



Advancing the Educational Preparation and
Professional Development of Alberta's Early Learning
and Care Workforce

What We Heard: A Report on Spring 2015 Consultations with
Early Learning and Care Stakeholders

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The Muttart Foundation

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Introduction

In April 2015, the Muttart Foundation sponsored four regional consultations with early learning and care stakeholders to consider how best to advance the educational preparation and professional learning of Alberta's early learning and care workforce. The regional consultations considered the growing body of research that examines these related fields, as well as the political and service traditions shaping early learning and care in the province and the complex service and policy environments in which change will need to occur.

The following report highlights the major ideas and discussion themes that emerged from these consultations. It draws on the detailed records of the consultation discussions that the Foundation previously prepared and shared with the consultation participants.

Well-educated and professionally supported early childhood educators and certificated teachers provide the foundation for high-quality early learning and care for children below the mandatory school-age and their families. And yet, despite the research evidence that supports this position, many of the current staff who work with young children in early learning and care settings in Alberta, and across Canada, remain relatively poorly educated and are not well-supported in their workplaces.

The current summary report provides a starting point for thinking about how Alberta might best advance the educational preparation and professional learning of its early learning and care workforce. Further discussions are required to explore more fully the changes required to better support the early learning and care of young children and their families, as well as how and over what timeline change is possible. Careful consideration will need to be given to the capacity of service environments to accommodate and respond to change.

The Muttart Foundation greatly appreciates the time and insights stakeholders brought to the regional consultations. They engaged in their discussions with a spirit of openness and learning that bodes well for advancing the early learning and care workforce in Alberta.

The Consultation Process

In April 2015 the Muttart Foundation supported four regional stakeholder consultations to explore how best to advance the educational preparation and professional learning of Alberta's early learning and care workforce. The consultations were held in Edmonton, Grande Prairie, Calgary and Lethbridge and included stakeholders from these major centres as well as those from surrounding communities. Stakeholders from the Wood Buffalo region attended the Edmonton consultation, Red Deer stakeholders attended the Calgary consultation, Medicine Hat stakeholders attended the Lethbridge consultation and stakeholders from the northwest region of the province attended the Grande Prairie consultation.

The 120 stakeholders who participated in the consultations included senior staff from early learning and care organizations, senior staff from schools and school divisions that deliver Early Childhood Services (ECS) under the Ministry of Education, academic staff from post-secondary institutions as well as staff from infrastructure organizations that support service delivery. In addition, staff from the Ministries of Human Services, Education and Health also participated in the discussions.

To support the consultation process, the Foundation commissioned a discussion paper (['Advancing the Educational Preparation and Professional Development of Alberta's Early Learning and Care Workforce'](#)). The paper reviewed the research on staff educational preparation and professional learning and examined the links between staff's formal education and access to professional learning, and program delivery and child and family outcomes. It concluded with the identification of proposed changes to increase the educational preparation and professional learning of the Alberta early learning and care workforce. Stakeholders invited to attend the consultations were asked to review the paper in advance of the discussions.

Each of the regional consultations followed a similar format. Participants engaged in a series of facilitated discussions which considered the drivers for change and key contextual factors shaping the Alberta early learning and care workforce; the core competencies early childhood educators and certificated teachers require to work with children below the mandatory school age and their families; the formal educational preparation and professional learning that supports a high-quality early learning and care workforce; and proposed changes in how Alberta approaches the formal educational requirements and professional learning for early childhood educators and certificated teachers.

The consultation participants recorded their individual responses to the discussion questions on worksheets, which then formed the basis for group discussions. Completed participant worksheets were collected at the end of each of the consultations and transcribed to provide a record of the discussions. This report summarizes the major findings from the transcribed records of the four regional consultations.

Consultation Findings

Across the four meetings, participants reached consensus both on the need to advance the educational preparation and professional learning of the early learning and care workforce as well as the types of changes that have the potential to increase the field's capacity to respond to the needs of young children and their families. Participants offered some differing perspectives on the change process itself and identified the potential impacts of change on the delivery of services.

The main arguments participants advanced in their discussions are outlined below as are any significant regional differences in these arguments, highlighting the complex nature of advancing change in a range of service settings with differing geographies and community contexts.

The Demands and Realities Facing the Early Learning and Care Workforce

In their opening discussions, participants explored the drivers for change in the educational preparation and professional learning of the early learning and care workforce. They then continued these discussions with a focus on the contextual factors to consider in thinking about the types of changes required to advance the Alberta early learning and care workforce.

The Key Drivers for Change in the Educational Preparation and Professional Learning of the Early Learning and Care Workforce

Participants identified four main drivers contributing to arguments for an increase in the educational preparation and professional learning requirements for the early learning and care workforce. First, the continued increase in the demand for early learning and care services across the province and the complex needs of children and their families which was placing significant strains on the current workforce (59 comments). Second, the growing body of research on the importance of the early years as well as the Alberta Early Development Instrument (EDI) results released in 2014 which show significant levels of vulnerability for children across the province (56 comments). Third, the interest in early learning and care both among political leaders and the public (50 comments). And fourth, related to the growing body of research on early learning and care, the need for high-quality early learning and care to support positive outcomes for children and their families (48 comments).

In all four regional discussions, participants spoke to the importance of higher levels of education for the workforce (45 comments) and considered arguments for approaching the field as a profession (25 comments).

The Lethbridge discussions considered the importance of staff remuneration in helping to recruit and retain staff (14 comments) while in Calgary participants highlighted the current challenges around staff retention (10 comments), supporting the field as a profession (9 comments) and the need for a shift in public perception of early learning and care (10 comments). The opening discussions in Grande Prairie highlighted the need to ensure that services remain affordable, accessible and inclusive for families and

their children (7 comments) and raised concerns around both the timelines for change and the impact of changes on current staff (9 comments).

The Contextual Factors to Consider in Making Changes to the Educational Preparation and Professional Learning of the Early Learning and Care Workforce

Participants outlined a series of contextual factors to consider in advancing workforce change. Much of their discussions centered on the current funding, organization and delivery of services which makes introducing changes to the workforce challenging (75 comments). They highlighted the current financing model as a specific factor to consider (37 comments), given its primary reliance on parent fees, and extended these discussions to include comments on the current absence of an early learning and care system (12 comments).

The importance of the political context in which workforce discussions take place was raised in all four regional discussions (25 comments) as was the consideration of public awareness of the need for, or benefits of, a better prepared and supported early learning and care workforce (41 comments). These discussions returned to some of the ideas previously considered as part of the drivers for change discussions, including the need to respond to families' diverse early learning and care needs (24).

The modest educational preparation of much of the workforce in child care settings (centre-based, preschools and family day homes) formed a central focus for discussions (48 comments), with participants highlighting the need to consider the timelines for implementing changes, the supports staff would need to meet higher educational requirements, as well as their possible responses to, or support for, higher qualifications (51 comments).

The limited capacity of post-secondary institutions to support an increase in staff qualification levels was raised in the Edmonton, Calgary and Lethbridge discussions (27 comments). In both Edmonton and Grande Prairie participants commented specifically on the challenges of supporting staff with higher qualifications in more isolated or smaller communities (10 comments). In Edmonton and Lethbridge participants commented on the need for continuing professional learning (19 comments), while acknowledging that staff are not currently supported to complete this learning. Participants also discussed approaching and supporting the early learning and care workforce as a profession as part of consideration of the contextual factors for making change (24 comments).

Across the four regional discussions, the topics that drew the largest number of participant comments were public awareness of, and support for, early learning and care in Edmonton, the impacts of higher qualification requirements on existing staff in Lethbridge, the financing of early learning and care in Calgary and supports for staff to reach higher educational requirements in Grande Prairie.

Additional Thoughts and Ideas Arising from Participant Discussions

In reflecting on their discussions of the drivers for change and contextual factors to consider in advancing the educational preparation and professional learning of the workforce, participants commented most frequently on the following areas: public support for early learning and care and/or awareness of its importance (24 comments); government or political support for workforce changes (21 comments); the importance of formal educational preparation (20 comments); the diverse and growing

needs of children and their families for early learning and care (20 comments) and the need for a large body of research and knowledge on the importance of the early years (19 comments).

Core Competencies for Early Childhood Educators and Certificated Teachers

In their second round of discussions, participants considered the core competencies early childhood educators and certificated teachers require to support high-quality early learning and care for young children and their families. They explored three related subjects. First, the argument that early childhood educators are most appropriately supported and approached as professionals. Second, the seven competence areas identified in the background discussion paper. And third, the current capacity of early learning and care workplaces to support the work of competent, professional early childhood educators.

Supporting Early Childhood Educators as Professional Staff

Across the four regional consultations, participants strongly agreed (76 percent – 75 participants) or agreed (15 percent – 17 participants) with the argument that early learning and care staff should be approached and supported as professionals. A small minority either disagreed or strongly disagreed (3 percent – 3 participants). 6 participants (6 percent) neither agreed nor disagreed with this position. The main arguments participants advanced for supporting early childhood educators as professional staff referenced the many different competencies (knowledge, skills and motivations) staff require to support high-quality early learning and care (90 comments). The most frequently identified competence was that of a knowledge of child development and/or early learning (23 comments). More broadly, participants emphasized the complex and demanding nature of work with young children and their families (25 comments).

Participants provided a number of comments of general support for approaching the field as a profession (34 comments) and the attendant benefits that would flow from this repositioning of the field (12 comments). They also noted some challenges or barriers to this approach (13 comments). In this vein, participants raised some concerns around the limited understanding that the public has of early childhood educators and their work (22 comments).

The Core Areas of Competence for Early Childhood Educators

Participants offered their support for the seven areas of competence outlined in the discussion paper (31 comments). They also raised the need, in general, to consider other related areas of competence (20 comments) and highlighted the need for other considerations in thinking about competencies (21 comments).

In their discussions of the further development of existing areas of competence, or the addition of new areas of competence, participants offered the following observations. Working with families and accommodating diversity was an area participants identified for further development (37 comments), as was working with children with diverse abilities (inclusion) (21 comments) and children's early learning and development (12 comments). The importance of care and caring in early learning was noted by

participants (19 comments) as well as the importance of self-reflection, reflective practice and critical thinking (15 comments).

Participants posed some questions about the broader application and use of competencies for the field (17 comments).

The Current Capacity of Early Learning and Care Workplaces to Support the Delivery of High-Quality Services

Participants provided the following assessments of the current capacity of early learning and care workplaces to support staff in the delivery of high-quality early learning and care services.

Early Childhood Services Supported Through the Ministry of Education

27 percent (26 participants) assessed the current capacity of workplaces funded through Early Childhood Services (Ministry of Education) to support staff's delivery of high-quality early learning and care as strong and 1 percent (1 participant) as very strong. Similarly, 27 percent (26 participants) assessed the capacity as weak while 4 percent (4 participants) considered it very weak. 27 percent (26 participants) described the capacity as neither strong nor weak, with one participant (1 percent) responding both strong and weak. 14 percent (14 participants) indicated that they did not know the current capacity of ECS workplaces to support staff's delivery of high-quality services.

Overall, those participants in the Grande Prairie and Lethbridge consultations, who offered a committed response, were more likely to consider the capacity to be strong. Conversely, participants in Edmonton, who similarly offered a committed response, were more likely to describe the capacity as weak.

Early Learning and Child Care Services Supported Through the Ministry of Human Services

For early learning and care service workplaces (centre-based child care, preschools, family child care) supported through the Ministry of Human Services, 46 percent of participants (46 participants) assessed their current capacity as weak and 24 percent (24 participants) as very weak. Four percent (all in Lethbridge) assessed the capacity as strong. 19 percent (19 participants) described their capacity as neither strong nor weak. 7 percent (7 participants) indicated that they did not know the capacity of early learning and care service workplaces to support staff's delivery of high-quality services.

Participant discussions of the capacity of current workplaces to support staff in the delivery of high-quality early learning and care clustered around three related themes or ideas. First, the differences between ECS supported through the Ministry of Education and early learning and care services supported through the Ministry of Human Services in terms of their organization, supports and planning (63 comments), financing (262 comments) and licensing, standards and regulation (18 comments). Second, the different professional learning opportunities available to certificated teachers and early childhood educators (40 comments). And third, the current differences in educational requirements (level and nature) for staff in ECS and child care settings (45 comments).

In their concluding discussions, participants reaffirmed a number of their previous observations. They commented on the need for a more systematic approach to early learning and care or the development

of a system and system-wide planning (34 comments) and referenced the often narrow (custodial) focus of child care regulations and standards (12 comments). They also returned to their earlier arguments on advancing staff's educational preparation and access to professional learning (21 comments). They further noted the challenges service providers face in supporting staff in their work (11 comments).

The Educational Preparation and Professional Learning of the Early Learning and Care Workforce

Participant discussions on educational preparation considered both the level (length or period of study) and the nature of formal education staff require to work with young children and their families in early learning and care settings.

Staff in Early Childhood Services (ECS) Programs and Settings (including Kindergarten)

Participants offered most comments on, and support for, a degree-level qualification as the minimum requirement for early childhood educators and certificated teachers in ECS programs and settings (87 comments). This higher qualification was seen to provide early childhood educators with a level of qualification equivalent to that of certificated kindergarten teachers.

A number of participants indicated their support and/or provided comment on a two-year diploma as the minimum educational requirement for early childhood educators (26 comments) in ECS programs. While a smaller number provided comment on the introduction of a master's degree requirement (3 comments) for staff in leadership positions or with pedagogical leadership roles. Two participants offered comments in support of a one-year certificate requirement for staff.

Building on their discussions of the level of qualification staff require, participants provided a large number of comments on the importance of a specialization in the degree/educational preparation (72 comments). The specializations participants proposed focus on early childhood development or early learning for all staff and management and leadership for those in senior positions. Participants offered some support for the use of staff teams with differing levels of qualifications (11 comments).

Staff in Child Care Programs and Settings (centre-based, family day home, preschools)

Participants provided most comments on and support for a diploma level (two-years) of formal educational preparation for early childhood educators in child care settings supported through the Ministry of Human Services (36 comments). They also offered their support for, and or provided comment on, a four-year degree level of preparation (28 comments), as well as a degree or diploma-level of preparation (16 comments). Participants provided a lower level of support and or comment on a certificate (one-year of study) level of preparation (14 comments). They questioned the merits of continuing to offer the current orientation course and or the use of equivalencies (15 comments).

The need for staff to have specialized education was highlighted in discussions (16 comments) including a focus on a higher or additional level of preparation for staff in leadership or management positions (10 comments).

Participants identified the option of using staff teams with a range of qualifications (13 comments) and emphasized the value of ongoing professional learning opportunities and/or requirements for staff (18 comments).

The requirements for early childhood educators to hold a degree-level qualification was most strongly supported in the Edmonton regional discussion (27 comments), while in the other three regional discussions participant discussions/comments focused more on a diploma-level of preparation (36 comments).

In support of their discussions on the level and nature of staff's educational preparation, participants raised the following arguments. First, they noted the specialized nature of the field and the complex nature of work with young children and their families (43 comments). Second, they highlighted the relationship between higher levels of staff educational preparation and high-quality services (30 comments). And third, they commented on the closer integration of early learning and care services, including the move toward similar qualification requirements for staff in different service settings, (18 comments) and the importance of ongoing professional learning for all staff (11 comments).

Professional Learning for Early Childhood Services (ECS) Staff (including Kindergarten teachers)

Participants considered both the form professional learning might take for ECS staff, as well as the introduction of mandatory professional learning requirements for all ECS staff (certificated teachers already meet mandatory professional learning requirements).

Participants provided a range of comments on the form or content of professional learning (64 comments) including a focus on the content areas for ongoing learning (for example, child development) as well as the approaches or models that might best support professional learning. Coaching and/or mentoring was one approach to professional learning participants considered (14 comments). Participants emphasized the importance of ongoing professional learning (18 comments) and argued that it should be mandatory (18 comments) or linked to ongoing certification (9 comments).

Professional Learning for Child Care Staff (including staff in centre-based, family day homes and preschool services)

Participants outlined a number of options for the form and or content of professional learning for early childhood educators in child care services or settings (50 comments). They highlighted the importance of ongoing learning in the areas of child development and supporting early learning (pedagogy). Some of the specific approaches or models for professional learning participants identified included coaching, mentoring and the development of communities of practice (23 comments).

Participants saw value in a more structured or comprehensive approach to professional learning with a focus on planning and/or goal setting (16 comments). They also supported mandatory requirements for ongoing professional learning and/or a link between professional learning and ongoing certification (35

comments). Participants identified the importance of supporting staff access to ongoing professional learning (14 comments).

In reflecting on their discussions on professional learning for staff in ECS and child care settings, participants returned to their earlier arguments in support of professional learning and its benefits and the need for life-long learning (28 comments). As a dimension of these discussions, participants offered some support for mandatory professional learning requirements (7 comments).

Participants further considered the models and approaches that might best support staff's professional learning (25 comments) as well as the content areas that might form a focus for professional learning (16 comments).

Additional Thoughts or Ideas Arising from Participant Discussions

Participant final thoughts or ideas that arose from their discussions of professional learning grouped around three related areas. First, specific approaches to professional learning or areas for content focus (51 comments). Second, the need for some oversight of professional learning, its links to ongoing certification and the need for, or relationship with, standards and regulations (42 comments). Third, the need to consider how and when changes might be introduced to professional learning (13 comments) and the supports needed to help staff access learning opportunities (11 comments).

Advancing the Educational Preparation of the Early Learning and Care Workforce

Participants either strongly agreed (67 percent - 55 participants) or agreed (27 percent - 22 participants) with the changes outlined in the discussion paper to advance the educational preparation of the early learning and care workforce. 4 participants (5 percent) neither agreed nor disagreed while one participant (1 percent) strongly disagreed.

The Changes Most Important for Advancing the Educational Preparation of the Early Learning and Care Workforce

Participants supported raising educational requirements in general (13 comments) as well as in more specific ways. They made 27 comments in support of the move toward a two-year diploma as the minimum qualification for staff in child care settings/services; 8 comments in support of a four-degree or and/or diploma qualification for staff; and 8 comments on higher educational requirements for staff in family day home services. Participants offered less support (5 comments) for a four-year degree requirement for all staff.

Participants noted the importance of leadership or management education or training for staff in senior roles (15 comments). They further proposed eliminating both the orientation level of training as well as the use of equivalencies (16 comments). Participants considered the need for, or value of, consistent program standards across post-secondary institutions (18 comments), and highlighted the importance of increasing staff remuneration (16 comments) to reflect any higher educational requirements.

Participants focused much of their discussions on how changes in educational requirements would be introduced and the need to consider numerous factors in introducing changes (27 comments). Specifically, participants commented on the need for supports to assist staff in reaching higher educational requirements (14 comments) as well as the need for system wide planning (14 comments). Professionalizing the field was mentioned in 10 comments and the need to raise awareness about the importance of the early years with parents and the broader public in 9 comments.

Considerations in Advancing the Educational Preparation of the Early Learning and Care Workforce

Participants offered most comment (55 comments) on the financing considerations that will flow from raising staff qualifications including staff remuneration. They noted the potential for higher staffing costs to result in higher parent fees and or make services less economically viable to deliver. In related discussions, participants noted some potential challenges that may result from higher staff qualification requirements (20 comments), including the difficulties that some service providers (especially those in smaller or more isolated communities) may encounter in recruiting and retaining qualified staff (5 comments).

Participants commented both on the nature of the change process required to raise qualification requirements as well as the timelines for change (28 comments). They highlighted the importance of carefully planning and implementing changes (26 comments).

Participants spoke to the importance of helping current staff upgrade their educational qualifications and saw merit in providing staff with financial support and other accommodations (31 comments). They further questioned whether or not existing staff would be grandfathered into the new higher requirements (4 comments).

Participants noted the need to develop the capacity of post-secondary institutions to educate and support greater numbers of more qualified staff (23 comments). And they linked the move toward higher educational requirements with a more professional early learning and care workforce (17 comments).

Participants also provided comment on the level or nature of public and political support for better qualified early childhood educators (11 comments) as well as the support from the field or workforce itself for change (7 comments).

Supporting the Early Childhood Educator as a Competent Professional

Participants either strongly agreed (68 percent – 61 participants) or agreed (28 percent – 25 participants) with the strategies outlined in the discussion paper to approach and support the early childhood educator as a competent professional. Four participants (4 percent) neither agreed nor disagreed with these strategies.

The Changes Most Important for Supporting the Early Childhood Educator as a Competent Professional

Participants offered most comment on the development of professional learning opportunities (and requirements) for early childhood educators (52 comments). They cautioned, however, that the move toward a more professional workforce would be contingent upon higher rates of remuneration for staff as well as improvements in their working conditions (32 comments).

Participants noted the importance of professional oversight for the field (32 comments) linked to, amongst other considerations, standards of practice and a code of ethics (29 comments). They raised some questions around the level of public support for an early learning and care profession as well as the political commitment to this reconceptualization of the field (18 comments).

Participants also returned to a discussion of financing for a more professional workforce (12 comments), and the broader need for changes in how early learning and care is organized and delivered (11 comments). They also noted the links between higher levels of educational preparation and the move to support the field as a profession (9 comments).

Considerations in Supporting the Early Childhood Educator as a Competent Professional

Participants commented on the need for financing for a new profession (39 comments) and how the financing of services would have to change to accommodate a better paid professional workforce. They provided specific comments on staff remuneration and working conditions (12 comments) as well as the model of oversight and appropriate regulations required to support a more professional early childhood educator (19 comments).

Participants commented on the potential impacts of a more professional early learning and care workforce on the design and delivery of services (24 comments) and offered some comments on the closer integration of services (6 comments).

They raised the argument that higher educational qualifications would help to advance an early childhood educator profession (24 comments), while highlighting the need to ensure that services continue to be delivered, across a range of services and programs in very different community settings, as changes are introduced (39 comments).

Participants similarly commented on the need for dedicated time and resources to ensure that staff can participate in professional development activities without disruptions in services for children and their families (18 comments).