
Subject: Early Years and Child Care Workforce Update

Report to: Public Health and Social Services Committee

Report date: Tuesday, April 4, 2023

Recommendations

1. That this report **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Key Facts

- Over 2022 and 2023, the Ministry of Education (MEDU) made a one-time workforce investment of \$141.3 million across the province, to support the recruitment and retention of a high-quality child care and early years workforce. Niagara Region's allocation of this funding over this period was \$3.65 million.
- Children's Services, in collaboration with community partners, has utilized the funding to undertake strategies and initiatives that support service providers with recruitment and retention of existing staff and innovative ideas aimed at enhancing the growth and sustainment of the workforce long-term.
- Despite these efforts, the lack of a qualified early years and child care workforce continues to strain service providers' operations and ability to meet child care demand.
- As of January 31, 2023, the child care system across Niagara region is operating at approximately 65% of its licensed capacity, mostly due to staff shortages. Staff estimate that to operate the system at approximately 90% licensed capacity would require an estimated 236 additional Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) or Director approved/Early Childhood Assistants.
- MEDU has recognized the workforce challenge associated with wages and has provided annual increases of \$1 per hour for qualified staff wages to increase up to a maximum of \$25 per hour by 2026, funded through the Canada Wide Early Learning and Child Care Strategy (CWELCC).

Financial Considerations

Over 2022 and 2023, Niagara Region received a total funding allocation of \$3.65 million, from the Ministry of Education Child Care and Early Years Workforce Funding.

In addition to the one-time investment, as part of CWELCC, until 2026, the Province has established a Workforce Compensation policy, which sets an annual hourly wage floor and commits an annual \$1 per hour increase for RECEs until wages meet the maximum of \$25 per hour.

The workforce funding and workforce compensation is fully funded by the Province with no levy contributions.

Analysis

The one-time workforce funding provided by the MEDU was intended to support the following two initiatives:

1. Development of Professional Learning Strategy that includes professional learning days and mentorship opportunities that support early years practices, mental health well-being, inclusion and diversity practices and approaches; and
2. Workforce Capacity and Innovation to support innovative recruitment and retention strategies at the local level.

With respect to the Development of a Professional Learning Strategy, Niagara Region Children's Services issued an Early Years and Child Care Workforce Professional Learning Grant to eligible service providers to support staff to undertake professional learning. Approximately 1,300 staff in the early years and child care sector participated in professional learning under this grant. To further support this priority a one-day conference is being planned for later this year.

For Workforce Capacity and Innovation, Niagara Region Children's Services, in collaboration with the community, undertook a number of innovative and strategic initiatives that supported the provincial direction and address regional challenges. Key initiatives include:

- Workforce Capacity Grant – service providers were provided flexible funding to support non-RECEs with tuition costs to become RECEs; childcare costs to incentivize staff to return to the workforce; and onboarding costs to provide sufficient orientation time for new staff.
- Indigenous-led Early Childhood Education (ECE) program – a partnership between Niagara College, Six Nations Polytechnic, Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre, and Niagara Region to pilot an Indigenous-led ECE program at the Fort

Erie Native Friendship Centre for 16 students to increase the supply of RECEs with the cultural knowledge and language skills required for the community.

- Licensed home child care marketing campaign – a campaign to attract more licensed home child care providers and inform families of licensed home child care as a viable child care option, resulting in approximately 50 new individual's expressing interest in becoming providers and more families expressing interest in licensed home child care.
- Educator leadership supports (school age and French languages) pilots – two pilot projects to support staff retention by upskilling staff with resources, mentoring and training to support children with special needs.
- Service providers recruitment table – launched a working group of local licensed child care service providers to share workforce ideas, and pilot small scale innovative ideas. One strategy currently being explored by a few select providers is sharing of supply staff.
- Participate in a provincial-wide *Knowing Our Numbers* project – collaboration with other service system managers and the Atkinson Foundation to create sustainable, regional-level early years and childcare workforce data collection processes, and information to inform decision making, support service providers with information and regional advocacy efforts.

While these strategies and initiatives have been an important step towards supporting the RECE workforce, further sustainable investments are required. As of January 31, 2023, the child care system in Niagara region is operating at 65% of its licensed capacity. Staff estimate that to operate the system at 90% capacity would require an estimated 236 more RECEs, not including any additional staff required to cover breaks and supply staff that are typically required to offset sick days and vacation.

The MEDU has recognized the staffing challenges and the need for a broader strategy. The MEDU, through CWELCC, established a workforce compensation policy and funding, which establishes an annual wage floor of \$24 by 2026, and provides a \$1 annual increase until the maximum wage of \$25 per hour is achieved. This will result in RECE wage starting at \$24 per hour in 2026, and RECEs currently employed in the system potentially earning up to \$25 per hour by 2026.

Early years and child care experts and advocates argue that in order to attract and retain RECEs, salaries and wages need to start at \$30 per hour immediately.^{1,2} In Ontario, only 55% of RECEs registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators work in child care, with many finding opportunities in other professions. According to the College of Early Childhood Educators as of December 2022, the primary reason indicated by RECEs that have resigned their RECE membership was “no longer working in the field” at 47%, followed by retirement at 23%.

Low and stagnant wages impose and will continue to impose a number of staffing challenges for the early years and child care system. These challenges are expected to exacerbate without active interventions, especially as the system expands as a result of the CWELCC. Ontario is expected to create 53,000 licensed child care spaces over the next four, which will require 14,700 new RECEs by 2020-2026. According to MEDU, without any further intervention strategies there could be an estimated shortage of 8,500 RECEs by 2026.

Early in 2023, the Province conducted consultations on the child care workforce to support a development of a broader provincial strategy. Niagara Region Children’s Services actively participated in those consultations. As Niagara Region Children’s Services awaits on the outcome of those consultations and a broader provincial strategy, it will continue to work with service providers through the Recruitment Table on innovative and local solutions that can support the recruitment and retention of RECEs.

Alternatives Reviewed

An update on the early years and child care workforce was requested by the Public Health and Social Services Committee.

¹ Workforce Collective, December 2022, *Childcare Workforce in Crisis Our Economy Won’t Work Without ELCC Workers* : <https://workforcecollective.ca/3d-flip-book/childcare-workforce-in-crisis/>

² Dr. Akbari and McCuaig, [What Ontario parents really need to know about the new early learning and child care agreement \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/what-ontario-parents-really-need-to-know-about-the-new-early-learning-and-child-care-agreement)

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

The provision of accessible and quality early learning programs and services supports Council's focus on Supporting Businesses and Economic Growth.

Other Pertinent Reports

[COM 15-2023 National Child Care Plan: Local Impacts and Recommendations](https://pub-niagararegion.escribemeetings.com/Meeting.aspx?Id=e8575525-4276-4670-917f-8757689c02ca&Agenda=Agenda&lang=English&Item=14&Tab=attachments)

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