

CAFRA Briefing Note

Re: Federal Funding of Early learning and child care in Alberta

26-May-21



Childcare Association for
Resources to Administrators

Overview

The recent federal budget announced a historic commitment to early learning and child care, so that “all families have access to high-quality, affordable and flexible early learning and child care no matter where they live.” The federal government is offering to provide Alberta with several hundred million dollars per year to reduce the child care fees of parents who use regulated early learning and child care. Alberta will be responsible for negotiating with the federal government to use this investment to best work for our province. This briefing note provides a summary of what CAFRA would like to see included in Alberta’s early learning and child care plan.

Accessibility

High quality and affordable early learning and child care (ELCC) should be universal for all children and families in Alberta. This will require a focus on increasing supports for children with special needs, increasing spaces within “childcare deserts” and ensuring high-quality, affordable options for all families, particularly those in vulnerable communities and shift workers. ALL of these accessibility concerns must be addressed in the negotiation between Alberta and the federal government. Of course, though, to be accessible, ELCC also needs to be affordable for Alberta families.

Affordability

Increasing parent subsidies might provide short-term relief for those paying high fees but will not improve the overall quality of ELCC. And there is a likelihood that providers will not pass on the reduced fees in full. We have already seen fee growth in Alberta after the 2020 subsidy increase, nullifying the benefit to those families. Therefore, long term affordability of ELCC using the subsidy strategy is not going to work alone. The aim of this new federal funding is to cut fees by 50% in 2022 and to achieve \$10/day by 2026. The simplest way to achieve this is to have licensed providers agree to work within a structured fee agreement, as well as to accessibility and quality standards within their programs, in order to receive government funding.

Concern that the federal government’s plan “may leave Alberta families with very few options” ignores the fact that *Alberta families currently have very few options*. Families seeking ELCC in Alberta generally have to choose affordability *or* quality, in places where they are lucky enough to have access, which is not really a “choice” at all. For example, if a family has a maximum budget of \$600/month for child care, this limits them to primarily unlicensed care options. It is unfair to assume that those families “prefer” unregulated care for their children just because that is what they currently access. The only way to offer *real choice* for Alberta’s families is to make the options affordable, universally accessible and of high quality.

Quality

While fees for many families using childcare are exceptionally unaffordable (4 Years of average ELCC costs are more than 4 years of University in both Edmonton and Calgary, based on rates published in the Edmonton Journal in 2020), a focus just on fees ignores the remaining challenges of our present childcare system. True choice for Alberta families means a choice from among *quality* ELCC options. And it should be no secret that quality early learning and child care is directly connected to the early childhood educators providing it.

The ELCC workforce is not prepared for rapid expansion of the system. Low wages and poor working conditions make it difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff. With Alberta's qualification standards for early childhood educators being so low, it's difficult to justify raising wages. Low education standards, low wages and poor working conditions keep a quality early learning and care system out of reach.

Wages and work conditions are recognised internationally as essential elements for building a quality workforce (OECD, 2006), and must be addressed in tandem with the question of affordability. CAFRA believes that the province should improve upon the current minimum educational standards for ECE's, including accountability for continuous learning. Paired with this, we need industry wide wage standards for certified ECE's commensurate with educational levels, as well as paid professional learning, planning and reflection time for those ECE's. Without improvements such as these to recruit and retain ECE's in the field, quality and accessibility in early learning and child care will remain unachievable targets.

Societal Impact

Early learning and child care is essential social infrastructure, just as roads and transit support our economic growth, so too does ELCC. There is economic value in growing a knowledge intensive society through early learning as well as social and personal gains that accrue with high quality early experiences. Investing in ELCC creates jobs for a primarily female child care workforce and enables parents (particularly mothers) to reach their full economic potential.

There is already a Canadian example of a quality, affordable ELCC system, in Quebec. When their Educational Childcare Act came into effect, women's labour force participation rate went from four percentage points lower than the rest of Canada to now four points higher, with Quebec women (with children under three) having among the highest employment rates in the world. Furthermore, studies show that child care alone has raised Quebec's GDP by 1.7 per cent, which pays for the cost of the program.

It is not a question of *if* we should create a universal early learning and child care system, it is no longer even a question of *when*. We are now at the stage of *how are we going to spend this money?* Alberta's families, society, and future generations need the province to find the right answer.