

The Pending Three-Year Provincial Action Plan Under The Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-wide Agreement

Priority Areas for Policy and Investment



A Record of Stakeholder Discussions June 23, 2023



Meeting Background

The Muttart Foundation, the Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association (SECA), the Saskatchewan Leaders' Caucus and Child Care Now, hosted a facilitated discussion with early learning and child care (ELCC) stakeholders in Saskatoon on June 23rd, 2023 (see Appendix A for a list of meeting participants). Similar discussions were also held in Manitoba through the support of the Manitoba Child Care Association and in Alberta with the support of the Muttart Foundation, Alberta Leaders' Caucus, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta and Child Care Now Alberta.

The main goals of the discussion with Saskatchewan ELCC stakeholders were two-fold: first, to gather their reflections on the first two years of system building under the Canada-wide agreement; and second, to seek their advice and direction on the priority areas for new policies and investments as part of the pending three-year provincial action plan (see Appendix B for the discussion questions).

The partners committed to share the results of the discussions with the provincial and federal governments, early learning and child care stakeholders and with the National Advisory Council on Early Learning and Child Care. Members of the National Advisory Council attended the discussions.

The sections below outline the main findings from the discussions. The discussions focused on the four main areas of investment outlined under the Canada-wide agreements: affordability, accessibility (service expansion), quality and inclusion.

The Priority Areas for ELCC System Building Policies and Investments in the Next Three-Year Provincial Action Plan

Affordability

Key learnings from the initial policies and investments to reduce parent fees (affordability)

The provincial government's accelerated introduction of \$10 per day child care was good for families. Public funding for parent fees has made the cost of child care primarily a public cost and this is an important aspect of system building. More focus is now needed on expansion and workforce investments, although there are some fears that there will not be a sufficient focus on these areas.

Reducing parent fees is positive. Lowering parent fees now may make it more difficult for future governments to withdraw funding from licensed centres/family child care and families.

Saskatchewan had lower parent fees than other provinces to start with making it easier to reach fee reduction targets.

There is some concern that lower parent fees may result in parents viewing programs and services with less respect.

During the first two years of the agreement, government communications with service providers were

poor. Service providers did not receive sufficient notice of funding changes. This made it difficult for service providers to explain fee changes to families.

Historically, there are examples of federally funded programs (e.g. housing, health) not continuing due to a lack of provincial support. There is some concern this may happen with ELCC system building.

There are concerns that middle-income and higher-income families have benefitted more from parent fee reductions than lower-income families. Lower-income families commonly face barriers in accessing regulated child care. Higher-income families are oftentimes better able to navigate services. Lower-income families may also need access to more flexible services.

Reduced parent fees have helped parents already accessing regulated child care. However, it has not had the same impact on those who are still on waiting lists to access these services. As a result, certain programs that serve vulnerable families are now being accessed by higher-income families, making it more difficult for lower-income families to access the services they need.

The new funding has essentially replaced parent fees with public funding but it has not resulted in more funding to ensure that services are high-quality. Funding needs to be stable – a new funding model is needed that is not based on grants. The Ministry of Education has indicated its commitment to develop a new funding model.

The Ministry of Education is developing a wage-grid for early childhood educators and looking at its financing model. To gather more insights from providers, the Ministry has set up workforce and financing working groups. Participants in these groups feel that they've been heard and believe it's important that this work be done well.

Some child care centres (e.g. rural programs) are more financially stable now with the new funding while others are not (e.g. programs in large urban centres). Some programs are finding that the new affordability grants make it more difficult for them to provide families with more flexible or part-time child care. Programs face continued challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified staff.

Some families who previously used part-time care now choose to pay the reduced parent fee and take-up a full-time space. As a result, programs are no longer able to offer families part-time care.

Programs across the province have different operating costs. Services located in school settings have different rent/lease costs; some are required to pay and others are not. These costs vary from school to school and can be significant. There are also differences in the rate of municipal property taxes, as certain municipalities have chosen to grant tax breaks to regulated child care centres while others have not.

Rising costs for facilities, food, toys and educational materials are placing financial strains on some organizations.

The Ministry of Education provided one time Change Management Grants to help service providers adjust to new funding models, which has been beneficial for programs.

Some service providers are concerned about future funding and what it will look like. As such, some service providers fear that they will lose control of budgeting and financial decision-making. Going forward, service providers need sufficient time to plan their operational budgets.

The priority areas for new policy and investment to advance affordability

There needs to be more stakeholder engagement – service providers need to know in advance what, if any, funding changes are coming. ELCC stakeholders will need to advocate together for system change.

Changes to program funding must be equitable and reflect differences in programs and services. Stakeholders need to have input into any new funding models. There will need to be agreement on how new funding models can best support programs and the delivery of high-quality, affordable services.

New funding models will need to reflect the large size of the province and the differences between services and their delivery costs.

The current child care regulations do not support high-quality services, nor does the current funding model. The Ministry's funding working group is understood to be working on recommendations for the Ministry. The working group has engaged some stakeholders and appears sensitive to the complexity of funding and the range of costs among service providers. The Ministry appears to be looking carefully at funding models.

Recently, the Ministry surveyed service providers on their operational costs. Around one-third of programs responded to the survey. The survey was long and complex and took a significant amount of time to complete. The survey did not focus on the actual costs of delivering high-quality services and there was concern the information submitted might not be comprehensive or fully accurate.

The continuation of current funding levels will not support the delivery of high-quality services. The goal must be one of developing a funding model that supports high-quality service delivery, including better compensation and working conditions for the ELCC workforce.

Public funding for ELCC must also take into account the public funding provided for schools, municipal governments and other services. Federal ELCC funding should not replace provincial child care funding or cover funding shortfalls in other areas of public services such as schools and municipalities. This can result in schools increasing child care lease costs or municipal governments raising child care property tax amounts.

ELCC stakeholders will need to advocate for appropriate funding and work with other levels of government and community partners – including the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association and school divisions.

Funding for affordability must be sufficient to support the inclusion of children and families with diverse and/or exceptional needs.

Accessibility (the expansion of regulated child care)

Key learnings from the initial policies and investments to create child care spaces

Historically, the province has had low levels of service supply. The Ministry's initial work to expand spaces does not appear to have resulted in a large number of new spaces. Further, there has been limited success in bringing unlicensed family child care homes into the regulated sector.

The Ministry of Education has sought input from stakeholders on space creation. The current capital funding provided is not sufficient to create new centre-based spaces – it might be up to a \$40,000 shortfall per space.

The shortage of qualified educators makes it difficult for service providers to open new spaces. It is particularly challenging to recruit qualified educators and directors in rural communities. Financial incentives are needed to attract qualified educators while creating a plan to retain experienced educators.

New and existing service providers must raise their own capital to finance new space creation. This may be possible for larger organizations, but not for smaller ones and new providers. There are also costs involved in 'start-up' and the need for infrastructure and planning investments.

Priority areas for new policies and investments to expand regulated child care

Partnerships and support from municipal governments (SUMA) could help with new centre development/space creation. There are also potential partnerships with school divisions.

Municipal governments have different zoning by-laws, taxation and policies that can limit the development of new services. These need to be improved.

New school construction should include space for regulated child care. There is also the potential use of public buildings and lands owned by municipal and other governments, although schools are not always supportive of including child care centres.

Government funding (provincial or federal) is required to develop new child care centres – which should be considered public infrastructure. Investments are also needed to help Ministry staff develop their capacity to support space creation.

The process for new school development and construction does not require individual organizations or service providers to develop new spaces. There is a system and process in place for publicly funded and managed expansion of services. Similar approaches could be applied to ELCC.

The costs of constructing a new child care space are well in excess of the current available capital grants. Some estimates put the construction cost of a new space at \$50,000 and this does not include land costs.

There may be a need for a new governance structure for non-profit organizations to help them expand services. Organizations need access to infrastructure and expertise (e.g. facility identification,

construction and program setup). Some organizations have the capacity and expertise to expand their services, others do not.

It may be possible to consider regional boards which would govern multiple program sites. But individual services would still need some autonomy. The federal government has supported affordable housing initiatives, perhaps there are similar models for ELCC. A combination of land, capital investments and development expertise are needed to create new child care spaces.

Ministry staff currently play a regulatory role – but they could also play supporting roles going forward, perhaps helping services expand. Alberta provides support for the Alberta Resource Centre for Quality Enhancement (ARCQE). Perhaps something similar could be funded in Saskatchewan.

There is limited information on where the ‘child care deserts’ are across the province.

ELCC stakeholders are not sure what strategies or options the Ministry of Education is considering to expand services. Politically, it does not seem that the provincial government is facing a lot of pressure, at present, from parents to expand services.

One possible option for expansion is the implementation of full-day Kindergarten and perhaps junior kindergarten. This would reduce the demand for child care, but would result in financial and service changes for the child care sector. This type of change would require the much closer integration of child care and early education services. Federal funding under the Canada-wide agreement can't be used for public education.

ELCC and education stakeholders would need to work together to plan the expansion of full-day Kindergarten, which perhaps could be delivered through child care programs and services. Schools offering kindergarten programs during school hours would still mean that parents needed care outside of these hours. This is potentially disruptive to parents if after hours care is not available in the school.

Ontario previously introduced full-day junior kindergarten and kindergarten. These changes impacted the financial operation of child care services. Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) also moved to school-based programs. New funding models would be needed to support such changes to ensure the continued viability of child care programs, stability of the ECE workforce and that the pedagogy is appropriate for children in the early years. Consideration would need to be given to the delivery of services in rural centres with smaller numbers of pre-school age children.

In Saskatchewan, part-day preschool programs are not currently licensed.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) discussions of ELCC policy note the differences between ‘split’ and integrated early education systems. In integrated systems, services for children 0 to 6 operate as a single system. The move towards such a system in Saskatchewan would be a big cultural shift and require new funding models.

Quality (including the ELCC workforce)

Key learnings from the initial strategies and investments to advance quality

The Ministry of Education has contracted SECA to support workforce recruitment. SECA is currently developing a workplan and budget and designing recruitment strategies. SECA also recognizes the importance of investing in the current workforce to increase staff retention. The Ministry of Education will shortly release a provincial workforce strategy.

The Ministry of Education has invested in expanding the post-secondary opportunities available to students and educators, including accelerated ECE programs and supported professional learning. The goal is to increase the number of staff advancing their education, thereby increasing their level of certification – which should support increased retention. There are concerns about the pending retirements of long-term ECEs.

The Ministry has increased investments in Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies, College Mathieu, and Saskatchewan Polytechnic, including supports for Indigenous educators.

The Ministry of Education has also provided wage enhancements for ECEs which appear to have helped with staff retention, however, improvements to working conditions must also be considered. As wage enhancements increase with higher certification levels, this has encouraged some educators to increase their education.

There is some indication that students completing education credentials are staying in the field – but there is no evidence for how long they stay. There is a significant increase in the number of international students completing ELCC credentials.

The Ministry also increased investments to help staff working in the field increase their education.

There was some suggestion that a post-diploma qualification for staff in administrative or management positions is going to be developed.

Service providers now have access to international trained staff/students through the Saskatchewan Immigrant Nominee Program.

The various new funding grants disbursed did provide centres with some flexibility to allocate monies to areas of particular need. Going forward stable operational funding is required.

The priority areas for new policies and investments to support quality

The working conditions for ECEs continue to be challenging and contribute to staff leaving the field. Individual programs have introduced short-term benefits to encourage staff to remain in the field. These benefits require ongoing funding if they are to be sustainable.

Programs face additional staffing costs (e.g. higher wages and related source deductions) if staff increase their level of certification. A new funding model is needed to support staff with higher certification levels.

Additional funding is also needed to improve staff working conditions, including support for professional learning, non-contact time and professional development days. New funding and supports are also needed for ECEs in leadership positions (e.g. management, mentoring, pedagogical leadership programs).

Specialized staff supporting inclusion need to be eligible for wage enhancements. At present, service providers have to find other resources to support improved compensation for these staff.

Some staff are delaying taking further education. They want to see what changes are coming to the sector before investing additional time and energy in further education. Some staff are too burned out to participate in ongoing learning.

The wage enhancements provided to date have made a difference. They have given staff and centre directors some hope. Staff anticipate that more investments will be coming. New compensation supports must place more of a priority on higher qualified staff/staff with seniority than they have in the past, otherwise senior staff will continue to leave the field.

Some programs have already lost staff – when they weren't eligible for new wage enhancements. Going forward, all staff must be included and see compensation increases.

Working environments and conditions are more demanding, so additional supports are needed. Educators are seeing that parents have increased expectations. Further, there are additional cleaning and health and safety requirements that staff must address within their day. Funding is needed to support planning and professional development time for staff.

There is more staff burn-out and more staff are off sick. This creates service delivery challenges and stresses. ECEs have to be 'on' 100 % of the time. They are providing active supervision all day and there is no time for breaks. This is a significant stress on staff.

To ensure quality, educators need time, energy and resources to appropriately interact with children, their families and other educators. These need to be supported.

New educators/students entering the field are excited about working in the field but they typically have to 'hit the ground running'. They receive no supports in terms of onboarding, coaching, or mentoring when they start in the field. There need to be new investments in people.

The current funding model does not support high-quality delivery. The adult:child ratios need to improve and there needs to be paid non-contact time for staff.

ELCC stakeholders have begun work on developing a provincial wage scale. This work is at an early stage. The stakeholders will look to do similar work to that undertaken in BC and AB. The aim is to engage multiple stakeholders in the work.

It will be important that the wage scale is developed through a sound process. Other sectors have looked at wage scales and costs of living. The ECE workforce is underpaid. It is also a racialized workforce that tends to be undervalued. Provincial wage scales must pay ECEs more than 'poverty

wages'. Fair and competitive wages are needed. There are various measures of low-income, including Market Based measures.

Child care programs and services must be funded properly so that they have the autonomy and capacity to meet community needs. There must be equity for families and equity of access across the province.

Inclusion

Key learnings from the initial strategies and investments to support inclusion

Inclusion is always there in the Ministry's language, but nothing has been done. It has become worse over the last two years. We need the staffing resources to make a difference. Families whose children have additional/specialized needs often have less access to regulated child care. Many children are often turned away.

The Ministry has approached inclusion with an old way of thinking – one-on-one support - rather than inclusion of children. However, some children, including medically fragile children, will still require one-on-one support.

The Ministry used to provide maximum funding of up to \$2,000 for a special needs child for an Educational Assistant (EA) to work 5.5 hours. With wage increases this funding now buys less staff time. That means less time with that child and it makes it difficult to provide the supports that are needed. There are also no staff available to work in these positions. We've had to say no to those families as we can't find staff.

The wage enhancements for ECEs have made it more difficult to provide inclusive child care, since funding for inclusion has not kept pace; recruiting qualified educators who can support inclusion is also difficult.

It takes a long time to place a child with special needs (e.g. Autism – a 6 month wait) and then we have no supports to give to the educators to help provide learning and care for the child.

There are administrative challenges around approving inclusion supports and referrals for service. Fewer specialists and supports are available in communities, particularly rural communities.

The challenges around inclusion are not linked to recent system building. Rather, they are longer trends that have been compounded by the pandemic and other disruptions to services.

There is a perception that some parents are hesitant to disclose their children's additional needs out of fear that their children will be denied admission into a program. Programs often discover later that certain children require additional/specialized supports. There are also challenges and delays in accessing the necessary supports and therefore, programs are limited in their capacity to take on more children with more complex needs.

As a result of some of the behavioural challenges children are presenting with, the health and safety of ECEs and other children are in jeopardy, as well as the work of the ECEs.

There is a shortage of speech language pathologists and child psychologists in the province, which is contributing to some of the challenges. Some of these professionals have moved into private practice which is costly for families to access. Only well-resourced families can access them.

The funding is not sufficient to provide children with the quality and inclusive child care they need. Programs end up trying to cover additional costs themselves, which is not financially sustainable.

Some programs will try and move children into sister programs given funding and staff limitations. Children can't afford these transitions or moves as they need consistency of care. This is especially true for medically fragile children and children who have experienced trauma.

The priority areas for new policies and investments to support inclusion

The Ministry appears to be aware of the challenges programs and services are facing in including children with additional/specialized needs. These children need additional supports and qualified staff or inclusion specialists – which are not available. These challenges continue into the education system. There are increased needs for speech language pathologists and other specialists but there is limited access to these professionals. In some communities, there are no child psychologists who can support children in programs.

Some form of 'regional' solutions are required given the shortages of specialized staff. Partnerships with school divisions might be one way forward; although school boards also have heavy caseloads of children with additional needs. Or, a new regional infrastructure organization that could provide programs access to inclusion specialists and other supports or training opportunities.

The ECE workforce will also need to be supported to serve more diverse populations. They will also need education and support to work with Indigenous children.

There needs to be recognition that the ECE workforce is diverse and includes many newcomers and racialized women. We have diverse workforces providing services to largely high- and middle-class, affluent families. The women in the workforce must feel welcomed, valued and respected.

Child care centres serving marginalized populations are experiencing an increase in middle- and upper-income families from outside their communities accessing their services. As a result, there is a decrease in the number of lower-income and more vulnerable families who can access their services. This means that more vulnerable families, who already have limited resources and could benefit from quality child care, are missing out on early learning and child care opportunities. This then has a negative impact on their lives, such as accessing education, finding employment, and even keeping their families together and stable.

Funding centres based on their licensed capacity rather than their current enrollment might help centres support and enrol families with higher needs.

The solution to the above challenges may be one of opening more quality and inclusive spaces – but this is difficult to do. Service providers would have to advocate for changes and it is not certain how the Government of Saskatchewan would respond to strong advocacy.

Participant Concluding Observations on the Priority areas for Policy and Investment in the Pending Three-year Provincial Action Plan

The ELCC sector needs to stay active and involved in arguing for policies and investments that support system building.

ELCC stakeholders are overwhelmed. New investments and policies are needed in all areas.

The ELCC sector needs to develop a position paper on ECE compensation.

The focus needs to be on ensuring that services are of a high quality.

The priorities are workforce and quality – these are linked. Growth and expansion must involve quality.

The workforce and inclusion are the priorities for new investments and policies.

The workforce is the priority – as in focusing on what is in the best interests of children and their families.

We need a vision of ELCC in the province that focuses on what is in the best interests of the child. Operational funding must be sufficient to allow service providers to meet the needs of children and families.

The ELCC sector needs a common agenda that focuses on system building.

It is challenging not being able to serve the children and families who need services. We need more qualified staff.

The workforce and system building are the priorities with the ELCC sector working collectively to advance change.

The main areas are all important and connected. Without a workforce we can't do any of the work.

The workforce is the priority area for investment. Funding must support a high-quality system and not bare minimum standards. Programs need more operational funding to deliver high-quality services.

Appendix A

| Saskatchewan ELCC Stakeholder Discussion | |
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| June 23, 2023 - Saskatoon - The ALT Hotel | |
| Angie Stevenson | St. Brieux ELCC, St. Brieux |
| Caley Eikelenboom | YMCA Saskatoon, Saskatoon |
| Cara Steiner | Prairie Lily Early Learning Centre, Regina |
| Colleen Christopherson-Cote | Saskatoon Poverty Reduction Partnership, Saskatoon |
| Donna Rice | Stepping Stones, Regina |
| Georgia Lavallee | SECA, Weyburn |
| Karin Duff | Ranch Ehrlo, Regina |
| Leanne May | Saskatoon Open Door Society, Saskatoon |
| Lisa Leibel | Preston Early Learning and Care, Saskatoon |
| Lisa Wyatt | Hope's Home, Prince Albert, Saskatoon and Regina |
| Nicole Ferguson-Marshall | Saskatchewan Polytechnic, Saskatoon |
| Roxane Kaskiw | YMCA Saskatoon, Saskatoon |
| Sheila Paradis | Natural Wonders Early Learning Centres, Swift Current |
| Shumi Zaman | YWCA Saskatoon, Saskatoon |
| Sue Delanoy | Child Care Now Saskatchewan, Saskatoon |
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| Christopher Smith | The Muttart Foundation, National Advisory Council |
| Don Giesbrecht | National Advisory Council |
| Monica Lysack | National Advisory Council |
| Morna Ballantyne | Child Care Now, National Advisory Council |
| Tara Stang | The Muttart Foundation |

Appendix B

What are the Priority Areas for ELCC System Building Policies and Investments in the Pending Three-Year Provincial Action Plan for the period 2023/24 through 2025/26?

1. Affordability

In 2021 the Government of Saskatchewan introduced new flat-rate fee reduction grants to reduce parent paid fees by an average of 50 percent. The Government increased the value of these grants in 2022 to reduce parent paid fees by an average of 70 percent. In March 2023, the Government announced the reduction of parent paid fees to \$10 per day effective April 1, 2023 – three years ahead of the original announced schedule. The initial two-year Action Plan allocated \$219.1 million in federal funding to reduced parent fees in 2021/22 through 2022/23.

What key learnings should the Ministry of Education take from its strategies and investments to reduce parent paid fees? What worked well and what needs improvement or revision going forward?

Given that the Government of Saskatchewan has already reached the goal of providing families with access to \$10 per day child care what, if any, are the priority areas for new policies and/or investments to support the sustainable delivery of high-quality regulated child care with significantly reduced parent paid fees?

2. Accessibility

The Government of Saskatchewan has committed to create 28,000 new non-profit or publicly owned regulated child care spaces over the course of the Canada-wide agreement. The space creation targets for 2021/22 through 2022/23 were 12,100 new spaces. The Government further committed to develop an expansion plan by the end of the 2022/23 fiscal year. The Government of Saskatchewan allocated \$49.8 million in federal funding to create new regulated child care spaces in 2021/22 through 2022/23.

What key learnings should the Ministry of Education take from its initial strategies and investments to create child care spaces? What worked well and what needs improvement or revision going forward?

What are the priority areas for new policies and/or investments to expand the provision of regulated child care given the space creation targets outlined in the agreement?

3. Quality

The Government of Saskatchewan's commitments to advance quality regulated child care in its initial two-year Action Plan included support for the provincial early learning framework as well as investments in building workforce capacity. The specific workforce investments identified included additional professional learning and educational opportunities for early childhood educators and support for improved compensation and the development of a provincial wage grid. The Action Plan allocated \$15.7 million in federal funding to support the above work. The Government also allocated federal monies received under the Bi-Lateral Early Learning and Child Care Agreement to build workforce capacity.

What key learnings should the Ministry of Education take from its initial strategies and investments to advance quality including building ELCC workforce capacity? What worked well and what needs improvement or revision going forward?

What are the priority areas for new policies and/or investments to support the provision of high-quality regulated child care including building ELCC workforce capacity?

4. Inclusion

The Government of Saskatchewan committed to develop plans and options to ensure ‘vulnerable children and children from diverse backgrounds’ have equitable access to regulated child care as part of the initial two-year Action Plan. The Action Plan included supports for vulnerable children transitioning into child care as well as investments to make child care programs and services more accessible and inclusive. The two-year Action Plan allocated \$4.052 million in federal funding to make regulated child care more inclusive in 2021/22 through 2022/23.

What key learnings should the Ministry of Education take from its initial strategies and investments to support inclusion? What worked well and what needs improvement or revision going forward?

What are the priority areas for new policies and/or investments to ensure that vulnerable children and children from diverse backgrounds have equitable access to regulated child care?

Concluding Observations on the Policy and Investment Priorities for ELCC System Building in the Pending Three-year Provincial Action Plan for the period 2023/24 through 2025/26