



# Recommended Actions for Alberta Children's Services in Support of Early Learning and Care



September 3, 2021

*The Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care recommends 13 actions that can be taken by Alberta Children's Services and that will support many families, contribute to economic and social recovery from the COVID pandemic, and help to address some of the critical priorities of EndPovertyEdmonton.*

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## Background

EndPovertyEdmonton has identified early learning and child care as one of six "game changers" that must be addressed if poverty is to be eliminated from Edmonton in a generation.<sup>1</sup> In particular, EndPovertyEdmonton recognized the need to work toward an integrated system of high-quality, inclusive, and affordable early learning and child care.

The Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELc)<sup>2</sup> was created to pursue this work and comprises 18 institutional and community partners with expertise and experience in early learning and child care (ELCC). It has created a vision, mission, and principles to guide this work. The Council has worked diligently to assess current conditions and needs, to explore options, and to identify paths for moving forward.

In the September 2020 Speech from the Throne,<sup>3</sup> the federal government committed to create a Canada-wide ELCC system through significant, long-term, sustained investments. Budget 2021<sup>4</sup> confirmed this commitment with proposed new investments of up to \$30 billion over the next five years for early learning and child care and Indigenous early learning and child care. Budget 2021 outlines the federal government's commitment to work with provincial and territorial governments to make meaningful progress in building a Pan-Canadian ELCC system that includes a focus on reducing parent fees and increasing the number of quality child care spaces, while committing to the development of an effective ELCC workforce.

These significant new investments can build on the existing federal funding provided through the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Agreement signed in 2017 and the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework signed in 2018. The Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, 2020-21,<sup>5</sup> allocates \$45.4 million in federal funding per year to the priority areas of affordability, accessibility, flexibility, quality and inclusiveness. The subsequent extension agreement, signed in 2021, consolidates federal investments in parent subsidies and also provides one-time support for early childhood educator recruitment and retention.<sup>6</sup> These federal investments complement existing provincial expenditures that are allocated, in the main, to parent fee subsidies and wage grants for early childhood educators with the provision of additional supports and resources to enable full participation of every child who has extra support needs.

The ECELc strongly endorses the federal government's commitment to build a Pan-Canadian ELCC system in collaboration with provincial and territorial governments. The move, over time, to a more publicly supported and managed system provides the opportunity to address the shortcomings of present policies and professional practices and provide all children and their families in Edmonton with equitable access to the high-quality, inclusive, and affordable services they need.



## Recommended Actions for the Ministry of Children's Services

Consistent with the goal of building an ELCC system, the ECELC recommends that the Ministry of Children's Services undertakes the following actions.

### Supporting Edmonton's Regional Early Learning and Child Care Work

The Ministry of Children's Services (CS) has an immediate role to play in supporting Edmonton's local efforts to create an integrated system of high-quality, inclusive, and affordable ELCC. The ECELC recommends that CS take the following actions<sup>7</sup>

**Action 1: Provide administrative data and staff time to the Edmonton Early Learning and Care Data Working Group.** CS collects a wide variety of administrative data on licensed and regulated ELCC. While some of these data are made available through Alberta's Open Data portal, the majority are not, instead being reported in aggregate format in CS annual reports or through other occasional means. These data contain valuable information for planning and monitoring ELCC in Edmonton and should be shared regularly with the Data Working Group, and at level that will be useful for helping to understand and solve local ELCC issues.<sup>8</sup> CS should also allocate time for Ministry staff to extract and provide data for the Edmonton ELC Data Working Group, and time for staff to participate in Edmonton ELC Working Group meetings.

**Action 2: Provide staff time to participate in the Edmonton Early Learning and Care Problem-Solving Working Group.** CS staff can play a critical role in informing the thinking of this Working Group, as addressing local ELCC issues will require coordinated action by multiple governments. Regular and consistent CS representation is important on this Working Group, so CS should allocate time for Ministry staff to attend.

**Action 3: Contribute funding for innovative ELCC projects in Edmonton that target Indigenous, immigrant and refugee, low-income, and vulnerable children and families.** The ECELC is recommending three separate methods for implementing innovative solutions to local ELCC issues that Edmonton faces. One of these methods is to create a city-administered grant program that will be used to create ELCC that specifically targets the needs of Indigenous, Newcomer, low-income, and vulnerable families and children in Edmonton. CS should match the City of Edmonton's funding for this grant, with the understanding that the Edmonton grant program will be broadly aligned with overarching provincial ELCC goals.

### Collection, Analysis and Public Reporting of Data on Early Learning and Care

Though much can be learned from the administrative data that CS gathers, critical gaps remain in our collective knowledge about ELCC in Alberta. For example, while we have some idea of median fees in Edmonton (and two other Alberta cities, Calgary, and Lethbridge), we do not know the range of fees that parents face in Edmonton, or how fees might vary between different parts of Edmonton. As part of the move toward a more publicly funded and managed system, CS will collect, analyze and report data on key aspects of service delivery. Therefore, the ECELC recommends that CS take the following actions:



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**Action 4: Develop and administer an annual survey/census of service providers.** This survey/census might include the number and type of services available, the cost of regulated care, the quality of care (including characteristics of the workforce) and the profile of children and families accessing regulated care. The regular collection and reporting of these data can help assess progress in Edmonton (and in other cities and municipalities throughout Alberta) toward meeting policy goals, support the ongoing improvement of service quality, and provide for transparency and accountability in the use of public funds.<sup>9</sup>

**Action 5: That the annual survey/census data be reported to the public on an aggregated basis and to the Edmonton ELC Data Working Group on a disaggregated basis to support local service management and planning.** Similar to the administrative data gathered by CS, the data from this survey/census will only be useful for local planning, monitoring, and problem solving if they are reported on a granular level—preferably, again, at the program level.<sup>10</sup> For example, ELCC fee information or workforce characteristics reported for all of Alberta, or across Alberta's CS regions, would be aggregated at too high a level to understand Edmonton's specific issues.

## Support for Building an Alberta Early Learning and Child Care System

### A Canada-Alberta early learning and child care system-building agreement

The federal government has committed to work collaboratively with provincial and territorial governments to build a Pan-Canadian ELCC system. This work commenced in 2017 with the signing of the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework and is now extended and significantly expanded through the Budget 2021 announcements of an additional \$27.2 billion in federal investments over five years to build a community-based, Canada-wide early learning and child care system.

Budget 2021 commits federal funds to reduce parent fees by 50 percent by the end of 2022, with the goal of having an average of \$10 per day for all regulated spaces in Canada by 2025/26, to strengthen early learning and child care workforces, and to increase the supply of regulated child care, primarily through the expansion of non-profit services.

The government of Alberta's active participation in building the Pan-Canadian early learning and child care system announced by the federal government provides the starting point for ensuring that all Alberta families will have equitable access to high-quality, inclusive, affordable child care. Edmonton families, including those living in poverty, who currently have limited access to regulated child care services due to either the high cost of services or their limited availability, will benefit significantly from the proposed new federal investments. Similarly, early childhood educators will benefit from additional investments in their wages and working conditions, which will also contribute to improvements in the quality of early learning and child care.

Provincial governments in British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec, Manitoba and Saskatchewan as well as the Government of Yukon, have reached early learning and child care system-building agreements with the federal government and have now begun to access the new federal monies available. It is critical that the government of Alberta reaches a similar agreement with the federal government so that all Alberta young children and families can access high-quality, affordable, inclusive early learning and child care. The ECELC, therefore, recommends the following action:

**Action 6: That the Government of Alberta fully support the move toward a Canada-wide system for early learning and care announced in Budget 2021 and negotiate a five-year bilateral agreement with the federal government that allows all Alberta**



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**parents and families with young children to have improved access to high-quality, inclusive, affordable early learning and child care.**

### The regional management and planning of early learning and child care

The move toward the more publicly funded and managed system of early learning and child care anticipated in Budget 2021 will require additional investments in and support for regional planning functions. System-wide planning at the provincial level is best supported through service management and planning at the regional or local level, which can help ensure that services remain responsive to local needs and priorities and supportive of region-wide initiatives that advance quality and affordability.

The Ministry of Children's Services has the opportunity to work with local levels of government, such as municipal governments and school boards, to determine how best to approach and support the regional management and planning of early learning and child care. There are various possible options available. In Ontario, municipal levels of government have delegated authority for early learning and child care service management and planning. In British Columbia, the Ministry of Children and Family Development introduced the Community Child Care Planning Program in 2018. This Program, administered through the Union of BC Municipalities, provides funding for municipal governments to conduct needs assessments, to identify targets for developing child care spaces and to draft community plans to address these targets. The ECELC, therefore, recommends the following action:

**Action 7: That the Ministry of Children's Services work with the City of Edmonton, school boards and the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care to determine how best to approach and advance the regional management and planning of regulated early learning and care services in the City of Edmonton. The Ministry should also work with other local government partners across the province to advance similar work in other regions.**

### Public financing of early learning and child care

Budget 2021 outlines the federal government's commitment to provide significant new public investments in regulated early learning and child care. Broadly, the federal government is committed, in the longer term, to cost-share early learning and child care with the provinces and territories. The initial federal investments outlined in Budget 2021, allied with those previously announced as part of the Multilateral Early Learning and Framework Agreement, will result in an approximate doubling of the public investment in early learning and child care in Alberta in 2021/22, with the federal government becoming the senior funding partner. The investments the federal government is proposing to make in regulated early learning and child care in Alberta will increase every year up to 2025/26, when it is estimated they will exceed \$900 million per year.

The federal government's short-term goal to reduce parent fees by 50 percent by the end of 2022, and its longer-term goal of moving towards an average parent fee of \$10 per day by 2026/25, will require significant changes to the financing model for regulated ELCC in Alberta. Consistent with the move toward a more publicly funded system, the Ministry of Children's Services will need to redesign its public investments in regulated ELCC with the introduction of operational funding grants ("supply-side" funding) for regulated service providers. Operating grants will enable eligible regulated child care service providers to reduce parent fees, while supporting improvements in the quality and inclusiveness of services and the wages and working conditions of certified early childhood educators. These operating grants will also help to stabilize the revenues of regulated child care providers impacted by the COVID-19 and support the broader economic recovery the province needs.



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In developing operating grants, the Ministry of Children's Services will need to work with ELCC stakeholders to ensure the adequacy and stability of public funding, accountability and transparency in the use of public funds, equity in the distribution of costs and benefits, and efficiency in the use of public investments. Meeting the above requirements will require the Ministry to institute provincial parent fee guidelines that establish the maximum fee amounts regulated service providers can charge parents, set thresholds for the maximum value of operating grants, and develop new reporting requirements for service providers that allow for transparency in the allocation and use of public monies.

The challenges that families on very low incomes face in accessing affordable, regulated early learning and child care, even with provincial fee guidelines in place, mean that the Ministry of Children's Services will need to establish parent subsidy amounts and income thresholds that ensure that eligible low-income families pay no fee for regulated early learning and care. In addition, the Ministry will need to ensure that subsidy amounts and thresholds provide families with modest household incomes an appropriate level of subsidy support.<sup>11</sup> The ECELC, therefore, recommends the following action.

**Action 8. That the Ministry of Children's Services redesign the funding model for regulated early learning and child care services, consistent with the goals and timelines for reducing parent fees outlined in the Federal Budget 2021, paying specific attention to the following:**

- **The introduction of operating grants for regulated child care service providers that allow for a reduction of parent fees while also supporting the quality of services and improving the remuneration and working conditions of certified early childhood educators.**
- **The introduction of fee guidelines that establish the maximum parent fee amounts regulated service providers can charge parents. Service providers that charge parent fee amounts exceeding the maximum amounts will not be eligible for operating grant support.**
- **The introduction of regular financial reporting requirements for all regulated child care service providers receiving operating grants that show the allocation and use of operating grant monies.**
- **The redesign of the subsidy system, as parent child care fees are reduced and then capped at \$10 per day, to ensure that parents and families on a full subsidy pay no parent fees for regulated child care services, and that parents and families with modest household incomes receive appropriate subsidy support.**

The expansion of regulated early learning and child care

As part of the building of a Pan-Canadian early learning and child care system, Budget 2021 anticipates the expansion of regulated early learning and child care services across Canada. It proposes that this expansion take place primarily through the non-profit and public sectors.



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Despite the increase in services over the last decade, Alberta families with preschool-aged children continue to have limited access to regulated early learning and child care. There are regulated centre-based child care spaces for less than one in four children below school age across the province, and national research highlights the presence of child care deserts in much of the province.<sup>12</sup>

The expansion of regulated early learning and child care anticipated in Budget 2021 will require public management, planning and investment both to ensure that the supply of services matches the demand and that the inequities of access that characterize child care markets are reduced and eliminated over time. Public monies used to support the expansion of services might best be used in ways that create public assets that form part of the broad community infrastructure and provide broad public benefit for a range of children and their families. The expansion of early learning and child care through the use of existing and new publicly owned buildings and or the construction of new child care centres on publicly owned lands are two possible strategies to support the development of community assets or infrastructure.

In the City of Edmonton, the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care sees merit in the initial expansion of services targeting those families and communities currently most underserved by regulated child care, with a specific focus on meeting the needs of families living in poverty, Indigenous children and families, and immigrant and refugee children and families. This initial targeted expansion would transition over time to support for the development of a universally available early learning and child care system. The ECELC, therefore, recommends the following actions:

**Action 9. That the Ministry of Children's Services work with the City of Edmonton, the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care and local school boards to develop an expansion strategy for regulated early learning and child care services in the City of Edmonton that focuses initially on meeting the needs of underserved children and their families. It is anticipated that the Ministry will work with local governments in other areas of the province to develop similar expansion plans.**

**Action 10. That the Ministry of Children's Services work with the Ministry of Infrastructure, the Ministry of Education and school boards to develop provincial policies and guidelines that ensure that all new school builds include dedicated space for community-based early learning and care and that all major school renovation projects include the review of options for including dedicated space for community-based early learning and care.**

### Building the Capacity of Certified Early Childhood Educators to Deliver High-Quality Early Learning and Care

The quality of the early learning and care available for young children and their families is of critical importance. High-quality early learning and care contributes to positive benefits for children and their families, while poor-quality early learning and care does not. Poor-quality care may have a negative impact on the development of those children who are most vulnerable.

The foundations of quality in regulated early learning and care are the everyday interactions between early childhood educators and children and their families. Interactions that are regular, sustained and shared can support children's development, while those that are more limited, intermittent, adult-directed and brief do not. Extensive research shows that increased educational preparation and competencies of early childhood educators are associated with higher quality interactions with children. Based on a comprehensive review of the research evidence, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and



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Development (OECD) concluded that 'staff who have more formal education and more specialized early childhood training provide more stimulating, warm and supportive interactions with children.'<sup>13</sup>

Budget 2021 recognizes the importance of supporting and building the capacity of the primarily female early learning and care workforce. It acknowledges that early childhood educators will form the heart of the proposed Pan-Canadian early learning and child care system and recognizes the need to improve their wages, working conditions and educational opportunities.

The Alberta early learning and care workforce has faced significant stresses linked to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and to the continued pressures of working in a sector that is significantly under resourced. Building a high-quality Alberta early learning and care system will depend on the ability of the sector to recruit and retain qualified staff, which will mean changes in both the educational preparation of early childhood educators and improvements in their wages and working conditions. The levels of pre-service education for early childhood educators will need to be increased over time with all staff holding a post-secondary qualification. Consistent with the changes made in those jurisdictions with publicly funded early learning and care systems, the introduction of degree-qualified early childhood educators further provides a basis for improving pedagogy and practice across regulated early learning and care services. Research further shows that high-quality professional development can increase the knowledge and skills of certified early childhood educators.

Improvements in the wages and working conditions of early childhood educators will help address the longstanding challenges service providers face in recruiting and retaining qualified staff. The working conditions and remuneration of early childhood educators have a significant impact on staff turnover and also make it more difficult to attract more qualified staff into the field. The ECELC, therefore, recommends the following actions.

**Action 11: That the Ministry of Children's Services introduce a new level of provincial certification for an early childhood educator based on completion of a four-year degree-level qualification, and that the Ministry of Children's Services require all certified early childhood educators who take the online orientation course to complete a certificate level qualification within five years of commencing work in the field. The Ministry would provide staff with financial support to complete that certificate-level credential.**

**Action 12: That the Ministry of Children's Services work with early learning and child care stakeholders, including the Association for Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, to develop a provincial wage scale for early childhood educators. The proposed wage scale would establish competitive wages for certified staff and recognize different levels of qualification while also taking into account years of experience.**

**Action 13: That the Ministry of Children's Services work with the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and other provincial organizations representing early childhood educators to develop ongoing professional learning requirements for certified early childhood educators, with job-embedded supports at a child, educator and program level.<sup>14</sup> The Ministry will develop financial support programs to help certified early childhood educators cover the costs of professional development.**

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*For questions or further discussion, please contact [info@ecelc.ca](mailto:info@ecelc.ca).*



### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> EndPovertyEdmonton. [What Are Game Changers?](#)

<sup>2</sup> Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care. [Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care — EndPovertyEdmonton](#)

<sup>3</sup> Government of Canada, 2020. Speech from the Throne. [2020 Speech from the Throne - Canada.ca](#)

<sup>4</sup> Government of Canada 2021. Budget 2021. A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth and Resilience. [Budget 2021](#)

<sup>5</sup> Government of Canada, 2020. Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, 2020-21. [Canada-Alberta Early Learning and Child Care Agreement - 2020-2021 - Canada.ca](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Changes to Alberta's child care system | Alberta.ca](#)

<sup>7</sup> These three actions are based on, and complement, several recommendations that the ECELC is making to both the City of Edmonton and to local educational authorities. In particular, see recommendations 5, 6, and 8 in Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (2021). [Recommended Actions for the City of Edmonton in Support of Early Learning and Care.](#)

<sup>8</sup> CS and the Edmonton ELC Data Working Group should create a data agreement that allows for the regular transfer of Edmonton data without the Data Working Group having to go through Ministry internal request processes or having to submit Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) requests. Provincial data should be provided at the smallest level of granularity possible, preferably at the individual program level. The data agreement between CS and the Data Working Group should address any privacy and data security issues associated with this data transfer.

<sup>9</sup> One possible model for the collection of these data is that used by the Ministry of Education in Ontario. There, the Ministry requires all licensed child care service providers to collect statistical data on the services they provide, using a standard reporting process on an annual basis. The Ministry sets out this requirement in regulation.

<sup>10</sup> As with provincial administrative data described in Action 1, privacy and security agreements between CS and the Edmonton ELC Data Working Group would cover this data transfer.

<sup>11</sup> An analysis of Alberta's subsidy system, with further explanation of many of the elements of this recommendation, is available from the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care at <https://www.ecelc.ca/publications-archive/analysis-of-child-care-subsidies-alberta>.

<sup>12</sup> MacDonald, D. 2018. Child Care Deserts in Canada. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

<sup>13</sup> Organisation for Economic Cooperation. 2006. *Starting Strong II. Early Childhood Education and Care.*

<sup>14</sup> Research shows that when learning supported with coaching or pedagogical onsite supports are in place, the transfer of new learning and skill development into everyday professional practices is significantly strengthened. See Snyder, Hemmeter et al., *Exceptional Children*, 2018, Vol. 84(2) 213 – 232), and Buysee V. & Wesley P. (2005) Consultation in Early Childhood Settings, page 158.