



Regulations Can Support Quality Early Learning and Child Care



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Quality early learning and care plays an important role in the healthy development and well-being of children. It supports a strong economy and increases the labour force participation of mothers. It helps to reduce poverty and connects people with their communities.

Alberta's review of the 2008 Child Care Licensing Act¹ and supporting regulations provides a timely opportunity for broad discussions on quality early learning and care. A new report by Jane Beach—a nationally recognized policy expert and consultant on early childhood education—explores regulatory and non-regulatory measures that support quality. The Beach report offers a number of practical suggestions that Alberta could consider as it updates its legislation.

About the Beach Report

Alberta completed a review of its 2008 Child Care Licensing Act and regulations in the summer of 2020. The purpose of the review was to “improve quality and safety in child care”² while also “reducing red tape, supporting choice for parents, and maintaining focus on the safety and well-being of children.”³

Alberta's legislative review provides the context for Jane Beach's report—a discussion paper titled [An Examination of Regulatory and Other Measures to Support Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta](#). Beach's study examines support for early learning and child care from both a system-wide and a program-level perspective.

A child care system includes a number of interlinked elements that are determined by public policy. System elements include financing, human resources, physical environment, planning and policy development, governance, infrastructure, data, research and evaluation, and continual monitoring and improvement. To achieve system quality, these elements must be considered in totality rather than in isolation from each other.

Regulation typically addresses program-related aspects of quality. Regulation plays an important role in ensuring the health and safety of children. And it provides a strong foundation for quality. But regulation alone cannot guarantee quality. Regulation must be supported by policy, funding, parental involvement, stakeholder engagement, support for the workforce, and continual monitoring and

¹ The act came into force on November 1, 2008.

² Ministry of Children's Services, “[Child Care Engagement](#),” last updated October 16, 2020.

³ Government of Alberta, *Children's Services Business Plan 2020–23*, p. 19.

improvement. And it must be considered within the context of ideas about the purpose of child care and about children and their role in society.

The Beach report proposes values and guiding principles that could guide the development of a quality system and “serve as a preamble to a regulatory framework.”⁴ It identifies and defines the system– and program–related factors that contribute to quality, accessibility, and affordability. And it proposes several regulatory measures that the Alberta government can adopt to improve quality.

Beach’s recommendations are based on a review of Canadian and international studies on quality and on interviews with early learning and care experts. They are informed by detailed analyses of early learning and care approaches in Alberta and four other Canadian provinces—Prince Edward Island, Ontario, Manitoba, and British Columbia. These jurisdictions were selected for a number of reasons:

- They have recently undertaken studies aimed at improving child care quality.
- They offer a range of approaches to and goals for early learning and care.
- They have both regulatory and other measures that support quality.

“Collectively, they provide useful examples of quality measures that could apply within the Alberta context” (p. 4).

The Beach report includes an analysis of Norway’s early learning and care system as a comparison. In Norway, accessible, affordable, high-quality early learning and care is considered a public good and a public responsibility. Children have a legislated right to child care from the time they are a year old until they start school. Child care is publicly funded and parents pay no more than 6% of their income in fees. At the same time, a significant portion of early learning and care in Norway is delivered on a for-profit basis. Beach notes that “much can be learned from how Norway has addressed many of the challenges faced in Canada with for-profit delivery” (p. 4).

About This Brief

This brief focuses on the key licensing and regulatory measures described in the Beach report. These measures support quality early learning and care.

Albertans might expect to see some or all of these measures included in the province’s forthcoming new child care legislation, which is intended to improve quality.

What Is Quality?

Quality is a relative concept that reflects the values, beliefs, culture, context, needs, and ideology of an individual or a society.

⁴ Jane Beach, *An Examination of Regulatory and Other Measures to Support Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta* (Edmonton: Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care and the Muttart Foundation, 2020), p. 2.

Subsequent quotations from the Beach report will be cited with an in-text page reference.

Defining quality is a dynamic, ongoing process that is important in its own right. The process provides opportunities for diverse stakeholders to share, discuss, and understand other people’s values and perspectives.

Values are important in evaluating quality and in building systems to support it. For example, if child care is viewed as a private responsibility that is best left to the marketplace, the role of government could be “limited to setting minimal safety standards and targeted funding for those considered most in need” (p. 26). If child care is valued as a public good—as it is in Norway—governments are usually more involved in planning, funding, and managing services in collaboration with stakeholders.

Quality is multifaceted and multidimensional. Countries with accessible, high-quality early learning and care systems have approached the development, delivery, and funding of services in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, they share a number of common characteristics, including low parental fees and high educational standards for early childhood educators. They also consider early learning and care as part of a larger set of social, economic, and educational supports—including wage scales for educators, parental leaves, and family policies that support a healthy work–life balance.

What Are the Components of Quality?

Structural quality includes staff qualifications, child-to-staff ratios, group size, the indoor and outdoor physical environment, and a program philosophy or curriculum framework. Because these components are relatively easy to measure, they are often included within regulatory frameworks.

Process quality refers to the nature of experiences in an early learning and care setting. It includes the interactions children have among themselves as well as the interactions between staff and children, staff and parents, and staff and colleagues. Process quality is more difficult to measure than structural quality, but it affects children in a more direct way.

Structural quality and process quality are interrelated. **Good structural quality that is defined in regulation supports good process quality.** For example, if staff members are better educated, they are more likely to engage children in interactions that promote healthy development and well-being.

As Beach notes, regulations that support quality are best considered as a whole rather than separately. For example, higher child-to-staff ratios might make sense if staff have a strong educational background, but they might be harmful if staff have little education.

How Can Regulation Support Quality?

In Alberta, regulation has traditionally focused on protecting children’s health and safety. But lessons from other jurisdictions show that regulation can support many other aspects of quality.

The discussion that follows summarizes some of the regulatory and policy issues Beach addresses in depth in her report.⁵

⁵ Beach’s recommendations for regulatory change are consistent with many of the recommendations made by the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta in its February 2020 position paper [*Getting It Right: Recommendations for Improving Alberta’s Child Care Licensing Legislation*](#).

In her report, Beach discusses many regulatory and non-regulatory measures in addition to those discussed in this brief. These measures include research and data collection, monitoring and inspection, workforce development, wage support, stakeholder engagement (including the role of municipalities), parental involvement, information sharing, public reporting, and inclusion of children with special needs.

STAFF QUALIFICATIONS

"The single most critical factor affecting the quality of early learning and care programs is the knowledge, skills, and stability of the early childhood workforce" (p. 32, citing Ontario's Expert Panel on Human Resources). Higher standards for education would significantly contribute to improved quality.

The European Commission Childcare Network recommends that at least 60% of frontline staff should have three years of post-secondary education that includes the theory and practice of pedagogy and child development (p. 36). No Canadian jurisdiction meets this benchmark.

Alberta requires that 1 in 3 staff per centre has a one-year early learning and care certificate or equivalent. Alberta's educational and certification standards are lower than Ontario's and Manitoba's, which require some staff to have a two-year diploma in early learning and care.

Alberta is unique in having an equivalency process through which certificates can be granted to individuals with education in disciplines such as disability studies, kinesiology, social work, or therapeutic rehabilitation. The equivalency process recognizes such education as equivalent to specialized early learning and child care education. Alberta's equivalency process has been criticized by early childhood educators in the province. It has also been criticized in provinces where the qualifications of Alberta-certified staff must be recognized even though these individuals would not ordinarily qualify for certification in those jurisdictions because they lack early years education.

Of the jurisdictions Beach selected for comparison, Alberta is the only one that allows staff to acquire the minimum required level of certification months after the commencement of employment. It is also the only jurisdiction that does not require ongoing professional development.

Selected Recommendations for Change

Raising the educational and certification requirements for providers requires a long-term workforce development plan. However, the following changes could be made in the short term.

- Require all staff to have a minimum level of certification prior to the commencement of employment.
- Require the renewal of certificates every three years. Require a minimum amount of approved professional learning as a condition of renewal.
- Require staff to have a minimum amount of experience before they can work as program directors in a child care facility.
- Require all program staff to have first aid certification. (Current regulations only require that one in every two staff members is first aid-certified.)

- Eliminate the current equivalency process to ensure that certified staff have the specialized knowledge they need to provide quality child care.
- Develop a workplace training model that would allow experienced staff to acquire an early childhood credential while remaining employed.⁶

CHILD-TO-STAFF RATIOS AND GROUP SIZES

Lower child-to-staff ratios enhance quality and support better outcomes for children. To be effective, however, ratios must be part of a package that includes group size as well as staff training, wages, and experience (p. 43).

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends child-to-staff ratios of 4 to 1 for two-year-olds, 7 to 1 for three-year-olds and 8 to 1 for older children. The academy recommends a maximum group size of 8 for two-year-olds, 14 for three-year-olds and 16 for older children (p. 44).

Child-to-staff ratios are fairly similar across Canadian jurisdictions, but there is considerable variation in group sizes. Alberta's child-to-staff ratio is 4 to 1 for one-year-olds, 8 to 1 for three-year-olds, and 10 to 1 for six-year-olds (p. 115). These standards are in line with those of other jurisdictions, but as discussed earlier, Alberta's staff qualification requirements are generally lower. Furthermore, Alberta (like Prince Edward Island) specifies staff qualification requirements for child care centres rather than for groups of children. This makes it possible to have one or more groups of children where no staff have post-secondary qualifications.

Another concern is that Alberta doubles the allowable ratio when children are sleeping (pp. 43, 78). This practice could be dangerous in an emergency.

Selected Recommendations for Change

Ratios, group size, and qualifications need to be considered as a whole.

- For every group of children, require that at least one staff member has a one-year certificate in early learning and care.
- Review the reduced ratio requirements for sleeping children. Ensure that an additional staff member will be immediately available if there is an emergency

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Safe, secure, well-designed indoor and outdoor play environments provide children with a range of developmental opportunities (p. 78).

The European Commission Childcare Network recommends at least 6 square metres of indoor space for each child under three years and 4 square metres of indoor space for each child between the ages of three and six. The network also recommends at least 6 square metres of outdoor space per child (p. 36).

⁶ The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta notes the disadvantages of apprenticeship models and the advantages of Manitoba's workplace training model, which allows staff to complete an accelerated post-secondary diploma while they continue to work in licensed early learning and care programs. See [Getting It Right: Recommendations for Improving Alberta's Child Care Licensing Legislation](#) (Edmonton, February 2020), pp. 73–74, 112–113.

Legislated indoor space requirements in Beach's selected jurisdictions (British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario and PEI) range from 2.8 to 3.7 square metres per child. Alberta's requirement for 3 square metres of indoor space is in keeping with these standards.

Legislated outdoor space requirements in Beach's selected jurisdictions range from 5.6 to 7 square metres per child. Alberta's requirements for outdoor space fall below these standards, especially for very young children.

Alberta requires 4.5 square metres of outdoor space for most children, but only 2 square metres for children younger than 19 months. In addition, Alberta's early learning and care programs are only required to meet legislated outdoor space requirements for 50% of their licensed capacity.

Selected Recommendations for Change

- For all new facilities, increase the outdoor space requirements to at least 6 square metres per child.

CURRICULUM FRAMEWORKS

Curriculum frameworks support quality by ensuring consistency across the system, providing common goals, and supporting early childhood educators in their practice. "They help develop shared views and understandings of the needs of young children and how to support them" (p. 57).

In its *Starting Strong III* report, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development identifies the design and implementation of curriculum and standards as one of five policy levers to address quality (p. 38).

Most Canadian provinces and territories have developed early learning curriculum frameworks that share a number of similarities:

- They guide pedagogy and practice and help early childhood educators build relationships with children and families.
- They approach learning through play.
- They view children as capable and eager learners.
- They view children and early childhood educators as co-constructors of knowledge.

Alberta has a very strong curriculum framework—*Flight*—which was developed with input from a wide range of stakeholders.⁷ As part of the renegotiated Alberta–Canada Early Learning Framework Agreement, the Alberta government has proposed increasing online training that can support implementation of the framework in all early learning and care centres and day homes. This is a positive step toward quality improvement.

⁷ Lee Makovichuk, Jane Hewes, Patricia Lirette, and Nancy Thomas. *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* (formerly called *Play, Participation, and Possibilities: An Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Alberta*), 2014.

Selected Recommendations for Change

- Make the *Flight* curriculum mandatory.⁸
- Provide staff with the pedagogical coaching and mentoring they need for successful implementation.

What Else You Can Find in the Beach Report

- In Chapter 2, Beach provides a **snapshot of early learning and care** in Alberta today. She includes a timeline that documents milestones in the development of early learning and care in the province since 1961, when the first standards for child care were introduced.
- Through tables, charts, and appendices, Beach documents an **extensive range of early learning and care–related facts** for Canada’s provinces and territories. These include staff educational and certification requirements, child-to-staff ratios, and physical space requirements. For selected provinces, Beach also provides overviews of child care delivery, availability of child care spaces, funding, fees, quality-related initiatives, and lists of early learning and care stakeholders.
- Strategic partnerships and a united stakeholder voice can have a powerful impact on government policy. In Chapter 6, Beach proposes an **action plan, objectives, and key questions** for stakeholders to consider in developing plans for quality early learning and care. She suggests that a **formal mechanism for stakeholder consultation** could help the government develop and implement a sustainable multi-year plan for quality early learning and care.
- In Chapter 3, Beach explains the relationship between **accessibility, affordability, and sustainable funding**. She presents data that shows what portion of their income parents can afford to pay before child care is out of reach.
- In Chapter 3, Beach examines a number of Canadian studies on the relationship between **for-profit or non-profit delivery** and quality. Although both for-profit and non-profit providers play important roles in the delivery of early learning and care services in Alberta, Beach advises that “the growth of corporate child care should be treated with caution” (p. 35). In jurisdictions such as Australia, large, well-established corporations exerted undue influence on government regulation, and as they began to dominate the sector, parent fees increased substantially.

This brief is part of a series of documents created by the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ecelc.ca) to address current topics in early learning and care that impact Edmonton. Jane Beach is a Victoria-based research and policy consultant whose work includes a number of large-scale national and international studies on early learning and care. Her discussion paper, [*An Examination of Regulatory and Other Measures to Support Quality Early Learning and Care in Alberta*](#), was commissioned by the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care and the Muttart Foundation. Marie Lesoway is a researcher, writer and editor with [Pentacle Productions](#). Correspondence can be sent to info@ecelc.ca.

⁸ The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta recommends that *Flight* should be adopted in all licensed and approved early learning and child care programs. See [*Getting It Right: Recommendations for Improving Alberta’s Child Care Licensing Legislation*](#) (Edmonton, February 2020), p. 96.