



# Labour Shortages, Working Conditions and the Care Economy

Written Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities

April 2022

*Building healthy  
communities*

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## Introduction

On behalf of YMCAs in Canada, YMCA Canada thanks the Government of Canada for its leadership in the fight against COVID-19, and its commitment to building back better following the pandemic.

YMCA Canada is pleased to contribute to the HUMA Committee's study on Labour Shortages, Working Conditions and the Care Economy. As Canada's largest non-profit provider of child care, the YMCA has more than 88,300 licensed infant, toddler, preschool, and school-age spaces across the country. At 1,250 licensed child care centres and program locations, the YMCA nurtures the development of children of all backgrounds and abilities. Our acclaimed national curriculum, YMCA Playing to Learn™ (up to age 6) and YMCA A Place to Connect™ (ages 5-12), is grounded in research on the best ways for children to learn. It provides a unique platform for the professionalization of educators through annual evaluations of every YMCA centre across the country. Research-based, it aligns with provincial regulations and is regularly and rigorously evaluated and practically informed by the feedback of families and educators. Our 9,900 child care staff and educators are highly trained and accountable for implementing our curriculum and adhering to the YMCA's national child safety and protection standards.

Our submission reflects our experience throughout the pandemic and providing high-quality early learning and child care over decades and focuses on emerging stronger following COVID-19. We would be pleased to further discuss our recommendations and can be contacted directly.

## Background on the Canadian Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Workforce

Pre-pandemic, the ELCC workforce in Canada consisted of over 200,000 early childhood educators (ECEs) and child care support staff, 96% of whom are women and approximately one-third are newcomers.<sup>i</sup>

ECEs and child care support staff play an influential role in a child's growth and development during their most formative years. Educators are responsible for the direct delivery of curriculum and provincial standards, and for keeping children safe.<sup>ii</sup> Research shows that participation in high-quality early learning and child care programs has a significant impact on a child's cognitive, social, emotional, physical development and wellbeing, all of which are fundamental to their achievements throughout life.<sup>iii</sup> This is especially true for vulnerable and marginalized children who are more likely to face multiple systemic barriers.

Educators are one of the most critical factors in providing high-quality care and expanding early learning and child care as part of a Canada-wide system. However, Canada has long faced a labour shortage of qualified ECEs and child care support staff who are able and willing to work in the field. A labour shortage that has been exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic.

## Labour Shortages in the ELCC sector

Attracting, training, and retaining qualified ECEs and child care support staff to work in the field is a challenge in Canada. Before the pandemic, it was estimated in 2018 that 15,000 ECEs were needed to fill existing vacancies.<sup>iv</sup> Low compensation, few opportunities for ongoing professional development and limited resources to support children with special needs are among the challenges pre-pandemic contributing to the workforce shortages.



During a 2021 roundtable facilitated by the Public Policy Forum, child care leaders from across the country raised alarms of deeper workforce shortages in early learning and child care due to the pandemic. In many parts of the country, child care never closed. ECEs and child care staff were on the frontlines throughout the pandemic and continued to be there for communities and care for children, during periods of lockdowns, variant surges, and public health restrictions. While our educators played a critical role in Canada's fight against COVID-19 and continue to support the she-recovery, the pandemic has put new pressures on child care staff. This includes higher rates of vacancies and absenteeism, staffing pressures due to COVID-related illness and isolation requirements leading to longer hours and increased levels of stress and burnout among educators.

As a result, high turnover in early learning and child care negatively impacts quality and children's growth and wellbeing and dictates the availability of spaces in communities. While all communities are negatively impacted, workforce challenges are felt more acutely in rural and remote regions. Furthermore, it is estimated that over 211,000 new full-time child care educators and staff, or 20,000 per year over 10 years, will be needed to ensure all children have access to a high-quality child care space.<sup>v</sup>

### Snapshot of YMCA ELCC Labour Shortages

Prior to the pandemic, YMCAs employed over 9,990 staff in early learning and child care, with ECEs making up approximately 53% of our ELCC workforce. Today, YMCAs across the country are actively recruiting to fill approximately 700 vacancies in our centres. To reach our licensed capacity, the YMCA would need to hire approximately 2,700 ECEs across Canada. To expand our licensed child care programs by 20% as part of a Canada-wide early learning and child care system, YMCAs in Ontario alone would need to hire an additional 4,500 new ECEs.<sup>vi</sup>

### Challenges impacting ELCC workforce recruitment, retention, and recognition

Low compensation, barriers to ongoing training and ongoing professional development opportunities, and in some instances, challenging work environments have made it difficult for child care agencies to recruit and retain qualified staff in licensed child care.

- **Compensation (wages, benefits and pensions):** The average weekly earnings in early learning and child care equated to \$640 per week or about \$35,000 annually in 2019.<sup>vii</sup> Additionally, long hours and limited access to other forms of compensation including health and wellness benefits, paid sick days, and pensions lead to low job satisfaction and high-turnover for higher-paying positions in other sectors. During the pandemic, one-time recognition pay was provided to ELCC educators and staff by most provincial governments. This was viewed as positive by our educators, however permanent and competitive compensation packages are critical to recognizing the role of the profession in caring for and educating children and supporting recruitment and retention.
- **Working Conditions:** Staff-child ratios, group sizes and aspects of the physical space all contribute to the working conditions and impact job satisfaction for child care educators and support staff. Enhanced staff-child ratios, smaller group sizes and rich learning and play environments with ample physical space leads to better working conditions, allow educators to provide more time and attention to children, reduce stress on staff and create better learning and care environments for children.<sup>viii</sup>
- **Education, Training and Professional Development:** Across Canada, 95 public colleges offer over 200 ECE programs to students annually, many of whom are international students.<sup>ix</sup> Despite full



enrollment each year, child care agencies including the YMCA have noted that many students entering the ECE college programs have little desire to work in the field due to low compensation and demanding working conditions associated with the profession. For those interested in working in the sector, the cost of an ECE degree/diploma poses a barrier for many. During the pandemic, online learning models have achieved positive results because they have allowed students to maintain their income while studying.

Ongoing professional development, mentorship, and career growth opportunities support positive employee engagement and retention in the sector. These opportunities allow educators to enhance their skills and understanding of best practices for delivering care and learning programs for children; improve cultural competencies; and offer on-the-job support and guidance for those entering the profession.

- **Impact of COVID-19:** ECEs and child care staff have been on the frontlines providing care to children and supporting families to cope, connect and recover from COVID-19. During the pandemic, child care agencies have seen increasing rates of anxiety, stress and burnout among staff caused by long hours, additional tasks associated with public health guidelines, higher vacancies due to COVID-related illness, limited relief staff and ongoing anxiety of the virus. Additionally, while many primary and secondary school educators were prioritized for vaccinations provincially, child care educators and staff, many of whom provided continuous care throughout the pandemic, were left out and waiting.

## Recommendations

Building a robust, well-recognized ECE profession is critical to expanding access, increasing affordability, and creating a high-quality Canada-wide child care system. Investments made in the 2020 Fall Economic Statement and commitments in the federal-provincial child care agreements are positive steps forward in addressing ECE recruitment and retention. However, further investments in workforce development best practices and innovative sector-based solutions are needed.

Enhanced federal investments in the ELCC labour force are necessary to building an accessible, high-quality Canada-wide child care system that is inclusive and affordable for families. Engaging organizations like the YMCA, as well as partnerships with the provinces and territories, in the expansion of child care, will help to build a system that meets the needs of children, their families, and high-quality early learning and child care providers. **We recommend the Government of Canada:**

- Enhance investments in initiatives focused on the recruitment, retention, and recognition of qualified Early Childhood Educators as part of a comprehensive, national workforce strategy, in partnership with the provinces and territories. This strategy would include prioritizing the establishment of fair and competitive compensation (wages, benefits, and pensions), and improving access to education, training, and professional development opportunities:
  - Increase funding dedicated to compensation for ECEs to close the salary gap and ensure consistency across all child education and care settings.
  - Provide additional funding to support access to ECE degree/diploma, as well as ongoing professional development opportunities and training. Include innovative solutions such as online training, paid placements, and mentorship programs in partnership with licensed



non-profit child care agencies.

- Increase access to certification programs and paid placements for internationally trained ECE looking to work in the field in Canada.
- Review existing evidence and research optimal ECE-child ratios that support child development across all age groups. Evidence should be shared with provinces and territories and could be leveraged to support national guidelines for ratios in licensed child care.
- Create and adequately fund an ELCC innovative sectoral workforce solutions program that supports projects focused on a range of sector-driven activities and creative solutions to address current and emerging ELCC workforce needs.
- Increase operating supports for licensed non-profit child care agencies to assist children with identified special needs. This includes adequate funding for special needs specialists, enhanced ratios, and support for one-on-one assistance for the entire time the child is in care. Access to ongoing training for ECEs, as well as developmentally appropriate materials and supplies to best support children's unique needs is essential.
- Coordinate regular collection and reporting of comprehensive statistical data using a variety of data collection vehicles to measure the ELCC workforce shortage and monitor and evaluate the impact of solutions.

### Contact Information

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**About the YMCA:** As one of Canada's largest and longest-standing charities, the YMCA has been part of communities for decades. Across Canada, the YMCA is at the heart of communities serving evolving needs and providing vital programs, services, and connections to over 2.39 million people through 39 YMCA Member Associations and supported by over 50,000 staff and volunteers. Together, we are unwavering in our dedication to achieving meaningful outcomes in the communities we serve. For more information visit [ymca.ca](http://ymca.ca).

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<sup>i</sup> Government of Canada. [Supporting Canadians and Fighting COVID-19, Fall Economic Statement 2020](#). Section 3.3.1.2 An Action Plan for Women in the Economy. November 30, 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> YMCA Canada. [Building a Pan-Canadian Child Care System. YMCA Canada's national positioning on early learning and child care](#). March 2021.

<sup>iii</sup> Schleicher, A., OECD. [Helping our Youngest to Learn and Grow: Policies for Early Learning, International Summit on the Teaching Profession](#). March 14, 2019.

<sup>iv</sup> McCuaig, K. Atkinson Centre, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto. [Canada needs a national strategy to address the shortage of early childhood educators](#). November 26, 2018.

<sup>v</sup> Stanford, J., Centre for Future Work. [The Role of Early Learning and Child Care in Rebuilding Canada's Economy after COVID-19](#). November 2020.

<sup>vi</sup> YMCA Ontario. 2022 Pre-Budget Submission. February 2022.

<sup>vii</sup> Stanford, J., Centre for Future Work.

<sup>viii</sup> Public Policy Forum. [From Investment to Action. Building a Canada-wide Child Care System](#). May 25, 2021.

<sup>ix</sup> Public Policy Forum.