A young child with dark hair, wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt and green socks, is sitting on a wooden play table. The table has a bright green mat with a winding black path. On the mat are several colorful blocks: a red ring, a yellow block, a blue block, and a blue ring. The child is looking down at the blocks. The background is a plain white wall.

Roadmap to a Quality Early Learning and Child Care System in Saskatchewan

Acknowledgements

Ms. Jane Beach served as the lead researcher for the policy roadmap report. Ms. Beach also designed and facilitated the virtual engagements with stakeholders held during summer 2021.

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Preamble

The Roadmap to a Quality Early Learning and Child Care System in Saskatchewan is intended to engage stakeholders, community groups and policy makers in meaningful discussions about the essential elements of a quality system, and the initial policy actions needed to develop it.

Early discussions about the need for a quality system to ensure quality provision began in 2004, following Canada's participation in the second round of thematic reviews of early childhood education and care undertaken by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Saskatchewan was one of four provinces that hosted the international expert review team and actively engaged in the review. As part of the review, each of the 20 participating countries prepared a [background report](#) that was to address a common set of questions to inform the international review team in advance of the official visit. Several questions were about system-level goals and structures, for which there were no answers in the Canadian context, as all orders of governments played a mostly limited role and had not developed system-wide goals for quality, accessibility or financing. In their [Canada Country Note](#), the OECD review team made several recommendations to address the lack of a real system.

Following the OECD review, the authors of the background report, working with the participating provinces, embarked on [Quality by Design](#), a project that developed a conception of an early learning and child care (ELCC) system. It considered the recommendations from the OECD review, the findings of an extensive literature review, and an in-depth examination of ELCC delivery in each of the four participating provinces. The project defined the [Elements of a high quality ELCC system](#); these elements informed much of the recent discussion about system building during the consultation with stakeholders in Saskatchewan.

This roadmap outlines crucial actions needed to build a quality ELCC system in Saskatchewan and identifies key questions that the provincial government should consider and address as it develops its implementation plan under the *Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement*. The roadmap is intended to be a forward-looking document that provides information to stakeholders to support their meaningful participation in discussions about the core issues central to system building. It might also be used to monitor government progress in meeting the objectives of its agreement with the federal government. The roadmap is not inclusive of all policies, activities and approaches that need to be considered on the path to a comprehensive system, but hopefully provides a valuable framework to begin the conversations.

Introduction

In 1970, the report of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada first called for a national child care program. Now, after more than 50 years of research, advocacy, and a number of false starts, Canada is in a position to begin the process of moving away from a market-driven, ad hoc approach to service delivery and towards a publicly funded and managed, high quality, affordable, accessible and inclusive system of early learning and child care.

The COVID 19 pandemic has highlighted what researchers and advocates have known for years: high quality early learning and child care is essential for the economy, to enable women to fully participate in the labour force, to support the health, well-being and education of young children, and to support equity and social inclusion for families.

The federal [Budget 2021](#), *A Recovery Plan for Jobs, Growth and Resilience*, commits \$30 billion in new spending over the next five years. It sets out a framework for transformational change and identifies the need to build a quality system that will ensure that all families have equitable access to early learning and care now and into the future. The focus of this federal investment is on regulated child care for children 0-6.

On August 13, 2021, Saskatchewan became the eighth jurisdiction to reach a *Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* with the federal government. The agreement will bring approximately \$1.1 billion over five years to the province to increase the supply, affordability, inclusivity and quality of ELCC in the province and to continue to grow a skilled and well compensated workforce. The funds provide the opportunity to develop and implement the transformative changes necessary to create a quality system.

Why do we need a system?

The current market-based approach to child care in Saskatchewan is not working well for children, families and services providers. Regulated child care is unaffordable for many families, unevenly distributed across the province, not available in many communities and often of modest quality. Individuals and non-profit organizations must assume the bulk of the responsibility to develop, operate and maintain services. Service providers rely on parent fees to cover a significant proportion of operating costs with public investments in program grants and subsidies for low-income parents insufficient to cover service costs. Early childhood educators are modestly paid, often work in difficult circumstances and lack public recognition for their important work.

Simply expanding the supply of regulated child care and reducing parent fees will not create a system of ELCC, nor will they ensure high-quality services staffed by qualified educators are equitably available to all families. New government policies and approaches are required to build a Saskatchewan early learning and child care system that is publicly funded, planned and managed and it is these new policies and approaches that are the focus of the current roadmap.

How the roadmap was developed

The roadmap is the collaborative effort of six partners: the Canadian Child Care Federation and its Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus, Child Care Now and its Saskatchewan Chapter, the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association (SECA) and the Muttart Foundation. Its focus is on regulated early learning and child care, although the roadmap partners recognize the importance of the other forms of early childhood provision delivered through the school system, and acknowledge the need to better integrate these services with community-based child care as the province builds its early learning and care system.

The roadmap content reflects the findings from virtual engagements with ELCC stakeholders held in summer 2021, as well as the many years of Canadian and international research and policy development in respect to ELCC system building. It further incorporates some of the learnings from similar policy roadmaps previously developed by the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC and Early Childhood Educators of BC in spring 2021, [Roadmap for \\$10aDay Child Care in BC](#), and the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario in July 2021 - [Roadmap to Universal Child Care in Ontario](#). It further aligns with the national policy roadmap developed by Child Care Now, [Canada's Roadmap to Affordable Child Care for All](#), and its 10 elements of system-building.

The roadmap looks to build on the existing strengths of ELCC in Saskatchewan:

- **Non-profit provision:** More than 98% of child care spaces are non-profit, or are in family child care
- **Supply-side funding:** Saskatchewan provides significant operating funds to child care centres – among the highest per space expenditure in Canada
- **The support local municipalities provide for ELCC:** A number of municipalities contribute to the provision of child care, from providing space to direct operation
- **The Ministry of Education's consolidated responsibility** for both kindergarten, prekindergarten and licensed child care
- The Ministry of Education's investments in **early learning and care centres in schools**
- And the **previous sector collaborations** in support of early learning and care and public education

and reflects the following assumptions about ELCC system building:

- There is no perfect system that will meet everyone's needs all the time
- Building a system takes time and will require ongoing review and adjustments
- Concerns of availability, affordability and quality are inextricably linked and must be addressed together
- A strong, well-qualified and compensated workforce is key to quality provision and to expansion
- All levels of government will need to consult with content experts, ELCC and other stakeholders, including parents, labour, and social justice and anti-poverty organizations, through transparent and meaningful engagement during the transformation process and on an ongoing basis going forward.

Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care

The roadmap does not identify specific policy actions linked to Indigenous early learning and child care. The roadmap partners recognize and affirm the rights of Indigenous governments to design and develop ELCC systems and services that are distinctions-based and self governed consistent with the vision and principles set out in the [Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#) and commitments under the [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#).

The *Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework* lays out a shared vision, principles and a path forward for Indigenous early learning and child care across Canada. It's overarching vision includes a distinctions-based approach that recognizes the unique priorities of First Nations, Inuit and the Métis Nation.

Moving forward, the roadmap partners call on the Saskatchewan government and early learning and child care stakeholders to ensure that the system building work undertaken under the *Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* be guided by meaningful and collaborative discussions with First Nations, Inuit and Métis governments. And, that it respond to the calls to action of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) and the calls for justice set out in the [The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#).

The Roadmap Document

The roadmap report is organized into four sections.

Section 1: Ideas and vision proposes a vision, approach and principles as a framework for guiding ELCC policy and provision.

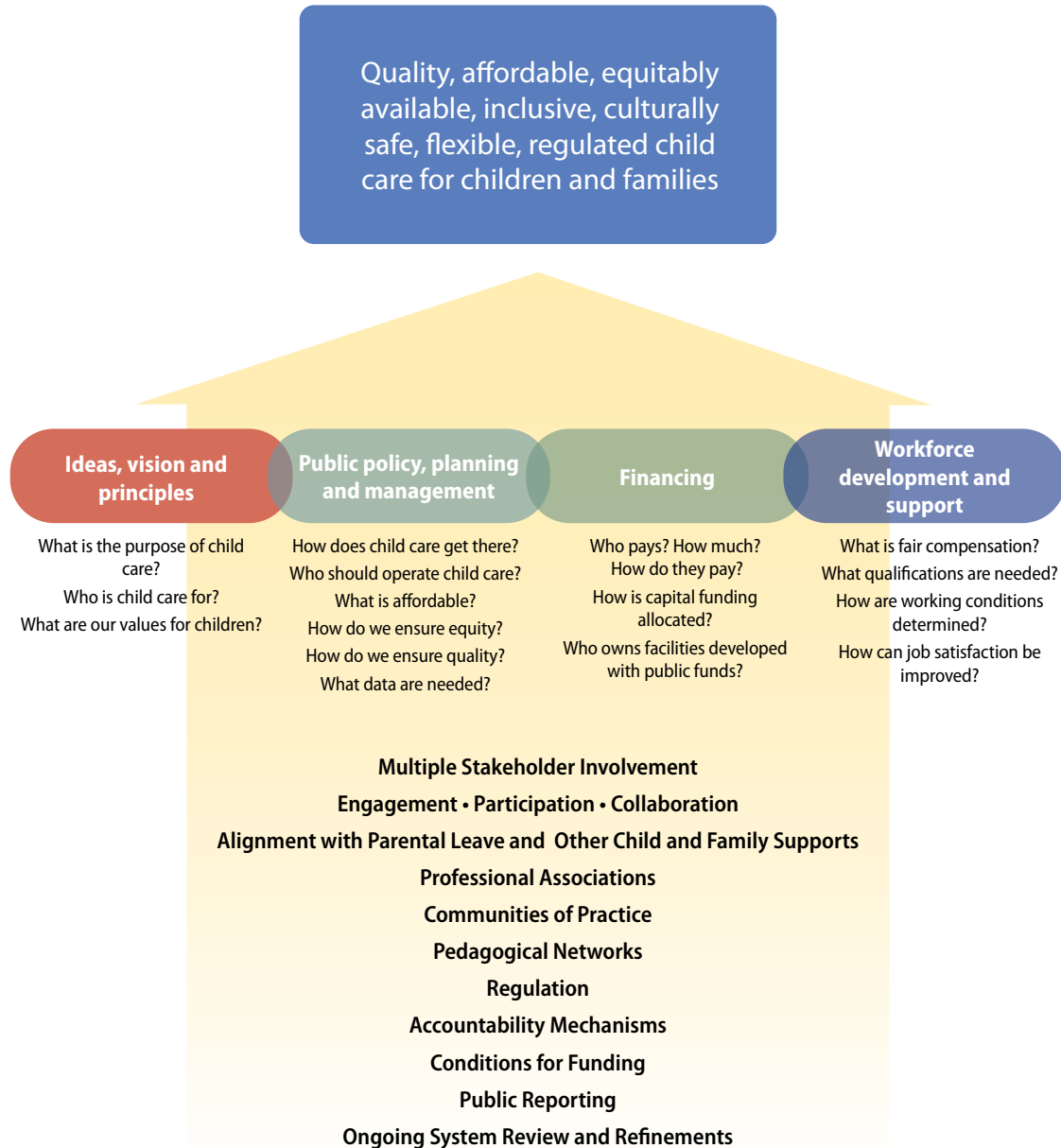
Section 2: Public policy, planning and management considers the role of government in systems development, including governance, expansion and service delivery.

Section 3: Financing examines approaches to funding services and affordability measures for parents and proposes new funding mechanisms and accountability measures to support program sustainability, quality provision and affordability for parents.

Section 4: Workforce development and support discusses and proposes policy actions to support the essential role of well-prepared and appropriately compensated early childhood educators in the delivery of high-quality ELCC.

Each section includes background information, a summary of the current context in Saskatchewan and the initial proposed policy actions. The roadmap is intended to begin the discussions that will inform the critical policy actions required to build a high-quality, affordable and accessible ELCC system.

A Schematic Diagram for the Process of Building an Early Learning and Child Care System in Saskatchewan



The above diagram shows the different considerations and core issues that will need to be addressed in building a Saskatchewan early learning and child care system. A quality early learning and child care system must be designed with significant stakeholder input and engagement and with the whole in mind, not just the individual components. Each area informs others, and decisions taken in one area have an impact on other interventions.

Section 1. IDEAS AND VISION

A high quality ELCC system should begin by articulating the ideas that will define it. The ideas will be contained in a conceptual framework that begins with a statement of the values held by the society and what it wants for its children. The values statement is based on implicit societal values and beliefs about the nature of the child and childhood. It is coloured by the history, circumstances and context - economic, social and cultural - in which the society exists.

Childcare Resource and Research Unit (2006:1)

[Elements of a high quality early learning and child care system](#)

Background

The OECD review of ELCC in Canada, completed over a decade ago, highlighted the importance of developing a 'coherent, long-term vision,' at both the provincial and federal levels, as a key first step for advancing services. Over the past two decades, international research has shed light on the possible purposes and goals for ELCC and the links between the ideas and vision that shape services and how they are organized, financed and delivered. While there are variations in the purposes and goals different jurisdictions set out for ELCC, there are also common themes which speak to the significant benefits that carefully planned and managed, high-quality ELCC can support.

Those jurisdictions with well-developed, high-quality, affordable and accessible systems of ELCC view early learning and care as a public good. They have broad goals and visions for ELCC which include supporting young children's early learning and development and promoting gender equity through mothers' labour force participation, while also recognizing the capacity of ELCC to help build social cohesion and ensure inclusion. These jurisdictions' broad goals and visions for ELCC contrast with the more limited views of ELCC evidenced in those countries, including much of Canada, where ELCC is approached more as a private service delivered through child care markets. In these countries ELCC is supported through limited or targeted public investments, often for children and families considered most in need, with an emphasis on supporting parents' labour force participation, but not necessarily in ways which provide all children with high-quality early learning and child care experiences.

Child rights arguments are central to the provision of ELCC in a number of Scandinavian countries, with a commitment to ensuring the right of all children to high-quality early learning and care. The 1989 [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), ratified by Canada in 1991, emphasizes that the best interests of the child are to be a primary consideration in ELCC, while the accompanying [General Comment No. 7](#) identifies the need for a comprehensive framework for ELCC services, which should include consultation and involvement of parents.

The current context in Saskatchewan

In common with other provinces and territories, Saskatchewan's current vision and goals for ELCC are stated generally and emphasize both children's development and support for parents while they work or attend school. The provincial vision and goals for ELCC are presented in a number of different documents, with some variations between them.

[Saskatchewan's Early Years Plan 2016-2020](#): A roadmap for a brighter path for children and families includes the following vision for young children and families (p.2)

The Government of Saskatchewan's vision for our province is to be the best place in Canada to raise children. To support this vision, we have developed Saskatchewan's Early Years Plan to help all children be safe, healthy and develop to their full potential in strong families and supportive communities.

The *Early Years Plan* emphasizes the provincial government's commitment to improve early years programs and supports for young children and their families, with a focus on eliminating gaps in services and ensuring that young children and their families receive the supports and services they need when they need them. It includes five main pillars, and draws a distinction between "early learning," with a focus on prekindergarten, and "child care," with a focus on services for children of parents who work or study. While the two are discussed separately, the *Early Years Plan* anticipates partnerships between child care and schools, including improving access to early learning spaces for four-year-old children through community-based preschools and child care centres as well as the establishment of child care centres in all new school builds. The specific goal for child care in the *Early Years Plan* is that '*children benefit from high quality environments in child care while their parents work or go to school*' (p.9).

The [Ministry of Education Plan for 2021-2022](#) also includes a related goal for children below the mandatory school age – including children in child care. The goal is that: '*Children aged zero to six years will be supported in their development to ensure that more students exiting Kindergarten are ready for learning in the primary grades*' (p.9)

There is also a reference to a vision for ELCC in the Canada-Saskatchewan agreements for 2017-2020 and 2020-2021 signed under the [Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#). Both agreements reference the long-term vision for ELCC set out in the Framework, 'all children can experience the enriching environment of quality early learning and child care that supports children's development to reach their full potential.' The objectives set out under the agreements focus on building on existing services with a focus on 'addressing local, regional and system priorities that have an impact on families more in need.'

The new federal funding commitments available through the *Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* provide the Saskatchewan government with the opportunity to take a more holistic approach to the development and delivery of ELCC services through the building of an ELCC system. Such a system will require a revised vision for ELCC in the province and new principles to guide the development, funding and delivery of services which answer big questions about the goals and purposes for early learning and care; who early learning and care services are for; whether early learning and care is best approached as a public good or private service; and the relationships between community-based child care and early education programs provided through the school system.

Based on our consultations with Saskatchewan stakeholders and the consideration of close to two decades of international and Canadian research on ELCC and its benefits for children and families, the roadmap partners propose the following new vision and guiding principles that will form the starting point for building a high-quality, affordable and accessible ELCC system in Saskatchewan.

Policy actions

1. A new vision and guiding principles for ELCC

The transformational change anticipated for ELCC in Saskatchewan as part of building an ELCC system requires a new vision and guiding principles for ELCC. The roadmap partners propose the following vision and guiding principles for ELCC as a starting point for stakeholder discussions.

Vision

All children in Saskatchewan, regardless of their family profile, circumstances or geography are welcomed into and have access to high-quality, inclusive, consistent, nurturing, regulated early learning and child care that is responsive to their needs, cultures, and disposition, where they have opportunities to play and learn, develop friendships, and form meaningful relationships with their peers and the educators who care for them.

All families have access to an affordable, high quality, convenient, suitable early learning and child care program that supports them in their parenting role, and enables them to work, study, or otherwise engage in and contribute to their communities. Parents have opportunities for meaningful involvement in their children's child care programs.

Early learning and child care programs are staffed by **well-educated, fairly-compensated educators**, who enjoy good working conditions, have opportunities for ongoing learning and career advancement, and are respected for their contributions to the well-being, education and development of children.

Early learning and child care services are located in well-designed and situated buildings; programs have adequate, stable funding to ensure stability, viability and security. Services are informed by best practice and contribute to our understanding of the importance of high-quality early learning and child care to a just and equitable society.

While early learning and child care must be **universal in approach**, additional supports and processes are needed to address and reduce barriers to access. Children with developmental delays or disabilities are welcomed into and are able to fully participate in all child care settings with the supports they require. Programs serving newcomer families, low-income families, and families living in conditions of risk have the resources necessary to provide the additional supports that may be needed.

Guiding principles

Early Learning and child care services are:

- **Focused on the best interests and rights of children** and the inherent value of childhood;
- **Equitably available** to all Saskatchewan families, regardless of income, family status or characteristics or where they live, with particular attention given to families living in

conditions of risk or vulnerability, and to families who have a child with a developmental delay or disability;

- **Evidenced-based**, reflecting current knowledge and research on quality provision, and regularly adapting and evolving with new learning;
- **Provided by non-profit and public entities**, supported by public policy and funding, content experts, professional associations and parents;
- **Coordinated** across different levels of government, across provincial ministries, and within the Ministry of Education;
- **Publicly planned, developed and managed** through collaboration and consultation with public and community partners to advance the objectives of a comprehensive child care system;
- **Sustainable**, ensuring capital investments are sustained with adequate ongoing operating funds, and adequate human resources to deliver quality services; and
- **Accountable**, through ongoing planning, data collection and analysis, monitoring, ongoing public participation and engagement, and public reporting.

Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care

Indigenous governments will design and develop ELCC systems and services that are distinctions-based and self governed consistent with the vision and principles set out in the [Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#) and the commitments made under the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.

Through listening to and engaging with Indigenous leadership in meaningful ways, early learning and care stakeholders are committed to addressing systemic racism, the impacts of colonialism and understanding the value of Indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge. The increased understandings that result from these engagements will help ensure that early learning and child care stakeholders meet our commitments under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, respond to the calls to action identified by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and honour and address the calls for justice set out in [The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#).

2. Amend Saskatchewan's child care legislation

The current child care legislation (*The Child Care Act, 2014* and *The Child Care Regulations, 2015*) focus on the requirements that centres and family child care providers must meet to obtain and maintain a license. The only reference specific to children's needs are the requirement that licensed service providers have a written statement of philosophy and a daily program that reflects their philosophy and is developmentally appropriate.

The current legislation will require amendments to reflect the proposed new vision and guiding principles for ELCC, including the recognition of children as rights holders and the entitlement of all children to participate in quality, culturally safe, inclusive ELCC programs.

Further changes to the child care legislation will be needed as Saskatchewan moves away from its current market approach to child care to a more public system. The incorporation of a new vision and principles for ELCC in legislation will provide a framework for the subsequent development of new policies and regulations consistent with system building.

Section 2. PUBLIC POLICY, PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT

Across Canada, developing child care provision has most often been treated as a private responsibility, with government playing a regulatory, supporting and occasionally facilitating role for the creators and managers of most Canadian child care services—large and small non-profit “third sector” groups and large or small entrepreneurs—rather than by ensuring through ongoing public processes that child care services are available where, when and for whom they are needed like schools, roads, electricity or sewers — part of the infrastructure.

Friendly et al (2020:10) [Moving from private to public processes to create child care in Canada](#)

Background

In those countries with robust ELCC systems, and in which ELCC is an entitlement, both central and local governments play active roles in the management, planning and delivery of services. These roles help to provide all families and children, regardless of circumstance or geography, with equitable access to high-quality, affordable early learning and child care.¹ They also help to ensure that ELCC services are connected and complement each other at the local level while remaining responsive to community needs.

A significant portion of services in ELCC systems is commonly publicly delivered, usually by local governments, which are responsible for service delivery, with financial and policy support from the senior level of government. Public delivery is often essential in those communities in which geographic or socio-economic factors make it challenging to deliver high-quality services that meet local needs. While there is some level of private delivery in most jurisdictions, the development and provision of services does not rely on a market-based approach in which parent groups, non-profit organizations or private businesses must assume the responsibility for developing and operating ELCC programs that meet community needs.

The public management and planning of services provides opportunities for parents and other community stakeholders to have input into decisions around how services are organized and delivered. ELCC services and programs have a more public profile or character, similar to that of schools, and become part of the local community infrastructure. They are viewed as community-assets or resources in which the broader community has a stake and interest, rather than the private property of service providers.

¹ For example, Denmark, Germany, Norway and Sweden where ELCC is an entitlement for children from at least one year of age; and Belgium and France where ELCC is an entitlement and free, for children from 2.5 and 3 years respectively.

The current context in Saskatchewan

In common with the majority of provincial and territorial governments across Canada, the Saskatchewan government currently plays a more limited role in the active planning and management of ELCC. It relies primarily on private non-profit service providers to develop and operate regulated child care services, although it can and does provide incentives or supports to 'steer' services and support their expansion.

The Ministry of Education has responsibility for the oversight of licensed child care and sets out the regulations that service providers must meet. It further monitors services to ensure compliance with these regulations. The Ministry develops policies and establishes guidelines for the distribution of public funds which it directs to regulated service providers to cover a portion of operating costs and allocates in the form of subsidies to eligible low-income families to reduce their parent fees.

Despite recent provincial efforts to expand regulated child care services, including through the use of federal monies under the [Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#) agreement, there is insufficient supply to meet demand. As of March 2021, there were 17,665 licensed child care spaces in the province, including centre-based child care and family child care. 2019 data collected by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit, showed that Saskatchewan had regulated centre-based child care spaces for around one in six children 0 to 5 years of age, the lowest supply relative to the population of all provinces and territories.

Historically, parent groups and non-profit organizations have assumed the primary responsibility for developing and operating regulated child care services in response to community needs. The opening and operation of family child care homes and group family child care homes has similarly relied on the private actions of individuals. These largely private efforts have led to an uneven distribution of spaces across the province and made it difficult for service providers to meet the needs of Indigenous, racialized or vulnerable children, and to provide the necessary supports young children with developmental delays or disabilities require to fully participate in their programs. Services have further struggled to meet the needs of rural communities and to address the needs of parents who work non-standard hours.

The small number of municipal governments which have taken on roles to support local child care centres and the Ministry of Education's support for the development of child care centres in nine joint-use school sites provide examples of governments playing more active roles to support or develop community-based child care. However, these examples are currently limited in their number and scale.

The Saskatchewan government's commitments under the Canada-wide ELCC system building agreement are ambitious:

- Reduce parent fees for regulated care by an average of 50% from 2019 levels
- Provide access to 12,100 more regulated space
- Work with stakeholders including First Nations and Métis partners, people with disabilities, newcomer and official language minority communities to develop child care options that are inclusive of culture, language and identity and
- Develop a wage scale for educators and invest in training opportunities

as is the goal of ensuring *'that all children have access to high quality, affordable and inclusive child care delivered by qualified early childhood educators'* and the commitment to work collaboratively with First Nations and Métis organizations to develop a plan for a coordinated system that reflects the needs and demands of Saskatchewan's First Nations and Métis peoples.

The Saskatchewan government's ability to meet these commitments will require significant changes in how it governs, plans and manages ELCC in the province. The ELCC sector, at present, has limited capacity to support transformational change and further continues to deal with the financial and service disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. While ELCC service providers and staff welcome the significant new investments and commitments to system building, they will need new supports and infrastructure to make the transition.

Based on our consultations with Saskatchewan stakeholders and taking into account the findings from international and Canadian research on ELCC system building, the roadmap partners propose the following policy actions to support the public management and planning of early learning and child care essential to system building.

Policy actions related to governance and policy development

3. Review and implement changes in how the Ministry of Education governs, manages and supports ELCC

To support ELCC system building the Saskatchewan government will need to make fundamental changes in how it governs, manages and supports ELCC. These changes will require the government to take an active role in supporting ELCC that includes the following:

- **The purposeful public planning** of services to meet community needs;
- **The development of a public infrastructure** to ensure services are developed where needed, with options for public delivery when a non-profit organization is not in place to operate needed services;
- **The development of coherent policies** that reduce the barriers to children's participation in ELCC;
- **A hands-on role** in meeting policy objectives and ensuring targets and timetables are met, and allocating adequate financing to meet objectives;
- **The meaningful and ongoing engagement** of stakeholders during the system-building process, and the development and support of formalized structures to enable stakeholders to provide ongoing input on system operation and management. This engagement should include representatives from a range of stakeholders including those from the ELCC sector, community and economic stakeholders, researchers and policy experts, other levels of government including municipalities, school boards and Indigenous governments, organized labour, post-secondary institutions and other child and family serving organizations;
- **Regular data collection, monitoring and evaluation** to assess the progress towards meeting system and service goals; and
- **The development of strong accountability measures** for both government and the ELCC sector.

4. Take a whole of government approach to the development of an ELCC system

The building of a publicly managed and planned ELCC system is a large and complex undertaking that will require the support of different government ministries beyond the Ministry of Education. In addition to the Ministry of Education, the following ministries have potentially valuable roles to play in system building:

- Advanced Education: responsible for postsecondary education;
- Immigration and Career Training: responsible to assist employers with the development, recruitment and retention of workers;
- Social Services: responsible for income support, child and family services, affordable housing, and supports for persons with disabilities;
- Government Relations: responsible for municipal relations, First Nations, Métis and northern affairs;
- SaskBuilds and Procurement: responsible to oversee the management of all provincial infrastructure projects and central property management; and
- Status of Women Office: responsible to ensure gender considerations are integrated into government policymaking, legislation and program development.

The Saskatchewan government will need to determine the most appropriate ways in which these ministries might best work together to advance an ELCC system. The possible options the government might consider include the formation of a dedicated ELCC Secretariat, the development of a formal cross-ministerial partnership or the implementation of a special Cabinet Committee.

Policy actions related to expansion

5. Develop a multi-year expansion plan for ELCC

The Saskatchewan government will need to develop a comprehensive, multi-year expansion plan for regulated ELCC. The plan must focus on ensuring that newly developed, regulated child care spaces are:

- Affordable – to all parents, regardless of their financial circumstances;
- Suitable – of high quality, inclusive and welcoming of all children, responsive to the needs of working/studying parents and conveniently located;
- Sustainable – with system-level funding and infrastructure; and
- Staffed – with well-educated and fairly compensated educators.

To ensure that spaces are developed where they are needed and that service providers deliver high-quality, affordable child care, the engagement and input of a wide range of government and community partners will be essential.

An expansion plan will need to include:

- Targets and timetables for space creation, including a capital funding program;
- Targets and timetables for increasing the supply of qualified educators;
- A data collection and monitoring process;
- Benchmarks to monitor progress;
- A process for evaluating the impacts of policy changes;
- Accountability measures for public financing; and
- Mechanisms to modify policies, amend regulations and standards as needed.

6. Formalize an engagement process with the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association (SUMA) and the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities (SARM) to develop local expansion and service plans

Saskatchewan has 773 urban, rural and northern municipalities – the largest number of any province or territory. Local municipalities know their communities and their needs and are well positioned to work with the Ministry of Education and non-profit organizations to plan for expansion, identify available public space and, where there are none or not enough non-profit providers to deliver needed services, to operate licensed facilities.

A number of municipalities, especially in rural areas, already support the provision of child care by providing space and/or operating a centre. Public delivery will be especially important in rural and/or isolated communities and in other communities where there are no appropriate non-profit organizations to operate or deliver services.

7. Develop an inventory of public buildings and facilities that have the potential to house child care centres, and identify opportunities for the construction of new facilities

In 2017, the Ministry of Education completed nine joint-use school projects, each consisting of a public and Catholic elementary school in the same building, along with shared community facilities, including a 90-space child care centre. There is further commitment to include child care in all new school builds.

The Ministry of Education, working in partnership with other government ministries, should build on this initiative through the development of an inventory of existing and proposed new public buildings and facilities that have space that could be repurposed or developed to house a licensed child care program. The Ministry should further review and consider the potential for new purpose-built child care facilities to be developed on publicly owned land. There may also be existing school buildings that have space that could be re-purposed to house a child care program, or school lands on which a child care centre might be developed.

The housing of new child care centres in publicly owned buildings or their development on publicly owned lands has the potential to support the expansion of services, and would ensure that child care centres developed with public funds remain public assets.

8. Develop a 'child care in schools' policy to support more stable and standardized occupancy agreements for child care centres located in schools

More than one-third of child care centres in Saskatchewan are located in schools, but the terms of their occupancy, including lease agreements, access to school facilities and relationships between the child care and the school vary considerably. These variations create challenges for some child care centres.

To address these variations, and support more stable and standardized occupancy agreements, the Ministry of Education should work with local school boards and child care service providers to develop a 'child care in schools' policy. The proposed policy would establish common guidelines and occupancy arrangements for child care centres located in school buildings and support positive and consistent relationships between child care providers and schools. As part of the 'child care in schools' policy the Ministry of Education could support the implementation of nominal charge lease agreements for regulated child care centres leasing school space.

In the longer term, as the government helps build a more publicly managed and delivered system of ELCC, the Ministry of Education should work with school boards and child care service providers to support the closer integration of early education and child care services at both the provincial and local levels.

9. Review the provision of unregulated centre-based child care and consider the potential to bring these services into a regulated ELCC system

While the Saskatchewan government will need to consider a range of options to expand the provision of licensed child care services, the Ministry should review and assess the potential merits of supporting the transition of existing unlicensed centre-based programs, part-day preschools and school age programs located in schools, into a regulated child care system. Where feasible and desirable, bringing unlicensed programs into the regulated sector has the potential to expand provision, provide funding to facilities and increase affordability for parents.

Part-day preschools and school age programs located in schools are not currently required to be licensed. These programs operate with no public funding nor regulations, other than child to staff ratios to ensure children's safety. There are no educational requirements for staff, no physical space requirements and no public oversight. While many programs may offer high-quality programs, they are not monitored and, therefore, there is little available information on the number children participating in these programs, the qualifications of staff or quality of care provided.

Almost all jurisdictions in the country require part-day preschools and school age care to be licensed, and there is some liability for the Saskatchewan government and service providers if these services continue to operate without any of the typical requirements placed on licensed facilities.

As a starting point, preschools that operate in facilities that are non-profit, that meet the current regulatory requirements for physical space and staffing certification could be licensed. Where feasible and where there is demand, some of these programs might be extended to full-day. Licensing preschools would add to the supply of licensed spaces and allow programs to receive public funding. The additional public oversight required for licensed child care providers would also add a level of assurance for parents that basic health and safety measures are in place.

A review of school age child care programs in schools, especially for kindergarten age children and those in the younger grades, could also be undertaken to determine the feasibility and potential benefits of licensing these programs and bringing them into a regulated ELCC system.

10. Work with school districts to better align ELCC in prekindergarten and community-based child care programs to ensure family needs are addressed

Publicly funded part-day prekindergarten programs are provided in 316 school locations across the province and serve over 5,000 children and their families. At present there is limited public information on how many of these children and their families want or need to access licensed child care services for the balance of the work day. Children who attend both part-day prekindergarten and a regulated child care program must transition between the two programs and accommodate changes in pedagogy as well as changes in the staff supporting their early learning and care.

To support the local integration of ELCC services and provide children and their families with a continuity of early learning and child care, the Ministry of Education should work with prekindergarten programs and community-based child care providers to develop guidelines and supports to reduce the challenges children and their families face in transitioning between ELCC services.

11. Evaluate alternative models of family child care provision

The Saskatchewan government's commitment to expand regulated child care as part of the Canada-wide ELCC system building agreement will likely include some consideration of how the supply of family child care services can be increased. Prior to any expansion of family child care, the Ministry of Education should undertake a formal review of the models for family child care delivery to determine how best family child care can form part of a publicly managed ELCC system.

The current model of individually licensed family child care providers and group family child care homes is one of a small business operation, and is not consistent with Saskatchewan's policy of funding only non-profit child care services. In addition, providers often operate in isolation, have little backup and support or opportunities for peer interaction.

Alternative family child care models the Ministry of Education might evaluate include support for the development and licensing of family child care agencies that recruit, oversee and provide ongoing support to family child care providers, or family child care homes established as satellite programs of child care centres, operating under the same administrative structure. As part of any plan to increase the supply of licensed family child care, the Ministry of Education should also look to increase the educational requirements for family child care providers and bring them more in line with those for certified early childhood educators working in centre-based child care.

Policy actions related to partnerships and engagement

12. Ensure and support the ongoing engagement of stakeholders in the development and monitoring of an early learning and care system and the delivery of ELCC services

The input of content experts, representatives from the ELCC sector, postsecondary institutions, advocacy organizations, organized labour, immigrant and refugee organizations, anti-poverty groups and parents will be central to building an ELCC system that has a strong public foundation and broad public support.² Similarly, the future operation of an ELCC system will benefit from formal processes or ‘councils’ that provide stakeholders with the opportunity to have input into the policy decisions and service delivery practices that impact on children and their families.

The Saskatchewan government will need to work with stakeholders to design the processes through which public input can inform both system building and guide the delivery of services. The provincial government may wish to consider the merits of new public bodies that provide input at both the system level and local service levels to ensure that ELCC services are informed by a diverse range of voices and perspectives. The current models and approaches used in public education to support parent and community engagement may offer possible options for consideration.

The ongoing and meaningful engagement of stakeholders at the ELCC system and service levels will support accountability and transparency and help confirm and maintain the public character of ELCC.

² Consistent with the principles set out in the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework, Indigenous governments will control the design, delivery and administration of an Indigenous ELCC system.

Section 3. FINANCING

Evidence suggests that significant public funding is necessary to support a sustainable and equitable early childhood system. Without this investment, there is likely to be a shortage of good quality programmes, unequal access, and the segregation of children according to income. The key is therefore to invest not only in expanding access, but also in improving the quality of ECEC services that is affordable for all children.

OECD (2017:34) *Starting Strong 2017: [Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care](#)*

Background

Financing is one of the most important policy tools governments have to support ELCC. High quality ELCC requires sufficient and well-directed public investments, the level and nature of which impacts on the quality, availability and affordability of ELCC services.

A number of international bodies have established targets or benchmarks for the level of public investment in ELCC and recommended that it be a minimum of 1 percent of GDP.³ At present, Canada spends, on average, much less than its peer nations on ELCC. [Starting Strong II](#), the OECD report prepared upon completion of the review of ELCC in 20 countries, found that Canada ranked last in public expenditures, spending approximately 0.25 percent of GDP. In its review of Canada, the OECD found the lack of public funding to be a “fundamental flaw” in ELCC provision. The [Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Canada: Country Note](#) reported that public expenditure for kindergarten was close to twice that of child care, even though child care is provided for longer hours than kindergarten and typically operates year-round, compared to the 10-month/year provision of kindergarten.

Governments support ELCC through two main types of funding: demand-side and supply-side. Demand-side funding provided through tax credits, deductions, and fee subsidies to individual parents is intended to make child care more affordable for families while also providing them with the ‘choice’ to purchase the child care that works best for their family’s needs in the market place. This type of funding, however, does little to ensure the creation of high quality ELCC, nor does it necessarily make child care affordable. It can further result in low-income families having to “choose” the cheapest child care available to them, which is also often of the poorest quality. Supply-side funding, the predominant funding model in ELCC systems, covers all or part of the costs associated with operating a regulated ELCC program. If the funding is adequate and ongoing, it can provide services with financial stability. It can also help governments support quality through the conditions they attach to funding.

Mindful of the barrier that parent fees present for many families, numerous OECD countries provide funding to programs to enable them to offer some free provision, or to limit the percentage of household income to be spent on parent fees. New Zealand provides up to 20 hours/week of free ELCC for all children aged 3-5; in England, all 3 and 4 year-olds are entitled to 15 hours/week of free child care, and 30 hours if the parent is working or attending school. In Germany, some municipalities

³ See [Quality Targets in Services for Young Children](#); [Starting Strong II](#); [UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 8](#)

have eliminated all child care fees. In Norway families pay no more than 6% of their household income for child care, up to a maximum of about \$400/month, and lower-income families with children 2-5 years of age are entitled to a number of free hours of care per week. Quebec charges \$8.50/day in its publicly funded centres and homes, but there is no reduced fee for low-income families, except for those on social assistance who are entitled to 20 hours/week at no cost. The US Department of Health and Human Services has set a benchmark for affordability of 7% of household income for low-income families receiving a government subsidy. In his extensive analysis and economic modeling on affordability for the Government of Ontario in 2018, [Affordable for All](#), Gordon Cleveland recommended that child care be free for preschool age children, with increased subsidies and sliding fee scales for younger children.

The current context in Saskatchewan

In 2020-2021, The Ministry of Education budget allocated \$73.5 million for regulated child care, which is available to non-profit and public child care centres, licensed family child care homes and licensed group family child care homes. The funding allocation falls into three main categories:

- Funding in the form of fee subsidies to help reduce the costs of child care for eligible families;
- One-time 'start up' grants for new programs or to meet health and safety regulatory requirements; and
- Various recurring grants that support the operation of child care programs.

Approximately 67 percent of the total funding and 90 percent of the recurring grants are spent on Early Childhood Services Grants, a monthly operating grant provided to licensed centres. The grant amounts vary by region, the ages of the children served and the type of centre. They are higher for centres located in the Northern Saskatchewan Administrative District and centres operating for extended hours.

The Ministry of Education also provides a number of other recurring grants, including northern equipment, training and transportation grants, inclusion grants, various tuition reimbursement grants, grants that support teen student centres and homes, and equipment, nutrition and program grants for family child care homes.

Saskatchewan's funding per regulated child care space is higher than in most provinces and territories. In 2019, the allocation per regulated space was \$5,028, higher than in the neighbouring provinces of Manitoba and Alberta, where allocations were \$4,645 and \$2,528 respectively. However, since Saskatchewan has a low level of supply, the allocation per child population 0-12 years of age was only \$476, compared to \$865 in Manitoba and \$503 in Alberta.

According to Ministry of Education data, the mean monthly parent fees for child care centre spaces in 2019 ranged from \$761 per month for infant care to \$590 for a preschool age child. The similar mean monthly parent fees for regulated family child care were \$767 per month and \$649 per month respectively. Parent fees were significantly higher in Saskatoon and Regina. Even though parent fees are lower than most provinces and territories without set fees, parents still pay the bulk of the costs of regulated child care.

While the government has increased the value of its operating grants in recent years, parent fee subsidies have remained virtually unchanged for over two decades. The family income thresholds for a full fee subsidy are below the poverty lines for families with one and two children, making licensed

child care unaffordable for many low and modest income families. In addition to meeting financial eligibility requirements, parents must demonstrate a “need” for child care; they must be working, looking for work, attending school or have a medical condition. These requirements result in many children of low-income families being excluded from regulated child care. Families who receive a fee subsidy must further pay the difference between the full fee and the maximum subsidy rates, which some are also unable to afford. In 2001, 51.4 percent of children in regulated child care received a fee subsidy; by 2019 it had dropped to 15.8 percent.

The current subsidy system can also have a negative impact on the finances of centres. Operators report challenges in trying to cover the parent portion of the fee for low-income families, of having to exclude children due to their parents’ inability to pay, and accumulating bad debts when families leave programs at short notice. They also note the challenges parents on social assistance face when they gain employment and must then pay the difference between the subsidy rate and the full parent fee. In these instances, some parents have to withdraw their children from child care while other parents return to social assistance so they can once again ‘afford’ child care.

In contrast to the situation in child care, there are no fees for parents of the approximately 5,000 children enrolled in one of the 316 prekindergarten programs. These programs are fully funded, but for the most part, operate part-day and follow the school calendar, including closing for professional development days and school holidays. Parents who work full-time or attend school must find child care for the times when their children are not attending the program.

Federal funding for ELCC flows to the province through two main agreements: the Canada-Saskatchewan agreements signed under the 2017 Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Agreement and the new Canada-wide ELCC system building agreement.⁴ In 2017, Saskatchewan entered into a three-year bilateral agreement – the Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, which was extended for one year in 2020 and again for a further four years in 2021. Most of the \$14.31 million in federal funds in 2020-2021 were allocated to one-time capital and start up grants, and a range of pilot projects and quality initiatives. In addition, a portion of federal funds were allocated to family resource centres and for supports for children with intensive needs in prekindergarten programs.

The funding available through the Canada-wide ELCC system building agreement, signed in August 2021, is significant. The province will receive new federal funding of \$114.4 million in 2021-2022 rising to \$316.5 million in 2025-2026. Over the next five fiscal years, Saskatchewan will receive close to \$1.1 billion of federal funding to build an early learning and care system.

The commitments under the Canada-wide ELCC system building agreement to reduce parent fees, expand regulated spaces and establish a wage scale for early childhood educators will require the transition to a new funding model for regulated child care. Based on our consultations with Saskatchewan stakeholders and the consideration of research on ELCC financing, the roadmap partners propose the following policy actions to support the public funding of an ELCC system.

⁴ In addition to the two ELCC agreements, the Government of Canada provides block funding to the provinces and territories through the Canada Health Transfer and the Canada Social Transfer (CST). The CST transfer provides funding for postsecondary education, social programs and programs for children. It is possible that some of the CST is spent on early learning and child care, but there are few conditions or reporting requirements on the allocation of funds. In 2021-2022, \$477 million will be transferred to Saskatchewan through the CST.

Policy actions

13. Fully and directly fund licensed child care centres and licensed family child care homes

The commitment to build a publicly funded ELCC system provides the opportunity to move away from the current complex mix of parent fees, grants and fee subsidies that finance the delivery of early learning and care. Consistent with public system building, the Ministry of Education should implement a supply-side funding model for regulated services that includes sufficient and stable funding to provide parents with access to affordable child care and early childhood educators with fair wages and improved working conditions.

Any parent fees that remain, to cover the balance of service costs, could either be collected centrally, or, if fees are paid directly to the program, recovered through adjustments to the core funding provided to programs and services.

The move to core, stable funding for regulated services will mean that early childhood educators' wages and benefits are no longer tied primarily to parent fees and provide the basis for the development of a provincial wage scale for certified staff.⁵

14. Develop a funding formula for licensed child care centres

Consistent with the move towards a supply-side funding model that provides stable and sustained operational funding, the Saskatchewan government will need to develop a funding model or formula that reflects the true operating costs for child care centres across the province. The possible funding model or formula might include two components: a base operating grant, that takes into account the following factors:

- The wages and benefits paid to early childhood educators consistent with their level of education, experience and job role;
- provisions for substitute staff, as well as non-program and support staff;
- the professional learning needs of certified and non-certified staff;
- Hours of operation;
- Average enrolment;
- Administrative and program costs;
- Occupancy costs, such as utilities and regular maintenance; and
- Revenue from parent fees

and a supplemental or conditional funding grant to cover the additional costs of service delivery for the following populations:

- Children and their families living in isolated rural and northern communities;
- English language learners and minority language children;
- Vulnerable children who experience barriers to full participation; and
- Children with developmental delays or disabilities who require additional support.

⁵ See Section 4 for policy actions related to wage scales.

15. Develop a funding formula for licensed family child care homes and group family child care homes

The Saskatchewan government will also need to develop a parallel funding model or formula for licensed family child care homes and licensed group family child care homes. This formula might also include a base operating grant and supplemental grant, that takes the following factors into account:

- The education level and experience of family child care providers;
- The ages of children served and average enrolment;
- The provision of care for children and their families with additional service needs;
- Service delivery costs (fixed and variable);
- Professional learning costs; and
- Revenue from parent fees.

16. Develop conditions for centres and homes to receive core funding

The government of Saskatchewan will need to establish the criteria or conditions licensed child care centres and family child care providers must meet to be eligible for direct funding support. These criteria or conditions will ensure the transparent and accountable use of public funds, while also ensuring that children and families have equitable access to high-quality, affordable early learning and care and that certified early childhood educators, support staff and family child care providers are fairly compensated.

The possible conditions the government of Saskatchewan might establish include requirements that licensed service providers:

- Be in compliance with requirements under Saskatchewan's *Child Care Regulations*;
- Pay staff in accordance with any established provincial wage scale and benefit package;
- Charge parent fees consistent with any provincial or regional parent fee guidelines, and apply any fee reductions set out for lower income families;
- Be transparent in financial reporting and publicly report on expenditures;
- Welcome all children into the program, including children with developmental delays or disabilities, regardless of family circumstance or employment;
- Have an inclusion plan which outlines the measures or supports available to ensure that children with developmental delays or disabilities are able to fully participate in the program with their peers;
- Have an equity plan that outlines how barriers to a child's participation or additional needs will be met, and how children from diverse backgrounds and identities, including Indigenous children, racialized children, LGBTQ2+ families and newcomers to Canada are welcomed, supported and provided with culturally safe ELCC;
- Develop an annual quality plan in collaboration with staff and parents, and indicate how opportunities for continuous learning will be provided;
- Have an induction/mentoring plan for all staff;
- Accept and supervise practicum students to support the expansion of the workforce; and
- Provide data and participate in any evaluation activities required by government.

17. Develop a definition of affordability

One of the foundational commitments of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care system building agreement is to make regulated child care more affordable for families. The federal investments provided under the agreement are intended to reduce parent fees by an average of 50 percent by the end of 2022 and to an average of \$10 a day by 2026.

While these decreases in parent fees will reduce the financial burdens many families face, some families will still find regulated child care unaffordable. The Canada-wide agreement does not establish a proposed upper limit for parent fees, nor does it set out a definition of child care affordability.

The Ministry of Education should work with early learning and care stakeholders and social justice groups to develop a definition of affordability that will ensure that all families have equitable access to licensed child care now and in the future. In determining child care affordability, some provincial governments have opted to establish a maximum parent fee for regulated child care with additional financial supports in place for lower income families.

18. Replace parent fee subsidies with a 'geared to income' sliding fee scale

The reduction of parent fees will still mean that some families face financial barriers to accessing regulated child care. Saskatchewan's current parent fee subsidy system does not meet the needs of many lower-income families and requires reform to make child care affordable for those families most in need.

To address these inequities, the Saskatchewan government should replace the current subsidy system with a 'geared to income' sliding fee scale that makes regulated child care affordable for all families. Parents with very low incomes would pay no fee for regulated child care, while parents on higher incomes would pay a set maximum fee. In addition, the government should remove the eligibility requirements for parent fee support to ensure that all children regardless of their parents' employment status or attendance in an education or training program have equitable access to regulated child care.

Section 4. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

Child care staff invest a tremendous amount of time and energy in doing their jobs to the best of their ability under extremely difficult conditions with minimal financial resources, inadequate compensation and little respect. It is the child care workforce that serves as the major engine on the road towards achieving quality child care in Canada, and it is the nature of the difficult and restrictive conditions under which the workforce operates that is the major obstacle to quality.

Goelman et al (2000: 72) [You Bet I Care! Caring and Learning Environments: Quality in child care centres across Canada](#)

Background

There is a substantial body of evidence that good quality early learning and child care programs are good for children, while programs of questionable or poor quality have the potential to do harm. There is further broad agreement that the educational preparation of early childhood educators is a key predictor of quality in ELCC, and that specific knowledge and skills related to early childhood education is associated with better outcomes for children.

The [You Bet I Care!](#) study of quality in child care centres in seven jurisdictions across Canada identified both direct and indirect predictors of quality. Researchers found that the key predictors of observed quality using the Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS) and the Early Childhood Education Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) included the observed staff member's level of ECE-specific education and the observed staff members wages.

The 2008 [UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 8](#) proposed 10 internationally applicable benchmarks for ELCC as a set of minimum standards to protect the interests of young children. Benchmark number 6 proposed that a minimum of 50 percent of staff in early childhood centres should have at least three years of tertiary education with a specialization in early childhood studies or a related field.

Among OECD countries, a degree in early childhood education for at least a percentage of educators has become the standard for centre-based programs. Family child care, which usually accounts for a very small portion of provision, primarily for children under the age of three, has lower educational requirements for providers. Generally, providers are not required to hold formal early childhood qualifications, although they are usually supported by pedagogues and in some jurisdictions may be municipal employees.

Historically, low wages have been a characteristic of the child care sector and have contributed to ongoing challenges in the recruitment and retention of qualified staff. These challenges have been compounded by increased opportunities for early childhood educators in the Education sector at higher wages, increased benefits and shorter working hours. The lack of public value attached to the early learning and child sector as compared to related educational or caring fields has similarly made it more difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff.

The current context in Saskatchewan

Each of the four primary types of ELCC in Saskatchewan – prekindergarten, child care centres, licensed group family child care homes and licensed family child care homes – have different educational requirements for staff and providers. They also operate with different staff to child ratios.

Prekindergarten classrooms have a maximum of 16 children and require a teacher and an associate. Teachers must have a teaching certificate, which requires an approved university degree or equivalent, with four years of post secondary education and completion of an approved teacher education program. Early childhood specialization is preferred but not mandatory. Associates require completion of grade 12; however, an early childhood background is preferred.

Child care centres have maximum group sizes and staff to child ratios depending on the age of the children served. Qualification requirements for staff are at a centre level and are not specified for each group of children. Overall, 20 percent of staff, including the centre director, must be certified as an ECE Level III, which usually requires completion a two-year ECE diploma; an additional 30 percent must be certified as an ECE Level II, which usually requires completion of a one-year ECE certificate. All other staff working in the program for 65 hours or more per month must be certified as an ECE Level I, which requires completion of an ECE orientation program from a recognized postsecondary institution, or three courses related to early childhood. There is no requirement for early childhood educators to renew their certification and they are not required to complete ongoing professional development, although many do.

Group family child care homes can care for up to 12 children depending on their ages, and are staffed by a licensee and an assistant. The licensee is required to achieve Level I ECE certification within three years of becoming licensed. The assistant does not require any certification or training. The licensee is required to participate in a minimum six hours of continuing education per year. Individual family child care providers may care for up to 8 children depending on their age. They are required to complete a 40-hour introductory course in early childhood education within one year of becoming licensed and must participate in a minimum of six hours of continuing education per year.

In common with ELCC sectors across Canada, Saskatchewan faces significant challenges with the recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood educators. A 2019 survey of ECE professionals, undertaken for the Canadian Child Care Federation and the Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus,⁶ found that 37 percent of programs were operating with exemptions from licensing requirements due to the lack of appropriately qualified ECEs. It also found that that nearly 60 percent of the workforce with an ECE Level I qualification or an exemption was hired or replaced within the previous year. The lack of recognition and respect felt by many educators contributes to low job satisfaction and turnover, challenges which the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified.

Saskatchewan Polytechnic (Sask Polytech) is the primary institution that offers early learning and care programs of study. It offers ECE programs at three of its campuses, and its ECE curriculum is also delivered by regional colleges across the province. Sask Polytech has approximately 150 full-time students and another 300 studying part-time through continuing education. In addition to the ECE programs at Sask Polytech, regional colleges offer a range of ECE courses, certificate and diploma programs through full-time study, part-time study and through distance education. There is also a First Nations Child Care Program at the Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies.

⁶ People First HR Services (2019). *Canadian Child Care Federation: 2019 Saskatchewan Survey Executive Summary* Unpublished report

At the request of the provincial government, Sask Polytech recently developed an accelerated diploma program for staff certified as an ECE II and currently working in the child care sector. The program, condensed into a six month period, will be delivered on-line through continuing education, and will be free to eligible participants. The first program will run from October 2021 to March 2022. A key challenge for students taking the program will be managing the demands of an intensive program while continuing to work in the field.

As in other provinces, the low wages of early childhood educators have contributed to ongoing challenges of recruiting and retaining qualified staff, as have staff's limited benefits and challenging working conditions. Licensed child care centres rarely close for professional development days for staff, and there is an expectation that staff must complete any ongoing professional learning outside of work hours. The Canadian Child Care Federation's 2019 survey found that the median wage was \$15/hour for an ECE Level I; \$17/hour for an ECE Level II and \$20/hour for an ECE Level III. The survey also found that just over one in ten staff work a second job to supplement their income.

The workforce challenges facing the early learning and care sector will demand significant new policies and investments to support ELCC system building. The field will need to attract and retain a larger and more qualified workforce if all children and their families are to have equitable access to high-quality ELCC. The overarching required policy action is the development of a comprehensive workforce strategy, informed by consultations with early learning and child care stakeholders, postsecondary institutions, the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association and other early learning and care supporters.

The initial policy actions required, that will form part of the comprehensive workforce strategy, will need to address the educational preparation, certification and ongoing professional learning of early childhood educators; their compensation and working conditions; and data collection, monitoring and evaluation of the child care workforce.

Based on our consultations with Saskatchewan stakeholders and taking into account the findings from research on early learning and child care workforces, the roadmap partners propose the following policy actions.

Policy actions related to qualifications, certification and ongoing professional development of certified early childhood educators

The development of a long-term strategy to increase the educational and certification requirements for early childhood educators in licensed child care will be foundational to providing all children with equitable access to high-quality early learning and care experiences. In the short-term, the Saskatchewan government can introduce a number of measures to ensure that certified early childhood educators have the knowledge and skills they need to support the delivery of high-quality early learning and child care.

19. Immediately strengthen staffing requirements in support of quality provision

During the first two years of the Canada-wide ELCC system building agreement, the Ministry of Education could implement the following measures to enhance quality provision:

- Require at least one staff per group of children in centre-based care to have at least an ECE Level II certification;
- Require any staff supervising a practicum student to have an ECE Level III certification; and
- Require all staff to complete a specified number of hours of professional learning per year with funding support provided through the Ministry of Education.

20. Invest in and support opportunities for early learning and care students and certified early childhood educators to increase their educational levels and participate in ongoing professional learning

The Ministry of Education could further support the educational preparation of early childhood educators through the following initiatives:

- Provide funding support for Sask Polytech to develop alternative pathways to ECE III certification, including the development of a workplace education/training model that provides existing staff with paid release time to attend classes. The Ministry of Education should also cover the costs of substitute staff during the times eligible early childhood educators are attending classes.
- Provide fee relief or reimburse the tuition fees for eligible early learning and care students completing an ECE diploma through a public post-secondary institution who commit to work in regulated child care for a fixed period of time after graduation.
- Develop and support a mentorship program for centre directors with a specific focus on managing and supporting early learning and care staff teams.
- Develop a post diploma program for directors that focuses on pedagogical leadership, human resources management, effective communication and administration.
- Support the development and ongoing costs of pedagogical networks and communities of practice to engage both centre-based staff and family child care providers.

21. Implement regular renewal of certification and associated ongoing professional learning requirements for all certified early childhood educators

Once an individual is certified as an early childhood educator there are no requirements for either the renewal of certification or the completion of ongoing professional learning. This means that experienced early childhood educators, who were certified many years ago, may not have completed further education or training on new pedagogies since they were certified, and in the case of senior staff, be unfamiliar with new models of pedagogy, leadership or management practices.

The introduction of requirements for the renewal of certification, with requirements for annual participation in professional learning, will help ensure certified early childhood educators continue to gain new skills and knowledge which, in some instances, may make them eligible for higher levels of certification.

As part of the certification renewal process, the Ministry of Education could collect information on an early childhood educator's current place of employment and position, which would help provide data on the workforce for planning purposes. The Ministry of Education may also be able to collect information on educators who choose not to renew their certification, to determine their reasons for doing so, which may include seeking employment outside of the early learning and child care field.

22. Develop a medium- to longer-term strategy to raise the educational requirements for centre-based staff and family child care providers

The current educational requirements for certified early childhood educators in Saskatchewan are modest, just as they are in much of the rest of Canada, and fall below the targets or benchmarks for early learning and care workforces identified or proposed in international studies. While the commitment to expand regulated child care included in the Canada-wide ELCC system building agreement makes it difficult to increase the pre-service educational requirements for certified early childhood educators in the short-term, in the medium- to longer-term these increases will be critical to building a high-quality ELCC system.

The Saskatchewan government should, therefore, begin work on a medium- to long-term strategy to increase the formal educational and certification requirements for early childhood educators. The proposed strategy should take into account research findings on the educational preparation of early childhood educators as well as international benchmarks and norms for the educational requirements of early learning and care workforces. It should further review and provide direction on different pathways for students and certified staff to complete or upgrade their formal post-secondary education, the introduction of a degree-level qualification for a portion of early childhood educators, as well as the introduction of new post-diploma requirements for staff in senior leadership or management positions.

The Saskatchewan government will need to support the introduction of any proposed higher educational requirements for certified early childhood educators through new investments in educational bursaries and supports for staff upgrading their education, as well as improvements in the wages and working conditions for certified early childhood educators.

Policy actions related to compensation and working conditions

23. Develop a competitive provincial salary scale for all certified early childhood educators that reflects their level of education, experience and job role, and a common benefit package, including a pension plan

The current low levels of compensation for certified early childhood educators and their limited access to benefits present significant barriers to the recruitment and retention of qualified staff. To address these barriers, the Saskatchewan government should work with the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association and other sector stakeholders to develop and implement a provincial salary scale for certified early childhood educators.

The provincial salary scale should take into account the similar scales either being developed or proposed in other provinces and consider a starting wage of between \$25 and \$29 for an educator with a two-year diploma. It should further cover all staff who work in licensed child care, including those who do not have direct responsibility for children, as typically they experience the same low wages as educators. In addition, the proposed provincial salary scale should also include provisions for benefits and pension plan payments.

In 2020, the Canadian Child Care Federation and the Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus commissioned a competitive market review for base pay for key child care positions in Saskatchewan.⁷ It found that equivalently trained ECEs in Education earned between \$2.25 and \$6.00/hour more than those working in the child care sector. This market review could be used to start the discussion in developing an appropriate wage scale, which should include in its development, at a minimum, government, sector stakeholders and bargaining agents.

As an interim measure and until such time as the Saskatchewan government can develop a competitive provincial salary scale, the Ministry of Education should provide all certified early childhood educators with either a one-time compensation payment or a temporary wage enhancement.

24. Review working conditions for staff

Improvements in the working conditions of early childhood educators are also required to help reduce staff turnover and encourage qualified staff to remain in the field. The Ministry of Education should introduce the following initiatives or make the following changes to child care regulation and funding:

- The introduction of induction and peer mentoring support for all new early childhood educators;
- The provision of paid non-contact time during the workday to allow for program planning and staff meetings;
- The provision of paid release time during the work day for certified staff to participate in ongoing professional learning;
- A well-designed and equipped physical space, with immediate access to outdoor play space; and
- Opportunities for certified early childhood educators to provide input into program decisions.

25. Develop ELCC professional profiles and role descriptions

In many instances, program staff have similar responsibilities, regardless of education and level of certification. In some cases, staff with an ECE Level I certification are asked to supervise staff with an ECE Level III certification and oversee the placements of practicum students. The absence of well-defined professional roles and responsibilities for certified early childhood educators can diminish the value of education and act as a disincentive for early childhood educators looking to acquire higher credentials and advance their careers in the field.

The Ministry of Education should work with the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association, the Canadian Child Care Federation and Sask Polytech early learning and child care faculty to develop professional profiles and role descriptions for early childhood educators with different levels of education and certification.

⁷ People First HR Services (2020). *Canadian Child Care Federation: Saskatchewan Compensation Review* (revised July 2, 2020) Unpublished report.

Policy actions related to data collection, monitoring and evaluation

Regular data collection, analysis and reporting will form an important part of the proposed comprehensive workforce strategy. Reliable data on the state of the early learning and care workforce and the identification of key trends and changes over time will enable the Saskatchewan government to assess the effectiveness of policy changes and ensure that regulated child care services are appropriately staffed and supported by a qualified workforce.

The Ministry of Education should look to collect, analyze and report the following workforce data.

26. Compile and analyze human resources information collected from centre directors

As one of the conditions of receiving direct funding, the Ministry should require licensed child care centres to provide regular reporting on staff qualifications, the staffing complement within the centre, professional learning opportunities provided, wages and benefits, staff turnover, and human resources practices.

27. Conduct regular surveys of centre-based staff and family child care providers

The Ministry should also design and conduct regular surveys of centre staff and family child care providers to measure or assess their level of job satisfaction (including reference to their wages and working conditions), their proposed plans for further education, their participation in professional learning, and their anticipated work and career plans, including plans for leaving the field or retirement.



NEXT STEPS

The roadmap partners have drafted this document to help identify the key policy steps required to begin early learning and child care system building in Saskatchewan. The road map draws on the findings from an initial series of virtual engagements with stakeholders, held over the summer of 2021, as well as Canadian and international research on early learning and care systems.

The Federal Budget 2021 investments, accessed through the *Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* signed in August 2021, provide the opportunity to transform how early learning and care services are organized, financed and delivered in the province. The federal-provincial commitments to make early learning and child care more affordable for families, expand services and support the workforce will require new policies and approaches that move the child care sector away from its historic reliance on a market-based approach towards a publicly managed, planned and financed system of early learning and child care.

The roadmap partners see this initial policy roadmap as the starting point for discussions on how best to build an early learning and care system. These discussions must take place across the province with early learning and care stakeholders, community organizations and the many others who have an interest in the future of early learning and care, as well as policy makers at all levels. Each of the proposed policy actions outlined in the roadmap provide a basis for the collective work required to build an early learning and child care system.

The roadmap is a public document that stakeholders can use both to raise public awareness about early learning and care system building in Saskatchewan and to encourage further community conversations about the importance of early learning and care to the province's economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

In the coming months, the roadmap partners will share this preliminary road map, its ideas and proposed policy actions with others across the province. The partners will also work together to develop more detailed policy briefs on key elements of system building such as building the capacity of early learning and care workforces, expanding regulated services and the financing of service delivery.

To further coordination and collaboration in this regard, the roadmap partners will develop, in the coming weeks, an outreach plan to engage quickly and effectively with others, including government policy-makers, on the key policy actions that will help build a comprehensive and responsive system of early learning and child care in Saskatchewan.

