

CHILDCARE WORKFORCE IN CRISIS: OUR ECONOMY WON'T WORK WITHOUT ELCC WORKERS



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Over the past two years, conversations about Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) have been at the forefront. **Quality ELCC has been emphasized as essential for economic recovery** and development as well as familial wellbeing. More resources for ELCC would improve educational outcomes for children, reduce income inequality, and increase workforce participation – especially of working mothers[i]. Despite these benefits, Canada is behind its international peers and has an \$8 billion gap in childcare and early learning spending[ii].

The ELCC system has been characterized by uneven access, affordability, and quality and a generally low-waged female labour force iii. The pandemic exacerbated these challenges. Through the COVID-19 crisis, employment losses were seen more strongly for women than for men (she-cession)[iii],[iv] and family care defaulted largely to women[v]. These outcomes have significant consequences at the household and macroeconomic levels, including decreased tax revenues for governments, and increased poverty for women and children[iii].

Childcare system interventions increase GDP and get mothers back into the workforce. With Quebec’s universal childcare system reform, approximately 69,700 more mothers were able to hold jobs than if the province had continued to follow the traditional approach. This addition of mothers to the labour market led to an increase of \$5.1 billion (or 1.7%) in Quebec’s internal income (GDP).[vi]

For every dollar invested in childcare, the broader economy receives a return of \$1.60[vii]. When taking a longer view, considering the benefits to children over their educational journeys and into their careers, the anticipated return increases to almost \$6.00. Also, as barriers to low-income families, such as finding and accessing quality childcare, are removed their income goes up which generates more economic activity and tax revenue[viii].

Since 2014, publicly funded schools have provided childcare to 90% of Ontario’s four- and five-year-olds through full day kindergarten (FDK). The jobs in this system can be classified as decent – with kindergarten teachers earning an average salary of closer to \$43.96 per hour[ix], being recognized as valued professionals, and working in quality work environments[ii]. Ontario’s implementation of **FDK, as a childcare system intervention, contributed to a boost of \$5.6 billion** to Canada’s GDP in one year[xi].

The federal government recently promised to invest more than \$30 billion to extend an ELCC system across Canada[xii]; however, the current workforce cannot support this plan. **Early Childhood Educator (ECE) staffing shortages are a known issue**, with high turnover rates of existing employees[xiii] and not enough students graduating and entering the field.[xiv]

ELCC worker shortages are deeply felt in small cities and rural communities such as those highlighted in this Brief (Cornwall, the United Counties of Stormont, Dundas & Glengarry [SDG], Leeds & Grenville, Prince Edward, Lennox & Addington). **Thousands of working parents in these Eastern Ontario communities are currently on the waitlist for childcare** yet 68% of licensed childcare spaces are operational in Cornwall and SDG[xv], 69% are operational in Prince Edward, Lennox, and Addington[xvi] and 70% are operational in Leeds and Grenville[xvii]. That means that there is physical space to accommodate those families, but a shortage of childcare staff is the main reason for not operating at capacity.

Staffing shortages are in part attributed to financial concerns which ranked high among challenges for childcare operators in Canada, with over 40% of providers reporting difficulties meeting wage and salary costs[xviii]. Table 1 shows the median annual and hourly wages for ECE jobs in Eastern Ontario and Ontario. In Eastern Ontario, ECEs and Assistants earn only slightly above living wage (\$19.05/hour).[xix]

Table 1. Wages for early childhood educators and assistants (NOC 4214), Eastern Ontario[xxi] & Ontario[xix].

	Median annual wage (2023)	Median hourly wage (2023)
Cornwall, SDG	\$40,884	\$19.66
Leeds & Grenville	\$40,884	\$19.66
Prince Edward, Lennox & Addington	\$40,610	\$19.52
Ontario	\$41,600	\$20.00

Note: In Cornwall and SDG, wages specifically for Registered early childhood educators (RECEs) range from \$18.25 and \$32.65[xv] per hour; in Prince Edward, Lennox, and Addington the range is \$15.50 to \$24.90[xv]i per hour; and in Leeds and Grenville RECEs earn a median hourly wage of \$21.14[xvii]

Designated Early Childhood Educators in FDK in Eastern Ontario earn between \$24.48-\$28.58 per hour.[xxi]

Research on ECE program graduates shows not all graduates stay in the field[xiv] with one likely reason being the low rate of pay. In Spring 2023 there were 12 graduates from St. Lawrence College-Cornwall Campus’s ECE program, a graduation rate of 44%[xxii], and 18 graduates from Loyalist College’s ECE program, a graduation rate of 53%[xxiii]. Currently, there are no ECE programs located in either Prince Edward, Lennox & Addington or Leeds and Grenville.

Strategies to attract and retain ECE grads and ELCC workers should focus on wage increases, with a salary scale starting at \$25 per hour for all childcare workers and \$30 per hour for Registered/Designated ECEs[xxiv]. At the local level, expanding access to a variety of quality professional learning opportunities (e.g., workshops, conferences, professional communities) will also be critical to build the required ELCC workforce[x].

Supporting the creation of decent jobs within childcare will support Eastern Ontario’s economy (and beyond) now and into the future. The need to attract and enable young families to move to and work in the region is increasing due to changing population dynamics and an aging workforce. A better ELCC workforce strategy is a key socio-economic issue that needs to be addressed in order to support equal employment opportunities for everyone[iii].

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