saskatchewan centres closed during the reference week which reported that they were either ‘not sure’ of reopening or that they will ‘probably’ or ‘definitely’ remain closed was 7.5%. This is lower than the percentage in Manitoba (13%) and Alberta (20%) and similar to the percentage in British Columbia (9%).

Ninety percent of the Saskatchewan family child care homes closed during the reference week reported that they would either ‘definitely’ or ‘probably reopen’; this is lower than the 96% in Manitoba but above the rates in Alberta (75%) and British Columbia (85%) (question 47).

**Anticipated Problems Around Reopening and the Resumption of Service Delivery**

The majority of Saskatchewan child care centres anticipated one or more problems in both the short- and longer-terms around reopening and the resumption of service delivery (questions 28 and 29). The

percentage of centres that anticipated problems was lower than the national average in four of six categories in the short-term (the first month or two after reopening) and three of five categories in the longer-term (up to six months after resuming service).

The anticipated challenges Saskatchewan centres most commonly reported in the short-term included 'lower enrolment' (88%) and COVID-19 'health and safety costs' (81%). Further, over half of Saskatchewan centres (53%) anticipated 'staffing difficulties', while 44% a 'lack of reserve funds'.

In the longer-term (up to six months), the main anticipated challenges centres reported were again 'lower enrolment' (74%) and COVID-19 'health and safety costs' (69%). Around half (51%) of Saskatchewan centres anticipated 'staffing difficulties' and just under half (47%) a 'lack of reserve funds'.

Overall, Saskatchewan child care centres were less likely to report anticipated challenges around reopening and the resumption of services, in both the short- and longer- terms, than child care centres in Alberta and Manitoba, but somewhat more likely than centres in British Columbia.

In both the short- and longer-terms, Saskatchewan child care centres reported anticipated problems in respect to a 'lack of reserve funds' that were above the national average.

Saskatchewan family child care providers reported anticipated challenges in respect to 'lower enrolment' and 'higher health and safety costs' in both the short-term (81% and 54% respectively) and in the longer-term (73% and 71% respectively). The proportion of Saskatchewan family child care providers who anticipated challenges in both the short- and longer-terms was higher than that in Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia.

### **The Impact of Federal Government Benefits and Supports**

The federal government introduced a series of benefits and supports to help businesses and individuals respond to the shut down in provincial and territorial economies and service sectors. Early learning and child care organizations and their staff were eligible to apply for a number of these benefits and supports.

Based on their experiences as of the survey reference week at the end of April, early learning and child care centres in Saskatchewan reported both limited applications for and receipt of federal benefits or supports (question 30). These experiences were similar to those of centres in other regions of Canada.

Child care centres in Saskatchewan were the second most likely to have applied for (16%) and the most likely (18%) to have received the federal Temporary Wage Subsidy (TWS) among the provinces – although the rates of application and receipt were relatively low. Centres in Manitoba reported the highest rates for application (18%) for the TWS among the provinces.

Saskatchewan centres reported similarly low rates of either application for (21%) or receipt of (5%) the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS). The application rate for CEWS among centres in Saskatchewan was significantly lower than in the neighbouring provinces of Alberta (30%) and Manitoba (46%). It was, however, higher than the rate in British Columbia (15%) - the only other province that did not require the bulk of child care centres to close.

As in other provinces, only a small proportion of Saskatchewan centres reported either receiving (9%) or having applied for (8%) the Canada Emergency Business Account (CEBA). The comparable rates for application and receipt in the neighbouring province of Alberta were 16% and 22.5%, and 5% and 6% in Manitoba. In British Columbia, 8% of centres reported applying for the CEBA and 11% reported receipt of the benefit.

Similarly, Saskatchewan child care centres reported very limited applications (1%) or receipt (1%) of the Canada Emergency Commercial Rent Assistance (CECRA) program which was announced shortly before the administration of the national survey.

Saskatchewan centres generally reported 'no concerns' (46%) with the CEWS, although one in four centres (26%) reported that either it 'takes too long to receive money' or that their centre was 'ineligible for this fund' (question 32). Similarly, 40% reported 'no concerns' with the CEBA, although close to one in five centres (18%) reported having 'not heard of this benefit'.

Forty-two percent of Saskatchewan centres reported that they had not applied for any federal government benefits because the provincial government was 'providing adequate child care funding' (question 31). This is similar to the proportion of centres in Manitoba (43%), above the proportion in Alberta (24.5%), but below the proportion in British Columbia (61%). Nationally, 60% of centres reported that they had not applied for any federal benefits because of adequate provincial or territorial government child care funding.

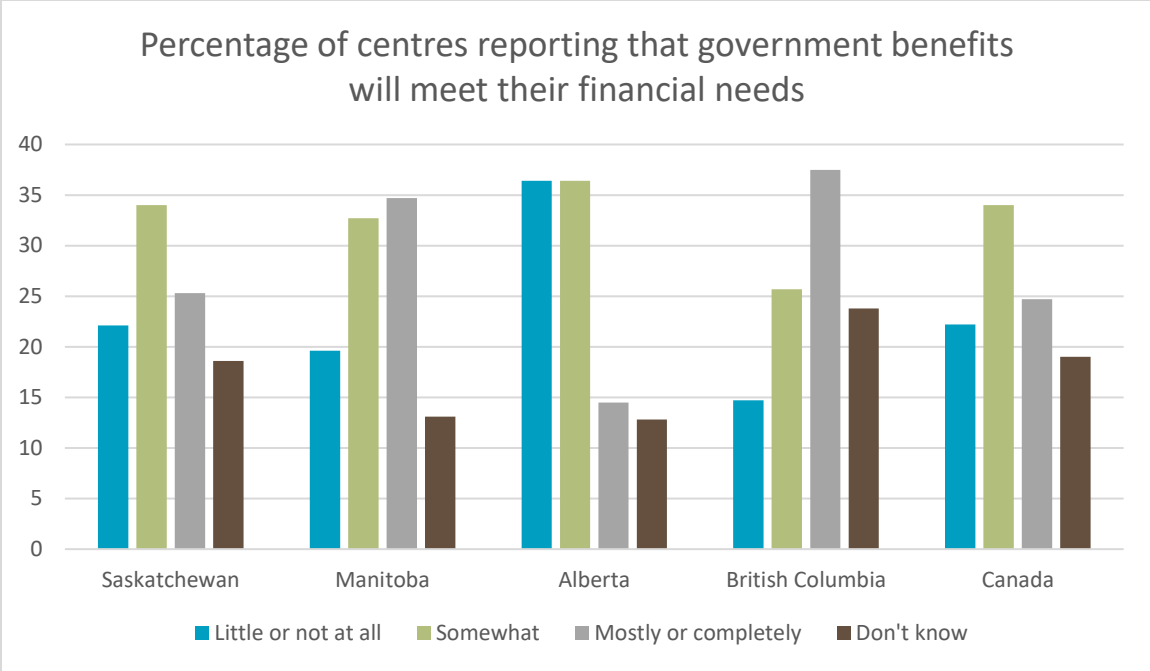
Just over half of family child care providers reported applying for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) (52%) – the highest rate among provinces and territories (question 51). The comparative rates for application for the CERB in Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia were 29%, 32% and 43%.

### **Government Benefits Meeting Financial Needs**

Saskatchewan centres reported that government benefits (including supports provided by federal, provincial and municipal governments) will meet their current financial needs in rates that were similar to national averages (question 33).

One in four (25%) Saskatchewan child care centres reported that government benefits (federal, provincial, municipal) 'mostly' or 'completely' met their current financial needs. This compares to 35% in Manitoba, 14.5% in Alberta and 36% in British Columbia. A further third of Saskatchewan child care centres (34%) reported that government benefits 'somewhat' met their needs.

Just over one in five Saskatchewan child care centres (22%) reported that government benefits will meet their financial needs either 'not at all' or 'a little'. This is similar to the rate among centres in Manitoba (20%), below the rate among centres in Alberta (36%) and higher than the rate in British Columbia (14%).



**Service Provider Comments**

Survey respondents had the opportunity to provide written comments at the end of the survey (question 56). One hundred and nine respondents provided written comments which either expanded on their answers to specific survey questions or raised larger concerns relating to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on early learning and care services.

Respondents’ comments covered four broad areas.

Falling Enrolments and Lost Revenues During the Initial Phase of the Pandemic

Respondents identified the fall in enrolments, and the associated loss of parent fees, as the most significant challenge facing service providers six weeks into the pandemic. Respondents linked the fall in enrolments to the larger shut-down of the economy and the concerns parents had about the health and safety of their children. They raised concerns that some parents would not feel safe returning their children to early learning and care services in the future. For some respondents, the fall in enrolments raised questions about the sustainability of their centre or service.

Respondents provided the following comments on the fall in enrolments and its impact on services.

*I had a full daycare before the virus. Now I have 3 kids and at the end of May I will be down to 2 kids. This is hurting me hard.*

*As a small non-profit cooperative childcare, it is very challenging for our center to cope with our expenses considering the fact that there are not enough children which means not enough*

*funding that comes in. That is the main reason why we have to lay-off staff, shorten our hours of operation and staff hours. No children attendance - no subsidy.*

*It is difficult to plan ahead as we do not know what families will be doing short term and long term. It feels as if we went backward 10 years as far as enrollment and budget. Will families feel safe using group care??? How long do we live poor and fund raise to stay afloat while maintaining health- safety and quality programs...?*

*Another challenge that our centre encountered is that we had no choice but to continue charging our families a monthly fee whether their children are attending or not as we continue to have salaries, bills and operational expenses to pay as well the need to have an operational centre for families to utilize when they return to work.*

*It would be nice if we could be helped financially for just our vacant spots that we cannot fill. I have chosen to keep my daycare open so I do not qualify for the CERB benefits. My income has gone down a lot and it would be nice to receive some financial aid while keeping my daycare business open and trying to fill my empty spots.*

*This lock down has affected our center like a tsunami wave. If things don't change soon we will be forced to close altogether. Our center is completely dependent on enrollments especially in September. We predict far fewer enrolments in September because all of our parents have been negatively impacted financially as well.*

*Our main concern will be what is going to happen when we open? We know that enrollment will be low, will the Government offer financial support past COVID -19? Will the government review the Subsidy amounts for low income parents attending Child Care?*

### Staffing Challenges and Concerns

Respondents commented on the impacts of the pandemic on the early learning and care workforce. They identified the challenges staff faced in continuing to work during the pandemic and raised concerns that some of the staff who were laid off would not return to work. Going forward, some respondents saw the pandemic as compounding the longstanding staffing challenges facing the sector including those around the recruitment and retention of well-educated staff.

Respondents made the following comments in respect to staffing.

*Post-COVID, the cost of staffing, coupled with low enrollment, as well as a shallow pool of educated educators will be a continued conundrum. As well as the cost of added cleaning and disinfecting supplies, and the time it will take staff to complete these extra duties and responsibilities. If prior to COVID early learning was experiencing extreme employee turnover, the added duties and responsibilities, with lack of decent compensation (and lack of education) it will be a health risk to children and to staff.*

*The issue of qualified staff in the early learning environment is paramount. No more can we piece meal together care and programming, for minimum wage, nor with uneducated educators. Educated experienced educators need to be our front-line workers in our post-COVID world.*

*Our childcare centre also had Early Childhood Educators that have underlying health conditions and immediate family members with the same types of conditions and they were unable to continue working during the COVID19 pandemic in order to stay healthy.*

*My concern is if we lay off too many staff, how will we get them back? We are in a rural community of 500, finding ECE workers to work for min wage is near impossible. We need more financial help to keep workers on payroll for a longer period to time, until things are back up and running.*

*We already had concerns before this Covid hit because childcare workers are not paid a decent wage and therefore it is extremely hard to obtain and retain workers with such low income. It was already a struggle with an insane amount of fundraising to meet financial obligations without gouging families needing care.*

*We have lost staff due to this pandemic and those staff will not be returning to work. We are left short staffed now and when children start returning to the centre we will not have adequate staffing to accept these children.*

*We have staff with elementary kids, so they are able to stay on the CERB. This means finding temporary staff for an unknown amount of time - especially difficult when it's for EAs with kids with autism who thrive on routine.*

*We are so short staffed and we are now reaching over 8 kids, splitting rooms. There is minimal staff, I'm director, cook, cleaning, and with a special need [child]. I am running my butt off and I am exhausted, as are the rest of the staff. There is ALOT of cleaning to do, with no time to do it because of the group splits.*

#### Lack of Support and Recognition for the Early Learning and Care Sector

Respondents commented on what they saw as a lack of support for the sector during the first six weeks of the pandemic. They further raised concerns that the value of the sector and the importance of its work was not recognized and supported.

Respondents made the following specific comments around the lack of support and recognition for the sector.

*Did not know child care was front-line essential service! Find it interesting that we are required to be open but NO ACKNOWLEDGMENT from government or anyone else and NO respect for our profession.*

*We put our lives in harms way, take that risk home to our families and NOT ONCE have we been remunerated in any way. This has been a real awakening as to our value in our communities, provinces and our country. We should have all closed and that would of, in itself, shut down the country...with or without COVID.*

*The low wage for the amount of work, qualifications, expectations is terrible. I am thankful to be still working during this time, however I have been questioning why I am in this field and*

*considering a career move. The field of early childhood education is under appreciated by the government and public.*

*I believe our sector needs to be treated like we matter. I feel, not only the government but the public as well don't see child care as important as other jobs in society. We are still thought of as baby sitters and are disposable...I wonder where the province or Canada would be without childcare?*

*I feel our Saskatchewan Government has no idea how childcare works and has no want to know. I feel we were brushed aside in the whole process of COVID and that it is clear we are not valued or acknowledged in Saskatchewan.*

*I was really hoping the view on ECE would change throughout this, but it does not seem to be. We are essential enough that no one can go back to work without Childcare but not essential enough to be viewed as a valued sector of the community.*

*It's amazing that we are not recognized by government to receive adequate pay but yet we are now considered essential service workers. Without us, many 'IMPORTANT, recognized' Essential workers wouldn't be able to go to work.*

*It's been a trying time for everyone but it's definitely been quite an eye opener of how little importance the early childhood sector plays in our community. Mostly all extra funding is coming from the federal level and with the extra provisions needed to be taken at our centre it's a bit defeating to know there has been absolutely no extra funding to help with these new restrictions.*

*Childcare has been deemed an essential service but is left out of consideration when talking about safety measures, PPE or funding. We would like to see acknowledgement of our importance to the economy and society as a whole and see the funding to match.*

*If we had a National Childcare system in place prior to this, I believe we would have been far better supported. The inconsistent messages, and lack of information has been frustrating and worrisome. Although it seems some levels of government have realized the importance of childcare in our society its only been from the people requiring the care view. ECE Staff safety has never even been mentioned. We have had no assistance or even recognition that we, and our families are in possible danger with absolutely no PPE guidance.*

*There needs to be a universal approach to ensuring the ELCC sector is still viable when this crisis is over. Right now there is a patchwork of ideas that are just temporary band aids to the overall financial crisis that ELCC is in. Some provinces are addressing the issue by ensuring centres are funded while they are closed while others (Saskatchewan) has no funding in place and have hinted at taking the small amount of operation cost grant funding they give on a monthly basis.*

## Challenges around Communications, Meeting New Service Delivery Guidelines and Health and Safety Concerns

Respondents reported challenges with Ministry of Education communications to the sector during the pandemic and noted difficulties in meeting new service delivery guidelines with limited resources and supports. They also commented on what they saw as differences in how types of services were treated, specifically family child care homes as compared to centre based child care.

Respondents made the following specific comments on communications and challenges meeting new health and service guidelines.

*There wasn't much guidance from our province because we weren't mandated to close and when we closed we didn't know there may be funding to stay open.*

*Throughout this pandemic I feel Early Childhood Educators have been treated as disposable by the government. At no point has clear direction of any kind been offered. Very little support by the Early Years Branch and absolutely no support by the Ministry of Education or our MLA.*

*If the government expects us to stay open and continue with "Business as usual" we need to be able to access our usual supports and resources. The parks and playgrounds are essential for gross motor physical development.*

*Very upset that the funding seems to be going only towards centres. Homes are just as valuable and being government licensed we need to abide by the same regulations. We have fallen through the cracks and I feel so under appreciated.*

*Very stressful, the government left us out with preplanning the closure and then reopening to essential front-line workers. Guidelines are very hard to follow with younger children.*

*Child care providers now have to find an entirely new way to provide care. In my case, in order for families to return on May 19th I need to find new staff, I need to find a way to divide my home in to 2 separate daycare spaces to follow new number restrictions, I've been searching for weeks to find more approved sanitizer that doesn't seem to be available.*

*I wonder how this affects children when constantly reminded not to get too close to other children. A child's day consists of play; this is their world of learning. I feel it will leave negativity with a child.*

*It just didn't make sense to close schools and put pressure on daycare centers to remain open and take in school age kids whose parents needed care. Children under the age of 12 do not understand the concept of social distancing and it is ridiculous that the government expects infants, toddlers and preschoolers to stay apart and not play together.*

*Our Public Health officer asks people to stay at home if they can, yet we have many families bringing their children in for care because they need a break from their children. They are at home, but do not want their children home with them.*



## Conclusions and Next Steps

The national survey of early learning and child care service providers conducted in May showed the significant impacts of COVID-19 and the associated closures of provincial economies on child care sectors across the country. Six weeks into the pandemic the majority of centred-based child cares across Canada were closed, most following government directives to do so. By comparison family child care providers were permitted to remain open in a number of regions.

The minority of centres that remained open, including those providing emergency child care for the children of essential workers, saw significant falls in enrolment as families withdrew their children from child care. Family child care providers who remained open saw similar falls in enrolments. The loss of parent fees, and in some cases reductions of pre-COVID 19 government funding, created significant financial challenges for both child care centres and family child care providers in the majority of provinces and territories. Looking ahead, service providers commonly anticipated challenges around the reopening and resumption of services linked both to the economic dislocation resulting from the pandemic and ongoing health and safety concerns.

The experiences of Saskatchewan child care centres and family child care providers were similar to those of service providers in other regions of the country, albeit with some variations. The government of Saskatchewan, for example, was one of only two provincial governments that allowed centre-based child care centres to remain open beyond mid-March, other than for the delivery of child care for the children of essential workers. Thus, during the survey reference week, the majority of child care centres in Saskatchewan remained open, unlike in the rest of country where three-quarters of centres were closed.

Despite remaining open during the survey reference week, however, child care centres and family child care providers in Saskatchewan both reported significantly worse financial positions than before the pandemic, and further anticipated challenges around reopening and the resumption of services. More broadly, service providers commented on what they saw as a lack of government support during the pandemic and opined that the sector's contributions to child and community well-being did not appear to be well understood or valued.

Drawing on the main survey findings, the successful reopening and recovery of the child care sector in Saskatchewan appears likely to require significant public investments to address both the financial and service disruptions brought on by the pandemic. The early learning and care sector entered the pandemic facing challenges similar to those confronting sectors across the country, with particular concerns in respect to families' access to regulated child care, the affordability of care for families with lower household incomes, shortages of well-qualified early childhood educators, and the limited capacities of many service providers to deliver high-quality early learning and care. The results from the national survey suggest that the pandemic may have deepened these challenges.

To help the sector recover from the impacts of the pandemic, that appear likely to continue in the months ahead, the Ministry of Education would be well advised to develop a comprehensive early learning and child care sector recovery plan based on consultations with a range of early learning and care stakeholders. Such a plan would provide a framework for the allocation of the recently announced federal '*Safe Restart*' monies dedicated for child care, while also helping identify the priority areas for new provincial investment to enable the sector to recover and move forward.

The key areas the plan should consider and provide direction on include measures to ensure the financial stability of centres and family child care providers given the likelihood of lower enrolments and new service delivery guidelines for the balance of the current fiscal year and perhaps into the 2021/22 fiscal year as well; the health and safety guidelines required to ensure that services support the well-being of children, families and service providers; strategies to increase the capacity of a qualified early learning and care workforce to deliver high-quality early learning and care post-COVID-19; and specific measures to improve the affordability of child care services for families with lower household incomes.

As in other regions of Canada, the economic and social recovery of the province will rest in large measure on the ability of the early learning and child care sector both to support parents return to the labour market and to foster child and family well-being during these times of significant social and community dislocation.