

The Pending Three-Year Provincial Action Plan Under The Canada-Alberta Canada-wide Agreement

Priority Areas for Policy and Investment



A Record of Stakeholder Discussions Edmonton - June 22, 2023



ALBERTA EARLY LEARNING AND CARE
LEADERS CAUCUS



Meeting Background

The Muttart Foundation, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta (AECEA), the Alberta Leaders' Caucus and Child Care Now Alberta, hosted a facilitated discussion with early learning and child care (ELCC) stakeholders in Edmonton on June 22nd, 2023 (see Appendix A for a list of meeting participants). Similar discussions were also held in Manitoba through the support of the Manitoba Child Care Association and in Saskatchewan with the support of The Muttart Foundation, the Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus, the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association and Child Care Now.

The main goals of the discussion with Alberta ELCC stakeholders were two-fold: first, to gather their reflections on the first two years of system building under the Canada-wide agreement; and second, to seek their advice and direction on the priority areas for new policies and investments as part of the pending three-year provincial action plan (see Appendix B for the discussion questions).

The Muttart Foundation and its partners committed to share the results of the discussions with the provincial and federal governments, early learning and child care stakeholders, and with the National Advisory Council on Early Learning and Child Care. Members of the National Advisory Council attended the discussions.

The sections below outline the main findings from the discussions which focused on the four main areas of investment outlined under the Canada-wide agreements: affordability, accessibility (service expansion), quality, and inclusion.

The Priority Areas for ELCC System Building Policies and Investments

Affordability

Key learnings from the initial policies and investments to reduce parent fees (affordability)

In smaller rural communities, we are system building from the ground up. Programs did not have the capacity or resources to manage the funding changes introduced.

In rural communities with no regulated child care, parents rely on family members and pay no fees. The reference to reduced or lower fees is misleading to them. Also, reduced fees don't mean anything to parents who can't access regulated care.

Families accessing child care in smaller centres face other costs. They often have to travel further for work and their household costs are also increasing.

In smaller communities, there are no buildings in which to deliver child care and no staff.

The reduction in fees has made child care more affordable, but it has also increased demand. Lots of parents want part-time child care, but providing part-time care is an administrative nightmare. Programs have to match funding to the costs of service delivery and this is challenging. Managers have had to

become experts in spreadsheets. Programs need more funding to manage staffing and meet family needs.

The government didn't make it clear that the goal was to get to an average parent fee of \$10 per day. Parents didn't hear the word 'average'.

The reduction of parent fees has been messy. It has been hard for parents to understand how their fees are calculated and difficult for service providers to explain. Parents get an invoice, but don't understand all the additions and subtractions, nor how the funding works. Parents still have to pay other costs such as registration fees. This is putting some parents off. We should see parents running to child care, but we are not.

Child care fees are locked in at the 2019 level. Programs kept their fees low during COVID and accessed other funding (federal benefits) to make things work. When this funding ended, programs faced financial challenges. The three per cent limit on fee increases is challenging for service providers. Some parents think their fees should be lower (\$10 per day) and that programs are to blame.

Reducing parent fees is not working for parents or operators. Under the previous \$25 per day model, the lowest income families didn't pay parent fees. The changes to the subsidy program mean they now do. This has resulted in families leaving child care. Some now use family members for care, while others have left the workforce and stay at home. The waiting list for our program is now shorter than it was when we were a \$25 per day site.

Administration hours have increased significantly. Programs have to track the new funding grants and parents' eligibility to see whether they qualify for full-time or part-time funding. Parents eligibility for funding can change from month to month.

Smaller programs don't have the supports they need to administer and track the new funding. It takes time to train bookkeeping staff and there are no resources to do this. It is also time consuming for programs to reconcile provincial funding to ensure they receive the correct amounts.

More families are eligible for subsidies with the new higher income thresholds. Families have to provide a lot of information to receive subsidies and the questions are intrusive. Some families in smaller communities don't want to provide this kind of information.

Programs which serve more marginalized families, including newcomer families, spend significant time helping them with subsidy applications. These families need this help and support otherwise they can't access regulated child care. Oftentimes, they don't have the necessary identification documents required to apply. Programs don't receive any funding to provide this support.

Competent ELCC systems provide all children with access to care whether or not family members work. Access to child care shouldn't be linked to family incomes. High quality child care is good for all children.

The new funding models make family child care more expensive for families than centre-based care. As a result, families are leaving day homes and moving to centres because its cheaper for them. Day homes commonly charge the same fee no matter the age of the child. The reduction in affordability grant as a child ages results in an increase in fees for families.

The provincial infrastructure that processes funding claims is old and unreliable. The system frequently crashes when programs are submitting claims and there are lots of errors which result in programs not receiving funding. Programs also get their funding after they have already incurred service delivery costs.

Programs are required to undergo numerous audits for space creation and affordability funding. They don't have access to external auditors to complete this work and it takes a long time for Ministry staff to respond to financial questions.

The audits the Ministry requires are expensive (up to \$30,000) and don't line up with the yearly audits in larger organizations. Smaller organizations didn't budget for these audits prior to the introduction of the new grant funding.

Out of frustration, some programs have lost administrative staff during this time and so the reporting work is falling on senior staff. Or, senior staff are having to recruit and train new staff to take on these roles, which can be very difficult, especially in smaller communities.

The affordability measures and the determination of what is affordable for families does not match families' financial circumstances. A nationally set average parent fee does not reflect different families' incomes nor the costs of different kinds of child care. Affordable child care is free.

Does the Ministry of Children's Services have the information or the expertise required to determine the grants and subsidies needed to make child care affordable?

Under the previous \$25 per day initiative, programs received funding based on their service delivery costs. The new affordability grants are flat-rate grants, with no consideration given to where a service is located or the actual costs of service delivery.

Government communications around the \$25 per day program emphasized collaboration between providers and government and reducing fees for parents. Now the government seems to be saying that care providers are the problem and that our fees are too high.

Priorities for policies and investments to support affordability

There are many problems with the Alberta Cost Control Framework. The Ministry appears to be starting from scratch in developing a new funding formula and is only just beginning consultations with stakeholders.

The cost control framework would be a great idea if we weren't in a child care crisis. It's hard to see how it will benefit service providers. The funding model for Early Childhood Services (ECS) under Alberta Education works for programs that are honest and provide high quality services.

The Ministry collected some data on program costs and should provide programs with funding that covers these costs. As part of the \$25 per day initiative, the Ministry funded programs based on their actual program budgets, which were then negotiated. This is a better funding approach.

Service providers are concerned by the lack of information available on the proposed funding formula. If funding is linked to only meeting regulations, then it will not result in high-quality child care. Lots of important things are not included in regulations, including nutrition. Service providers have advised the Ministry of the importance of high-quality nutrition for children's development.

Service providers are very afraid that the cost control framework will harm quality programs. They fear it will create a two-tiered system of child care, with children whose parents can't afford to pay enhanced fees missing out on quality child care, including nutrition and field trips. Programs that currently provide enhanced services will drop them unless parents can pay additional fees.

The new funding formula will have to accommodate significant variations in costs across the province. Service providers are concerned that the cost survey the Ministry administered did not collect the data needed to determine the costs of high-quality child care. Some service providers did not have time to complete the survey fully, nor consider the true costs of quality provision. Service providers have not received feedback from Ministry staff on what the survey found.

Based on the implementation of affordability grants, service providers are afraid that the Ministry will not consult them prior to introducing a new funding formula. Organizations that face future deficits will not be able to continue to operate.

Service providers will need information on the new funding formula well in advance of its implementation to budget appropriately for the upcoming program year.

Accessibility (the expansion of services)

Key learnings from the initial policies and investments to expand services

A service provider's previous participation in a family day home expansion grant to develop new family day homes in child care deserts was not successful. Despite the offer of training and support, community members did not want to open new family day homes and private child minders didn't want to work under a family day home agency.

Families want flexible child care – part-time or for specific weeks at a time. The funding doesn't make this possible.

It's hard to recruit and support family day homes in smaller more rural communities. Local people need to be involved in planning family child care spaces and support the provider to make them successful.

Family Day Home Agencies are not eligible to apply for space creation grants if they don't meet their existing capacity thresholds. This means they can't open up new spaces in different communities.

Private unlicensed day homes continue to operate with large numbers of children. Even though they are reported, they remain open. In some communities, all the regulated spaces are full and families have no choice but to use unregulated child care.

The Ministry should bring local stakeholders together, including Family Resource Networks, to help plan and support new services. There is no local infrastructure to help organizations develop new services.

There is no provincial plan for expansion, and no incentive for private child minders to come into the licensed system.

Service providers are reluctant to open new spaces because of the lack of qualified staff.

Larger service providers have had to reduce the number of programs they provide due to high operating costs. Space costs are expensive and organizations can't afford to continue covering program deficits.

Service expansion across the province is complicated. There is both the contraction of some programs - often higher quality ones or ones with higher operational costs - and the expansion of others, some of which are poorer in quality. Some of these programs receive multiple non-compliances and require supports from groups such as the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement. Children in these programs do not receive high-quality ELCC, staff are minimally qualified and paid minimum wage by the employer.

There is the perception that child care is a relatively quick and easy business to get into. This is not the case. Holding a license and operating a high-quality program is difficult work, including understanding the regulations.

Some new centres that recently opened are not charging parent fees and rely solely on the affordability grants and subsidies to cover operational costs. This is not financially sustainable. These services are not providing quality child care and frequently receive non-compliances.

Staff who go into these programs to provide supports report they are commonly not full, have children with additional needs, and don't have the qualified staff required to provide high-quality care.

In Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray some families think that child care should have no cost. This makes it very difficult for service providers to operate and provide quality child care. Some families decide to leave their children with a neighbour rather than pay for child care.

Similarly, in some smaller centres, families want care for just a few hours a day or for particular days or weeks. Service providers are unable to meet these kinds of child care needs and remain viable.

Community-based preschools are under significant pressure and some won't survive after the summer. The lower fees for full-time child care mean some parents pay for a full-time space even if they only need a part-time one. In addition, more schools are now offering preschool programs that are free to parents using ECS funding.

The Ministries of Children and Family Services and Education need to work together to plan child care expansion. The previous changes to the ECS program (Program Unit Funding) and the new funding for child care have disrupted services. Further, parents using school-based programs often want summer child care, which may not be available.

The new funding for child care has also impacted Out-of-school care (OSC). OSC programs aren't eligible for affordability grants and there are significant staff shortages.

The different funding models for child care, ECS and Kindergarten and OSC contribute to a lack of continuity of care for children and families. Some parents are now keeping their kindergarten-aged children in child care rather than having them attend part-day Kindergarten. As a result, some child cares are struggling to deal with a new mix of 3, 4, 5 and 6 year-olds – which places additional pressures on staff and doesn't allow program spaces to open up for new children.

Priorities for policies and investments to support expansion

Some programs are not at full capacity and so are not in a position to expand. Organizations also face financial pressures – some of which go back to COVID when they incurred debt – and so they can't take on more costs.

The shortage of qualified staff makes some programs reluctant to consider expansion. There are also shortages of leaders (senior, qualified staff) who could go in and run a whole new centre.

The Town of Westlock completed a Labour Market Impact Assessment and is now able to recruit new Canadians through a rural renewal program, as long as they make a job offer to these individuals. Child care centres can recruit new staff through this program. Not all rural communities are participating in the program.

Programs would expand if there were appropriate funding for development, start up and qualified staff, including experienced directors.

New centres must be opened in buildings that are appropriate for ELCC, including new school construction. The space costs have to be reasonable for programs to operate.

A service provider in a smaller community opened a new centre through a partnership with its municipal government. The partnership provides the service provider with reduced space costs. Similar partnerships are possible in other communities, although sustainable provincial funding is required because municipal governments are unable to cover expansion and ongoing program costs.

Under the former \$25 per day initiative, service providers received grant funding in advance, which they then used to develop and deliver services, including purchasing capital items. Currently, service providers are only eligible to receive a portion of funding in advance, with the balance received after programs have incurred costs. With their limited budgets, this restricts their ability to expand.

The Ministry should only approve expansion for service providers with good service histories – and not those with multiple non-compliances. Service providers with no history in ELCC don't understand the delivery of high-quality care.

In other jurisdictions, the use of things like a central child registry enables services to be developed in those communities in which there is the greatest need. Governments then help with the planning and development costs.

The Ministry has recently reached out to FCSS programs to see if they might partner with them to create new child care spaces, however, they have limited knowledge of child care operations. Currently, FCSS funding can't be used for child care delivery.

Service providers want federal monies to support the delivery of high-quality services and ELCC system building. They have some concerns that the provincial government would rather transfer money directly to parents. Some service providers see merit in the federal government attaching additional conditions to the funding it provides under the Canada-Alberta agreement. Service providers also have concerns that the provincial government is not increasing its own ELCC investments.

Under the previous \$25 per day initiative, service providers received funding to build staff capacity which improved the quality of services. Service providers identified the need for funding to build and retain staff teams, including money for benefits. They also identified the need for funding to enable senior staff to undertake the additional administrative work related to system building.

Quality (including the ELCC workforce)

Key learnings from the initial policies and investments to support quality

The provincial government has invested in initiatives to encourage staff to complete additional education and professional learning. The administration of these funds was challenging for programs. A central PD portal that ECEs could apply through would streamline the process for them to directly access PD funding. Service providers have shared this idea with Ministry staff.

In Drayton Valley, the municipal government covers the tuition costs of staff completing post-secondary education. This has been very beneficial for staff and quality child care. The town has corporate support for the initiative and staff attend public post-secondary colleges.

There are real shortages of Level IIs and IIIs. The workforce was under significant stress during COVID, and this continues. There are some data from Advanced Education which show that the number of ELCC students enrolled has increased but students are not completing their programs of study.

Some new staff entering the field have different expectations about their work lives. They have limits around how many hours they are prepared to work.

Service providers do not consider an increase in the number of high school students receiving credentials through the completion of dual high school credit as a solution to the shortage of qualified staff. They want and need qualified and experienced staff.

The focus on helping ECEs complete post-secondary education is important – we need quality standards around that education. Micro credentialing may work for certain things but it is not a replacement for ECEs completing foundational education. Further, it is not going to help staff get a Level II or III certification, nor help to increase staff's wages.

Programs face financial challenges when staff increase their level of education because then they need to increase their wages. Staff are worth more money, but programs don't have the resources to pay them or to cover the costs of increased source deductions. Programs lose good staff because of this.

ECEs continue to be undervalued. The province has no vision for ELCC and government and society still view it as babysitting. We won't move past this until we raise the quality, but we can't do that until we pay ECEs fairly and educate them appropriately.

To advance quality, we need to educate management staff to lead and manage programs, including financial and HR management. Organizations commonly promote strong Level IIIs to leadership positions, but then have limited capacity to support them. We need to formally educate and prepare staff for these roles.

Changes are needed in the foundational education of ECEs. There are gaps in the curriculum around inclusion and working with diverse populations. Educators needed to be more prepared to work in the field – coaching and mentoring helps but there are no resources for these things.

Post-secondary ECE programs are working on these things. They know there is a gap between what students study and learn and what they see in practice. There are also groups for directors where senior staff can help and support each other.

There are senior staff and owner-operators who don't seem to have education or a strong knowledge about high-quality ECE practices. These individuals are responsible for hiring staff to work in regulated care, providing pedagogical leadership and in shaping the learning environments for children.

Programs that aren't high quality contribute to poor outcomes for children. Their poor quality negatively impacts children and when these children enter the school system, they face additional challenges. This places further pressures on the school system and teachers.

Service providers are not confident that the provincial government is concerned with the quality of ELCC. The government does not mention quality or what quality means. Expansion is the focus not quality.

Families don't want to place their children in poor quality child care. Good programs often have long waiting lists. Programs that only hire Level Is do not providing quality ELCC.

Some families don't know what quality ELCC looks like. Some families have no choice but to access low-quality services.

We have a workforce crisis. The quality of ELCC is strongly linked to the wages and working conditions of ECEs. ECEs are underpaid for their work and have challenging working conditions. We have high expectations of what ECEs should do, but the pay doesn't support this. ECEs are not seen as professionals. The wage grid developed by AECEA is a start, but it is still too low.

Children and their families are still feeling the stresses of the pandemic. Following COVID, parents themselves don't seem to have the resiliency to deal with all the pressures before them. Staff deal with parents who are angry and stressed – and this contributes to them leaving the field.

ELCC stakeholders now refer to 'enhanced ratios', which is only what is essential for ensuring quality early learning and child care. The ratios specified in regulations are just enough to keep children safe. Enhanced ratios, however, enable staff to have more breathing room to do their job well and improved working conditions.

The living wage in Edmonton is \$21.40 an hour and most Level Is and Level IIs did not make that. The sector average for all sectors is \$33.60, which is higher than the top wage in AECEA's wage grid. For LPNs in Alberta, the average wage is between \$30-\$35 an hour. ECEs, who work in full-day kindergarten in Edmonton receive a wage of \$32 an hour with the same certification level.

We aren't just competing to recruit ECEs from other centres, we are in competition with all sectors. The average wage across all sectors is \$33/hour. We are so far below that. ECEs have a complex job and they have to be professionally educated. So, we aren't talking about Level Is here – we are talking about professionals – so we need to be advocating for professional wages. This has to be the starting point.

For a long time, child care was made affordable by subsidizing child care fees on the backs of ECEs. Despite the new federal funding, ECE wages are still not going up.

There are wage scales in sectors that are publicly funded such as health care and education. If ELCC is to be more of a public system, then we should follow the practices of these sectors.

There is a fear that the provincial government views the increased wage enhancements, introduced in January 2023, as sufficient. Much more is needed.

ECEs need higher wages now before they can even think about, or pay for things like, matching pension contributions. Many ECEs have second jobs even with wage increases.

The Town of Drayton Valley did some benchmarking of staff salaries/wages in other programs. To be at the 75th percentile and be able to recruit strong staff, a director's salary would be \$81,000 and a Level III would be \$62,000. At the 25th percentile, it would be \$63,000 and \$41,000 and that's without wage top-ups. The benchmarking was with reasonable programs that are offering benefits. These are competitive salaries.

We need to see ECEs as valued, caring professionals. ECEs are tired of having to defend the profession. There is still the belief that anyone can work in child care.

The provincial government's campaign to recruit ECEs was extremely poor. It didn't present the field as a profession and showed an undervaluing of the work of ECEs.

Priorities for policies and investments needed to support quality

The turnover of staff is 25 percent every year. We can't retain staff. A competitive wage scale and benefits for staff would be game changers. We have the information about what is needed but we need the political will and the funding.

There needs to be a vision for ELCC in the province. Ministry staff have advised stakeholders that the government is still thinking about the vision. The Alberta roadmap that stakeholders worked on includes a vision. The vision needs to include children and recognize their rights. If we don't have a vision for ELCC, how can we recruit and retain staff?

The former \$25 per day initiative made quality a priority. Staff saw wage increases and there was money for education, mentoring and coaching. Staff felt valued. Now they don't. There is a lack of faith in the government.

Post-secondary programs prepare students well to work in the field. After their practicums, students have realistic expectations of what working in the field is like. Some move to public education because it allows them to work with children and families in a field that is more valued as a profession.

The projected demand for new ECEs appears to significantly exceed the number of students completing their education to enter the field. Some post-secondaries student enrollments are down since COVID. Individual post-secondaries (e.g. Portage College) which offer online learning, which enables students to continue working while they study, have seen significant increases in enrolment.

Some post-secondary institutions have increased their enrollment, but it is reported that students don't attend classes after registration.

Some service providers support and encourage their staff to increase their level of education and certification, while others do not. Program directors need to know about the options available for staff. Workplace education models appear useful. ECEs need help to cover their education costs 'up front', rather than having to wait for reimbursement of their fees after enrollment.

The education and training around the Flight curriculum are valuable and having staff go through the Flight course as a cohort provides them with benefits as well. Staff don't get a formal credit for completing the course. Perhaps they could receive a credit that could be applied towards an educational credential.

The different post-secondary institutions appear to offer different supports to students. There are potential differences in the quality of students' education, particularly around their field placements. There needs to be more consistent oversight and support for students.

We need a comprehensive workforce strategy – and staff need to be qualified at a diploma level. Recognizing and supporting the field as a profession with a provincial college, to oversee the workforce, may be an option. Ontario is the only province with a provincial college for ECEs.

Inclusion

Key learnings from the initial policies and investments to support inclusion

Service providers are concerned about the current state of inclusion. At Directors' meetings, programs report that even the quality programs are now turning children away. We didn't have to do this two years ago.

There are more children with exceptional needs and more children who are struggling. A stable workforce is required to effectively implement the Inclusive Child Care (ICC) model. The frequent departure of staff who have received ICC education and supports makes it difficult for programs to build their capacity to support inclusion.

When children are diagnosed with additional needs it takes a long time to get any supports. Programs end up incurring additional costs that they can't recover. Some parents don't have the time or resources to access the inclusion supports their children need.

The inclusion challenges are placing stresses on everyone. Programs and ECEs are stressed because they can't provide the support children and families need, children miss out on inclusion services and parents are stressed trying to receive professional diagnoses for their children – sometimes waiting up to one or two years for an assessment.

Some child care centres have faced challenges due to changes in Program Unit Funding. Previously, some centres in Edmonton had partnerships with school divisions, but these are no longer in place. Child care centres need specialized supports to effectively include children with exceptional needs. However, there are multiple ministries involved in policy and funding decisions, including Children's Services, Health and Education, which creates additional challenges for programs.

In some communities outside of the major centres, there are very limited supports available for children in child care. Families are sometimes dealing with addictions and mental health concerns and there are no supports available for them.

There are children in child care who require Program Unit Funding – and since this funding comes through the Ministry of Education it creates challenges. Different Ministries have different decision-making processes. Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD) also operates in different ways. It is very difficult for families and service providers.

Everyone is losing with inclusion right now. Inclusive programs are good for every single child in that program. By turning these children away, we aren't providing benefits for any child in that program. It's not just the child that is getting turned away who is missing out, all children are losing.

Children and families are getting expelled and are going into another program to start the same journey again and getting the same result. It is so difficult for families. If they get into another program, parents are scared to tell the truth. They don't want to disclose that their child has a diagnosis or any challenges. They don't even bring their children to the tour. They are so nervous.

Service providers who didn't want to support inclusion were already refusing service to children prior to ELCC system building. You see centres where there are no children with additional needs, and there are ones with lots of them. Those centres and their staff become overwhelmed.

Children are struggling with many deficits, a lack of social skills and speech delays. If their needs aren't addressed early, these children will place additional stresses on the education system. It takes two years to get a funding application approved and so these children don't get the ELCC supports they need.

Developmentally, children aren't where they were prior to the pandemic. They are placed in rooms with children with different levels of development and don't have the social and language skills they need to cope. This places additional strains on ECEs.

Priorities for policies and investments to support inclusion

Enhanced ratios are better for supporting inclusion than funding for one-on-one care. Programs now struggle to access inclusive child care and additional supports.

Some families are no longer attending family support programs and we no longer see them in the community. As much as they need ELCC, they still need the parent capacity building. It all goes hand in hand. We need that partnership with the family support network and we need to connect the work in day cares with work and supports in the home – including nutrition and homework strategies. Families are losing.

The inclusion challenges started before the Canada-wide agreement. The introduction of the Inclusive Child Care Program came at a bad time for the sector – during the pandemic and at a time of stress for the sector. Canada-wide system building has just been added on top.

The new Inclusive Child Care approach isn't working. Centres can't meet children's needs and children are asked to leave centres or denied a space.

Our licensing officers are also overextended, overwhelmed. They are trying to keep up with all the new centres opening and are relying on coaches and mentors to help them with their work. They come out twice a year but don't really have the time required to see what is happening. It is just chaos all around.

Participant Concluding Observations on the Priority Areas for Policy and Investment in the Next Provincial Action Plan

Government may have focused efforts on particular families – middle income – and this needs to be revised.

It's the overarching things. Thus far there has been no real system-building, no vision and no plan. The Alberta Quality Roadmap, prepared by stakeholders, outlines how to move forward.

A focus on the workforce – everything is connected in system building so this is key.

Stakeholders need to be consulted. We were told this would happen. We have so many people in the province with knowledge and they aren't being called on.

Spend time on the vision and roll out the compensation framework. Improve the supports to attract people into post-secondary educational programs and graduate more ECEs.

Trust the knowledge that we have. The participants in this meeting could develop the system in two days. Stop reinventing the wheel. We have the practical experience needed to ensure children receive quality care. Government staff need to know what we know. Second our leaders to government.

We need transparency about the vision for ELCC. At least then we will know where we are going and how we will fit into the system. The workforce is the biggest thing. We need to address the inclusion challenges in the short term - children are transitioning into school with no supports.

Investments are needed in sector leaders and in safe working environments. The sector is scrambling. We need a vision for ELCC. There are significant concerns about the pending cost control framework.

The communications and planning around changes to funding must be improved. The sector does not feel respected or heard in regard to how changes have been made.

The funding changes have created significant burdens for service providers – its too complicated for providers and families. We have to streamline things and make them fairer.

The funding changes have made the administration of services much more complicated. Service providers weren't prepared for all the changes and weren't provided with information in advance of the changes that were coming. Staff at all levels need support – there are real concerns around staff retention and what staff leaving will mean for children and families.

Children and their best interests should be the priority. High-quality environments support better outcomes for children. We need to listen to the experts on child care. Children don't have a voice so ELCC leaders must advocate for them.

There needs to be a focus on advocacy and a valuing of the workforce and sector leaders. There are real concerns that long-time sector leaders will leave with no succession plans in place.

Children have been forgotten. The government has focussed on reducing parent fees. Higher income families are receiving more support than lower-income families. The \$25 per day initiative ensured that lower-income families were supported.

System building should be based on research and evidence. We should be focusing on what children need – not just getting parents back to work. The federal government should put conditions on the money it transfers.

The previous \$25 per day initiative did a lot of things right. It included supply-side funding, emphasized quality and provided children with a right to access ELCC.

The priorities are wages and working conditions. The message to the federal government is hold the province accountable. The message for the provincial government is that the field is on the brink of collapse. If the province focuses on lowering quality – I am out.

The focus needs to be on children's rights. There must be investments in ECE wages and working conditions – valuing the workforce has been such a small part of the provincial government's focus. Educators need to be prepared to work with children. Unprepared ECE's provide low-quality ELCC.

The provincial government has taken a lot of federal money for something that it doesn't want to do. ELCC stakeholders must advocate for ELCC system building.

When the federal money was announced, it was like the angels were singing. Two years later, we have not invested the money well. We have not got ELCC system building right.

Appendix A

Alberta ELCC Stakeholder Discussion	
June 22, 2023 - Edmonton - The Muttart Foundation Offices	
Adine Shuchuk	Jasper Place Family Resource Centre, Edmonton
Angela Charles	Caroline ELCC/Caroline Playschool Society, Caroline
Annalise Yuzda	YMCA of Northern Alberta, Edmonton, Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie
Bernice Taylor	Town of Drayton Valley, Early Childhood Development Centre, Drayton Valley
Brittany Aamot	Early Learning at MacEwan (ELM), Edmonton
Carolyn Parkes	AECEA and MacEwan, Edmonton
Christine Villeneuve	Westlock Child Care Society, Westlock
Juliana Lambert	Montessori Play and Learn Centre, Edmonton
Leah Tolman	City West Childcare & Community Support Society, Edmonton
Lisa Daniel	Town of Jasper, Wildflowers Early Childhood Development Centre, Jasper
Marilyn Armstrong	Getting Ready for Inclusion Today (GRIT), Edmonton
Naida Meghji	Allen Gray Child Development Centre, Edmonton
Susan Cake	Child Care Now AB, Edmonton
Venessa Soto	Knowledge Tree Early Learning & Childcare Centre, Valleyview
Don Giesbrecht	National Advisory Council
Christopher Smith	The Muttart Foundation, National Advisory Council
Abiodun Oduke	National Advisory Council
Tara Stang	The Muttart Foundation, Alberta Leaders' Caucus

Appendix B

What are the Priority Areas for ELCC System Building Policies and Investments in the Pending Three-Year Provincial Action Plan for the period 2023/24 through 2025/26?

1. Affordability

In 2022 and 2023 the Government of Alberta introduced new flat-rate affordability grants and fee increase thresholds to reduce parent paid fees by an average of 50 percent. The Government will target further reductions in parent paid fees to an average of \$15 per day in 2023/24 and an average of \$10 per day by the end of 2025/26. The Government will develop a new funding formula for regulated child care in 2023, as outlined in the Cost Control Framework released in January 2023, to achieve these further reductions in parent paid fees. The Government of Alberta allocated \$806.4 million in federal funding to reduce parent fees in 2021/22 through 2022/23.

What key learnings should the Ministry of Children's Services take from its initial strategies and investments to reduce parent paid fees? What worked well and what needs improvement or revision going forward?

What are the priority areas for new policies and/or investments to further reduce parent paid fees in ways that provide families equitable access to high-quality child care given the proposed funding formula outlined in the Cost Control Framework?

2. Accessibility

The Government of Alberta has committed to create 42,500 new regulated child care spaces over the course of the Canada-wide agreement as well as 26,200 new for-profit spaces. The space creation targets for 2022/23 included 10,000 new not-profit or publicly owned spaces (including family child care) and 3,700 for-profit spaces the majority of which were already under development. In 2022, the government introduced a new Space Creation Grant to support the expansion of regulated non-profit and publicly owned child care. In early 2023 it indicated its support for the expansion of for-profit child care spaces. The Government of Alberta allocated \$50 million in federal funding to create new regulated child care spaces in 2022/23.

What key learnings should the Ministry of Children's Services take from its initial strategies and investments to create child care spaces? What worked well and what needs improvement or revision going forward?

What are the priority areas for new policies and/or investments to expand the provision of regulated child care given the space creation targets outlined in the agreement?

3. Quality

The Government of Alberta's initial two-year Action Plan included strategies and investments to support the provision of quality regulated child care, with a focus on valuing the workforce. These investments included support for additional professional learning and educational opportunities for early childhood educators and increases in wage enhancements. The Government of Alberta allocated \$77.54 million in federal funding for ECE professional development and supports in 2021/22 through 2022/23. The initial Provincial Action Plan indicates that monies for ECE wage enhancements are included in affordability investments.

What key learnings should the Ministry of Children's Services take from its initial strategies and investments to advance quality with a focus on the ELCC workforce? What worked well and what needs improvement or revision going forward?

What are the priority areas for new policies and/or investments to support the provision of high-quality regulated child care with a focus on the ELCC workforce?

4. Inclusion

The Government of Alberta committed to develop and fund a plan to provide 'vulnerable children and children from diverse backgrounds' with equitable access to regulated child care. The initial two-year Action Plan allocated \$38.4 million in federal funding to make regulated child care more inclusive, including the expansion of the Inclusive Child Care Program introduced in 2021/22.

What key learnings should the Ministry of Children's Services take from its initial strategies and investments to support inclusion? What worked well and what needs improvement or revision going forward?

What are the priority areas for new policies and/or investments to ensure that vulnerable children and children from diverse backgrounds have equitable access to regulated child care?

Concluding Observations on the Policy and Investment Priorities for ELCC System Building in the Pending Three-year Provincial Action Plan for the period 2023/24 through 2025/26