

# Strategies to Improve the Total Compensation and Working Conditions of Certified Early Childhood Educators in Saskatchewan



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# Introduction

The federal government's spring 2021 commitment to work collaboratively with provincial and territorial governments to build a Pan-Canadian early learning and child care (ELCC) system provides a historic opportunity to transform child care provision across the country. The over \$27 billion in new federal investments allocated in Budget 2021 provide the basis for building systems of early learning and child care that are publicly funded, planned and managed and better able to meet the diverse needs of young children and their families. The further federal commitment of over \$2.5 billion in new investments for Indigenous early learning and child care provides support for Indigenous governments to design and advance distinctions-based early learning and care that meets the needs of Indigenous children and their families.

The five-year Canada-wide system building agreements the federal government signed with provincial and territorial governments include common goals of making regulated child care more affordable and accessible for families, improving the quality of services while also making them more inclusive.<sup>1</sup> To date, provinces and territories have made significant progress in reducing parent paid fees, with a number already providing families with access to \$10 per day child care, including Saskatchewan. Progress in increasing the supply of regulated child care and in improving service quality and inclusion remains more limited, however, a result, in part, of the longstanding challenges facing early learning and child care workforces across Canada.

At their July 2023 meeting in Iqaluit, the federal, provincial and territorial ministers with responsibility for ELCC agreed on the importance of 'thriving' early learning and child care workforces to system building and identified the need for improvements in early childhood educators' compensation and working conditions. They further committed to work together on a Canada-wide multilateral workforce strategy to help provinces and territories recruit and retain the qualified educators needed to support system building.<sup>2</sup>

The following report, prepared by The Muttart Foundation in partnership with the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association and the Saskatchewan Early Learning and Care Leaders' Caucus within the Canadian Child Care Federation, presents the findings from focus group discussions with early childhood educators, held in fall 2023. The discussions explored educators' current working conditions, access to benefits and compensation and the improvements they identified as necessary to support their work with young children and improve educator retention. Educators spoke knowledgeably and passionately about their work with young children and families. They shared examples of the resources and supports that helped them create high-quality learning environments that benefit children, as well as the challenges they commonly faced in meeting children's learning and care needs. They also commented on the improvements in educator working conditions, access to benefits and compensation needed to help recruit and retain the thousands of new qualified early childhood educators required to help build a high-quality early learning and child care system in Saskatchewan.

The report includes four main sections. The first provides the background to the study. It includes an overview of the Saskatchewan early learning and care workforce and a summary of workforce investments

<sup>1</sup> Government of Canada. 2024. *Early Learning and Child Care Agreements*. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories.html>

<sup>2</sup> Government of Canada. 2023. *Federal, provincial and territorial ministers meet to advance shared priorities in early learning and child care, including the development of a multilateral workforce strategy*. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2023/07/federal-provincial-and-territorial-ministers-meet-to-advance-shared-priorities-in-early-learning-and-child-care-including-the-development-of-a-mult.html>





during the first two years of the Canada-Saskatchewan agreement. The second describes the research design and rationale for the research approach. The third presents the major findings from the focus group discussions and includes the views and experiences early childhood educators shared. The fourth presents strategies to support improvements in early childhood educator working conditions, access to benefits and compensation as part of early learning and child care system building.

The collaborative work of building a high-quality early learning and child care system in Saskatchewan will not be possible without significant improvements in educators' compensation, access to benefits and working conditions. The observations and insights early childhood educators shared about their work with young children and their families during the focus groups, allied with the findings from previous research, provide starting points for developing the strategies required to support and advance the capacity of the early learning and care workforce. The value governments and service providers place on educators and their work contributes to the quality of service provision, while how early childhood educators view themselves and their work impacts their ability to foster children's early learning and care. Advances in both areas are needed to support the move towards the high-quality and inclusive early learning and child care system that children and their families want and need.



# Background

The central role qualified and well-supported professional early childhood educators play in the delivery of high-quality early learning and care is well documented. Early learning and care is recognized as a specialized field, with high-quality service provision contributing positively to children's learning and development and family well-being. By contrast, poor or low-quality early learning and child care provides children with limited or no benefits and may even do harm to those children who are most vulnerable.

Early childhood educators require comprehensive pre-service education, ongoing professional learning and supportive working conditions to create the high-quality learning environments in which children grow and thrive.<sup>3</sup> Competitive and fair compensation, allied with opportunities for career development, further help encourage professional qualified educators to remain in a field which historically has seen high rates of staff turnover.<sup>4</sup> More broadly, the delivery of high-quality early learning and care requires competent service systems that are publicly planned and managed to help ensure children and families' equitable access to high-quality early learning and care.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the importance of qualified and well-supported early childhood educators to the delivery of high-quality early learning and care, progress in building the capacity of child care workforces across Canada has been slow and uneven. The primary reliance on market-based approaches to organize, finance and deliver child care has resulted in the undervaluing of early learning and care work, with early childhood educators commonly underprepared and poorly resourced for their important work. High rates of staff turnover remain a persistent challenge for child care sectors, with governments and service providers commonly struggling to recruit and retain the qualified early childhood educators required to deliver the high-quality services children and their families need.

The current Saskatchewan early learning and care workforce has much in common with child care workforces across the rest of Canada. It comprises certified educators with different levels of education who work in a range of licensed or regulated settings, including centre-based child care, family child care and group family child care. Educators who complete three courses related to early childhood or an ECE orientation course are eligible for certification as an ECE Level I; educators who complete a one-year ECE certificate program or have an equivalent amount of post-secondary coursework are eligible for certification as an ECE Level II; educators who complete a two-year ECE diploma program or have an equivalent amount of post-secondary coursework are eligible for certification as an ECE Level III. Early childhood educators who live outside of Canada can apply for pre-approval of their qualifications and receive their ECE certificate when they become a resident of Saskatchewan. As of March 31, 2023, there were over 4,400 discrete non-cook child care centre staff positions, with 67 percent of these positions filled by an educator holding an ECE Level I, II or III certification.<sup>6</sup>

3 OECD. 2022. *Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Development: A Foundation for Process Quality*. OECD Education Policy Perspectives, Directorate for Education and Skills, Policy Brief No.54.

4 OECD. 2020. *Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce: Further Results from the Starting Strong Survey, 2018*. TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris.

5 Urban, M., Vandenbroeck, M., Lazzari, A., Van Laere, K., & Peeters, J. 2011. *CoRe: Competence Requirements in Early Childhood Education and Care*. European Commission: DG Education and Culture. Retrieved from: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED534599.pdf>

6 Government of Saskatchewan. 2023. *Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement 2022-2023 Annual Report*. Retrieved from: <https://pubsaskdev.blob.core.windows.net/pubsask-prod/143892/2022-23%252BAR%252BCan-SK%252BCW-ELCC%252BAGreement%252B-%252BFinal.pdf>



Since signing the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Agreement in August 2021, the Ministry of Education has taken important steps to improve educators' compensation and to build workforce capacity. As of September 2024, the Ministry has provided four wage enhancement grants; supported staff recruitment and retention efforts, including through funding support to the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association to help with educator recruitment; made new post-secondary investments to develop and deliver accelerated ELCC programming; provided professional development supports for educators; made tuition-free training opportunities available to increase the supply of educators and conducted a review of best practices and options for advancing workforce development. The Ministry has further committed to develop a provincial wage grid for certified ECEs. Based on the most recent wage enhancements announced in September 2024, the provincial hourly wage thresholds (average wage plus wage enhancement grant) for front-line educators and group family child care home assistants are \$21.06 for ECE Level Is; \$25.06 for Level IIs and \$28.93 for Level IIIs.<sup>7</sup>

The expansion of regulated high-quality, affordable, inclusive child care proposed under the Canada-Saskatchewan agreement (the province has committed to create an additional 28,000 new regulated child care spaces) requires a significant increase in both the size and capacity of the early learning and child care workforce. Saskatchewan, like other provinces and territories, will need to recruit significantly more new qualified educators into the field while also improving the retention of existing staff to provide families with access to high-quality, affordable and inclusive early learning and care. To help support improvements in educator pay and benefits, the Saskatchewan Early Learning and Care Leaders' Caucus, working in partnership with faculty from the University of Regina, commenced work on a provincial compensation framework in 2023. The partners will continue their work on the compensation framework in 2024.

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<sup>7</sup> Government of Saskatchewan. 2024. *Governments of Saskatchewan and Canada Invest in Early Learning and Child Care Workforce*. Retrieved from: <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/news-and-media/2024/september/05/governments-of-saskatchewan-and-canada-invest-in-early-learning-and-child-care-workforce#:~:text=The%20ECE%20wage%20enhancement%20grant%2C%20effective%20September%201%2C%202024%2C,on%20training%20and%20education%20levels>.



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# Research Design

The current study presents the findings from focus group discussions with certified early childhood educators, held in fall 2023. The research partners, The Muttart Foundation, the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association (SECA) and the Saskatchewan Early Learning and Care Leaders' Caucus within the Canadian Child Care Federation (Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus) organized and hosted the focus groups to provide early childhood educators with an opportunity to discuss their working conditions, access to benefits and compensation. In Alberta, The Muttart Foundation worked with the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and the Alberta Early Learning and Care Leaders' Caucus (within the Canadian Child Care Federation) to organize similar focus groups during the same time period.

Sixty-three early childhood educators participated in the focus groups, which included two in-person discussions and four virtual ones. The two in-person focus groups were held in Saskatoon and Regina, with centre-based educators. The four virtual groups included discussions with centre-based educators from Saskatoon; centre-based educators from smaller communities across the province; family child care educators from communities across the province and with student educators completing post-secondary credentials at Saskatchewan Polytechnic.

Thirty-nine of the participants reported holding a Level III certification, 12 a Level II certification and 7 a Level I certification. Five of the student educators reported holding no provincial certification or did not disclose their certification level. Forty-nine of the participants worked in facility-based child care, of which the majority served children 0 to 6 years of age, including one participant from an Indigenous child care program, one participant from a Métis Nation child care program and one from a Francophone child care program. Six of the participants worked in family child care. Eight of the participants were student educators who had completed one or more practicum placements in a regulated child care setting.

The length of tenure of those educators with work experience in regulated child care ranged from one year to 40 years. The average length of educators' work experience was approximately 13 years. A number of those educators with longer work histories in the field, five years or more, reported working in either a number of different centre-based programs or, in a smaller number of cases, different types of regulated services (e.g. child care centres and family child care). A number of educators reported previous education or work experience in early learning and child care in their home countries before moving to Canada.

The Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus and SECA helped recruit educators to participate in the focus groups. Post-secondary students were recruited with the assistance of Saskatchewan Polytechnic faculty. Where the number of eligible applicants for a focus group exceeded the group capacity, the research partners selected participants with differing levels of experience or from different geographic communities. Educators or students who attended a focus group received a \$50 gift card to thank them for their participation.

The focus group discussions explored a similar set of questions, with some variations introduced both to accommodate the different working environments and experiences of family child care educators and the varied work experiences of post-secondary students, a number of whom only had limited work experience (see Appendix A for the focus group protocol). The discussions considered two main aspects of educators' work: first, their working conditions and how they might be improved to better support the delivery of high-quality child care; and second, their compensation and access to benefits and the ways in which these might be improved to better reflect the nature and demands of their work. A third related theme that educators raised in discussing both their working conditions and compensation was the undervaluing of their work.





As part of the background information for the focus groups, participants received a summary of the profile of the Saskatchewan ELCC workforce and the investments made under the Canada-wide system building work to build workforce capacity. During the discussions on educator compensation, participants were specifically asked to consider possible approaches the government of Saskatchewan might take to fairly and competitively compensate educators.

The research partners used a focus group approach to provide front-line early childhood educators with the opportunity to speak directly to their own working conditions, compensation and access to benefits and the possible strategies and changes that could help improve them. Despite the work of professional associations such as the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association, early childhood educators often have limited opportunities to discuss the policies and practices that directly impact on them and their work. The focus group approach gave them the chance to share their own experiences and insights while also hearing those of their fellow educators. It further validated educators' voices, with the researchers committing to share the research findings with the federal and provincial governments, as well as with other early learning and child care stakeholders.

As with all research methods, there are limitations with a focus group approach. While focus groups allow the researcher to better assess and understand the range and strength of participant views and experiences, the use of a qualitative design and a non-probabilistic sampling method means that caution is required in generalizing from the findings. There is also the possibility of response biases in group discussions, with some participants potentially uncomfortable or unwilling to share their views or experiences, especially if they differ from those of others in the group. To help reduce these biases, the research partners relied on a skilled facilitation team and set out clear ground rules for the discussions. They further advised participants that the information and comments they shared would be anonymized in reporting the focus group findings.



# What Early Childhood Educators Say About Working Conditions, Access to Benefits and Compensation

The following sections present the focus group findings, arranged according to the major discussion themes: early childhood educator working conditions, access to benefits and compensation. A final section summarizes the advice educators indicated they would share with policy makers, given the opportunity to do so. Not surprisingly, educators saw links or connections between the main discussion areas. They further reflected on some of the changes they had observed over time, particularly in respect to their working conditions, which they considered to have become more challenging. By contrast, educators described the increases in their compensation through wage enhancements as a step forward, although not all educators reported receiving a wage enhancement. The variations or differences in educators' working conditions, compensation and particularly their access to benefits was a common theme across the discussions, as was the view of many educators that their work was undervalued, particularly by those outside of the field.

## Early Childhood Educator Working Conditions

In all six focus groups, educator working conditions received the most discussion. Educators discussed how the different features or characteristics of their current working environments impacted their capacity to support high-quality early learning and care experiences for children and families as well as their own well-being. They further reflected on how the quality of their working conditions had changed over time, especially since the pandemic. Many reported an overall decline as centres and programs struggled to meet the growing demands for service often with limited access to the specialized services required for children with additional or more complex needs. Broadly, educators drew attention to the growing pressures on front-line educators, which some saw as contributing to high rates of staff turnover and the decision of qualified staff to leave the field.

### ***Orientation and Support for New Early Childhood Educators***

Educators initially discussed their entry into the field and the orientation and support they received when they started work. Some entered the child care sector shortly after completing high school, with clear goals and aspirations to work with young children. Others began their work after completing college credentials, some after coming to Canada as newcomers with previous work experience and formal education in unrelated fields. Experienced educators, with five or more years of work in centre-based child care, observed that the orientation and support they received when they began work differed from the support now available for some new educators. A number referred to the increased pressures and demands on programs and services



since the pandemic which, combined with the shortage of qualified staff, made it more difficult for some organizations to support new educators' transition into the field. Educators further reflected on the significant variations in the kinds and quality of orientation and onboarding new staff received.

## *The Importance of Coaching and Mentoring*

The majority of centre-based educators received some type of orientation or support when they began work in the field. They highlighted the value of being paired with either a mentor or experienced staff member for guidance or coaching and the importance of receiving information on a program's policies, routines and early learning practices. Some described the benefit of not being 'in ratio' for an initial period of time (up to two weeks), which enabled them to observe the work of other educators and to get to know their working environment and the children in their care.

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***When I started, you aren't in ratio. So, being able to learn and not worrying about ratios — it's a huge thing. You can book learn a lot of it but when you are in the middle of it, there are a heck of a lot of things that you must do.***

***(Level III Educator working in Regina)***

Educators found resources such as handbooks and orientation binders useful, although they emphasized the importance of having time to get to know the interests and needs of the children in their care. Those educators who completed student placements in a program before starting work there, and those who worked first in either casual or 'float position' roles, found both experiences helped them get to know a program and its routines. Educators spoke of the importance of 'hands-on' training, as well as the merits of having the opportunity to work in different rooms in a centre, to help them better understand a program's work and its approach to early learning and care. They also saw value in new staff having the opportunity to ask experienced educators practice questions and seek advice in 'real time' to help them build their own knowledge, skills and confidence.

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***We have new ECEs who just have their Level I. They have three classes and are trying to figure out how to apply what they are learning to their practice. It's really, really important to have the mentorship piece, for them to be able to talk to someone, to help them make sense of what they're learning. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)***

The majority of long-time staff in the Regina and the two Saskatoon focus groups described their initial work experiences as positive. They reported benefiting from different types and levels of support including participating in formal onboarding processes with prepared materials, the shadowing of a senior staff person, as well as more individually tailored orientations. Educators from a larger organization, with multiple program sites, described the comprehensive nature of their orientation process, which included scheduling additional staff to support 'on the floor training' for new educators as well as a focus on helping new staff get to know the children in their care and their interests. They also highlighted the value of new staff meeting regularly with a supervisor.

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***When I started as an ECE, you get a trainer. You are paired with someone in a room — that person is a mentor, you are learning from that person. That person trains you. That way you know the expectations before you are in ratio in a group. I wasn't in ratio for two weeks so I could learn from this individual. (Level III Educator working in Regina)***



In contrast to the above positive experiences, other educators received relatively little orientation or support when they began work in centre-based care. These educators' initial work experiences were 'frustrating' and overwhelming. They referred to themselves as being 'thrown in' and required to work 'on the floor' right away. Some educators were given orientation materials, which they were asked to read outside of work hours, with limited opportunities to review or discuss these materials with more senior staff. Others shared their frustration in receiving either insufficient guidance on the expectations for their work or a lack of support and, in some instances, impatience from other staff when they made mistakes in the workplace.

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*It would be really nice to have the staff to mentor new staff coming in for a week or two, but that's not reality in our rural area. Usually, we are just thrown in. I think we continue to tell our staff everything here is fluid and changes so rapidly, so make it work for you. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)*

### *Reduced Capacity to Support New Educators*

Despite the value of new educators receiving a strong orientation when starting in the field, including coaching from experienced staff, focus group participants were concerned that these kinds of support were now often unavailable for new educators and especially so since the COVID pandemic. They cited the shortage of qualified staff, high rates of staff turnover, an increase in the number of children with additional needs, and the heavier workloads of front-line educators and management staff as all factors contributing to the reduced capacity of programs to orient and support new educators.

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*I got hired right out of school. I would say my orientation was fragmented to put it nicely. They had a beautiful orientation binder, checklist and all that stuff, but I could tell that the admin team didn't have the resources or support to properly facilitate the orientation. They had a plan in place but there was no time or resources. (Level III Educator working in Saskatoon)*

Individual educators shared the challenges they faced 'struggling to keep up' with their own work, while also taking on the additional responsibilities of 'constantly' training new staff, many of whom left after short periods of employment. They highlighted the shortage of experienced educators to mentor or coach new staff as a growing problem in some centres and the difficulties of trying to support new, inexperienced staff while working in ratio — it's 'just watch and learn.' Some experienced educators felt burdened by the responsibility of training new staff and were frustrated that they did not have the time or resources required to support them.

Educators in Saskatoon and Regina were concerned that some new staff were either not well-prepared for the demands of the work or did not have a strong understanding of what the work involved. Others felt overwhelmed by the large numbers of new, inexperienced staff entering the field. Individual educators were further worried that some programs did not have the resources required to provide educators who were either newcomers or international students with the additional orientation and support they needed as they began work in cultures and service environments with which they were not familiar.

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*Some staff don't know what they are getting into until they are there. It kind of shocks them. They thought it would be easier. Working with children is not easy. You need patience and you have to love what you are doing. If you don't know what you're doing and don't have training, it is hard. It is scary for them. (Level III Educator working in Regina)*





Student educators working in the field while studying described their initial work experiences as challenging and, in some cases, isolating. Those students who had recently begun work reported receiving limited formal orientation and relying instead on their own observations of other staff to become familiar with a centre's routines and practices. They advised that they were required to work in ratio right away and, in the case of individual students, had to request training or support from senior staff themselves, since it was not provided. Individual student educators further shared their disappointment that some experienced staff were 'not open' to the ideas they shared on pedagogy and practice.

### *The Challenges of Starting Out in Family Child Care*

Family child care educators shared the challenges they faced in setting up their family child care. They commonly described struggling with a lack of information and support — experiences which for some were relatively recent (within the last two to three years) while for others were from over a decade ago. Individual educators advised that they had incurred significant costs for home renovations to meet building regulations and licensing requirements, and cautioned that some family child care educators went into debt before starting work. They referred to themselves as being 'on my own' in terms of getting started in family child care.

Experienced family child care educators described the roles they had played in helping new providers open licensed family child care, including providing them with information and resources. They advised that new family child care educators sometimes struggled to access information and support due to the shortage of Ministry of Education consultants in particular regions of the province, high rates of consultant turnover and the lack of dedicated resources for family child care educators. They also reported some inconsistencies in the information educators received. Individual educators described facing long delays before their family child care licensing was approved, with some reporting waiting times of up to 9 months.

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*Homes are calling me and asking a ton of questions. I know we have a licensing officer here, but there is no support for people when they start out. I see a lot of homes getting into a lot of debt to get started or needing help with a plan to get started. (Level III Family Child Care Educator working in a smaller community)*

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## ***The Challenging Nature of Early Childhood Educator Working Conditions***

Across the focus groups, educators described their working conditions as challenging, although they advised that some centres or programs were better able to support educators and their work than others. They cautioned that many educators were under significant stress, working longer hours and caring for more children with additional or more complex needs, often with insufficient access to the specialized resources they needed to support inclusion. While they shared their own commitment to working with young children and families, they expressed concerns that many educators were discouraged and, in some cases, worn down by the increased demands placed upon them. They were further worried by both the loss of qualified, experienced educators who had left the field and the high rate of turnover among new staff, some of whom left after relatively short periods of employment.

The interrelated factors educators saw as contributing to their more demanding and challenging working conditions are outlined below, as are some of the potentially insulating factors that educators saw as helping them manage their work.

### *Heavy Workloads, Limited Resources and the Lack of Non-Contact Time*

Educators in both centre-based care and family child care were concerned by their heavy workloads. They reported feeling stressed and referred to themselves and their fellow educators as tired or burned out. One educator referred to staff as feeling ‘defeated,’ while others described educators as facing ‘sink or swim’ working conditions. Educators commonly reported working longer hours and managing higher levels of stress than prior to the pandemic. Individual educators cautioned that longer workdays and more stressful working environments were impacting on their own health and well-being, including making it more difficult for them to schedule health appointments during work hours and contributing to an increase in physical strains and injuries. Some working in centres in smaller communities shared how they had taken on additional responsibilities, including cleaning and sanitizing toys, because of the loss of support staff. Student educators working while studying and some educators in Saskatoon described finding it more difficult to implement high-quality pedagogy and practices due to a lack of resources and time to work with children. Additionally, individual student educators described some educators as seeming to have ‘checked out,’ given the demands placed on them.

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*I think at times we talk about the cost to ECEs and we hear that we need more ECEs in the field. But they are leaving the field and the pandemic really brought that to a head. I had lots of friends who walked away and said they were done.*

*The impact of that was significant — we lost the wisdom and creativity of people who’ve been in the field for a long time and there’s a cost. We are tired. We’re really tired. (Level III Educator working in Saskatoon)*

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*They left some place to come to our centre because they thought it would be better, and it wasn’t. They were just defeated. We’ve had people give notice, we’ve had people not show up that day and some who have left at lunch and not come back. The expectation is so great — the needs of the children are high. (Level III Educator working in Regina)*

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Family child care educators were concerned about the extended length of their workdays, which they described as ten or more hours of direct care followed by additional hours of administrative work, cleaning or program planning. They highlighted the difficulties they faced in taking breaks during the day, even when working with an assistant in group family child care, and advised that it was now taking longer for family child care assistants to access education or training to become certified.



Centre-based educators described their lack of access to paid non-contact time as a particular challenge. They advised that many front-line staff had either little or no dedicated time for program planning and documentation, with educators working in ratio for either all, or the majority, of their workday. Some educators reported completing program planning outside of their regular work hours, either in the evenings or on weekends, which took time away from their home or family lives. Educators with regularly scheduled planning or preparation time advised that it was either limited (an hour to two hours per week) or often had to be given up, when they were required to work in ratio to cover for staff shortages or absences. In Regina, individual educators advised that some staff were no longer willing to do program planning on their own time.

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*When I first started, I had a lot of program planning time. I felt like I was doing a good job and had time to research things I didn't know. Nowadays it is different. You don't have programming or planning time and all the stuff keeps piling up. I'm a seasoned educator and I am trying to keep up. I now do it on weekends, but I have a lot of staff who don't know how to do documentation. They are like, 'you want me to do all of this? I can't handle the kids. I'm out.' (Level III Educator working in Regina).*

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Some educators described individual staff members and staff teams as having to take on more of the responsibility for high-quality early learning and child care as organizations struggled to access funding and resources. They referred to educators as 'scraping by' and being expected to 'push through.' Individual educators shared examples of the kinds of resources and supports they needed to support their work with children, including pedagogical mentors, improved indoor play spaces and more dedicated funding for learning materials and supplies, which, for many, were either not available or in limited supply. Educators in Saskatoon and those working outside of the major centres advised that Ministry of Education consultants were not always available to provide the support and advice they needed, while also noting that individual consultants had different levels of knowledge and expertise in respect to pedagogy and practice.

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*I think it's ridiculous that we go to school to be ECE's and have these great early learning experiences with children but we're forced to be creative to solve problems due to a lack of funding, lack of time and lack of support. It's not allowing us to live up to our career's potential. We're constantly just scraping by. (Level III Educator working in Saskatoon)*

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Family child care educators referenced the challenges they faced in purchasing sufficient equipment and supplies with the grant funding available. They also commented on the shortage of Ministry of Education consultants to provide them with program advice and support.

### *The Shortage of Qualified, Experienced Educators and High Rates of Staff Turnover*

Centre-based educators identified high rates of staff turnover and the shortage of qualified, experienced staff as two factors contributing to more demanding working environments — 'a revolving door of staff.' They described the loss of experienced staff as disruptive to programs and resulting in a loss of staff knowledge and skills that made it more difficult for centres to deliver high-quality early learning and care. Experienced educators reported spending more time working with new educators to help them build their knowledge and skills and shared the disappointment and, in some cases, frustration they felt when these newer staff left the field, some after relatively short periods of employment. Individual educators described the turnover rate of new staff as high and cautioned that the shortage of qualified educators was resulting in some service providers retaining staff they might otherwise have let go to ensure they met staff-to-child ratios.



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*I worked in a centre for 20 years and I loved the centre. I loved the setup because it was age segregated and we moved through the rooms. But I got burnt out from constantly training people. I felt bad because I just couldn't do it anymore. It was like oh there's somebody new and then they leave, somebody else comes in and it was constantly new staff.*  
(Level II Educator working in Saskatoon)

Individual educators saw links between heavy workloads, high rates of staff turnover and low workforce morale, including among experienced staff. They expressed their fears that some new educators who entered the field with high levels of motivation and enthusiasm quickly become disheartened and left, in part, because of the lack of support they received and the stresses they saw impacting experienced staff. Educators also described the disruptions to staff work schedules and program delivery when staff left, sometimes with little or no notice. Educators further reported that the shortage of qualified educators was resulting in supervisory or management staff spending more time 'working on the floor,' making it more difficult for them to fulfill their management or leadership roles and responsibilities. Educators working outside of the major centres identified the need for dedicated mentorship and support for staff in leadership positions to help them develop and build their management skills.

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*We go into this field because it is something that we are really passionate about. Seeing a lot of educators who are checked out and so tired is discouraging. I think it is tied to the lack of funding and lack of resources. A lot of educators are having to put a lot of their own time in to provide enriching experiences for kids.* (Student Educator, Saskatchewan Polytechnic)

Individual educators saw the shortage of qualified staff as potentially undermining the professional nature of the field, with service providers having to recruit relatively large numbers of new inexperienced educators, most with limited pre-service education, to meet the increased demand for child care. They were concerned that some new staff entering the field did not appear motivated to work in child care.

### *Difficulties Managing Staff-to-Child Ratios and More Children with Additional or Complex Needs*

Educators in both centre-based care and family child care reported finding it more difficult to meet the early learning and child care needs of children and their families. They described difficulties with the current staff-to-child ratios and having to work with large groups of young children, sometimes in poorly designed rooms or spaces. In all focus groups, educators reported working with more children with additional or more complex learning and care needs, advising that there were often two or more children in a group with higher needs. They cautioned that the shortage of qualified, experienced staff made it more difficult for some programs to include children with additional or more complex learning needs, a problem compounded by service providers' often limited access to specialist staff and resources to support inclusion.

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*Ratios for sure. We have a lot of children with high needs. We have a lot of children with English as their second language. When you put those things in the equation — children who don't understand what you are saying, children with a processing disorder and other children who haven't had a good night's sleep — it's hard. We need better ratios.*  
(Level II Educator working in Saskatoon)





Educators linked the increase in the number of children with additional socio-emotional and behavioural needs to the COVID-19 pandemic's negative impacts on young children's socialization and development. They further described working with more children with complex developmental needs, including language delays and developmental disabilities (e.g. Autism Spectrum Disorder). Educators shared the difficulties they faced in accessing additional funding and specialized supports for children with complex needs and identified the need for higher levels of funding for educational assistants to enable them to work one-on-one with children for a full day of care, rather than for part of a day.

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*Families can't access the supports for their children. You talk to these families and there are these issues now and they need the support now. But they have to wait over a year for a diagnosis. We have kids that we can't get support for and yet there is a 100% need for support. We can't just turn them away and turn their family's lives upside down because we can't support them. (Level III Educator working in Regina)*

Individual educators were frustrated by the limited funding and specialized resources available to support inclusion, as well as the long wait times for a child and their family to receive a diagnosis and specialized support. They shared examples of children diagnosed with a delay or a disability who were not able to receive additional support because of the lack of specialized staff in centres as well as the wider shortage of health and educational professionals in many communities. More broadly, educators were concerned that their own pre-service education and professional learning did not provide them with the knowledge and skills required to support the inclusion of children with complex early learning and care needs. Individual educators shared feeling discouraged when children faced long delays in receiving specialized support and described the additional stresses that these delays placed on front-line staff and families. They expressed their fear that the inability of child care programs to provide children with appropriate support would result in some children facing difficulties throughout their school years.

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*We have children with all these needs and there's so many needs. When we first started, 25 years ago, we didn't have kids that were tube fed, autistic, or had diverse needs and you know, we're not trained. You can get all the funding you want, you can do this and get a staff in there, but we don't know how to work with them. That makes for burnout for our staff and stress on everyone. So, it's hard, it's really hard. (Level II Educator working in Saskatoon)*

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*At the centre, when we are looking to get more support, it is a difficult thing to get approval from the board to go forward with that. It is a revolving door of staff. Particularly when you have children with high needs and the need for building trusting relationships. Those children need a constant educator. They have speech needs, grief, children on the spectrum. We see a high number of children on the spectrum. Also delays in general, social delays. (Level III Educator working in Saskatoon)*





### *A Reduction in Opportunities for Workplace Collaboration and Staff Interactions*

Centre-based educators were concerned that increased workloads and high rates of staff turnover were negatively impacting their working relations with other staff. They described having less time to meet and talk with other educators, fewer opportunities for mentoring or coaching and, in some cases, a loss of autonomy or control over their own work with children. Student educators, upgrading their education, expressed their concerns that some programs were finding it more difficult to provide educators with supportive workplaces. They highlighted the importance of educators feeling part of a workplace team and emphasized how an educator's sense of belonging contributed to the quality of their working environment and, by extension, their work with young children and their families.

Educators highlighted the value of staff teams meeting together and participating in shared activities, including professional learning, during regular work hours rather than at the end of long workdays. They described how some larger organizations, with more resources, were still able to support staff meeting and working together, which contributed to positive work environments. Educators cautioned that other programs now found it difficult to support educators working together, resulting in staff feeling more isolated in their caring roles. They were also concerned that some educators now had fewer opportunities to build their own knowledge and skills through working with different age groups of children. Educators working in smaller communities saw support for 'community networks' of ECEs as one strategy to help experienced and new staff share information and learnings.

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*At my centre, we are not getting time to sit down together to discuss what improvements we can make, and what's going on. There should be some monthly time when all the staff sit together and discuss who is facing which problem and how we can find solutions. There is a communication gap. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)*



Educators in Regina and Saskatoon discussed how strong working relationships between front-line and management staff helped programs build and maintain positive workplace cultures. They also described examples of management and front-line staff not working well together, resulting in front-line educators questioning the decisions made about children's learning and care. Educators agreed that the pressures and demands on staff in leadership or supervisory positions had increased, especially in smaller organizations where they were increasingly required to work 'on the floor' to cover for staff shortages.

Individual educators identified what they saw as divisions within some staff teams, with educators having different motivations for working in the field. They cautioned that some new staff appeared unprepared for the demands of the work, while others viewed child care as a short-term job rather than a long-term career. They further observed that the high turnover of staff meant that educators now commonly worked with colleagues who had different understandings of what high-quality pedagogy or practice involved. Educators saw regularly scheduled staff meetings as one way in which centres could help staff teams develop strong working relationships. They also saw value in more experienced staff with higher levels of certification having time to mentor or coach more inexperienced educators.

Family child care educators described the challenges they faced in working out of their own home, and the isolation and lack of connection with other educators they sometimes experienced. They highlighted the value of the relationships they built with other family child care educators and the support family child care educators often provided each other. Those educators working in group family child care emphasized the importance of having another educator to work with, although they also cautioned that it was becoming more difficult for educators to recruit and retain assistants. Some educators relied on family members to fulfill their assistant roles. Individual family child care educators saw the potential value of a family child care agency, which could provide them with information and resources as well as help them build connections with other family child care educators. Some family child care educators argued that the supports and information Ministry of Education consultants provided family child care providers were more limited than those available for centre-based educators.

### *Opportunities for Professional Learning and Development*

Educators agreed on the benefits of high-quality professional learning and its value in helping them improve their practice and, in some cases, manage additional workplace demands. They drew attention, however, to some of the challenges educators faced in accessing professional learning, as well as some of the professional learning opportunities that had been lost since the pandemic.

Regina educators highlighted the value of 'hands-on' training and of educators participating in joint training as part of staff teams. Individual educators cautioned that heavier workloads made it more difficult for some staff to attend workshops or classes in the evenings and on weekends — and reiterated the general level of tiredness and fatigue within the field. Educators from smaller communities referenced the time and cost barriers some staff faced in travelling to larger centres for education and training, as well as the additional costs programs incurred when they had to replace staff who were participating in professional learning. They also noted the preference of some staff for face-to-face training rather than on-line learning. Despite the value and importance of professional learning, educators cautioned that some front-line staff now viewed it as an additional burden rather than a benefit.

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*It's the access to education, having time to do it, and having it in our community rather than driving for an hour to Regina. I spoke with some of the staff about virtual options and distance learning and while some of the staff are okay with it, some find it hard to do online. They prefer to have somebody to talk to, to mentor them. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)*



Individual educators described the value of the on-site training the Ministry of Education provided prior to the COVID pandemic. They advised that educators missed these training opportunities, which had been particularly beneficial for new educators entering the field. Saskatoon educators shared how the opportunity to work with pedagogical mentors supported their work, although they noted that mentors were only available in a small number of centres. They suggested that all centres would benefit from access to a pedagogical mentor.

Educators in Regina and Saskatoon discussed the benefits of designated professional learning days, when centres closed, and staff had the opportunity to train and learn together, including bringing in external trainers or presenters. Individual educators shared examples of their own centres closing for two or more professional development days per year, which they advised required both Ministry of Education and board support. They highlighted the benefits of closing the centre, with parents given sufficient notice, which included not having to find replacement or supply staff — both of which remain in very short supply. Educators saw designated professional learning days as providing educators with more equitable access to professional learning. Individual educators suggested that professional learning days, allied with paid time for planning and programming, would help to elevate early learning and care work and affirm its educational nature.

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*Professional development should be seen as working time, not above and beyond. Not outside of working hours. I think it needs to be considered part of our operational time, instead of having to jump through hoops to bring staff together outside of hours or as overtime. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)*

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### *The Undervaluing of Early Learning and Care Work*

Educators were concerned that the growing pressures on staff, allied with challenging working conditions, reflected a broader undervaluing of their work. Some were disappointed and frustrated that, despite the higher expectations around pedagogy and practice within the field, early learning and care was still not consistently valued or appreciated by those outside of the sector in the same way as educational work with school-age children. They reported that some parents and community members still thought of child care as ‘baby-sitting’ rather than early education, and expressed their regret that the higher profile child care had received during the pandemic, when it was deemed an ‘essential service,’ had not resulted in longer-term improvements in how the field was viewed. In Saskatoon, individual educators suggested that the reduction in parent paid fees as part of system building, was contributing, in part, to the under-valuing of their work, with some parents viewing child care as a low-cost service. Other educators suggested that the reliance on grant funding for core program costs such as staff wages reinforced the view that child care was less important than publicly funded schooling.

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*Sometimes we aren't encouraged by parents or staff. All the work we are doing, we don't hear from the parents or other staff. All the work we are putting in and it isn't an easy job. We would appreciate the encouragement. If we don't hear that, it is hard. (Level II Educator working in Regina)*

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Other educators drew attention to the tensions that can arise in staff teams when experienced educators, with formal pre-service education work alongside staff with introductory qualifications, some of whom viewed their work in child care as a temporary job rather than a career. They also emphasized the important role senior staff play in creating workplace cultures and environments that support and value educators and their work. Individual educators highlighted the importance of senior staff reinforcing the value of front-line educators' work, especially given the lack of broader community support.





## Early Childhood Educator Access to Benefits

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Educators discussed their access to workplace benefits from a number of different perspectives. They identified those benefits that were of most value to them, as well as those that they needed but either did not receive or only had limited access to. Centre-based educators highlighted the importance of paid sick days, given their close contact with children who often have symptoms of illness. They also stressed the importance of health benefits, paid family days and pension plan contributions. Educators drew attention to the differences in the benefits educators received depending on where they worked, which they saw as linked both to the size of organizations and their budgets. Individual educators advised that the rising cost of benefit programs was making it more difficult for some smaller organizations to provide them for their staff. They further noted that the general lack of benefits was one of the reasons staff left to work in other sectors, including public education.

*A lot of staff leave and go to the school system because they get benefits there. The wages are starting to get up in child care and staff are quite happy with that. But when it comes to benefits, that's why staff leave. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)*

Educators reported that larger organizations, including those with multiple child care programs or those which offered a range of services, were more likely to provide staff with benefits than smaller, stand-alone child care centres — some of which only had between 10 and 15 employees. They further observed that early childhood educators generally had access to fewer workplace benefits than professional staff working in related fields (e.g. publicly funded schools), and less than employees in other economic sectors, including the resource sector. Some educators advised that they relied on their spouse's benefit plan, which was more comprehensive than their own workplace one.

*There is such a disparity between centres that have a parent organization and those which are a stand-alone organization. I think it is great that some have good benefits, but there is a huge difference based on the size of the centre. (Level III Educator working in Regina)*

Educators discussed the differences in their access to benefits and the inequities and challenges that these presented. In respect to paid sick days, educators reported receiving between a high of 18 and a low of five paid sick days or less per year, although some staff received no paid sick days. Those educators with fewer paid sick days described the financial challenges they faced when they were off work for an extended time period, without pay. They advised that some staff returned to work early because they could not afford to be off work sick. Individual educators described the related challenges they faced in taking time off from work to care for their own children who were either sick or had to attend appointments. They highlighted the importance of educators having equitable access to a sufficient number of paid family days to complement their allocation of paid sick days.

*We especially need pay for sick days. That is something we wanted in our centre. You are working with kids who are always sick and especially in the first year, I was sick all the time. Sometimes I felt like I had to go to work even though I was sick. The pay aspect is important because even if I'm sick for a couple of days, how will that affect me? I will never get back those wages. (Level I Student Educator working in Saskatoon)*



Educators reported similar inequities in their access to health benefits, with many having only limited access to extended health benefits, such as dental care or coverage for glasses. A number had access to health spending accounts through their employer rather than a health care plan. And while they found the flexibility of these accounts useful, for example using some funds for non-medical costs, they also cautioned that the funding (which ranged from between \$450 to \$700 per year) could be quickly expended, leaving educators without coverage for other health costs that arose. Educators considered health care coverage an important benefit, given the physically demanding nature of their work — including frequent lifting, bending and standing. They also drew attention to the additional stresses of meeting children’s socio-emotional needs, which, at times, impacted on their own mental health and well-being.

Individual educators found the cost of health benefits prohibitive and reported paying \$200 per month or more for basic family coverage. They advised that the employee premiums for cost-shared health plans were not affordable for some staff given their low wages. Educators agreed on the importance of front-line staff having sufficient time and resources for their own ‘self-care,’ including paid leave. They advised, however, that some programs found it difficult to provide staff with time off due to the high rates of staff turnover and the shortage of qualified staff. Individual educators drew attention to the efforts of some centres to limit staff’s evening and weekend hours, both in recognition of their heavy work loads and to respect their need for family time.



As a complement to paid vacation time, which the majority of educators received, individual educators drew attention to the challenges immigrant staff members faced when they needed to travel to visit or care for family members overseas. They advised that some staff had to take unpaid leave, while others had to resign if they required extended time off. Educators suggested that the introduction of leaves of absence for staff would enable them to travel overseas.

Educators shared a range of views on pensions. They again highlighted the differences in educators' access to pension benefits, with some educators receiving Retirement Savings Plan contributions from their employer while others did not. Individual educators with long work histories in the field described their disappointment and regret that they did not have a workplace pension as they approached retirement.

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*Many staff have been there for many years with no days off. I worked at a centre for 13 years and when I left there were no benefits. When I am looking to retire, there is nothing for me. (Level III Educator working in Regina)*

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Some educators argued that the lack of pension benefits made it more difficult for programs to recruit and retain younger, qualified staff — especially given competition from public schools. Others saw the absence of pension plans as contributing to the view that child care was a 'stepping stone job,' rather than a longer-term professional career. Educators saw equitable access to pension benefits as one factor that would help to elevate the field as a profession both for current staff and for student educators completing post-secondary credentials. Individual educators indicated that low pay and the rising cost of living resulted in some younger staff expressing a preference for wage increases rather than pension contributions, given their more immediate need for higher incomes.

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*It's just a job, not a career. People don't stay for a career because there is no family stuff. There is no pension, people don't stay if there aren't benefits. If I cannot support my family, I can't stay. I need family hours to take care of my children. (Level III Educator working in Regina)*

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*I really appreciate that we get family time, which means that we don't have to use a holiday day. It is time that we need. Sometimes things come up and you just need time off for appointments for your kids. Before I used to think how I can't go on holidays because I used those hours for appointments. (Level III Educator working in Regina)*

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Educators working in family child care shared many of the same concerns as centre-based staff in respect to their limited access to benefits. They noted the challenges of being self-employed and the need for them to pay privately for benefits such as health care (e.g. Blue Cross private insurance). They similarly noted the challenges they faced in taking sick days or time off for family matters. Individual educators highlighted the importance of including time-off provisions in their service contracts with parents and families. Although, this was not something all providers were comfortable in doing. Family child care educators highlighted the loss of income they faced when they were unable to work.

Individual family child care educators advised that the physical demands of child care work and the relatively low pay made the lack of access to affordable benefits more difficult for educators to manage as they reached either the mid-point or anticipated latter phases of their working lives. Individual educators expressed concerns that their lack of pension savings would result in them having to work longer, despite the physical demands of the work.

Educators in all the focus groups were in favour of publicly funded benefit and pension plans for child care staff, both in centre-based and family child care. They argued that publicly funded benefits would not only



help with staff retention and the recruitment of new educators but would also elevate the field and support a higher valuing of early learning and child care work. Educators saw a more ‘centralized’ approach to the financing of staff benefits as a way of making benefits more equitable and accessible to all staff, including those working in smaller organizations. They also argued that all educators should have access to a ‘minimum standard’ of benefits.

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*A provincially funded approach would be better because everybody would have their basic benefits covered which would be really good so we don't have a competition for the centres. Some centres have good benefits and some don't. All centres would have this. If you have universal, that would be good for everyone. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)*

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## Early Childhood Educator Compensation

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Early childhood educators’ discussions of compensation covered a range of topics. Broadly, educators working in centre-based care were concerned both with their low pay, compared to professional staff working in related fields — including public education, and the inequities in compensation within the field. While educators saw the wage enhancements introduced by the Ministry of Education under the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-wide agreement as a positive development, they were disappointed that not all educators or staff working in child care were eligible to receive them. Some educators were also worried that the reliance on grant funding to finance the wage enhancements meant that they could be discontinued at a future date if government priorities changed or if funding was no longer available. Family child care educators were concerned that their incomes had fallen because of rising household and operating costs. Overall, early childhood educators working in both centre-based care and family child care supported the introduction of a publicly funded provincial wage scale, which they saw as potentially increasing their income and reducing the inequities in compensation across the sector.

Centre-based educators appreciated the significant wage increases many staff had received through the wage enhancements. Individual educators described the difference the increases had made for them personally, including sharing that they now earned an hourly wage which exceeded what they had thought was possible when they entered the field. Other educators, however, including those who were not eligible for wage enhancements, remained concerned that their compensation still did not reflect their level of education, length of service nor the demands and responsibilities of working with young children. Some shared that they struggled to cover their monthly living expenses and advised that their wages were lower than those of staff in non-skilled fields, including the service sector.

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*I am truly making more in the field than I ever thought I would. But we need to look at all that we do and whether our wages are reflective of the work. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)*

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Educators saw low wages as one of the main reasons experienced staff left the field, resulting in programs struggling to recruit and retain qualified staff. They advised that educators commonly reached the top of their pay scales after around ten years of work in the field, leaving them with limited opportunities for future income growth and, in the case of some experienced staff, few financial incentives to stay in the field. Educators suggested that ‘bonus’ payments for long-term service might be one possible strategy to encourage experienced staff to remain in the field.





Educators also advised that the low pay across the sector resulted in staff moving between centres for relatively small increases in hourly pay rates to raise their incomes. Overall, educators argued that more competitive wages and greater pay equity within the sector would reduce staff turnover and the related disruptions to organizations and service delivery when staff leave.

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*I feel that everyone in the field must start at \$25 per hour. It is a field that requires education. To have a Level I you need schooling. You need skills. We do a lot of things — observation, documentation and this job is demanding. My wage is so low for my education. (Level II Educator working in Saskatoon)*

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Despite the importance of the wage enhancements for individual educators' financial well-being, participants across focus groups highlighted some challenges with their design and implementation. Educators' main concerns focussed on the pay thresholds used to determine eligibility for wage enhancements. They suggested that staff newer to the field, as well as those with lower levels of certification, were more likely to have received the enhancements than more experienced staff with longer work histories. They advised that this had resulted in some tensions within staff teams. Educators reported that some senior staff were discouraged or disheartened by their ineligibility for enhancements, leading to some questioning whether they should stay in the field. They were further concerned that staff in administrative and support roles, including those responsible for food and nutrition with no ECE certification, were similarly ineligible for wage enhancements.

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*I have staff that have not received anything, because they are over the threshold. That created a lot of problems for my centre. I have staff that have a Level III, with all kinds of training and experience. They're getting nothing, while Level I and II staff are getting \$4.50 or \$5.50 per hour. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)*

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Individual educators were afraid that the financing of the wage enhancements through grant funding meant that they were not permanent and could be cancelled if government funding priorities changed. They further suggested that the reliance on grant funding added to the general sense of financial instability in the sector and reinforced the views of some educators that their work was undervalued. Educators further drew attention to the different ways in which centres paid the wage enhancements, with some providing educators with separate payments that were not included as part of their regular compensation, while others paid them on a quarterly rather than monthly basis. Individual educators in management and support roles advised that administering the wage enhancements had proven time-consuming. They contrasted the more labour-intensive process of calculating and paying wage enhancements with the more flexible process centres used to disburse the staff 'retention grants' they had previously received.

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*My only fear is technically this is still a grant. And as a Level III, I'm getting \$7.50 an hour increase but this is still a grant. So, if it comes out tomorrow that this grant is now getting taken away, and you take \$7.50 away from my wage, and expect me to still do the exact same job, I'm leaving. And so is every single staff member here. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)*

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In addition to the challenge of low pay, educators highlighted what they saw as further inequities in educator compensation. Some remarked on the limited financial incentives for educators to either increase their knowledge and skills or to improve the quality of their work. Others advised that the constraints on centre budgets made it difficult for educators to be compensated for their additional work or efforts. They further described examples of experienced staff feeling discouraged by their lack of opportunities for future career



and income growth. Individual educators also remarked on tensions around compensation within some staff teams, given the differences in educator pay linked to level of certification rather than their individual work roles and responsibilities.

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*If you're a brand new ECE Level III, you're making the same as a ECE Level III who's been there for over 15 years. Trying to retain staff who have been there for a very long time and have all of this knowledge behind them, and to tell them that a new ECE is making the same as them. That's a pretty hard pill to swallow. (Level III Educator working in a smaller community)*

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Family child care educators similarly considered their incomes as relatively low and under recent pressure due to the rising costs of operating a family day home (e.g. housing costs, nutrition costs and the costs of supplies and materials). They identified the challenges some long-term family child care educators faced in generating a reasonable income and advised that some educators and their families qualified for low-income benefits. Family child care educators cautioned that incomes would need to increase both to attract new providers into the field and to encourage experienced educators to stay. Individual family child care educators shared that they did not receive additional income for providing extended hours of care, and that their incomes had been effectively capped due to the limits on parent fee increases. Individual family child care educators were concerned that new public investments in family child care might not be given the same priority as the expansion of centre-based child care as part of early learning and child care system building.

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*Where I struggle is with the cost of the materials for the curriculum. The amount of breakage that happens, it is unreal. The amount that I throw out on a daily basis. I am also taking a hard hit on nutrition right now. The cost of food and living costs have gone so high. (Level II Family Child Care Educator working in a smaller community)*

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Educators in both centre-based programs and family child care supported the implementation of a provincially funded wage scale that would more fairly and competitively compensate child care staff. They expressed a preference for a wage scale which took in account educators' education, experience and the quality of their work. They further argued that a provincial wage scale should provide educators with a competitive starting wage that reflected the responsibilities and demands of their work. They also highlighted the importance of educators with similar levels of education and experience receiving equitable compensation no matter where they worked. Educators outside of Regina and Saskatoon referenced the need for a wage scale to reflect regional cost differences.

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*Educators are leaving the field. I want to advocate for ECEs to get what they deserve. They deserve to have compensation in line with their education and years of experience. The more education ECEs have and the more experience, they deserve a higher salary. (Level II Student Educator working in Saskatoon)*

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Educators saw a provincially funded wage scale as helping to position the field as a profession rather than just a job, with student educators drawing parallels between the work of early childhood educators and certificated teachers. They saw a wage scale with increments for education, experience and different roles as providing educators with longer-term career opportunities, and helping to encourage experienced, qualified staff to remain in the field. Some educators expressed a fear, however, that the historic undervaluing of their work may result in a provincial wage scale that established relatively low rates of pay for educators. Other educators cautioned that higher wages for staff would need to be matched with increases in pre-service educational requirements consistent with a more professional view of educators and their work. They also emphasized the need for sufficient and sustained public funding for service providers to support a competitive wage scale.



## Educators' Advice to Governments

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If time permitted at the end of the focus group, educators were asked if they had any specific advice for policy makers on how best to improve their working conditions, access to benefits and compensation. Much of the advice educators provided built on their earlier discussions, with some common themes or arguments presented.

First, educators wanted provincial and federal government staff and elected officials to understand the importance and demands of their work. They suggested that if policy makers spent time with certified educators in regulated child care programs and services then they would be more likely to support the investments required to improve educator compensation and working conditions. Educators further wanted government staff and elected officials to understand more fully the increased pressures on front-line staff and the programs and services in which they work. They wanted to be recognized as professionals, given their education and skills, and argued that some policy makers still did not seem to value their work and its impacts on children and their families. Educators expressed the hope that staff working with pre-school aged children would be valued in similar ways to teachers in public education.

Second, educators urged policy makers to seek front-line staff's advice and input on how best to build the capacity of the workforce. They advised that many front-line educators felt left out of system building work and had not had the opportunity to provide input into the policy and funding changes that had impacted their compensation and working conditions. Educators also wanted governments to share information on policy and funding changes with service providers first, before it was communicated to parents and communities.

Third, some educators expressed the view that the focus of early learning and child care system building should now shift more to the delivery of high-quality, inclusive early learning and child care for children and their families given that parent fees had become more affordable. They advised that the successful reduction in parent paid fees had increased the demands on front-line educators as more parents tried to access regulated care. Educators cautioned that more qualified and experienced staff would leave the field unless governments moved quickly to reduce the growing pressures on front-line staff.

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*If we are putting so much into the children we are teaching, we should not be on empty ourselves. You can get to the point where you don't feel you are getting anything—you feel you are just giving and giving and there is nothing coming to you. (Student Educator, Saskatchewan Polytechnic)*



# Strategies to Improve Early Childhood Educator Working Conditions, Access to Benefits and Compensation

The observations and insights early childhood educators shared about their working conditions, access to benefits and compensation — just over two years into early learning and child care system building in Saskatchewan — have much in common with those previously shared by their fellow educators in other regions of the country. Broadly, they reflect the well-documented and longstanding challenges that early learning and care workforces have historically faced across much of Canada and highlight the need for significant new approaches and investments to help build workforce capacity as a central foundation of system building.

Saskatchewan early childhood educators, like their colleagues in other provinces and territories, remain committed and motivated to work with young children and their families. They continue, however, like their colleagues, to face challenging working conditions, have limited access to workplace benefit plans and, despite recent improvements in their hourly wages, remain more modestly paid than staff in related fields, including public education. Moreover, there are variations in educator working conditions, access to benefits and compensation between organizations that further contribute to workforce instability and make it more challenging for educators to consistently support and foster the high-quality early learning and child care in which all children learn and develop.

The significant expansion of regulated early learning and child care anticipated under the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement makes investments in the workforce a priority. New strategies are required both to stabilize the workforce and, over time, to build its capacity. The important work the Ministry of Education has already undertaken to, amongst other things, increase educator wages provides a basis for further work on compensation, allied with related improvements to educator working conditions and access to benefits. The larger provincial goal should be one of designing and implementing a comprehensive workforce strategy to support and sustain the ‘thriving’ workforce identified by federal, provincial and territorial ministers as central to system building at their July, 2023 meeting in Iqaluit. As it undertakes this work, in partnership with early learning and child care stakeholders, the Ministry of Education has the opportunity to learn from the successful strategies other provinces have recently implemented. It can further draw on the larger body of research on workforce development.

To support the above work, the Ministry of Education will need to review existing child care policies, regulations and funding to ensure that they appropriately support and value early childhood educators and their work. The increasingly diverse populations who access regulated early learning and child care means that educators require additional knowledge, skills and access to specialized resources to meet the needs of all of the children and families in their care. Updated child care policies, regulations and funding will be





foundational to ensuring that educators are appropriately prepared, resourced and supported to deliver the high-quality, inclusive early learning and care all children and their families need and deserve.

## Improvements in Early Childhood Educator Working Conditions

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Early childhood educators' working conditions fundamentally shape the quality of early learning and child care for children and their families. They further impact on the ability of the sector to attract and retain qualified staff. Challenging or difficult working conditions contribute to high levels of educator stress, burn-out and staff turnover, which, in turn, disrupt the relationships between educators and children, erode the knowledge and skills of staff teams and reduce the capacity of programs and services to deliver high quality early learning and care.

To create the high-quality environments in which children learn and thrive, professional early childhood educators require well-resourced and supported workplaces with sufficient staffing levels to meet children's individual learning and care needs; dedicated time for program planning, documentation and meeting with families; opportunities for high-quality professional learning as well as access to specialized resources and support when required. Educators further need to feel valued, respected and supported by workplace cultures, including management practices, that provide them with an appropriate level of self-efficacy. New, inexperienced educators starting out in the field especially benefit from well-resourced, supportive working environments, which enable them to work alongside and learn from experienced staff as they build their own knowledge and skills.

The historic limited public funding for early learning and child care in Saskatchewan and much of the rest of Canada, has resulted in workforces that are commonly under-resourced and face challenging working conditions. Improving early childhood educators' working conditions is therefore a critical first step in building the high-quality early learning and child care system that children and their families need.

The following strategies are proposed to improve educators' working conditions.

### ***The Design and Funding of Orientation and Induction Supports for New Educators***

The expansion of regulated child care services outlined under the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement requires a significant increase in the number of qualified educators working in the field. Large numbers of new educators will need to be recruited and retained, many of whom will have limited formal education and little direct experience working in regulated child care. Research from both the early learning and care field and related sectors such as public education, highlights the high turnover rates among new staff, many of whom leave after relatively short periods of employment. To help retain new educators entering the field, the Ministry of Education should work with the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association (SECA), public post-secondary institutions, service providers and early learning and care researchers to design a series of orientation and induction resources and supports for use in regulated child care programs and services, including family child care.

The Ministry should work with service providers to ensure that all new educators have access to orientation and induction resources and supports to help them integrate into the workplace both when they start out in the field and when they transition into new positions. The Ministry should provide dedicated funding and



resources to child care centres to enable them to support and orient new educators, with similar supports also provided to new family child care educators setting up a family child care home.

### ***Funding for Back-up and Relief Staff to Enrich Staff-to-Child Ratios***

Early childhood educators find the current staff-to-child ratios and group sizes set out in regulation difficult to manage. This is especially the case for educators new to the field, many of whom have limited pre-service education and little experience working with very young children. The current staffing levels make it difficult for educators to provide children with the one-to-one care they often need, while relatively large group sizes add further complexity to the demands of creating high-quality learning environments for children. During the focus group discussions, educators reported particular challenges in working with groups of up to ten toddlers (19 to 29 months old) with staff-to-child ratios of one to five and groups of up to 20 preschoolers (30 months and over) with staff-to-child ratios of one to ten. The challenges educators referenced echo the findings from previous research on educator working conditions and highlight the often demanding and stressful nature of work with young children.

To relieve the demands and stresses on educators in the short- to medium-terms, the Ministry of Education should provide child care centres with dedicated funding for back-up or relief staff. Centres would use the dedicated funding both to support periodic higher staff-to-child ratios (more staff) and or to temporarily relieve staff who are overstressed or overburdened. The Ministry should provide similar dedicated funding to licensed family child care educators to help them better support young children's learning and care.

In the longer-term, the Ministry should review the current staff-to-child ratios and group sizes in centre-based child care, family child care and group family child care to ensure they are consistent with supporting the delivery of high-quality and inclusive early learning and child care. As part of the above review, the Ministry should consider establishing new staffing requirements for the number and proportion of 'child care workers' who meet or exceed the qualifications of an ECE Level II or ECE Level III at the group or classroom level in centre-based care. Similarly, the Ministry should review the qualifications for licensees of family child care homes and assistants to ensure that they are consistent with the provision of high-quality and inclusive early learning and care.

### ***Redesigned Approaches to Educator Professional Learning and Development***

Continuing professional learning is important for the professionalization of the workforce, educators' individual growth and development and the delivery of high-quality and inclusive early learning and care. Ongoing professional learning can help educators with a lower level of certification increase their knowledge and skills. It can also provide more experienced educators with opportunities to review and update their practice to reflect the rapidly developing ideas and understandings of children's early learning. Educators' participation in professional learning with other educators can further help improve communication and collaboration within centre-based staff teams, and help family child care educators build professional networks with other educators.

The Ministry of Education should work with SECA, public post-secondary institutions, researchers and service providers to redesign the funding and delivery of educator professional learning. This should support ongoing educational opportunities that are comprehensive and align with educators' work with children and families; accessible to educators during regular work hours; provide educators with more equitable access to professional learning opportunities; and support educators' on-site learning as part of staff teams.



The following strategies are proposed to support effective ongoing professional learning for educators.

### *Professional Development in Pedagogical Leadership and Management/ Administration for Staff in Leadership Positions*

Educator working conditions are shaped both by the resources available to programs and services and the pedagogical and organizational leadership senior staff provide at a centre level. Centre leaders play key roles in shaping educators' working environments through their management of workplace policies and practices. They can further influence and guide educators' ongoing learning and growth both through the support they provide for educator professional development and the opportunities they make available for staff to take on new work roles and responsibilities.

To increase the capacity of management and leadership staff in centre-based care to create high quality working conditions for front-line educators, the Ministry of Education should work with public post-secondary institutions, SECA and sector leaders to increase the educational opportunities available for centre directors and other senior staff. These increased educational opportunities should include a focus both on pedagogy and the management or administration of centre-based child care and can build on the Early Childhood Administrator Advanced Certificate offered through Saskatchewan Polytechnic.

Over time, all centre management and leadership staff should be required to complete dedicated pedagogical and management education to support their work with educators. This education should be funded through the Ministry of Education and available at no cost to centre management and leadership staff.

### *Designated Professional Development Days*

To provide early childhood educators with equitable access to professional learning during their regular workday, the Ministry of Education should work with regulated child care providers, including family day home educators to develop and support designated sector-wide professional development days. Regulated child care programs and services would close on these designated professional development days to enable all educators to participate in approved professional learning activities either at the centre or regional level. Family day home educators would have the opportunity to participate in local or regional professional development days either with centre-based educators or with other family child care educators.

The Ministry should work with public post-secondary institutions, SECA, child care researchers and service providers to support the design and implementation of designated professional learning days that meet the ongoing professional learning needs of early childhood educators. Early childhood educators, including family child care educators, would receive their regular compensation during their participation in professional development days.

### *Mandatory Ongoing Professional Learning For Certified Early Childhood Educators*

In parallel with the implementation of designated professional development days, the Ministry of Education should introduce a regulatory or policy requirement for all certified educators, including family child care educators, to complete a required number of approved professional learning hours in a designated period, for example up to 45 hours of approved professional learning every three years. The Ministry would require educators to renew their certification on a three-year basis, with renewal dependent on their completion of the required number of hours of approved professional learning.



To support and guide their ongoing professional learning, all certified early childhood educators should further be required to develop an individual professional learning plan. The professional learning plan would set out an educator's education and training goals to build their knowledge, skills and competencies. Educators would be responsible for updating their learning plans on an annual basis. Centre-based educators would develop and update their learning plans with the support and guidance of centre management or leadership staff. Family child care educators would develop and update their learning plans with the support of Ministry of Education consultants.

### *The Design and Implementation of a Pedagogical Mentor Program*

To support improvements in educators' pedagogy and practice the Ministry of Education should work with public post-secondary institutions, SECA and child care researchers to design and implement an on-site pedagogical mentor program. As part of the program, the Ministry would support the work of pedagogical mentors who would work with a cluster of child care centres or a network of family child care homes. The pedagogical mentors would work with the leadership staff in centres to determine the pedagogical needs and then develop organization specific learning plans for centre staff. The pedagogical mentors would work in similar ways with networks of family child care educators. The pedagogical mentors would be experienced, Level III certified educators who ideally would also have completed further early learning and care education at the degree level.

Over time, the Ministry of Education should build the capacity of the pedagogical mentor program to ensure that all regulated child care services, and family child care homes have equitable access to on-site pedagogical mentors. In designing the pedagogical mentor program, the Ministry of Education should review existing pedagogical models in place in other jurisdictions and work with regulated service providers to determine the best model for use in Saskatchewan.



## ***The Provision of Paid Non-Contact Time***

Educators require equitable access to paid non-contact time to support their work with children and families. Non-contact time provides educators with opportunities to plan and document children's early learning, to reflect individually and in teams on their work and to meet with families and parents. It also provides educators with some respite from the many demands of direct work with young children.

To provide all certified educators, including family child care educators, with equitable access to paid non-contact time as part of their regular work day, the Ministry of Education should amend current early learning and care regulations and or policies to include designated non-contact time for educators. The Ministry will need to provide centre-based child care programs and services with additional operational funding to support this non-contact time, while also determining how family child care educators can be provided with resources to support their access to paid non-contact time. The Ministry should work with SECA, ELCC researchers and service providers to determine the amount of paid non-contact time educators receive on a weekly and monthly basis.

## ***A Comprehensive Review of the Funding and Supports Provided Through the Ministry of Education to Support Inclusion***

To support the inclusion of children with additional needs and more complex needs, certified educators require appropriate pre-service education and ongoing professional learning as well as access to specialized resources, supports and allied professionals. Educators advise that the Enhanced Accessibility Grant and the other inclusion initiatives provided through the Ministry of Education are not sufficient to support the inclusion of children with additional or more complex learning and care needs. Educators report that this is contributing to challenging working environments for front-line staff, poor quality learning and care environments for some children and their families and, in some cases, the exclusion of children with additional needs from regulated child care.

To support the inclusion of children with additional and more complex needs in regulated child care, the Ministry of Education should review the inclusion resources, services and supports it provides child care programs and family child care educators to determine the critical areas for improvement and further investment. The Ministry should further work with public post-secondary institutions to increase their capacity to provide educators with additional pre-service education on inclusion as well as dedicated professional learning opportunities. The Ministry of Education's support for the Autism Spectrum Disorder Certificate, delivered through Saskatchewan Polytechnic, provides a possible approach that could be extended to include other areas of inclusion.

## **Improvements in Early Childhood Educator Access to Benefits**

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Workplace benefits form an important part of educators' total compensation that contribute both to staff well-being and retention. Early learning and care work is physically and emotionally demanding, with educators' close interactions with children regularly exposing them to infections and viruses. The primarily female workforce further commonly has family and caring responsibilities outside of the workplace, which make family-friendly employment conditions an important feature of high-quality working environments.





Benefits such as paid sick time, personal care days, health and dental benefits, paid vacation time and pensions all support educators in their work with children and families and provide important incentives in the recruitment and retention of qualified staff. The historic limited public funding of child care, prior to the Canada-wide system building investments, and the primary reliance on small community-based nonprofit organizations to deliver services has resulted, however, in educators having less access to workplace benefits than staff in related publicly funded fields, including those in public education. It has further led to differences in the benefits educators receive.

In December 2023, Nova Scotia announced the introduction of a province-wide benefits and pension program for early childhood educators. As of January 1, 2024, all employees have access to an Employee and Family Assistance Program and as of May 2024 were enrolled in group benefits and pension plans.<sup>8</sup> The group benefits plan includes medical, dental, orthodontic, vision, life and long-term disability coverage, EFAP, and emergency travel coverage, provided through the non-profit Health Association of Nova Scotia. The defined benefit pension plan is provided through the CAAT Pension Plan, also a nonprofit. The provincial government provides a grant to family home child care providers to enable them to source their own benefits and contribute to a registered retirement savings plan. The province-wide benefit and pension plans follow educators as long as they remain eligible and are employed by a provincially licensed and funded child care centre or family day home agency in Nova Scotia.

The following strategies are proposed to improve educators' access to benefits.

### ***Design and Implementation of a Publicly Funded Province-wide Benefit Plan for Certified Early Childhood Educators***

The Ministry of Education should work with SECA, early learning and child care researchers, insurance companies, and service providers to research, design and implement a comprehensive publicly funded, province-wide benefit plan for all certified early childhood educators. The Ministry should seek advice and input from certified educators and service providers on the proposed benefit plan, including from those service providers which currently provide their staff with access to benefit plans. The Ministry should work with ELCC stakeholders to determine how best to provide family child care educators with access to equivalent benefit plans that align with their status as self-employed individuals.

All regulated centre-based child care providers receiving funding under the Canada-wide agreement would be required either to support their employees' access to the province-wide plan or provide them with similar coverage under existing plans.

### ***Design and Implementation of a Publicly Funded Province-wide Defined Contribution Pension Plan for Certified Early Childhood Educators***

The Ministry of Education should work with SECA, early learning and child care researchers and pension fund providers to research and design a defined contribution pension plan for all certified early childhood educators. The Ministry should seek input and advice from certified early childhood educators and service providers on the proposed pension plan, including from those service providers which currently provide their staff with access to a pension plan. The Ministry should work with ELCC stakeholders to determine how best to provide family child care educators with access to a defined contribution pension plan or contribution that aligns with their status as self-employed individuals.

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<sup>8</sup> Child Care Nova Scotia. *Pension and Group Benefits*. Retrieved from: <https://childcarenovascotia.ca/benefits>



All regulated centred-based child care providers receiving funding under the Canada-wide agreement would be required to support their employees' access to the provincial defined contribution pension plan or provide them with similar pension benefits under an existing plan.

### ***Early Childhood Educator Access to Paid Sick Days and Paid Personal Days***

The Ministry of Education should work with SECA, early learning and child care researchers and service providers to establish new province-wide guidelines for paid sick days and paid personal days for certified early childhood educators. The Ministry should review options for ensuring that both centre-based educators and family child care educators have reasonable and equitable access to paid sick days and paid personal days.

Following the above work with stakeholders, the Ministry should set out, in regulation and or policy, the minimum number of paid sick days and paid personal days certified early childhood educators would be entitled to receive. All regulated child care providers receiving funding under the Canada-wide agreement would be required to provide their employees with the minimum number of paid sick days and personal days set out in regulation or policy. Service providers would have the discretion to exceed the minimums set out in regulation or policy.

### ***Early Childhood Educator Access to Paid Vacation Time***

The Ministry of Education should work with SECA, early learning and child care researchers and service providers to establish new minimum requirements for the number of paid vacation days certified early childhood educators receive. The Ministry should review and consider options to ensure that family child care educators have equitable access to reasonable paid vacation time.

Following the above work with stakeholders, the Ministry should set out, in regulation and or policy, the minimum number of paid vacation days certified early childhood educators would be eligible to receive, based on their years of service in the field. All regulated centre-based child care providers receiving funding under the Canada-wide agreement would be required to provide their employees with the minimum number of paid vacation days set out in regulation or policy. Service providers would have the discretion to exceed the minimums set out in regulation or policy.

## **Improvements in Early Childhood Educator Compensation**

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To address the historic challenge of low compensation, the Ministry of Education has introduced a series of wage enhancements to raise the wages of certified early childhood educators. Even with these enhancements, however, service providers continue to face challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff. During the focus group discussions, educators expressed concerns about their relatively low compensation, which remains less than that of staff in related fields. Further, they also commented on the inequities in educator pay between organizations and the limited opportunities for income growth for qualified, experienced staff. These concerns are similar to those raised by educators in other provinces and territories.

To improve educator compensation, the majority of provincial and territorial governments, including the Government of Saskatchewan, have committed to develop wage scales or grids for certified early childhood



educators as part of their Canada-wide early learning and child care system building agreements. Publicly funded wages scales can help provide educators with competitive, equitable compensation that reflects their level of education, years of service and the roles they play in the delivery of high-quality regulated child care. They can further help ensure that educators have opportunities for future income growth commensurate with increases in their level of education, experience and their taking on of additional roles and responsibilities. The Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus, working in partnership with faculty from the University of Regina, has undertaken initial research on a wage scale for certified educators in the province. This work, along with the findings from related work in other provinces, can help to inform the development and implementation of a provincial wage scale for certified educators.



## ***The Development and Implementation of a Publicly Funded, Province-wide Wage Scale for Certified Early Childhood Educators***

The Ministry of Education should work with SECA, the Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus, early learning and child care researchers and labour market experts to develop and implement a province-wide wage scale for certified early childhood educators, drawing both on the work already completed by the Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus in partnership with faculty from the University of Regina and related work on provincial wage scales in other provinces. The Ministry should seek input and advice from service providers on how the proposed wage scale can support the recruitment and retention of qualified educators and fairly compensate them based on their level of pre-service education, experience and work roles and responsibilities.

To support the development of the above wage scale, Ministry staff should review the design and implementation of similar wage scales for certified educators in other provinces as well as those for staff in related fields in Saskatchewan (such as public education and health care). The Ministry should further research and determine whether the wage scale needs to include 'regional allowances' to fairly and competitively compensate staff who live and work in higher-cost regions of the province. The Ministry will also need to consider how a provincial wage scale can accommodate educator compensation that exceeds the wage amounts set out in the grid and any current collective agreements in place. The Ministry should further commit to review the wage grid on a regular basis to reflect increases in the cost of living and changing labour market dynamics.

To support the implementation of a provincial wage scale, the Ministry of Education will need to ensure that service providers receive sufficient and equitable operational (supply-side) funding that reflects the different profiles of centre staff teams (number of staff certified at different levels and those with supervisory, pedagogical mentor and management roles) and accommodates increases in educator compensation as staff increase their level of education, gain more years of experience and take on more senior roles. The Ministry will also need to work with ELCC stakeholders to determine how best to compensate family child care educators in ways that are fair and equitable.

All regulated child care providers receiving funding under the Canada-wide agreement would be required, at minimum, to compensate educators in line with the amounts set out in the provincial wage scale. Service providers may choose to provide educators with higher compensation than that set out in the provincial wage scale.



# Conclusions

The Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement provides the opportunity to transform the provincial child care sector to better meet the needs of children and their families. New workforce investments will be central to this transformation, given the foundational role early childhood educators play in the delivery of high-quality, inclusive early learning and child care.

Despite the significant benefits of investments in early learning and child care, the historic reliance on parent fees to cover the bulk of service costs, allied with lower levels of public funding, management and planning have resulted in the provision of services that are only able to meet the needs of a portion of the children and families who require access to high-quality, inclusive early learning and child care. They have further hampered the development of a stable, well-qualified and well-supported workforce and contributed to a broader under-valuing of early childhood educators and their work with children and families. In Saskatchewan, as in much of the rest of Canada, the predominantly female early learning and child care workforce faces working conditions that are often challenging and stressful, has limited access to benefits and receives compensation that is generally lower than that of professional staff in related fields, such as public education. Further, there are significant variations between organizations, with service providers having different levels of resources and capacity to support educators and their work.

The findings from the focus groups as well as from previous research on the ECE workforce, highlight the need for new strategies and investments to improve educator working conditions, access to benefits and compensation. The increasing demands on early childhood educators require a comprehensive workforce strategy to help stabilize the workforce and provide a firm foundation for early learning and child care system building. A large body of research, allied with findings from promising approaches other provinces are developing to support their early learning and care workforces, can help inform how the Government of Saskatchewan builds on its initial investments in early childhood educators.

The Ministry of Education might also look to the public school system for direction on the kinds of strategies and approaches required to ensure that early childhood educators have more equitable access to the supports, resources and rewards they need to deliver high-quality early learning and care. While the demands on public school teachers are significant, and perhaps increasing, they nevertheless have access to competitive salaries, comprehensive benefits and paid professional learning and non-contact time. Public schools and teachers further have the support of larger system infrastructure which ensures a greater consistency of service delivery through public funding and management. The improvements needed to advance early childhood educator compensation, working conditions and access to benefits in the province require new investments and strategies supported and managed at the provincial level rather than the reliance on individual service providers to address what remain sector-wide challenges.





# Appendix A

## Early Childhood Educator Working Conditions and Compensation – Focus Group Protocol

The focus group questions were revised in minor ways for the discussions with students completing post-secondary credentials and for family child care educators.

### Introduction

The current focus group is one of a series of groups The Muttart Foundation, the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association and the Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus within the Canadian Child Care Federation are hosting with early childhood educators to gather your advice on the improvements in educator compensation and working conditions that will help build a high-quality ELCC system in Saskatchewan.

The results of the discussions will be compiled into a report that will be shared with the provincial and federal governments and with other ELCC stakeholders.



## A. Early Childhood Educator Working Conditions

### Facilitator introduction

We would like to begin by asking you some questions about early childhood educators' working conditions. The phrase 'early childhood educators' working conditions are children's learning conditions,' speaks to the importance of making sure that early childhood educators' working conditions support their work with young children.

### Facilitator Questions

1. Thinking back to when you first started working in child care, what did you find the most useful in terms of helping you begin your work in a specific centre or program? For example, did you receive an orientation or written materials from your supervisor/director which were helpful?

**Follow up:** Are there other orientation activities or resources that would have been helpful?

2. Thinking of the position you have now, what resources and supports are available to you to help you provide quality care?

**Follow up:** Are there any other resources and supports that add to the quality of your working conditions?

3. Apart from wages and benefits (which we will discuss later) what changes, if any, would you like to see at your centre to improve educators' working conditions?
4. Do you have any other thoughts or suggestions that you would like to share about working conditions in child care in general and how they might be improved?

## B. Access to Benefits

### Facilitator Introduction

We would now like to ask you some questions about employee benefits.

Employee benefits form an important part of the compensation early childhood educators receive. Previous studies indicate that early childhood educators often have access to fewer workplace benefits, such as paid sick time, health and dental benefits, life and disability insurance and pension benefits than staff in other education and caring fields.

### Facilitator Questions

1. Based on your experiences in your current job, which of the employer-paid or employer-employee cost-shared benefits that you receive are of most value or importance to you?

**Follow-up:** What makes these particular benefits important to you?

2. Are there benefits that are currently not available to you that would make a difference to your work or your well-being?
3. Are there any final thoughts or comments you would like to share on early childhood educators' access to workplace benefits before we move on?



## **C. Early Childhood Educator Compensation**

### **Facilitator Introduction**

To conclude the focus group, we would like to ask you some questions about early childhood educators' wages or compensation. In Saskatchewan as in the rest of Canada, early childhood educators' wages or salaries remain relatively low when compared to staff in related fields with similar qualifications. The Saskatchewan Government has provided educators with three wage enhancements since it signed its Canada-wide agreement in August, 2021. Although not all educators were eligible for these enhancements.

### **Facilitator Questions**

1. Based on your experiences, what changes are needed to early childhood educators' compensation to better reflect their work responsibilities, education and work experience?

### **Approach to ECE Compensation**

#### **Facilitator Introduction**

We would like to ask you some questions about how the Saskatchewan government might best support fair and reasonable wages for early childhood educators that reflect their education, experience and work responsibilities.

The Saskatchewan government has relied recently on wage enhancements, combined with employer paid wages, to compensate certified educators. The Ministry of Education has advised that it plans to develop a provincial wage scale for educators, an approach that a number of other provincial governments have already taken.

2. Based on your experience working in the field, what should a provincial wage scale for early childhood educators include to ensure that educators are fairly compensated for their work?
3. Are there any additional things you would like to say on early childhood educator compensation?

## **Concluding Focus Group Question (time permitting)**

### **Facilitator Introduction/Question**

1. We have covered a lot of different topics this evening on working conditions, benefits and compensation. As we end our discussions, I would like to ask each of you what you think the federal and provincial government need to focus on as they work to improve educators' compensation and working conditions.
2. What one or two specific pieces of advice would you give to them?





Saskatchewan Early Learning  
and Care Leaders' Caucus



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