



ECE Response to the 2026 Kindergarten Curriculum Changes

A narrative report on the 2026 AECEO Consultation on Kindergarten Curriculum Changes

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Introduction

In January of 2024, the Ontario Ministry of Education first announced their “back to basics” kindergarten curriculum, originally set to be implemented in September 2025. Throughout the winter of 2026 the Ministry of Education held virtual webinars to outline and dive into the changes that were made, primarily in the areas of literacy and numeracy, now set to be implemented in September 2026. Some changes were introduced in response to the *Ontario Human Rights Commission’s Right to Read Inquiry (2022)*, which found Ontario’s kindergarten literacy program to be lacking in evidence-based approaches. It was emphasized that what would not change about the program was the foundation of play-based learning.

In April 2026, the AECEO launched an anonymous virtual survey requesting feedback from ECEs working in the full-day kindergarten (FDK) program on the recently announced changes to the curriculum. This survey was launched with the intention to better understand current and anticipated impacts of the curriculum changes. The survey was shared on social media and through the AECEO’s email list. 146 respondents completed the survey, with 142 self-identifying as currently working in the FDK program. Geographic representation includes respondents participating from Windsor, London and surrounding area, Waterloo Region, Guelph, Hamilton, Niagara, Toronto and the GTA, Peterborough, Coburg, Brockville, Kingston, Ottawa and surrounding area, Cornwall, Simcoe County, Grey-Bruce county, Sudbury, Sault Ste Marie, and Thunder Bay. When asked if respondents were aware of the updates to the curriculum, 96% said yes. Only 30% of respondents attended one of the webinars held by the Ministry of Education that provided an overview of the changes, and fewer than 45% were aware of any professional development directed to ECEs about the changes taking place within their school boards.

ECEs’ feelings toward the curriculum changes can be grouped into three categories:

- 1) Concerned, worried, and anxious;
- 2) Unsure, confused, indifferent, ambivalent, or have mixed feelings, and;
- 3) Not worried, excited, fine, hopeful, or open to these updates.

Quotes interspersed throughout this report are shared from responses to the following short-answer questions;

- 1) How are you feeling about the new Kindergarten Curriculum?
- 2) How do you think the new Kindergarten curriculum might impact your work?
- 3) How do you think the new Kindergarten curriculum might impact your relationship with your teaching partner?

4) Is there anything else you would like us to know?

The responses have been sorted into the following themes, indicating the primary areas of concern with the changes: Developmentally appropriate learning through play, challenges with implementation, the role of the ECE in kindergarten classrooms, and ECE & OCT relationships.

Developmentally Appropriate Learning Through Play

Educators shared feelings of concern, worry, and anxiety that the changes may “make it difficult to maintain authentic, meaningful play”. They are “concerned that this shift may limit opportunities for inquiry-based learning, where children explore, initiate, and make meaning in ways that are developmentally appropriate.” While information sessions with the Ministry of Education highlighted the value and inclusion of play-based learning in the curriculum, the changes have still sparked concern amongst educators as to how this may be implemented. Many respondents commented on the possibility of misinterpretation and the increase in worksheet based lessons, with one respondent sharing, “there is a risk that some educators may take this approach to the extreme, relying too heavily on worksheets. This could take away from the joy of learning through play and limit opportunities for children to explore and learn in diverse ways”. Another respondent commented they are “concerned that teachers and ECEs alike will feel more pressure to reduce play” while others shared that the updated document “fundamentally changes the role of play from child-led discovery to educator-directed activity” where play “is often not interest led, it is intentionally set up”. ECEs are trained in childhood development and understand the benefits of play. One RECE said, “I am deeply concerned that this curriculum ignores the fundamental psychological evidence regarding how children learn best. Play is not a 'break' from learning; it is the primary vehicle for cognitive development.”

There is worry amongst respondents that learning opportunities that accommodate the natural differentiation in development, particularly at this age, will not be possible due to the “same direct instruction for everyone”. A respondent indicated that it feels as though “this shift prioritizes academic outcomes over the developmental needs of 4 and 5 year olds” and “that the academic expectations [will] put a lot more pressure on us and take away from what FDK was truly meant to be”. One respondent speaks to the challenges they foresee working with children who require additional support, sharing they “anticipate this curriculum change will increase the challenges I face in the classroom on multiple levels”.

Feelings of indifference, being unsure, or ambivalent about the changes often corresponded with being unaware of “what are the specific requirements” and feeling

“uninformed”. Some share it is “too early to say”, and one respondent stated that they are “choosing to view this change as semantics”. Many responses shared mixed feelings, recognizing the important elements of the changes or feeling “hopeful that the change will be for the better”, and yet still feeling concern about the potential for decrease in time for important play.

Many who did not feel worried, but instead felt excited, fine, or hopeful felt that the changes align with work that is already being done in their programs, or that the changes would not impact their work much at all. One educator shares their journey after reading the *Right to Read* report, telling us that “with the support of my teaching partner at the time, I did a deep dive into what structured literacy could look like in a play-based environment.” Multiple respondents shared various versions of “my school board has been doing most of this programming already”, “we are already doing all of it” and “we have been doing most of it anyways”, and one even mentions that “positive results are showing”. Importantly, ECEs in these spaces “still have a strong play based program to support [children’s] learning”. Others felt that the changes made the expectations “more concrete and clear”, specifically with “more defined math and literacy expectations” and that “it provides more structure and clarity for educators, helping us be more intentional and specific in our planning and what we aim to cover.”

Challenges with Implementation

Without the appropriate supports, manageable class sizes, and time to set a foundation of self-regulation and a love of learning, the curriculum as it stands can feel difficult to implement. Implementation of the new changes presents an additional strain on a strained workforce. In this context, the management of behaviour has become a large part of the role of the Kindergarten ECE, often supporting or stepping into the role of Educational Assistants (EAs). Even when educators are doing their best to meet curriculum goals, it is “a bit unrealistic to accomplish with class sizes so high, not enough EA support and a blend of kids between 3 and 6 years of age”. Another educator shared that, “Things happen in a kindergarten class that you don’t expect...The lack of supports makes it difficult to get things done in the class”. Another participant said the curriculum changes “won’t [impact their work] at all. We never followed the previous one, while it was good. The number of students is always high, the needs are too high, the support is missing”. Without decent working conditions in place, educators are not able to do what they are trained to do — educate and support the growth and care of young children. Instead, they are relegated to basic survival and supervision.

Moving away from play-based learning has many negative implications. One respondent shared this perspective clearly when they stated they are, “predicting that

behavioral concerns will increase and many students will be unable to meet these new expectations. This will cause frustrations for both staff and students. If the government would like to see students succeed at the kindergarten level, then we need to meet children where they are. In a lot of cases that means focusing on self-regulation, emotional readiness and the ability to focus, BEFORE introducing academic expectations that require these skills. These are skills a lot of kindergarteners are coming to school either completely without or struggling with, and yet they are coming into a program that expects them to have those skills already. This is setting them up for failure and not what a play-based program is supposed to be.”

A consistent theme throughout the responses was the need for professional development (PD) on the changes that took place to ensure successful implementation. Only 30% of respondents shared they were able to attend a Ministry of Education webinar on the updates, and fewer than 45% of respondents were aware of any PD specifically including ECEs taking place in their school boards. This concern aligns with calls from The Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO), who are “urging the Ministry of Education to provide educators with high-quality, comprehensive, job-embedded professional learning and sufficient time before rolling out the newly revised Kindergarten curriculum in fall 2026” (ETFO, 2025). Educators who have been able to participate in PD felt that it was inadequate, stating they were “given a half PD day to watch 3 detailed modules on the new curriculum. It was long and tedious but I did not feel it truly explained what it would look like in the classroom.” The most impactful PD has been when “school boards are having PD sessions inviting FDK teams (both OCT & RECE) to review the changes” together. While PD has been made available for some, many ECEs shared concerns about learning that is expected to be done on unpaid personal time, or sessions that are inaccessible due to their schedule. For example, one respondent stated that “even though there are webinars or training sessions during the day, we are not getting coverage for this, so we cannot attend!”. One ECE expressed concern that the updates “will roll out without a plan for supporting staff with time to delve into the content, and deepen their own understanding and strategy for implementing the changes while maintaining an environment that provides time for meaningful play.” It is clear that focused professional development is needed to ensure the successful implementation of the curriculum changes and to ease educator feelings of concern, worry, and uncertainty.

Role of the ECE in FDK Classrooms

More than half of respondents shared that they thought the impact of the curriculum changes would impact their work in a negative way, citing that their days would be more difficult and challenging, and that there would be less respect for and

increased confusion about the role of the ECE in the kindergarten classroom. ECEs indicated that they are worried about the added pressure and “being given more responsibility with no extra compensation”. Lack of planning time was mentioned frequently, as well as “the amount of time OCTs must spend on individual assessments, leaving ECEs to manage the rest of the 30+ classroom on their own”. Educators indicated they are anticipating additional “pressure and stress on educators in an already overwhelmed environment”. With educators already mentioning the additional time spent managing behaviour, it is no surprise that ECEs anticipate “more time trying to manage behaviors on the carpet”, and being “expected to help students sit and learn”. One respondent shared that this type of learning “minimizes the importance of learning through play and movement” and goes on to share concern that “our youngest learners are being rushed into leaving their childhood behind too quickly for the sake of achieving academic success”.

Many who were feeling concern, worry, or anxiety, felt so around the value and recognition of the role that ECEs hold in the full day kindergarten classroom, where they are meant to be working in partnership, side by side, with an Ontario Certified Teacher (OCT). One respondent explained that they are “concerned about the impact this shift may have on the ECE role. There can already be a tendency for the role to be undervalued or reduced, and I worry that a move toward more explicit, teacher-directed instruction may further marginalize the ECE, rather than recognizing the importance of early childhood pedagogy and shared professional expertise” while another shared that “since I’m “just an ECE”, my previous experience, methods and success has been ignored and shunned”. There has been a tendency for ECEs to be treated as and/or to feel as though they are secondary to the OCT in the room. This sentiment was frequently shared throughout survey responses, with comments such as:

- “I also feel that we have been fighting to be recognized as a professional and partner for a very long time and now it looks like more expectations for OCT and we may be seen even more like a “helper” in the classroom”;
- “I think many will start to treat us as their helper instead of partners. There have been many that have been doing that, but it will be even more obvious and more will start”, and;
- “I feel secondary, less knowledgeable to my teaching partner and invisible within the systems”.

It will be critical to recognize the expertise of the ECE in the implementation of the changes as the changes could create “wider hierarchies between the teaching team”, or “a further divide between us”. Recognition of the expertise and understanding that ECEs bring to the partnership impacts the relationship between the ECE and OCT, which forms the basis of a quality program.

ECE & OCT Relationships

Shared in the responses and demonstrated above were many inequities that already exist between ECE and OCT partnerships in the classroom. OCTs are often seen and treated as the experts and ECEs are seen and treated as classroom assistants. Noted differences in treatment varied from large salary gaps to professional development opportunities on the curriculum changes. One respondent commented that they “know [OCTs] have a scheduled paid day to learn about it and DECEs at this point do not” and another shared a solution to the inequity stating, “I think it should be mandatory that partners have the opportunity to learn together and both be paid. It’s unfair that I have to go to PD on my own time and my partner gets a paid day to learn the same information. No equality at all, it’s actually a joke!”. Other differences include lack of combined planning time, or any planning time at all for the ECE in the room. A respondent said “it’s hard to say” about the impact on their relationship as they “never get time to plan together or any PD”.

Assessment of students was a topic mentioned multiple times in the responses, with ECEs feeling worried that there will be “additional workload for OCT, additional assessments leaving the RECE to watch (literally just watch because its 30+ children) everyone while OCT is doing 1:1” or that “there might be more conflict based on our philosophy of learning when the OCT is pressured to fulfill assessments which in turn lessens play opportunities.” Ensuring adequate time for play amongst the new expectations created by these updates will be critical to demonstrating the recognition of the needs of children’s development.

Certain skills were identified as necessary if the curriculum changes were going to be implemented effectively and in the best interest of children and their development. These included teamwork, stronger collaboration, open communication, and a positive relationship. One respondent with mixed feelings shared, “The new Kindergarten Curriculum may support stronger collaboration by providing clearer expectations for planning and teaching. However, it may also create challenges if the emphasis on explicit teaching leads to less balance between partners.” Strong, positive partnerships fostered on “communication and mutual respect will be important to ensure both play-based learning and structured teaching are valued, and that both partners continue to feel like equal contributors.” When ECEs are seen as equal educators by their OCT partners and are able to work together to implement a program that honors both of their expert backgrounds, they did not anticipate the curriculum updates impacting their relationships.

Conclusion

ECEs are holding a range of feelings about the kindergarten curriculum update. Many are feeling worried, anxious, and concerned, primarily about their ability to implement a developmentally appropriate play based environment while meeting the new expectations. Those who feel unsure, ambivalent, or indifferent about the updates have not been provided the opportunity to review the changes. Many who were not worried, or felt fine or open to the changes indicated that the changes align with work that is already being done in their programs and work, where school boards or teaching teams have already implemented similar changes.

There are many challenges with implementation that impact the work of ECEs in the program, including lack of appropriate supports, class sizes that are too large, and the negative impact of less play time for children. Many respondents also commented on the need for professional development that would assist their understanding of the updates. Providing opportunities for kindergarten educators (both ECEs and OCTs) to learn together in partnership is a component of decent work and can support equity between roles.

Changes to the curriculum impacts the view of the role of the educator in the kindergarten classroom partnership. The actual day to day work of the ECE has had to adapt to the needs present in each classroom, and the idea that ECEs are assistants to OCTs has become more prevalent. Some feel as though ECEs “were starting to gain a little bit of traction in our role and finally being seen and now this is taking a step back. We'll have even more ECEs leaving the profession.” This may be correct as respondents shared their plans, or hopes, to exit the field. They shared that they anticipate “more added stress if I was continuing my role in the fall. But I am preparing to be finishing my role as a RECE in June” and that they “won't have to face this possible challenge as I won't be returning in the fall”. Another commented that they “would encourage no one to become an ECE, after my almost thirty year career I would give anything to go back and make other choices.” Finally, an educator stated they “do not want to return but financially I'll have to.” This demonstrates the need for decent working conditions that honor the important role of the educator.

In order to provide these decent working conditions, and aid the retention of ECEs in the sector, one respondent advocates for “adequate training, realistic implementation timelines, and a commitment to keeping the whole child — not just their academic outputs — at the centre of kindergarten education.”

References

Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario, 2025. ETFO calls for quality professional learning, time to support revised Kindergarten curriculum <https://www.etfo.ca/news-publications/media-releases/etfo-calls-for-quality-professional-learning-time-to-support-revised-kindergarten-curriculum#:~:text=The%20revised%20curriculum%20introduces%20significant,Foundations%20of%20Language%20and%20Mathematics>