



PUBLIC INTEREST ALBERTA

PRIORITIES FOR CHANGE

CHILD CARE & EARLY
EDUCATION

MAY 2023

Priorities for Change: Child Care & Early Education



The Vision: Build a high-quality, inclusive, affordable, publicly-funded early childhood and care system accessible to all children and families regardless of their ability to pay.

Alberta's Current Child Care and Early Learning Landscape

Since the 2019 Alberta provincial election, devastating changes have occurred in child care and early learning. Changes to policy and funding began soon after the election and included cuts to government funding for childcare arrangements, a review of and changes to the Alberta Child Care Licensing Act, and the elimination of the Alberta Child Care Accreditation Standards.

But Alberta was about to be rocked by even bigger change. On March 17, 2020, Alberta declared a state of public health emergency in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following months and years, families struggled to work and care for children at the same time, or to continue to afford child care in the face of decreased income and rising costs of living. The importance of a public child care and early learning system in our society could no longer be ignored.

On April 19, 2021, the federal government announced an historic investment in child care, proposing to spend an additional \$30 billion over the next five years, with the goal of establishing a nation-wide \$10 per day child care system. . This agreement is the result of decades of work from child care and early learning advocates. Finally on November 15, 2021, after months of discussions, Alberta signed their agreement

with the federal government.

Making child care and early learning a public good will alter the social landscape completely. In Alberta, one in six children live below the poverty line. Access to high-quality, inclusive, affordable, and publicly-funded child care and early learning programs is a proven intervention for family poverty. Studies show that children in places with universal access to these programs have better physical, developmental, and psychological health by age six. Investment in early learning and care is not only critical to children's health and well-being, it creates a future where there is less stress on our health care and social support systems.

Furthermore, investment in child care and early learning means investing in a primarily female workforce. The overwhelming majority of workers in the early learning sector are women. And not only women working in the field would be impacted. A public system would mean addressing the gendered pay gap and the gendered dimension of poverty. Lack of access to child care can impact a parent's, particularly a mother's, workforce participation. So far changes to child care costs have provided the least amount of help to the lowest income families who need it the most.



Finally, investing in child care and early learning means a higher quality system for the children and families who access it, and higher quality working conditions for educators. Quality in child care and early learning is directly related to the qualifications and well-being of early learning professionals. Changes to the system as a result of the federal-provincial agreements have mainly

benefited families, while professionals are still struggling. The working conditions of early childhood educators are the care conditions for the children in their charge. Everything in a system is connected and we cannot afford to leave educators behind.

The child care and early learning sector, and Alberta as a whole, has faced a myriad of challenges and successes over the past four years. Significant federal funding for the sector is a major achievement, but planning, with input from educators and providers, is required to ensure funding is spent optimally.

While parent fees have changed, little has been done to support professionals who are struggling to keep their doors open in the face of cuts to core cost funding such as CPP coverage for staff and inflation rising operating costs without additional income streams. Programs that are able to make ends meet often cannot run at full capacity due to shortages of qualified staff, especially outside of urban areas. Even when there are qualified educators in a community who could meet this need, they are choosing to work outside of the child care and early learning field due to low wages, lack of benefits and pension, and poor working conditions.

There is still much work to be done. As we prepare for the next election, we must prepare to ask more of our elected officials.

Priorities for Advancing the Public Interest in Child Care and Early Learning

The federal-provincial child care agreements offer a once-in-a-generation opportunity for Alberta. We must come together to advocate for a vision that serves all Albertans, especially those experiencing financial challenges.

The priorities outlined in this document, which align with early learning and child care “road map,” only begin to describe what is needed to achieve the vision of a high-quality, inclusive, affordable, publicly-funded child care and early learning system. They are, however, foundational recommendations for working towards this vision based on the current context.



The Government of Alberta must:

Ensure every child care and early learning space in Alberta is high quality.

- Establish long-term, stable, and direct **supply-side funding** for all licensed child care and early learning programs
- **Re-write licensing standards to include clear requirements for creating high-quality spaces**, not simply standards for basic safety
- Enforce licensing standards by **hiring more licensing officers** to meet the increased demand as thousands of new childcare spaces are being made
- Establish a procedure for **accountability, system planning, and data collection** for all licensed programs to ensure that all requirements for a public care system are met. This data would be made publicly available through the Government of Alberta portal. This procedure would be similar to the present system used for Alberta education programming.
- Provide **professional development opportunities and coaching support** to early learning and child care professionals for implementing the province's early learning and care curriculum framework
- **Review the cost-control framework** with meaningful input from the child care sector and make the necessary changes. As we continue to require ALL child care centres to meet child care system requirements, we acknowledge that our goal is to promote a public child care education system

Support the professionalization of early childhood education

- Standardize a **province-wide wage grid** which includes benefits and pensions to retain well-trained and educated staff
- Strengthen education standards for early childhood professionals by phasing in a **requirement of a minimum of a two-year diploma** in the field, with support for educators already in the field to meet the new requirements
- Support post-secondary institutions to **expand child care and early learning diploma and degree programs** to fill the dire need for early childhood educators in the field
- In alignment with other professional associations, **require early childhood educators to renew their certification** dependent on ongoing professional development to best serve the needs of all children and families

- Provide funding for educators to attend **professional development**
- Provide funding for educators time attending professional development time to be covered

Improve accessibility to high-quality early learning and childcare programs and school-aged care

- Invest in child care **programs for Indigenous children and families, immigrant and refugee children and families, infants, children with exceptional needs, and families living with lower income**
- **Improve hours of accessibility** to child care spaces to support families working evenings, weekends, and holidays
- Require all new schools and other publicly-owned facilities such as libraries to **incorporate space for early childhood and school-age care**
- Require municipalities to **plan for early childhood and school-age care in new developments**
- End inequitable access to licensed spaces and ensure **province-wide accessibility** through strategic provincial and municipal planning as well as program supports in traditionally underserved areas
- **Institute full-day Kindergarten** as part of our public education system

