

Roadmap

to Universal Child Care in Ontario



**First edition
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**ONTARIO COALITION FOR
Better Child Care**



aeceo
Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario

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Roadmap to Universal Child Care in Ontario.

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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic shone a spotlight on how important child care is to our communities and how essential child care will be to our social and economic recovery. Over the past year a growing chorus of child care champions joined long-time advocates to demand real action on child care from governments.

The 2021 Federal Budget's investment of \$30 Billion over five years and permanent ongoing funding of approximately \$9.2 Billion annually has the potential to transform child care in Canada. In Ontario, this new funding could mean that the provincial child care budget more than doubles. This opens up possibilities for regulated child care to: become more affordable for parents; provide decent work and pay for educators; and serve many more children and families across the province, including those in currently underserved communities. We need our provincial government to work collaboratively with the federal government, local service system managers and communities to make this vision a reality.

THE VISION

Parents would know that there would be a child care space in their neighbourhood when they needed it – no more waitlist scrambles. Parents would know that they could afford it – fees would be capped at \$10 a day and geared to income – no more subsidy wait lists, no more private loans.

Early childhood educators would know that they were respected for their pedagogical knowledge and skills. With decent paying positions that reward their education and ongoing professional learning, they would know they can have a rewarding, lifelong career in child care.



Children would know that there would be a caring and joyful place for them to play and learn each day. They could form attachments with educators, confident that those same educators would be there each day. Children whose parents work shifts, weekends or part-time hours would know they have stable and caring spaces to grow and learn too.

Child care operators and service managers, families and communities would know that they could work collaboratively to plan and meet early learning and child care needs in their local community.

For a caring and inclusive world: It is a moral imperative to reflect on and respond to the crises of our times. Addressing racism, ongoing settler-colonialism, and the environmental crisis is necessary, and cannot be done if we continue the status quo. While we are setting a foundation for a new child care system, we must also think of what becomes possible if we break off our current path and imagine the world we want to create. Moving forward, Ontario's development of early years and child care policy should be guided by:

- Meaningful, transparent and collaborative dialogue with First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Urban Indigenous communities and organizations to expand Indigenous control, management and coordination of child care services.
- Transforming pedagogical approaches in Ontario's early years and child care sector to centre anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-oppressive knowledges, frameworks, and pedagogy.
- A comprehensive, interdisciplinary inclusion strategy that centres the voices and experiences of the disability community.

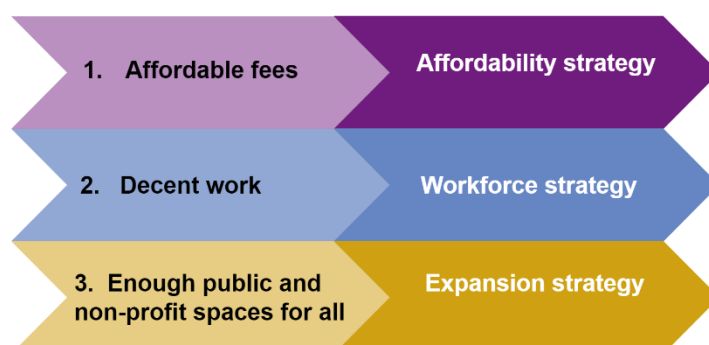
Discussion Question 1: What is your vision for a universal child care system in Ontario?

THREE BIG IDEAS TO THREE KEY STRATEGIES

Child care advocates in Ontario have campaigned for several years for action on *Three Big Ideas* that could broadly define a new system:

1. Affordable fees for families;
2. Decent work and pay for educators; and
3. Enough quality public and non-profit spaces for all.

Now is the time to move these three aspirational concepts into more detailed, actionable strategies that address our current context and post-pandemic future.



Ontario's child care system has many strengths upon which we can build:

- a strong public and non-profit child care sector that provides three-quarters of Ontario's child care spaces;
- child care is part of the Ministry of Education, as it is in most jurisdictions with publicly funded systems;
- the majority of child care programs are located in schools and other public spaces;
- high quality post-secondary Early Childhood Education programs graduate thousands of Registered Early Childhood Educators each year.

But to move forward to our goal of a quality, affordable child care system for all, we must be ready to navigate roadblocks including:

- the highest child care fees in the country;
- a staff retention crisis;
- child care programs financially struggling due to low enrollment and frequent closures during the pandemic;
- barriers between different parts of the early years sector, including licensed child care, family supports and education system;
- A haphazard approach to expansion that has left many communities underserved.

To move forward we must stabilize, transform and expand our child care system.

Discussion Question 2: What do you think are the biggest strengths and challenges of Ontario's current early learning and child care system?



The Roadmap to Universal Child Care in Ontario was developed (and is still developing) through community engagement and consultation. Over the past year, the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario have engaged our members, partners, allies and their communities in discussion about how to move child care forward. During the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic we developed the [“From Reopening to Recovery”](#) plan to safely reopen child care in Ontario and put child care at the centre of economic and social recovery. That plan has now evolved to address our current context, including the emergence of the federal government’s child care commitment. This edition of the *Roadmap to Universal Child Care in Ontario* is only the first of many - we have included discussion questions throughout to further elicit stakeholder feedback.

Since federal budget 2021, child care advocates in all regions of the country have been convened by Child Care Now, Canada’s child care advocacy association, with a call for provincial and territorial child care organizations to develop regional roadmaps to facilitate the creation of affordable, high quality, child care systems across Canada. Child Care Now has also released their own roadmap, featuring 10 elements to guide pan-Canadian system building. These elements are:

1. Public management of ELCC provision;
2. Direct and sufficient public funding of ELCC operational budgets;
3. Public funding with conditions;
4. Publicly funded and managed expansion;
5. Expansion plans and strategies;
6. No expansion of for-profit ELCC;
7. Workforce strategies;
8. Data and research;
9. Public accountability; and
10. Democratic participation.

Our *Roadmap to Universal Child Care in Ontario* aligns with these pan-Canadian system building elements, but also brings local policy context and harvests local solutions to meet local challenges.

This Roadmap sets out our vision and our shared path forward, but cannot delve deeply into each area of the transformation we need. That is why this Roadmap will be complemented by an upcoming series of Policy Briefs that discuss in more detail issues such as: municipal role, regulated family child care, urban Indigenous child care, rural child care, family support programs and more. We will also be releasing Program Profiles that will highlight innovative practices in programs across Ontario from which we can learn while building a new system.

A NOTE ON QUALITY

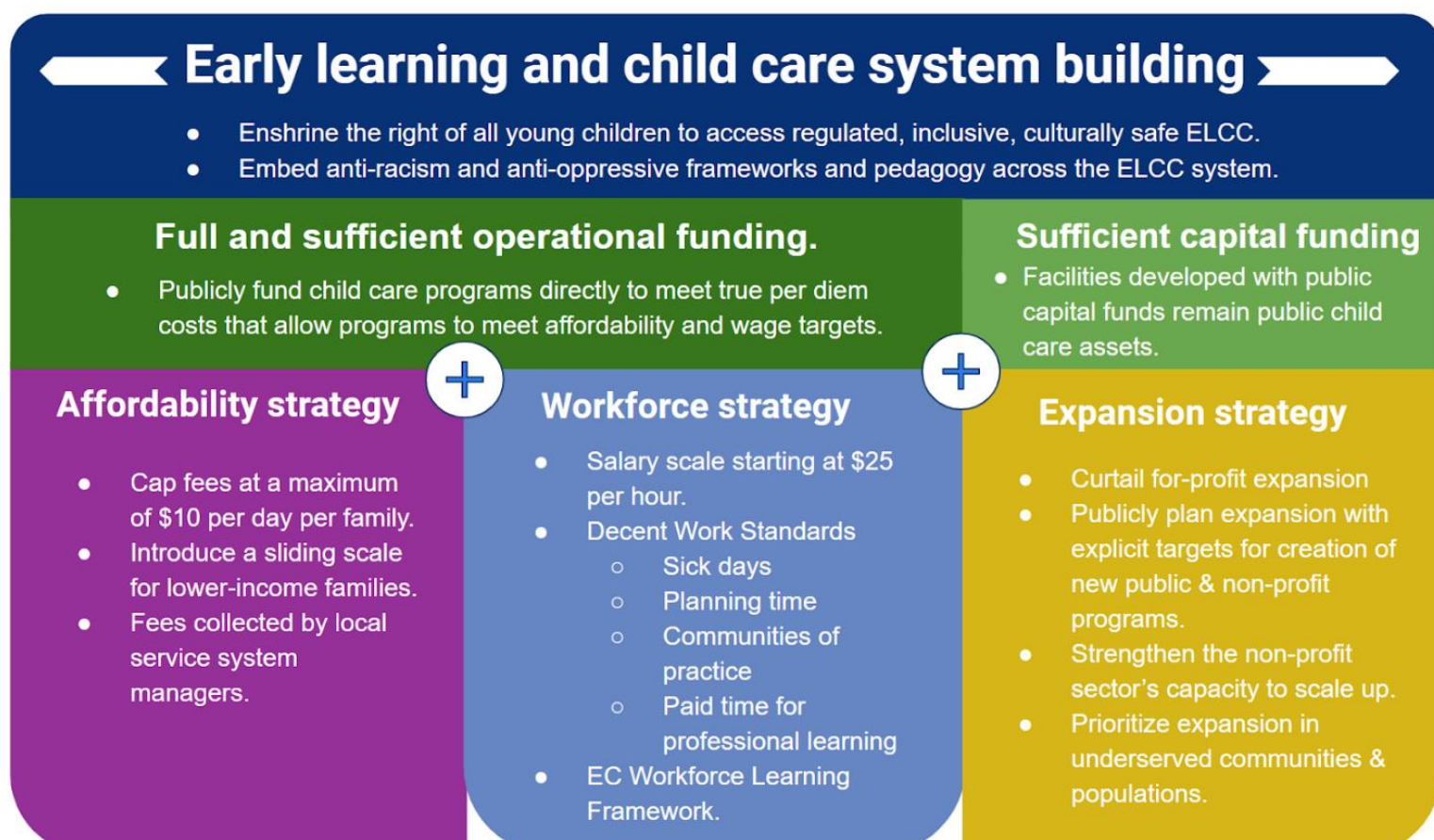
A growing number of early childhood education and care theorists and philosophers have called for a rethinking of dominant, technical approaches to defining and monitoring quality. There is an emerging recognition that it is the important role of well-educated early childhood educators with decent work who bring “quality” to life through caring relationships and pedagogy with young children and families. Embedding decent work principles in legislation through a Workforce Strategy, including a Provincial Wage Scale and an Early Childhood Workforce Learning Framework, demonstrates a commitment and respect for relational quality in programs. Through these, and other policy interventions offered in the Roadmap, we are committed to conceptualizations of quality as *woven through* a well-funded and supported system - not siloed into separate policy interventions or programs.



OUR PATH-BREAKING PLAN

We face a serious challenge as we journey to a new early years and child care system. Decades of reliance on our current market-based arrangements mean that many of its features permeate how our governments and communities understand and deliver child care. For years we have treated the issues of high parent fees and low ECE wages separately rather than as two sides of the same coin - best solved by publicly funding services directly.

Path dependence could lead our governments to continue to only tinker around the edges rather than make big changes. But this moment offers us a chance to break a new path. Our Roadmap tackles the issues of affordability for parents, decent work for educators and creating enough spaces for all as three facets of one unified plan, built with full and sufficient public funding and overarching system building and democratic governance. Each section of the Roadmap describes the goal, the provincial context and recommended policy interventions.



Goal: All young children have the right to access regulated, affordable, inclusive, culturally safe, flexible, high quality early learning and child care.

Transforming Ontario's patchwork of market-based child care services into a comprehensive publicly funded and managed system will require work in a number of areas: funding formulas and guidelines, fee structures, workforce strategies and planned expansion. All of the roadmap's policy interventions are designed to move us closer to that system. But these initiatives are brought together by an overarching plan for system building and transformation.

Child care in Ontario is currently treated as a private service rather than a public good; children do not have a right to access early childhood education and care. A critical step to building a new system is to enshrine children's right to early learning and child care in the *Child Care and Early Years Act*.

The current system creates silos between different parts of the early years and child care sector (e.g. EarlyON, family support programs, licensed child care and the school system) that should be better integrated to create a comprehensive system to support children, families and communities.

In our consultations we were introduced to a number of policy recommendations to address colonial and racist structures that have been resoundingly ignored by the provincial government in recent changes to Ontario's early years and child care system. Further, we continue to see acts of colonial and racist violence and harm in Ontario's communities and to this date, the [94 Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) have yet to be fulfilled. Ontario must do its part. In order to redress these harms and move forward in good faith, Ontario must undertake a transparent and open consultation process, through which data, deliverables, and consultation documents can be used to maintain accountability for the significant transformation that is required.

POLICY INTERVENTIONS

1. Amend the *Child Care and Early Years Act* to enshrine the right of all young children to access regulated, inclusive, culturally safe early learning and child care.
2. Create a Task Force to develop an approach to embed anti-racism and anti-oppressive frameworks and pedagogy and centre Indigenous knowledges and ways of being across the ELCC system, including professional preparation programs. Membership must centre Black, Racialized, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis and Urban Indigenous children, families, ECEs, Elders, Knowledge Keepers and organizations, alongside representation from the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Colleges and Universities, the College of Early Childhood Educators, Post-Secondary Institutions, labour groups, and provincial organizations.
3. In consultation with the Disability Community, child care sector, researchers, and stakeholders, develop an Inclusion Strategy that builds on policy recommendations made by the Inclusive Early Childhood Service System Project and centres the experiences of the Disability Community.

4. Convene a working group to review existing policy recommendations that have not been implemented and develop a plan to implement legislative and regulatory changes to entrench Indigenous control and management of Indigenous child care programs. Membership must include representation from First Nations, Inuit, Métis and Urban Indigenous organizations, Elders and Knowledge Keepers, and the voices of children, families and educators.

Discussion Question 3: What ideas do you have for breaking down silos between different parts of the early years and child care system?



Goal: Child care programs are directly and sufficiently publicly funded.

Publicly funding child care programs' operating costs directly and sufficiently is the key to addressing both affordability for parents and decent pay for educators. It is important to remember that while child care is unaffordable for many families, the daily cost of child care operation is also artificially low because educators are underpaid. In essence, educators' low wages currently subsidize the cost of care.

Currently in Ontario, child care centres receive public funding through various streams including general allocations and wage enhancement grants, but not in sufficient amounts to offset true costs. A full and sufficient public funding approach would harmonize these grants into simpler streams of operating funding that cover child care programs' *full* costs. Rather than programs collecting and relying on a mix of parent fees and grants, child care programs would be fully publicly funded and fees would be collected by local governments.

Responsibility for licensed child care in Ontario moved from the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to the Ministry of Education in 2010, but there is much more that must be done to break down barriers between the child care system and the public education system. Although the majority of Ontario's child care facilities are in public space, including public schools, many are still charged exorbitant rents and their use of the public space is precarious. Currently, the provincial education funding formula does not count school square footage that is used for child care programs. This means that for school boards child care centres are a cost. Most child care centres pay rent to school boards and are treated as tenants, shared space is often not guaranteed. Even during the pandemic, while air filters were being installed in school classrooms, child care programs in schools were told that if they wanted new HVAC systems they would have to purchase and install their own. It should not have to be said that schools and child care centres serve the same children and families - who breathe the same air. It is time that we treat child care as an equal partner and integral part of the education system.

Child care facilities that are in public spaces - and built with public capital dollars - must, wherever possible, be maintained as child care programs. Currently, there is nothing stopping public entities from accepting child care capital dollars, developing child care facilities, only to abandon them down the road. For example, in 2020 the Region of Waterloo decided to close all of their publicly operated child care programs, leaving four purpose-built child care facilities sitting empty despite the outcry of local parents. In Markham, Town's Little Children (TLC) Daycare was a purpose-built non-profit child care centre, developed in 1990 with \$500,000 in public child care funding in Markham Civic Centre and served Markham families for 25 years. But a snap decision by the City of Markham in 2015 to use the site for office space meant that TLC closed permanently, having not even been given enough notice to find a new space. Their playground was torn down, their classrooms rebuilt into offices - despite a child care shortage in the area and ample office space in the neighbourhood.

To build a stable system, we need to ensure that, wherever possible, facilities built using public child care funds remain public child care assets. Sufficient capital funding should support publicly planned expansion rather than ad-hoc grants.

POLICY INTERVENTIONS

5. Harmonize and enhance the child care funding formula to provide full and sufficient operating funding that meets the true per diem costs of child care programs and regulated home child care providers and agencies;
6. Budgeting for Quality targets: to qualify for public funding sites would need to commit to meeting caps in fees and staff wages that meet, at minimum, a threshold set out in a provincial salary scale (see Affordability and Workforce sections).
7. Change the education funding formula to include child care facilities in schools space funding. Eliminate profit-making rental agreements with child care programs in schools and public buildings.
8. To ensure efficient use of public child care dollars, child care facilities developed with public capital funding should remain public child care assets.
9. Create equitable funding opportunities for Urban Indigenous child care programs.

Discussion question 4: What would it look like if child care was a strong and equal partner in the education system?



Goal: Licensed child care is affordable for every family.

As we move to a child care system that is fully and sufficiently publicly funded, child care will become more affordable for many families. Direct program funding will mean that we can transition from our current parent fee subsidy system and its waitlists. But even an average \$10 a day parent fee per space, as the federal government has promised, is still unaffordable for many lower income families. We must ensure that our new system's approach to affordability is equitable. Ontario's current parent fee subsidy system can be reformed into a geared-to-income sliding fee scale that is affordable for every family. Fees should be collected by local service system managers (Consolidated Municipal Service Managers and District Social Service Administration Boards) and Indigenous governments and organizations.

POLICY INTERVENTIONS

- 10.** Cap child care fees at \$10 per day per family.
- 11.** Introduce a geared-to-income sliding fee scale for lower-income families based on the current fee subsidy criteria.
- 12.** Collect child care fees centrally by CMSMs/DSSABs and Indigenous governance organizations, relieving child care programs of this administrative task.

Discussion Question 5: What impact would a streamlined, affordable system have for you?



Goal: Workforce retention challenges are addressed through decent work and pay that values early childhood educators and child care professionals.

Early Childhood Educators, early years staff and child care providers are the heart of our child care system. Their pedagogical, caring work with young children creates possibilities for communities, our collective well being and for a better world. Ontario has a qualified and experienced workforce who are leaving the sector, and graduates of ECE diploma and degree programs who are not entering the profession.

The core issue of current workforce shortages is a lack of decent work fueling a long-standing retention and recruitment crisis. The lack of decent work has driven qualified professionals out of the sector and is deterring new graduates from entering the profession. Recent data analysis from the College of Early Childhood Educatorsⁱ is telling, and echoes what the ECEs and child care workers [have been describing in their advocacy](#):

- Graduation rates of Post-Secondary ECE programs have increased in recent years, yet, enrollment of graduates in the professional college has been declining by an average of 7.2% per year.
- Fewer graduates entering the profession are indicating licensed child care as their place of work.
- RECEs are also less likely to maintain their professional status when working in the licensed child care sector, with membership resignation averaging within three years, compared to other employment settings where the average is seven years.

We must, as a critical first step, address retention and recruitment by delivering on decent work and pay for early childhood educators, early years staff and child care providers. These priority policy interventions will help to recalibrate the current system and set a foundation for future expansion.

POLICY INTERVENTIONS

The province's response to workforce issues should be guided by an Advisory Committee that centres the voices of the early years and child care workforce, including Black, Indigenous and Racialized educators and child care providers, and includes provincial organizations and sector stakeholders to coordinate and inform the development of the following policy interventions:

- 13.** Develop and implement a salary grid that ensures a \$25 per hour starting wage with a commensurate benefits package and develop a daily rate minimum and benefits options for licensed home child care providers.
- 14.** Develop and establish Decent Work Standards to support pedagogical practice. Decent Work Standards should align with the AECEO's Decent Work Charter and include:
 - a.** revisions to current legislation and regulation to address challenging working conditions (e.g., staff to child ratios)

- b. the provision of daily, collaborative, on-site paid planning time for centre-based programs and a community-driven model to connect and support licensed home child care providers;
 - c. permanent paid sick and emergency leave days;
 - d. provisions for engagement in communities of practice;
 - e. an Early Childhood Workforce Learning Framework that ensures paid, non-contact time to access meaningful professional learning opportunities. This framework must mandate inclusion of anti-racist pedagogy and Indigenous knowledges and ways of being, grounded in trauma-informed practice, and work to fulfil responsibility to Truth and Reconciliation.ⁱⁱ
15. Create practitioner roles and identify educational requirements alongside a career ladder that will strengthen program quality while formally recognizing the value of credentials, experience, and traditional knowledges. These roles must uphold commitments to building an anti-racist and decolonized system, and include leadership opportunities for racialized communities and knowledges and experiences that are silenced in our current system.
16. Reimagine and enhance pathways to acquiring and upgrading qualifications, which respond to the needs and reflect the strengths of rural, remote, and marginalized communities. Enhanced pathways must address the barriers to attaining qualifications experienced by racialized, Black, First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Urban Indigenous populations.

Discussion Question 6: How do you think Decent Work will transform the child care system?



EXPANSION STRATEGY

Goal: Enough public and non-profit early learning and child care spaces for all.

Up to this point, Ontario has relied mostly on the market model for the expansion of child care. This has led to uneven and inequitable distribution of child care services around the province and child care deserts where families are particularly underserved. Sociologist Susan Prentice has described this as the “popcorn method” of child care expansion - whether child care pops up in a given area or not mostly relies on either non-profit organizations or for-profit businesses to decide to open there. It is time for this to change. In their paper, [*Moving from Private to Public Processes in Child Care in Canada*](#), Friendly et al call for “a more proactive, publicly managed, planned, intentional and integrated approach based on greater public responsibility for the availability, characteristics and distribution of regulated child care” and describe the public management resources and policy tools needed to achieve this kind of expansion.

Ontario has a strong foundation on which we can build. Ontario municipalities have a key role in the service system management of child care and many regularly develop child care service plans. Municipalities (CMSMs/DSSABs) should be mandated and supported to expand this planning role in consultation and collaboration with the child care community.

Expansion should be exclusively in the public and non-profit sectors. We need a permanent moratorium on licensing new for-profit child care businesses. We also need to strengthen the non-profit sector’s ability to scale up. As the Ontario Nonprofit Network recommends in their recent [*Briefing Note*](#) on child care expansion, we must invest in “nonprofits that can function as intermediaries between nonprofit child care services and the child care spaces building process to strengthen the sector’s ability to expand (e.g., technical assistance and capital project financing experts)”.

POLICY INTERVENTIONS

- 17.** Place a permanent moratorium on new for-profit child care.
- 18.** Mandate municipalities to publicly plan expansion with explicit targets for creation of new public and non-profit programs. Strengthen and support the non-profit sector’s capacity to scale up.
- 19.** Prioritize expansion in underserved communities and populations, including non-standard hours, rural and remote child care, emergency and respite child care.
- 20.** Review legislative and regulatory barriers to licensing culturally responsive programs (e.g., Indigenous-led land-based child care).

Discussion Question 7: What supports does the child care sector need to scale up and expand in your community?

NEXT STEPS

- Share feedback and answers to the discussion questions with us. If there is a policy area that you think we should do a deeper dive on through a Policy Brief, or if you know an innovative child care program in your community that you think should be featured in a Program Profile, let us know. There is a feedback form posted at: childcareontario.org/roadmap_feedback
- Share this Roadmap, its ideas and policy interventions with your local decision makers: MPs, MPPs, School Board Trustees, municipal Councillors, etc.
- Use our [Roadmap Action Toolkit](#) to raise public awareness about child care issues, start community conversations about universal child care, and campaign for the Roadmap in your community.



ⁱ College of Early Childhood Educators. (2021). *Licensed Child Care in Ontario [Infographic]*. Personal communication. June 29, 2021.

ⁱⁱ Many First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Urban Indigenous organizations and programs currently offer or are developing responsive, community driven, Indigenous developed and led professional learning opportunities for ECEs. These initiatives should lead the way.