



**Summer
2026**

**AECEO Guiding
Committee on Truth
and Reconciliation**

ECE Voices

Decent Work Project





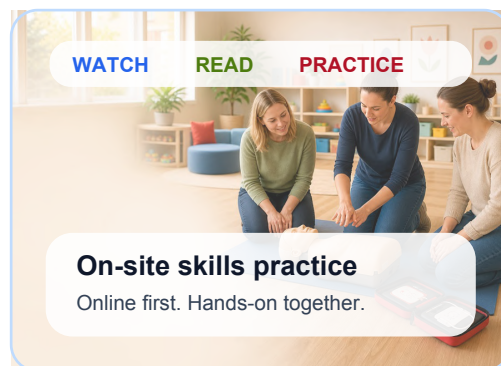
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Registered Charitable Organization Number:
106732001RR0001

Canada Post Publication Mail Agreement #:
40014752

The eceLINK is a quarterly publication of the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO). Since 1992, the publication has been distributed across Ontario to all our members and affiliate organizations. The eceLINK has a circulation of approximately 3000, reaching Early Childhood Educators working in different early learning and child care settings. They include students, frontline practitioners, administrators & supervisors, trainers and policy makers.

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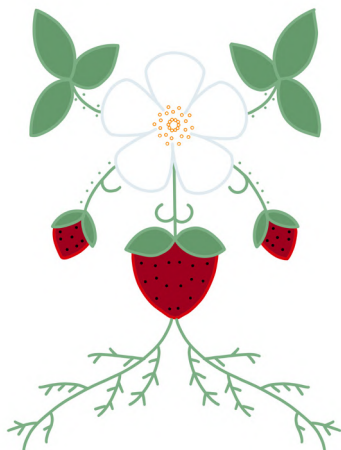
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COVER PHOTO: AECEO Members' Retreat and Advocacy Summit May 2026

PHOTO CREDIT: Mariam Patel

ECELINK DESIGN & LAYOUT
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Program Profile: Early Years at Tungasuvvingat Inuit

By Wendy Rahman

This article, Early Years at Tungasuvvingat Inuit, marks the first in a series of program profiles developed by members of the AECEO Guiding Committee on Truth and Reconciliation. Committee members collaborated to create guiding questions and to identify Indigenous early learning and child care

programs whose work should be highlighted. In future issues of eceLINK, readers will be introduced to a range of programs across the province, including Métis, urban First Nation programs, and rural First Nation programs.

How are Indigenous history, culture, and ways of knowing meaningfully integrated into program design, curriculum, and daily practices?

At Tungasuvvingat Inuit, our Early Years work is rooted in community, relationships, culture, and care. Through Illipalialisaaqtilugu EarlyON Child and Family Centre and our connected family support programs, we create spaces where Inuit children, parents, caregivers, and families can come together, feel welcomed, and see themselves reflected.



Tungasuvvingat Inuit

Our work is guided by Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit and Inunnguiniq, which shape how we understand children, families, relationships, learning, and community responsibility. Inunnguiniq reminds us that raising children is a collective

responsibility and that children learn through observation, connection, storytelling, language, play, and everyday experiences.

In practice, this means culture is not treated as a separately. It is woven into the environment, relationships, food, materials, conversations, and the way families are welcomed. Through cultural teachings, storytelling, sewing, food preparation, songs, Inuktitut exposure, community gatherings, and family engagement, children and families are supported in ways that feel meaningful, natural, and grounded in everyday life.

What specific Indigenous-focused elements distinguish these programs and raise awareness of the First Peoples of this land?

What makes our programming distinct is that it is designed for Inuit families living in an urban context. Many Inuit families in Ottawa are living far from their home

communities, extended family networks, language, land, and familiar systems of support. Early Years programming becomes one way to help rebuild those connections.

Our programs include EarlyON, CAPC, CPNP, prenatal and postnatal supports, parent-child programming, cultural activities, family engagement, and community-based early learning opportunities. Across these programs, we create space for Inuit identity, cultural teachings, Inuktitut exposure, traditional skills, food, storytelling, and relationships with Inuit staff, Elders, cultural knowledge holders, and community members.



These pieces help raise awareness by showing that Inuit families, histories, cultures, and ways of knowing are distinct and living. They also create spaces where Inuit children and families do not have to explain who they are. They can simply belong.

Our pedagogical approach is supported by Inunnguiniq, Inuit childrearing practices, and provincial early learning frameworks, including How Does Learning Happen? We are intentional about ensuring these frameworks are understood through Inuit values and community priorities.

We see children as capable, curious, competent, and full of potential. We also understand that children develop within families, cultures, histories, and communities. For us, early learning is not separate from identity, language, wellness, relationships, or belonging.

What we are most proud of is the way our programs continue to grow from the needs, strengths, and voices of our community. Early Years work is never just about one program. It is about the whole family. It is about creating spaces where children are supported in their development, while parents and caregivers are also supported in their own journeys.

A strong example of this approach is our Pregnancy Circle, which was adapted through collaboration with Ottawa Public Health and our CAPC/CPNP programming. The Pregnancy Circle brings together prenatal education, cultural connection, food security, peer support, and relationship-building. It reflects our belief that early childhood begins before birth, and that supporting pregnant individuals, parents, and caregivers is part of supporting infant and child well-being.

In what ways are Indigenous languages incorporated into programming to support cultural continuity and identity?

Language is deeply connected to identity, culture, memory, and belonging. In our Early Years programs, we create opportunities for Inuktitut exposure through songs, greetings, stories, teachings, cultural activities, and everyday interactions.

Even small moments of language exposure in the early years can support pride, recognition, and connection for children and families. These moments help children hear and experience Inuit language as part of who they are and as part of the community around them.

For families living in an urban setting, opportunities to hear and connect with Inuktitut can be especially meaningful. It supports cultural continuity and helps create an environment where Inuit identity is visible, valued, and celebrated.

How do the programs support educator development, advocacy, and retention through continuous professional learning grounded in Indigenous perspectives?

Supporting educators is an important part of this work. Early Years staff need opportunities for continuous professional learning that strengthens their understanding



of trauma-informed practice, infant and early mental health, cultural safety, Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, Inunnguiniq, and community-based approaches.

This work requires educators to hold space for many realities at once. Families may be experiencing joy, growth, isolation, grief, poverty, housing concerns, food insecurity, or difficulty accessing mainstream systems. Educators need to feel supported, valued, and connected to the purpose of the work so they can continue supporting children and families in meaningful ways.

There are real challenges in the Early Years sector, including burnout, wages, recruitment, retention, and the emotional labour of community-based work. Supporting staff through reflective practice, cultural grounding, professional learning, and stronger sector investment is essential to sustaining this work.

What systemic strategies, community partnerships, and local collaborations are in place to ensure long-term sustainability, quality, and distinction-based excellence within these programs?

Our Early Years programs sit within TI's broader role as an Inuit social service agency, which means families are not supported in isolation. Families may first connect with us through a playgroup, prenatal program, food support, or family activity, but through those relationships we can also help connect them to broader supports within the organization.

This may include referrals or connections to food security programming, housing support, employment services, family wellness, cultural programming, and other community-based services. Because TI offers multiple services under one organization, we are able to respond to families in a more holistic and relational way, without asking them to start over or retell their story in disconnected systems.

This reflects how we understand early childhood and family well-being. Children do not grow and develop separately from the realities of their families. When caregivers are supported with food, housing, employment, wellness, culture, and community connection, children are also supported. Our Early Years programs are part of a broader circle of care at TI, where departments work together to support Inuit families in ways that are practical, culturally grounded, and responsive to community needs.

For Indigenous Early Years programs, sustainability requires more than short-term funding or project-based solutions. It requires long-term investment in Indigenous-

led programming, culturally grounded spaces, professional learning, and community partnerships. It also requires recognition that Indigenous communities are not all the same. Distinction-based approaches matter. Inuit families need Inuit-specific programs, led by Inuit organizations, and grounded in Inuit knowledge and community priorities.

Looking ahead, our hope is that early childhood education continues to move toward models that are more relational, culturally grounded, and responsive to the realities families are living. In our community, the ultimate Early Years program would be an Inuit-led, wraparound model that brings together early learning, licensed childcare, infant and early mental health, perinatal support, cultural programming, food security, land-based learning, family wellness, housing support, employment support, and caregiver support.

At the heart of our work is love for community. It is the belief that children deserve spaces where they are celebrated, families deserve supports that honour their realities, and culture belongs in the everyday moments of early childhood. Our programs are still growing, and we are always learning, but the vision remains clear: to build Early Years spaces that are rooted in Inuit ways of knowing, responsive to community, and grounded in care.

From Burnout to Renewal: Rediscovering Joy and Purpose in School-Age Programs

By: Ashmeet Parmar-Saroya

There is quite a trend, I am sure many of you have noticed in childcare settings, placements, and hiring conversations: fewer students and fewer educators are choosing to work with school-age children. When the topic of before-and-after school care, PD Day, or summer camp programs comes up, the energy can shift—sometimes to uncertainty, sometimes to dread, and often to the assumption that it’s “not real ECE.” Yet the age group we’re talking about—roughly 4 to 12 years—deserves our renewed attention, our best thinking, and our most skilled practice. This developmental period, often called middle childhood, is characterized by significant growth in peer relationships, identity formation, and autonomy (Eccles, 1999). This group of children are not “too old for play” and not “too young to be independent.” They are in a dynamic in-between stage of building identity, friendships, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

For many programs, especially before-and-after school care, the last few years have felt like operating in survival mode, with staffing shortages, shared spaces, tight schedules, and constant transitions. Survival mode keeps children safe—but it rarely creates the kind of joyful, responsive, high-quality experiences we know are possible. It’s time to change the narrative. School-age care is not a compromise; it’s a specialized practice area that can be deeply rewarding when educators design it intentionally.

The Challenge: Why School-Age Care Has Lost Its Appeal

Let’s name what many educators feel but don’t always say out loud: school-age care can be hard to love when you’re under-trained, under-resourced, and treated like an add-on. Students have described this experience as confusing, leading to feelings of being overlooked or overwhelmed, and I’ve heard experienced educators say they feel less like professionals and more like traffic controllers—managing

arrivals, snacks, transitions, and pick-ups in a narrow window of time. When the work is framed that way, it’s no surprise that many educators gravitate toward infant, toddler, and preschool settings where the environment feels more “ECE,” the routines are more predictable, and the pedagogy is more widely understood.



There’s also a perception that school-age children are less rewarding because they don’t “need you” in the same visible ways. They can put on their own shoes, they can argue their point, and they can challenge your authority with a level of confidence that can catch educators off guard. For some, that confidence reads as disrespect. For others, it’s simply exhausting at the end of a long day. Add in the reality that many school-agers arrive after a full day of academic expectations, social pressure, and sensory overload, and you can see why behaviours may escalate in the hours they are with us. At the end of the school day, they are often hungry, tired, and emotionally full—yet expected to “hold it together.”

Another factor is training. Many ECE programs focus heavily on early childhood development and the foundational years, which makes sense—but it can leave educators feeling unprepared for the developmental tasks of middle

childhood: peer dynamics, identity formation, risk-taking, leadership, and the complex social world of school. Without tools for conflict resolution, group facilitation, and relationship-based guidance with older children, educators can feel like they're constantly reacting instead of intentionally teaching and supporting.

We must also challenge the assumption that school-age care is entry-level work requiring minimal skill. It demands specialized knowledge of middle childhood development, group dynamics, conflict resolution, and relationship-based practice. Recruiting individuals who are genuinely passionate about this age group and who understand the unique energy school-age children bring is essential.

The Shared Space Dilemma

If there is one issue that consistently drains morale in school-age programs, it's the shared space reality. Many before-and-after school programs operate in classrooms that belong to teachers during the day. That arrangement can work—but only when there is clear leadership, shared expectations, and mutual respect. Too often, educators are navigating a maze of unspoken rules: what can be touched, what can be moved, what can be displayed, what can be stored, and what must look exactly the same by 8:30 a.m. The message—sometimes subtle, sometimes direct—is that the program is a guest in someone else's home.

This creates a kind of professional “walking on eggshells.” Educators may hesitate to introduce materials that support play and inquiry because they worry about complaints, missing items, or classroom disruption. They may avoid messy experiences, construction, or open-ended art because the cleanup time is limited, and the risk of conflict feels high. Even when relationships with school staff are positive, they can be built on heavy compromise: “We'll keep the children quieter,” “We won't use that shelf,” “We'll only go outside,” “We'll do homework time, so it looks structured.” Over time, compromise can become a slow erosion of program quality.

The red tape can be real. Access to storage, gym time, outdoor equipment, or even basic supplies may require multiple approvals. Decisions about the environment—furniture, displays, learning materials—can be out of reach. And when there is a lack of leadership within the school to support collaboration, the burden falls on individual educators to negotiate, repair, and maintain relationships. That's a lot to ask of educators who are already managing large groups and tight transitions.

The impact on children is just as significant. When educators don't have ownership over the environment, it's

harder to create a sense of belonging. Children pick up on the “don't touch” energy. They learn quickly which areas are off-limits and which materials are “teacher stuff.” The room may not reflect their interests, identities, or projects. And when the environment can't evolve, the program can start to feel repetitive—another place where children are expected to comply rather than contribute.

We need to be honest: shared spaces are not a minor inconvenience. They are a structural barrier that affects educator confidence, program creativity, and children's experience of agency. If we want school-age care to be appealing, we must address the conditions that make educators feel like they're doing high-stakes work with low authority.

Rethinking Program Planning for Two-Hour Windows

Traditional ECE program planning often assumes a long, continuous block of time: children arrive, settle, engage in play, revisit ideas, and return to projects over days or weeks. Before-and-after school care rarely works that way. In the morning, you may have 45 minutes to an hour—often with staggered arrivals, morning cereal or snack, and a hard stop when the bell rings. In the afternoon, you may have two hours, but that time includes attendance, snack, transitions, outdoor time, and pick-up waves. The window is short, and the pace is fast.

This is where many educators feel stuck. We're still accountable to quality expectations—planning, responsiveness, inclusion, and meaningful engagement. *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years*, along with legislative guidelines outlined in the Child Care and Early Years Act (CCEYA), and other municipal quality standards like the Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI) expectations in the City of Toronto, requires us to demonstrate intentionality, documentation, and reflective practice (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). But the reality is that setup and cleanup time can swallow the very minutes we're trying to protect for children's play. When you're packing materials into bins, resetting a classroom, and ensuring nothing is left behind, it can feel like the environment is working against you.

School-age planning needs to be designed for quick activation. That doesn't mean lowering expectations; it means choosing formats that fit the rhythm of the day. Think of programming that can start in under five minutes, that can be paused and resumed, and that can accommodate children joining late or leaving early. It also means planning for energy levels: children may need movement first, connection second, and focused engagement third. When

we plan as if school-agers are preschoolers with longer attention spans, we miss what they actually need after a full day of sitting, listening, and managing social dynamics.

The goal is not to fill time—it's to create a predictable structure that still leaves room for choice, creativity, and relationship-building. When educators have planning tools that match the two-hour reality, the work becomes more sustainable, and the program becomes more joyful.

Play-Based Learning and Projects: Not Just for Preschoolers

Play-based learning remains essential for school-age children—but it has to be worthy of them. School-agers can spot “baby activities” instantly, and when they feel underestimated, they disengage or disrupt. The answer isn't to replace play with worksheets or rigid rotations. The answer is to offer play that is complex, social, and skill-building: games with evolving rules, dramatic play that reflects real interests, construction that involves design and problem-solving, and creative experiences that allow for personal style and identity.

Projects are one of the most powerful ways to engage this age group because they offer ownership and voice. A project might be designing a club, planning a mini tournament, building a cardboard arcade, creating a mural, producing a short podcast, or organizing a kindness campaign. The educator's role shifts from “activity leader” to coach, collaborator, and guide. That shift is not only more respectful—it's often more effective. When children have a say in what they're building, they invest in the process and in each other.

We also need to remember what school-agers are coming from. Many have spent the day in environments where movement is limited and choices are constrained. After school, they need active, hands-on experiences that help them regulate and reconnect. Play is not a break from learning; it's a pathway back into relationship, curiosity, and confidence. Research consistently demonstrates that well-designed after-school programs that incorporate play-based and social-emotional learning approaches produce positive outcomes for children's development (Durlak et al., 2010; Whitebread et al., 2017). When we protect play for school-agers, we protect their well-being—and we make our programs places they actually want to be.

Outdoor Environments: Rethinking What's Possible

Outdoor time can be the highlight of a school-age program—especially when children have spent the day indoors. Even when we share school yards and face restrictions, we can rethink outdoor programming as more than “recess supervision.” School-agers thrive with active play options that include choice, challenge, and skill-building: organized games, sports clinics, obstacle courses, and cooperative challenges that rotate weekly. When outdoor time is intentionally planned, it becomes a protective factor for behaviour and well-being.

Outdoor environments also offer space for nature exploration and inquiry. A small patch of green can become a science zone for tracking insects, mapping plants, or building mini habitats. Sidewalk chalk can become a design studio. Snow can become engineering. The key is to bring a mindset of possibility and a kit of portable materials that make outdoor play richer without requiring permanent changes to the yard.

When we treat the outdoors as a learning environment—not just a break—we give school-agers what they need most after school: movement, freedom, and a sense of joy.



Strategies for Success

Reimagining school-age care doesn't require perfection—it requires practical strategies that respect the constraints while still aiming for quality. Below are approaches that consistently make a difference in before-and-after school programs, PD days, and summer camp settings.

Design for portability. Use rolling carts, labelled bins, and “grab-and-go” kits (art, STEM, games, loose parts) so children can start quickly, and educators can reset efficiently.

Create flexible zones. Even in a shared classroom, establish predictable areas: a quiet corner, a building zone, a game table, and a maker space. Use portable rugs, table bins, and signage that can be put away daily.

Plan for regulation first. Build in a consistent arrival routine: snack, check-in, and a choice of movement or calming options. Many behaviour challenges decrease when children's basic needs are met early.

Offer “club-style” programming. Rotate short-term clubs (sports, art studio, coding, drama, board game league, nature club). This mirrors YMCA-style programming and gives children identity and belonging within the larger group.

Build leadership pathways. Create roles such as equipment manager, welcome leader, junior coach, or project captain. Pair older children with younger ones for mentoring in ways that are structured and supported.

Use games as curriculum. Cooperative games, strategy games, and team challenges teach communication, fairness, problem-solving, and emotional regulation—without feeling like a lesson.

Set clear boundaries with school staff. Aim for respectful clarity: what materials you need access to, what storage is required, and what “reset expectations” are realistic. Document agreements so they don't rely on individual personalities.

Protect educator authority. Children need consistent expectations across the day. When possible, align key rules with the school, but don't allow the program to become an extension of classroom compliance. After school should feel different—still safe, but more spacious.

Strengthen parent communication. Use brief, consistent updates: what children did, what they're working on, and what support is needed. When families understand the program's goals, they become allies rather than critics.

Prioritize staffing consistency. Relationships are the curriculum in school-age care. Stable staffing reduces behaviour challenges, increases engagement, and makes it easier to run projects over time.

Plan PD days and summer with a different lens. Longer days allow deeper projects, community walks, guest facilitators, and skill-building workshops. Use that time to build a culture that carries back into the school-year program.

When these strategies are in place, the work becomes less about “getting through the day” and more about building a program that children and educators are proud of.

The Case for Qualified, Trained and Fairly Compensated Educators

In school-age care the typical split shift of 7-9 and 3-6 in most centres, along with prorated benefits, doesn't offer the employment conditions that most qualified early childhood educators need. While some centres offer alternative hours in sleep rooms or provide a specialized hourly rate for split shifts, the overall workplace structure is not only unfair to educators; it's unfair to children. Middle childhood is a distinct developmental period with its own needs: peer belonging, competence, autonomy, identity, and moral reasoning. Supporting those needs requires skill. This is no less work. It is specialized work. When we staff school-age programs with qualified, trained educators—and when we compensate and support them accordingly—we send a clear message: school-age children matter, as do the people who work with them.

Educator Training: Regulation, Emotional Support and Boundaries

Big Emotions and the Need for Self-Regulation Tools

School-age programs are filled with big emotions. Children arrive after a full day of academic demands, social navigation, and sensory input. They are tired, hungry, and emotionally full. When they walk through the door of an after-school program, they are not ready to sit quietly or follow another set of instructions. They need to decompress, and that decompression often looks like chaos if the environment is not designed to support it.

Self-regulation is not something children simply develop on their own. It requires modelling, practice, and environmental support. Programs need dedicated spaces and strategies for regulation: calm corners, sensory tools, movement breaks, breathing exercises, and check-in routines that help children name what they are feeling before it escalates into conflict.

A common challenge in school-age programs is the issue of waiting. When some children show signs of distress or dysregulation, and educators do not know how to respond, the default is often to make everyone wait while the situation is addressed, or worse, to ignore it entirely. Both responses fail the group. Children who are waiting become bored, restless, and more likely to express their frustration through challenging behaviours. Children whose behaviour is ignored learn that their actions have no impact and no one is paying attention.

Educators need practical strategies for managing these moments: how to address one child's behaviour while keeping the group engaged, how to use transition activities

and choice-based programming to reduce dead time, and how to build routines that anticipate the energy shifts children experience throughout the afternoon. Training in these practical skills is not optional; it is the foundation of effective school-age programming.

Technology: A Nuanced Conversation

Part of supporting big emotions means being realistic about all the tools available to us, including the controversial topic of technology. The use of technology in school-age programs is a sensitive and often polarizing topic. Some centres maintain strict no-technology policies, viewing screens as antithetical to play-based learning. This position is understandable and comes from a genuine commitment to active, hands-on engagement. However, it may not account for the full reality of school-age children's lives and needs.

Children in before- and after-school programs are in care for many hours each day, on top of a full school day. It is not realistic, nor necessarily desirable, to program every moment with structured activities. Play should always come first. Engagement, creativity, and social interaction are the foundation. But there are moments when technology can serve a legitimate purpose.

For some children, particularly those with serious behavioural challenges or sensory processing needs, a period of quiet screen time can function as a regulation tool. It provides a predictable, low-demand activity that allows the nervous system to settle. For others, technology time can serve as a meaningful incentive within a structured framework, not as a bribe, but as a natural reward for meeting expectations.

This is not an argument for unlimited or unmonitored screen use. It is an invitation to move beyond all-or-nothing thinking and consider technology as one tool among many. The question is not whether technology belongs in school-age programs, but how it can be used intentionally, sparingly, and in service of children's well-being.

Reasonable people will disagree on this topic, and that is appropriate. What matters is that programs make thoughtful, informed decisions rather than blanket policies that do not account for individual children's needs or the realities of extended-day care.

Setting Boundaries with Confidence

One of the most critical gaps in school-age care is training educators to set and maintain clear, respectful boundaries. Many educators enter the field without adequate preparation for the unique dynamics of school-age children, who are

developmentally wired to test limits, negotiate, and push back. Without confidence in boundary-setting, educators may default to one of two extremes: authoritarian control or passive avoidance. Neither serves children well.

The recent College of ECE "Professional Advisory: Practices that harm children" (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2025) is an important and necessary document. It rightly identifies punitive, shaming, and coercive practices that have no place in any childcare setting. However, for educators who already feel uncertain about guiding school-age positive interactions, this guideline may unintentionally create confusion or hesitation.

The concern is not with the guideline itself, which is sound, but with how it is interpreted by educators who lack training in positive, firm boundary-setting. Some educators may read the guideline (College of ECE, 2025) and conclude that any form of limit-setting or consequence is harmful. This misinterpretation leads to a dangerous pattern: ignoring conflict, overlooking disrespect, and failing to address escalating behaviour because the educator is unsure where the line is between guidance and harm.

School-age children need boundaries. When adults fail to respond to inappropriate behaviour, children receive the message that no one is in charge, no one is paying attention, and no one cares enough to intervene. Behaviours do not self-correct through inaction; they escalate. Children who are testing limits need to encounter a calm, consistent adult who can hold the boundary without resorting to punishment.

Logical Consequences and Collaboration with Families

When boundaries are clear and consistently held, logical consequences become a natural extension of guidance rather than punishment. A logical consequence is directly connected to the behaviour and helps the child understand the impact of their choices. For example, a child who damages materials is invited to help repair or replace them. A child who uses hurtful language is supported to make amends before rejoining the group.

These are not punitive measures. They are learning opportunities that respect the child's dignity while maintaining safety and community standards. Educators need training to distinguish between logical consequences and punishment, and to deliver them calmly, without shame or anger.

Collaboration with families is essential but often complicated. Some families send mixed messages. When a parent tells their child to hit back if someone hits them, the educator faces a direct contradiction between home values and program expectations. This does not mean the family is wrong to want their child to defend themselves, but it does mean the program

must be clear about its own standards while respecting the family's perspective.

Open, non-judgmental communication with families about program expectations and genuine curiosity about family values builds the trust needed to navigate these tensions. Follow-up conversations after incidents help families understand what happened and how the program responded, creating consistency between home and care.

When supervision concerns during school hours go unaddressed, or when school teachers, childcare educators, and admin teams and directors fail to communicate and collaborate, the disconnect shows up directly in children's behaviour. Children are perceptive. They know when adults are not on the same page, and they respond to inconsistency with confusion, testing, and escalation. For example, a recurring frustration among educators is the feeling that incident reports lead nowhere. When children display testing behaviours—disregarding boundaries, or engaging in repeated conflict—educators are often told to document each incident. They do. They write detailed reports, track patterns, and submit paperwork. But without clear procedures for what happens next, the documentation feels like busywork rather than a pathway to support.

Educators need to know: How many incidents trigger a family meeting? At what point does a behaviour support plan get developed? What actions follow repeated documentation? When there is no threshold, no timeline, and no visible follow-through, educators lose faith in the process. They begin to feel that their observations don't matter, that leadership is not responding, and that they are left to manage escalating behaviours without backup. Eventually, many stop writing the reports altogether—not because the behaviours have stopped, but because the effort feels futile.

Programs need proper procedures: clear criteria for when documentation moves from tracking to action, transparent communication with families about patterns and next steps, and collaborative planning that includes the educator's voice. Without this structure, incident reports become a symbol of isolation rather than a tool for problem-solving. Educators deserve to know that their documentation serves a purpose and that they are not alone in supporting children with complex needs.

An Invitation to Rediscover

School-age care asks a lot of educators. The constraints are real: shared spaces, short windows, staffing pressures, and the emotional intensity children carry after a full school day. But the rewards are real too—and they are unique to

this age group. School-agers will surprise you with their humour, their honesty, and their capacity for empathy when they feel respected. They will test boundaries, yes, but they will also rise to responsibility when we offer meaningful roles and a real voice. You get to witness independence forming in real time. You get to mentor children as they learn who they are and how they want to show up in a community.

If we want this work to be appealing again, we have to invest in it. That means training that reflects the realities of middle childhood. It means advocating for better access to space, storage, and materials. It means designing programming and program plan templates that fit the rhythm of before-and-after school care rather than forcing a preschool model for programming into a two-hour window. And it means speaking about school-age care with confidence—as a professional practice area that deserves expertise, not apology.

My invitation to the field is simple: let's rediscover the joy. Let's reimagine school-age programs as places where children can belong, learn, and grow—and where educators can engage in work that is challenging, creative, and deeply meaningful. When we change the narrative, we rediscover purpose and new possibilities.

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Decent Work Project Update

Mobilizing the Early Childhood Workforce in the Movement for Decent Work

Written by: Thơ Nguyễn

The winter and spring of 2026 have been an incredible season of growth, community, and political action. From playful street art to policy responses, here is a snapshot of what we have been up to, and how we are fighting for decent work that all early years professionals deserve.

Advocacy and Policy Responses

We kicked off the year by ensuring the voices of ECEs were heard at the highest levels of government. In January, we signed a [joint letter](#) organized by Child Care Now, delivered to all ministers responsible for Early Learning and Child Care ahead of their Federal Provincial Territorial Forum. This letter emphasized the need to protect and expand the \$10aDay child care program. The AECEO and our partners at the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) sent a [direct letter](#) to Ontario's Minister of Education, Paul Calandra, highlighting the severe workforce crisis and highlighting the need for an immediate increase in funding for wages through a pay-equity compliant wage grid. We also maintained regular communications with national, provincial and municipal governments to keep workforce issues central to every child care policy discussion.

Listening & Storytelling Community Research

From January to March, we hosted a series of focus groups as part of our Listening and Storytelling Community Research, building on a survey that captured the experiences of 652 respondents. These sessions explored the diverse talents ECEs bring to the sector, while also exposing the systemic barriers they face, including burnout and the persistent blurring of boundaries between professional passion and unpaid labour. We are deeply grateful to everyone who shared their stories. We invite you to read the [focus group findings](#) report recently published in April 2026. Coupled

with the [executive summary](#) released last September, this report officially wraps up the project. However, the invaluable insights gained from this community research will continuously shape our advocacy moving forward.

Community Partnerships & Engagement

We continue to grow our relationships with various early childhood and cross-sector community partners. To align our goals, we frequently met with provincial and national child care associations, mentorship and advocacy organizations, including the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, Family Supports Institute Ontario, Ontario Mentorship Collaborative, Early Childhood Educators of BC, Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association, and Child Care Now. We also tabled at the Peel Region ECE Workforce Networking Event and Peterborough "Gather & Grow" Professional Learning Day.

Recognizing that the struggles experienced by the child care workforce are both unique and deeply rooted in the historical devaluation of care and feminized work, we have been working closely with the Equal Pay Coalition to influence broader policy change addressing the gender pay gap. Our close partnership with the Equal Pay Coalition successfully integrated child care advocacy into the broader provincial labour movement. The Equal Pay Coalition adopted "Care Counts, Wages Matter" as a focal point for [Equal Pay Day 2026](#), marking the 50th anniversary of the coalition and amplifying the call for decent work across cross-sector platforms. Additionally, our team joined critical sector events, including the No One Left Behind Summit hosted by the South Asian Women and Immigrants' Services and Bolstering Ontario's Care Economy Policy Summit by the Ontario Nonprofit Network.

Our work is continuously enriched by the insights, enthusiasm and creativity of ECE students who are driving change in the early years sector. This past term, we connected with students from colleges and universities across Ontario through winter placements, internships, class presentations, and career fairs. Check out the AECEO Student Blog on our [website](#) to see brilliant projects completed by our placement and internship students over the years! We extend a massive thank you to our post-secondary partners who help us shape the experiences of pre-service early years professionals.

We also hosted multiple workshops to give our community practical tools for change. In February, we held a two-day, in-person advocacy training and networking series in the Greater Toronto Area, coaching ECEs how to use personal storytelling to influence policy. In May, we partnered with the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) and Student Early Childhood Educators Ontario (SECEO) to deliver a two-part workshop series “Seeking Great ECE Jobs,” providing participants with insights on finding ECE jobs that align with their values, alongside practical tips for resume building and job interviews.

CARE Collectives

Our CARE Collectives continue to build advocacy from the ground up, hosting monthly community check ins for new and seasoned advocates to share experiences and resources, and lift each other up. Recently, our CARE Collectives led some beautiful initiatives. The All Nation Circle of Practice joined a webinar on Indigenous Astronomy as told by the Haudenosaunee with Samantha Doxtator, offering a new way to understand the cosmos and our connection to it. The Community of Black ECEs hosted a Screen to Self activity using media created by Black artists and storytellers to spark meaningful conversations about mental health, identity and belonging, resilience, generational healing, self-reflection and growth. Parents 4 Child Care member Janet Amito spoke at a press conference in Ottawa about the Child Care Now open letter to provincial ministers, calling on ministers to expand and strengthen the \$10aDay child care system. Both the Early Years Coalition Waterloo Region and Early Years Professionals Rise Up T.O. collectives welcomed new co-leads, working closely with AECEO community organizers Jess Tomas and Erin Filby to discuss organizing training and strategy, and to map out upcoming actions.

Community Visits

Erin, Patrícia and Thor had a wonderful time meeting educators during our most recent community visit to Hamilton. We felt the vibrant energy of hundreds of students at the Mohawk College Career Expo and connected with local child care

supervisors at a professional learning event hosted by the Affiliated Services for Children & Youth (ASCY). We also got to chat with the ECEs and staff at the beautiful Waterdown facility of the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic Child Care Centres. Our team was so inspired by the well thought out and organized resources available for ECEs and early years professionals and students at the ASCY library. Seeing ECEs being supported at many levels to work their magic with children always sparks immense joy in us and reminds us of why we come together to advocate for decent work! Before heading home with full hearts, we spent an evening with local ECEs and community members at the beautiful Pinch Bakery and Plant Shop, making arts, sharing laughs and tears and dreaming together about the future of our profession. Thank you so much to everyone who welcomed us in, stopped by to chat, or came out to join us. This work is not possible without you and we are so grateful to have been able to spend this time with you. Stay tuned to find out more about future community visits, we look forward to meeting you!

“Care Counts, Wages Matter” Campaign Launch

This International Women’s Day marked the official launch of our new multi-year campaign [Care Counts, Wages Matter](#). We kicked things off by marching alongside our long-time community partners at the Toronto Women’s March. To keep the momentum rolling, we launched [“Operation Baby Doll”](#), joining in on a playful yet provocative international street art project. We transformed famous statues of male historical leaders in Toronto and Ottawa into caregivers. Passing by Toronto City Hall or the Courthouse, community members saw figures like Winston Churchill suddenly caring for the day, adorned in colourful baby carriers. The installations invited the public to pause and reflect: Who does the work of caring for children, and why is that work still overlooked?

Whether you are an ECE, student, operator or ally, your story matters! Join us in bringing the Care Counts campaign to your community! Check out our [Care Counts Campaign Tools](#), share your amazing ideas, and let us know how we can support you as we get louder together!

AECEO Team Updates

Our team is counting down the days to meet our newest, littlest AECEO member! Rachel Neville, our Membership Outreach & Policy Analyst, has officially started her parental leave. Over the last year, Rachel dedicated herself to planning our Members’ Retreat & Advocacy Summit (more on this in our next issue), and leading the creation of our brand new website (launching soon!). We wish Rachel and her family all the very best on this new journey.

With Rachel away, we are absolutely thrilled to welcome Bre Picocolotto (they/she) as our new Membership Outreach & Policy Analyst! Bre is a Registered Early Childhood Educator with over a decade of experience in the early learning and child care sector, including caring directly for children and families and working in professional learning, post-secondary education, policy research, and advocacy.

Bre is also stepping into the host's seat for the [Circle Time with the AECEO Podcast](#)! Check out our recent episodes where we discussed: how crafting and art are an integral part of ECE practice, the power of parent and ECE solidarity (featuring Parents 4 Child Care), and the historic, on-the-ground story of the 1970s Campus Community Co-Operative Day Care Centre occupation.

Thank You!

Our collaboration with each and every one of you makes our Mobilizing the Early Childhood Workforce in the Movement for Decent Work project incredibly meaningful. Thank you for continuing the good fight to ensure all early years professionals thrive.

If you are looking for unique, ECE-centric products, visit the [AECEO Merch Store](#) for seasonal items designed by ECEs, for ECEs, to celebrate our unique roles and professional pride!

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Content embedded in hyperlinks within this article may be found at the following websites:

Listening & Storytelling Community Research Executive Summary and Focus Group Findings:

https://www.aeceo.ca/listening_storytelling_community_research_executive_summary

Joint letter to ministers responsible for Early Learning and Child Care ahead of their Federal Provincial Territorial Forum, and the direct letter to Ontario's Minister of Education:

https://www.aeceo.ca/federal_provincial_territorial_forum_on_elcc

Equal Pay Day 2026: <https://equalpaycoalition.org/mobilize-your-mpps>

Care Counts, Wages Matter campaign: <https://childcareontario.org/care-counts>

Operation Baby Doll: <https://childcareontario.org/when-male-statues-become-caregivers-for-a-day-care-counts>

Care Counts Campaign Tools: <https://childcareontario.org/care-counts-tools>

Circle Time with the AECEO Podcast: <https://www.aeceo.ca/podcast>

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Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2026 Federal Budget

Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario
Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care
May 21, 2026



Recommendations

1. Budget 2026 must increase the annual federal transfers to the provinces and territories to strengthen and significantly expand the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care plan. In alignment with recommendations from our national partner, Child Care Now, we recommend that Budget 2026 allocate **\$9.7B in operating funding 2027-28, ramping up to \$13.3B in 2030-31, and \$3B in capital funding in 2027-28, ramping up to \$4.0B in 2030-31** to support the needed expansion of early learning and child care.
2. More than five years into the CWELCC plan, the federal government and provinces and territories now have more accurate assessments of the cost of the program for each jurisdiction. The federal government must **recognize and respond to the variation in costs across provinces and territories**, with the goal of full and sufficient funding of CWELCC.
3. The federal government must transfer to provinces and territories **dedicated and long-term funds to support fair wage grids, benefits and pension plans** for Early Childhood Educators and child care workers in the CWELCC system. They should also seek provincial and territorial government commitments to match the federal contributions for the ELCC workforce.
4. In addition to federal transfers for CWELCC, we recommend that Budget 2026 allocate sufficient funding to strengthen and expand the **Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework**, co-developed by First Nations, Métis and Inuit governments and the Government of Canada.

About our organizations

The Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care (OCBCC) is Ontario's central advocacy body for a universal, affordable early learning and child care system. We represent over 500 early learning and child care programs, child care associations, social justice and labour organizations, as well as concerned individuals. We are the Ontario affiliate of Child Care Now, Canada's national child care advocacy association.

The Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO) is the professional association for registered early childhood educators (RECEs) in Ontario. We advocate for respect, recognition and appropriate wages and working conditions for all RECEs and a high quality, publicly funded early childhood education and child care system.

Progress and challenges with CWELCC's implementation in Ontario

Ontario is a key part of the CWELCC system, with over 300,000 families benefiting from more affordable child care thanks to federal investments and collaboration. While CWELCC has been life-changing for many Ontario families, Ontario currently has a \$19 average daily fee and \$22 fee cap for CWELCC spaces, not yet meeting the promise of \$10aDay. Further, a child care workforce shortage and sluggish expansion means that there are currently too few spaces to meet the increased demand for affordable

child care, leaving many families on waitlists for CWELCC spaces while they pay market fees, cobble together multiple unregulated arrangements, or forfeit job opportunities. With affordability top of mind for all Canadians, increased investment to fully and sufficiently fund the CWELCC program will be beneficial in many ways.

Child care is essential economic infrastructure

Despite these challenges and although the program is still in development, CWELCC has already led to important economic benefits across Canada. A [2024 economic analysis](#) found:

- New jobs in the ELCC sector make it the sixth-largest source of new employment in Canada since CWELCC started.
- Female labour supply has increased in line with expanded ELCC services, through two channels: improved labour force participation, and more full-time work. Combined, this has increased female core-age (25-54) labour supply by 175,000 full-time equivalents.
- The combination of increased ELCC activity, expanded spin-off work (in upstream supply chains and downstream consumer industries), and enhanced female employment has raised Canada’s national GDP by \$32 billion (or over 1%) since 2019.
- The new GDP supported directly and indirectly by expanded ELCC services prevented Canada from entering a technical recession in the second half of 2023.

To build on this progress, and to expand access to all the families that need it, we recommend that the federal government ramps up investments in ELCC. The current federal CWELCC spending plan, as outlined in the 2026 Economic Update will flatline operational funding and sunset the Child Care Infrastructure Fund, blunting the effectiveness of this program. An increase in federal funding would continue and expand on the achievements listed above. Increased transfers to the provinces and territories should be used to attain and maintain the \$10aDay parent fee cap, to ensure that lower income families and families living in poverty are able to access the program, and to ensure that workforce strategies are effective to retain, re-attract and recruit the increased number of Early Childhood Educators and child care workers needed to run quality programs.

In alignment with our federal partner, Child Care Now, we recommend that Budget 2026 allocate federal transfers as follows:

	2026-2027	2027-2028	2028-2029	2029-2030	2030-2031	Total
Operational Funding	8.7	9.7	10.8	12.0	13.3	54.5
Early Learning & Child Care Infrastructure Fund	0.2	3.0	4.0	4.0	4.0	15.2

Recommended Federal transfers for Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (\$ billions)

Since CWELCC started in 2021, with five years of experience and data gathering, governments now have much more accurate assessments of the cost of the program for each jurisdiction. Ontario has developed a cost-based funding formula and carried out extensive child care operator surveys to develop a good sense of the funding needed to meet CWELCC’s goals. CWELCC transfers should recognize and respond to the real funding needs across provinces and territories.

Care Counts, Wages Matter: Supporting the Child Care Workforce

We recommend that dedicated and long-term funds to support standards of working conditions, including fair wage grids and province-wide benefit and pension plans, should be transferred to provinces, territories and Indigenous governments. Provincial and territorial government commitments should match the federal contributions for the ELCC workforce and benefit and pension plans should be equivalent to those in place in publicly funded sectors such as public education, health care, and municipal services.

The CWELCC program does not work without the early years workforce. It is widely acknowledged, including in federal [Budget 2024](#), that “early childhood educators are critical to the success of the early learning and child care system”. While that budget set “fair wages for Early Childhood Educators as a cornerstone” of the CWELCC plan, progress on compensation improvements has been mixed across the country, and does not go far enough in Ontario. CWELCC has begun to support some varied compensation improvements across jurisdictions. Wage grids for ECEs exist in seven provinces and territories, and benefits plans have been implemented in six. Impacts of this are already beginning to be seen; for example, PEI’s wage grid, pension,

and benefits plans are already improving staff retention and morale. In Ontario, some Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) now have a wage floor of \$25.86. While this modest improvement was direly needed, it falls far short of making child care wages competitive, fails to comply with the Pay Equity Act, and is well behind other provinces and territories that have introduced wage grids, benefits, and pension plans.

Federal Budget 2024 called on provinces and territories to ensure ECEs are fairly compensated, including the creation of robust pension plans. Budget 2026 must go further to make certain that this call is taken up in every province. We recommend that the federal government transfer to provinces and territories dedicated and long-term funds to support fair wage grids, benefits and pension plans. They should also seek provincial and territorial government commitments to match the federal contributions for the ELCC workforce.

Wage grids provide evolution within the workforce, they provide something to look forward to and work toward. They recognize years of service and levels of education. Wage grids consider pay equity. Benefits and pension plans demonstrate the recognition and respect the sector deserves. They support the physical and mental health of

the workforce, and therefore the physical and mental health of the children they care for. Combined, a wage grid and benefits and pension plans lead to increased attraction to and retention within the sector. A wage floor sets a minimum wage for a select group of the workforce. This leads to some feeling recognized while others are left behind. While these two strategies do make an impact, the outcome is not equal.

We recommend that workforce funding include policies to ensure that employees are compensated for all hours worked, including program preparation time. Planning is integral to the emergent curriculum used by Early Childhood Educators to implement high quality programs. The contribution of provincial and territorial governments to workforce development does make a difference. Manitoba has already established a wage grid for ECEs and their recently released 2026 budget includes a 2.9% increase, demonstrating their understanding of the necessity of professional wages for professional work and a recognition of ECEs.

In order to continue to expand the CWELCC program in Ontario, we must solve the workforce shortage by providing fair wages and benefits for ECEs in order to attract them to the sector, and support them to build lifelong careers.

The Problem

The child care workforce crisis is impacting the \$10aDay child care plan in Ontario – a lack of qualified staff is limiting spaces, undermining quality, and making programs unstable. We cannot solve waitlist stress for families, and create more high quality spaces, until we solve the workforce crisis.

Wages matter. ECEs and child care workers identify compensation and working conditions as *the* primary issues impacting their decision to enter, stay in, or leave, the profession.

The Solution

A provincial wage grid for Early Learning and Child Care starting at \$35-\$45 per hour for RECEs and \$28 per hour for early years staff, annual increases, extended health benefits, and a pension plan. Ontario must develop, implement, and fund a wage grid as part of a renewed Canada-Ontario child care agreement. Ontarians need an action plan that delivers affordable child care, decent work and pay, and enough spaces for all.

The Ontario Budget Ask

Currently the federal government contributes 56% of funding to child care vs Ontario's 44%. **The Ontario government should pay its fair share, boosting its contribution to CWELCC by at least \$500 million to match federal investments.**

The Campaign:



For more information and to join the Campaign use this QR code or go to: childcareontario.org/care-counts/



Reconsidering Behaviour Support in Contemporary Early Learning Environments: A Structural Perspective

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Abstract

As behaviour support in early learning environments becomes increasingly individualized, many educators find themselves holding multiple parallel strategies within classrooms that were not structurally designed to sustain them. This article proposes a shift in perspective: from viewing behaviour as a child-centred problem requiring targeted intervention, to understanding it as an output of the classroom system itself. Drawing on ecological and self-regulation frameworks, as well as Ontario's How Does Learning Happen? pedagogy, this article introduces a four-part Stability Framework — addressing environment, flow, adult consistency, and predictability — as a sustainable starting point for reducing escalation and supporting both children and educators more effectively.

Keywords: early childhood education, behaviour support, classroom structure, self-regulation, Montessori, inclusive practice, Ontario

You know the moment. The transition is almost done, the room feels almost settled — and then it isn't. Something shifts in the energy, and what follows requires your full attention, again.

Across early learning environments, a similar question is arising with increasing frequency: why are approaches that once felt effective no longer having the same impact? Many educators describe implementing strategies they know are sound — approaches they have used successfully in the past — yet finding that behaviour feels more frequent, more intense, or simply harder to shift.

These experiences are not isolated. They reflect a broader shift in the day-to-day reality of many classrooms. What stands out, however, is not a lack of effort or care. If anything, educators are demonstrating deep commitment, responsiveness, and a genuine desire to support children well. And yet, despite this, something continues to feel slightly misaligned.

This article explores why that misalignment so often lives in the structure of the classroom itself — not in the child, and not in the educator.

Why Behaviour Support Feels Harder Than It Used To

In many early learning settings, behaviour support is becoming increasingly individualized. Educators are receiving thoughtful recommendations from consultants, resource teams, and specialists, each designed to support a particular child. This form of support is both valuable and necessary within inclusive practice.

At the same time, when viewed within the context of a full classroom, the cumulative effect of these recommendations becomes more complex. An educator may be holding multiple strategies for one child, different approaches for another, and additional expectations across the group — each requiring variation in timing, language, or response.

While each strategy is reasonable in isolation, their combined implementation within a dynamic, group-based environment can become difficult to sustain. The challenge is not one of knowledge or willingness, but of capacity. Educators are being asked to carry a level of individualized precision that is difficult to maintain consistently within the realities of ratio, movement, and the ongoing demands of the day.

The Structural Gap

This complexity becomes clearer when compared with other professional contexts. In healthcare or therapeutic environments, individualized plans are typically implemented within systems designed to support that level of specificity — often with lower ratios, clearly defined roles, and dedicated time to focus on a single individual. These conditions allow for consistency and precision in implementation.

In early learning classrooms, however, educators are simultaneously supporting a group of children, often with multiple needs emerging at once, while also maintaining relationships, ensuring safety, and supporting the overall flow of the day. When highly individualized expectations are introduced into this group context without corresponding structural adjustments, the result is not a lack of effort, but a strain on sustainability.

This is the structural gap: the space between what is being asked of educators and what the environment itself is set up to support.

Behaviour as a Response to the Environment

One shift that has proven helpful in practice is to look more broadly at what is happening within the classroom environment itself. Children develop within systems, and the immediate environment plays a central role in shaping behaviour.

Behaviour and learning emerge through interaction — through what is happening between individuals and within the environment (Vygotsky, 1978; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This perspective aligns closely with *How Does Learning Happen?* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014), which highlights the importance of responsive and predictable environments in supporting children's sense of well-being, belonging, and engagement. From this viewpoint, behaviour is not only something that resides within the child, but something that is continuously influenced by the conditions surrounding them.

As Shanker (2016) describes, when the demands of a situation — sensory, social, cognitive — begin to build, a child's capacity to regulate can shift. In this way, behaviour can be understood not simply as an action to be managed, but as an indicator of how the child is experiencing the environment. The research from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2011) reinforces this, demonstrating how the early environment directly shapes the development of executive function and self-regulatory capacity.

Observing Patterns in Practice

When classrooms are observed through this broader lens, behaviour often appears as the result of accumulated, everyday experiences rather than isolated events. A common example

emerges during transitions, where children finishing activities at different times begin waiting, and movement within the space becomes less structured. No single moment appears problematic, yet within a short period, waiting increases, movement overlaps, and the overall energy in the room begins to shift.

It is often at this point that behaviours such as running, calling out, or disengaging become visible and appear to require a response. However, when traced back, these behaviours frequently emerge from the conditions leading up to that moment — from the structure, not from the child.

Educators are consistently working to support children, yet small variations in tone, pacing, or response — while entirely natural — can influence how children interpret expectations (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2011). When adult responses are aligned, the classroom often feels more stable. When responses vary, even slightly, children may experience uncertainty, which can contribute to increased testing or escalation. This is not a performance issue; it is a systems issue.

When Systems Begin to Feel Strained

When individualized expectations continue to build without corresponding adjustments to the overall classroom structure, the impact tends to extend beyond individual children. Children may experience support that feels inconsistent — not by intention, but because educators are balancing multiple needs simultaneously. Educators themselves may experience increasing cognitive and emotional load, moving continuously between responses without the opportunity to stabilize the environment as a whole.

An additional layer of complexity arises when children are waiting extended periods for formal assessment and diagnosis. During this time, educators are identifying needs, implementing individualized approaches, and supporting inclusion within the existing classroom environment — often without the staffing, resources, or structures that typically accompany a formal diagnosis. This highlights a gap between what is needed and what is currently available, and reinforces the importance of classroom approaches that can support children consistently, regardless of where they are in the process of accessing formal support.

These patterns do not reflect a lack of care, but rather the weight of what educators are being asked to hold. Acknowledging this is not a concession — it is a prerequisite for building something more sustainable.

What to Look at Before Adding Another Strategy

Given these considerations, it can be helpful to begin with what can be stabilized across the classroom as a whole. Rather than adding additional layers of individualized

intervention, educators may find it useful to reflect on how the environment, the flow of the day, and adult responses are collectively supporting all children.

In practice, this often comes back to four consistent areas of focus. These form the foundation of what is referred to here as the Stability Framework — a structural lens for reading a classroom before reaching for a strategy.

The Stability Framework: Four Areas of Structural Focus

- 1. Environment.** Does the physical space support independent movement and clear expectations? Can children ‘read’ the room — understanding where to go and what is expected there? An environment that communicates clearly reduces the cognitive load on both children and adults.
- 2. Flow.** Where does the day create waiting, uncertainty, or unstructured gaps? Transitions are frequently where behaviour escalates — not because of the child, but because the structure has not yet caught up. Mapping the flow of the day reveals where to invest first.
- 3. Adult Consistency.** How aligned are adult responses across the team? Variation in tone, language, or follow-through — even when unintentional — can signal unpredictability to children who are already working hard to regulate. Consistency is not uniformity; it is reliability.
- 4. Predictability.** How clearly are expectations communicated during the moments when demands are highest? Predictability is not rigidity — it is the structure that allows a child’s nervous system to settle enough to engage. As Montessori (1967) observed, it is the prepared environment that frees the child.

Bringing attention to these four elements does not add to the workload. In many cases, it reduces it — because when the environment is doing more of the work, educators are freed to be more present, more responsive, and more genuinely consistent.

Building a Classroom That Holds Itself

Sustainability remains a central consideration in early learning environments. Educators are balancing multiple responsibilities simultaneously, and approaches that rely heavily on numerous individualized strategies can be difficult to maintain consistently over time. When the overall structure of the classroom is supportive, many behaviours begin to soften before direct intervention is required.

Behaviour strategies continue to have an important place within early childhood practice. Their effectiveness, however, is closely connected to the conditions in which they are implemented.

When the environment is stable and predictable, strategies are more likely to be effective. Without that foundation, even well-designed approaches can feel difficult to sustain — not because the strategy is wrong, but because the ground beneath it is not yet stable.

This invites a meaningful shift in perspective: from asking only “what strategy should be used” to also considering “what within the environment may be contributing to what is being observed.” In many cases, this broader lens opens the possibility for more sustainable and supportive ways of working — for children and for educators alike. The goal is not a perfectly managed classroom. It is a structurally honest one.

“Most classrooms don’t need more strategies. They need less inconsistency. When the structure is stable, the child can be too.”

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intermontessori.com

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Is It Not “Real” Work

By Grace Collrin

At drop off
Backpacks are set on hooks,
goodbye hugs are given,
A parent jokes-

“I wish I could play all day.
Instead, I have to go to a real job and work.”

This phrase is said lightly,
But it lingers so heavily,
weighing me down.

A real job-
Is my job not real?

Is it not “real” work
to bring my education into every moment,
to turn interest into possibility,
to create daily opportunities for learning and
development?

Is it not “real” work
to support children through their emotions,
to guide growing minds through conflict,
to observe and document moments that most
overlook?

Is it not “real” work
to care for 25 developing personalities,
to advocate for those in my class,
to create an environment that fosters well-being?

Is it not “real” work
because I sit on the floor instead of office chairs,
because I wipe tears,
Because I care?

For women, this type of work is still mistaken
as something natural rather than earned,
as instinct instead of skill,
as something easy.

My work is not easy.

It is patience I have practiced,
It is knowledge I have earned,
It is skill I have refined.

So, I stand there professionally,
holding a smile,
while my work is diminished
with a phrase they will forget
but I will always carry.

Grace Collrin is a B.Ed in ECE student at the University of New Brunswick

About Borrow My Calm

The inspiration for Borrow My Calm emerged from a Professional Development workshop I attended in April 2026 titled “Targeted Social Emotional Supports for Neurodivergent Learners”. The session challenged me to think beyond behaviours and to consider what children may be communicating beneath the surface of their actions. It highlighted an important truth for educators: children are not always giving us a hard time; often, they are having a hard time.

As educators, we can easily become focused on what we see—big emotions, dysregulation, withdrawal, frustration, or challenging moments. Yet co-regulation invites us into a different posture: one of curiosity rather than judgment, connection rather than control, and understanding rather than reaction. It reminds us that before children can learn to regulate themselves, they often need to borrow calm from the trusted adults around them.

This poem is a reflection on the quiet but profound role educators play in helping children navigate emotional storms. It honours the moments where our presence, patience, and steadiness become the bridge between distress and safety, and where the calm we offer today may become the self-regulation children carry with them tomorrow.

Borrow My Calm

You looked troubled, I became flustered.

My first thoughts whispered,
“Oh, you’re giving me a hard time.”
But the reflective mind answered,
“No—you’re having a hard time.”

I pause and look again.
The furrowed brow,
The restless hands,
The tears that words cannot explain.

How can I help
When I fail to understand
That beneath the noise,
Beyond the behaviours I can see,
Is a small heart asking for safety?
You do not need my frustration.
You do not need my raised voice,
To compete with the storm within you.

You need my steady presence,
My patient eyes,
My gentle words,
My quiet reassurance that says,
“I’m here.”

You need my calm
To quiet your storm.
Because co-regulation is not control.

It is lending peace
Until you can find your own.
It is holding steady
When your emotions feel too big,
Standing beside you
Until the thunder softens.

And one day,
The calm you borrowed from me
Will become the calm you carry within yourself.

*Adenike Ovundah (BSc., Dip B. Admin, MLS, Dip ECE)
Whitehorse, Yukon*

Professional Lone Rangers

We did not begin this journey alone.

We gathered around tables,
Shared ideas in meeting rooms,
Raised our hands for committees,
Poured ourselves into conversations
About the professions we loved.

We showed up faithfully,
Not merely in attendance
But in purpose,
Believing that community strengthened practice
And that together
We could shape something greater than ourselves.

Then life happened.

Competing priorities knocked at the door,
Family called us by name,
Private battles unfolded behind closed curtains,
Unexpected losses arrived uninvited,
And burdens too heavy to explain
Quietly took their place beside us.

So our seats became empty.
Our voices grew less frequent.
Our names no longer appeared
On attendance lists and committee rosters.
To some, perhaps it appeared

As though we walked away.

But leaving is not always abandoning.
Sometimes it is choosing balance
Over burnout.
Sometimes it is protecting peace
Over pressure.
Sometimes it is gathering the scattered
pieces of ourselves
Before we have anything left to give another.

And so we practice from quieter corners.
Still learning.
Still growing.
Still believing in the work.

Lone rangers not by desire,
Nor by rejection of community,
But by the understanding
That some seasons require distance
Not to disconnect from who we are,
But to remain whole enough
To continue becoming who we are meant to be.
For even from a distance,
The profession still lives within us!

*Adenike Ovundah (BSc., Dip B. Admin, MLS, Dip ECE)
Whitehorse, Yukon*

The Meeting Place

by Kelly Ashfield and Nathalie Bourgoin

We gather here to laugh and share.
Our languages carry the stories, traditions,
and identities that make us who we are.
We have come from afar,
Some were already here,
But in every accent and voice, we honor our heritage.
Unique cultures make us who we are.
Yet together, they create a supportive community.
One that is full of pride, joy, friendship, and support.
Listening deeply,
We grow and enrich our understanding, overcoming division,
Strengthening our connections to one another.
Although each journey is different,
We learn from one another
through the stories that we share.
Every tradition passed down,
and the moments spent together.
We may all come from different backgrounds,
but our hearts remain in the same place,
with our families and loved ones.
Every voice deserves to be heard.
With kindness and understanding,
We make connections through our experiences,
Creating a place where everyone belongs.
Together with you,
Where we all belong,
We gather to laugh and share-
At the meeting place.

*Kelly Ashfield and Nathalie Bourgoin are B.Ed in ECE students at the
University of New Brunswick*

Beyond “Just Babysitters”: My 27-Year Journey as an Early Childhood Educator

By: Jane Cervi (she/her), RECE, MA

When I became an Early Childhood Educator in 1998 at the age of 25, one of the first messages instilled in me was that we are far beyond “just babysitters.” At the time, I wondered why this distinction was emphasized so strongly. After all, babysitting requires no formal training—yet my two-year diploma program demanded an in-depth understanding of child development, curriculum planning, legislation, observation, ethics, professionalism, and countless hours of field placement.

So why did professors, supervisors, and colleagues continually insist that we reject the label of “babysitter”? And why did the public so often continue to use it?

Over time I came to understand the root issue: the profession of early childhood education has historically been undervalued, largely because the majority of its workforce are women and the work is tied to care—something society tends to see as natural rather than professional. But even early in my career, as I studied the Day Nurseries Act (DNA, 1990)—now the Child Care and Early Years Act (CCEYA, 2014)—it was clear to me that this field is grounded in specialized knowledge and essential responsibility. We do not simply “watch” children; we educate, guide, protect, scaffold, advocate, and co-learn with them and their families.

I graduated with honours and quickly immersed myself in the sector. Working within an umbrella agency of 20+ non-profit centres gave me a deep appreciation for the complexity and diversity of early childhood settings. I always intended to continue my studies—so much so that I visited Toronto Metropolitan University’s School of Early Childhood Education shortly after graduating. But life unfolded:

marriage, motherhood, and practical realities meant that dream had to wait.

Throughout my career, I explored many facets of early childhood education:

- I ran my own home child care business aligned with DNA and later CCEYA.
- I worked in the Full-Day Kindergarten program.
- I returned to licensed child care in various roles.
- I led the Niagara West Home Child Care Networking Group, fostering monthly professional learning and collaboration among providers.

Professionalism was, and still is, a non-negotiable for me. For five years I reminded the Niagara West network that being a professional means upholding safety, ethics, relationships, and continuous learning, regardless of one’s setting.

In 2008, the establishment of the College of Early Childhood Educators felt monumental. To me, it signaled recognition—a regulatory body similar to my mother’s College of Nurses—one that would elevate our profession and hold us accountable to the highest standards. While some colleagues feared increased oversight, I saw it as validation: a safeguard ensuring that children, families, and educators could rely on ethical, reflective, high-quality practice.

I also hoped, perhaps naively, that government recognition would translate into livable wages for RECEs. Unfortunately, that struggle continues today. Operating my own program helped me survive financially, but when I became a Designated Early Childhood Educator in 2018, registration with

the College shifted from voluntary to mandatory. I embraced it—not out of obligation, but out of commitment to the profession I love.

The pandemic unexpectedly opened the door for me to return to school. I enrolled in the Direct Entry Early Childhood Studies BA program at Toronto Metropolitan University, finished that, and by 2024 I proudly completed my Master of Arts in Early Childhood Studies. These credentials strengthened my capacity to advocate for RECEs and contribute to meaningful sector change.

Today, as a program supervisor, I remain deeply aware that while our sector is imperfect, it is also full of potential. With nearly three decades of experience, I have cultivated strong communication, writing, and analytical skills, as well as a deep understanding of ethical, relational, and pedagogical practice within Ontario’s early learning sector. I also serve as a board member with the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario, where I contribute to advancing and advocating for the profession.

For 27 years, I have conducted myself as a proud professional. I uphold the values of Care, Respect, Trust, and Integrity, engage in continuous learning, make ethical decisions, build strong family partnerships, maintain clear boundaries, and advocate for the well-being of children—all while acknowledging my own biases and the diverse cultural contexts in which we work.

I am an RECE.

I am an educator.

I am a professional.

And I will never be “just a babysitter.”
—The End

The Difference We Don't See...

By: Gabriella Belony

There are some days when a child walks in and I can tell instantly, before they even drop their bag, that it's going to be one of those days. Maybe they had a rough morning, maybe something happened at home or school, or maybe it's simply one of those days where everything feels a little... off. Whatever the reason, I can feel myself bracing, mentally preparing for the challenges I know are coming. I remember one day in particular when I wasn't even through attendance before the chaos began.

I was working with a Junior Kindergarten child whose behaviour stretched every adult in the room. They were the child who needed eyes on them at all times — known for sprinting out the door without warning, lashing out at other children, kicking or throwing whatever was within reach, and shouting language no four-year-old should know. Their days could turn quickly, and when they did, the whole room felt it.

That afternoon was no different. Within minutes this child had dumped entire bins onto the floor, slammed a door hard enough to rattle the walls, screamed at two children, destroyed another's work, and bolted across the room so fast I had to physically block the exit to keep them safe. By the time I finally managed to get close enough to speak to them, my heart was pounding. The room looked like it had been hit by a small storm, and the other children were visibly shaken.

"I can see you're having a hard time," I said quietly, "and I want you to know I'm not angry with you. Whenever you're ready to talk, I'll be ready to listen, and we can work something out. I'm going to come check on you in five minutes." The child kicked over a chair with all the force they had and stormed away.

As an educator, it felt like failure — like I had somehow made things worse. For the entire five minutes, the child

sat in a corner, shoulders tight, jaw clenched, refusing to look at anyone. The room had settled, but they clearly hadn't.

When I came back, I approached slowly, keeping my voice low. "Hi ... are you feeling any better? Do you want to talk about what happened?" For once, they didn't interrupt me. They didn't argue. They didn't bolt across the room. This child just sat there, breathing hard, eyes fixed on the floor. Then, after a long pause, they looked up and asked, "Ms. Gabby... why are you patient with me when I'm so bad?"

Bad.

The word landed harder than any behaviour I'd dealt with all year. This child's actions had challenged me, absolutely — but I had never thought of them as bad. They are a small child. A bright, funny, surprisingly charming little person when they weren't fighting the world around them. Hearing this child say it and hearing how certain they were, felt like the air had been knocked out of me.

"Everybody else said I'm bad," they added.

I realized they weren't trying to avoid consequences. They weren't looking for reassurance. They genuinely wanted to understand why I hadn't given up on them the way they believed every other adult had. That was the part that broke my heart — the idea that patience and respect were things this child thought they didn't qualify for.

I didn't have a perfect answer for them. I just told them the truth: that I saw a child who was trying, a child who was learning, and a child who mattered to me. A child who wasn't "bad," no matter what they'd been told or made to feel.

Something shifted between us after that conversation. Not in a dramatic way, but in the small, practical ways that matter in a Kindergarten classroom. This child started checking in with me before things went sideways. They'd stay a little closer instead of taking off the second they felt overwhelmed. This child listened longer, even if it was only by a few seconds. They pushed back less automatically. They allowed me to support them without assuming I was there to correct or control them. And somewhere in between all of that, I finally began to see the child underneath the behaviour.

It's often said in our field that behaviour is communication, and the longer I do this work, the more I see how true that is. When we only focus on the surface — the running, the shouting, the defiance — we miss what's underneath: the stories children have absorbed about themselves, the treatment they think they deserve, the identities they've been handed before they ever had a chance to choose for themselves. Our role asks us to be intentional in how we respond, not because it sounds good in theory, but because our reactions shape the way young children understand themselves in real time. When we rush or react without thinking, we risk reinforcing the negative beliefs we don't even know they're carrying.

We also miss the impact of the small things — the quieter moments that don't look like progress but matter more than we realize. The extra second they

pause before reacting. The way they look over to check if we're still there. The shift in their tone when they feel safe enough to try again. Much of the meaningful work we do as RECEs happens in these moments. It doesn't announce itself. It shows up slowly, in a child who starts to believe they're more than a label, in a family that feels understood instead of judged, and in a community that benefits from children who have experienced patience and consistency somewhere in their day.

This field is hard. It asks for patience when you're running low, gentleness when you're stretched thin, and consistency when everything around you feels unpredictable. If you're struggling — or if you're new to the work — the difficulty isn't a sign you're doing it wrong; it's a sign you're doing the real work. We shape how children understand themselves long before they have the language for it, and most of that impact won't be visible in the moment. We rarely see the full story. We don't always know which moment mattered, which comment stayed, or which quiet decision shifted a child's trajectory. Most of the time, our work is influencing something we won't see until much later — in who they become, how they relate to others, and what they believe about themselves long after they leave our programs.

And maybe that's part of the job. Maybe the difference we don't see now is simply the difference we don't see yet.

Author Bio

Gabriella Belony is a Registered Early Childhood Educator with nine years of experience working in Montessori, municipal, community-based, and school-age programs. She earned her Early Childhood Education diploma from Sheridan College and is currently pursuing an Honours Bachelor Degree in Early Childhood Leadership. Her work is shaped by relationship-centred practice and a commitment to supporting the children and families in the communities she serves.



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Navigating the Hurdles of the CWELCC System: Centring Ontario Early Childhood Education and Care Operators' Perspectives

Cheryl Lee-Yow, Kristy Timmons

Abstract

This paper investigates how early childhood education and care operators in Ontario navigated the early implementation (2021-2023) of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system. Drawing data from a mixed-methods survey and a political economy of care framework, the findings reveal widespread concern about the sustainability of the funding system, lack of workforce support, and implementation gaps. While affordability goals have largely been met for families, operators reported increased financial strains, staffing shortages, and unclear policy directives. The paper highlights a growing disconnect between federal policy goals and provincial execution, emphasizing the need for frontline-informed childcare reform.

Keywords

Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC); Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC); Funding; Implementation Gaps; Operators; Ontario

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Acknowledgements

This paper and broader research study was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council's Canada Graduate Scholarship. A sincere thank you to all the participants that took the time to provide thoughtful insights and experiences that helped guide this work.

Navigating the Hurdles of the CWELCC System: Centring Ontario Early Childhood Education and Care Operators' Perspectives

Access to affordable childcare has become a growing concern for many interest groups, including registered early childcare educators (RECEs) (Kupfer, 2022; Wilson, 2022), early learning and childcare operators (Baird, 2022; Kupfer, 2022; Wilson, 2022), and families (Balintec, 2022). Since the 1970s, there has been an increasing demand for high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services (Cleveland, 2022), and since the pandemic, the demand has escalated and become a national priority (Uppal & Savage, 2021). To address challenges in the childcare sector, the Government of Canada launched the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system (Government of Canada, 2022). The initial CWELCC agreement allocated up to \$30 billion over five years (2021-2026) to lower the average costs of childcare to \$10/day by 2026 for all regulated spaces opting into the system (Government of Canada, 2022). The system's objectives are to address critical issues such as the unaffordability of childcare fees, limited access to high-quality and inclusive programming, challenges in workforce retention, the low attractiveness of early childhood education careers, and prolonged waitlists for childcare.

As the CWELCC system was being implemented across Canada, each province and territory had its own implementation process (Government of Canada, 2022). Focusing on Ontario makes it possible to examine how policy goals were implemented across local administrative, workforce, and operational conditions. Ontario is a model for examining the CWELCC implementation on a provincial scale due to its size, mixed delivery structure, regional variation, specific challenges associated with translating national childcare objectives into provincial implementation, and its leadership in introducing public kindergartens (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025; Wloka, 2020). In addition, Ontario's late adoption of the federal agreement and rapid rollout overlooked

the complexities of the childcare sector, resulting in implementation uncertainties, administrative burdens and instability, workforce gaps, and funding shortfalls (Akbari & McCuaig, 2022; Cleveland, 2023, 2024; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025).

Advocacy groups emphasized the importance of collaboration between federal and provincial governments and early childcare operators to ensure that policies effectively support a qualified and competitive workforce, which is essential for expanding childcare access for families across Canada (Bennett, 2021; McLean et al., 2022). While the CWELCC objectives are clearly articulated in the federal-provincial agreements, there is limited empirical evidence on whether those objectives are being realized during the implementation of the system in Ontario, particularly from the perspectives of operators who are responsible for delivering the policy on the ground (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025). When policy implementation is not accompanied by sufficient and stable workforce conditions, funding, and structural supports, operators navigate challenges of increased instability, staffing issues, administrative pressures, and reduced capacity to sustain high-quality childcare programming (Costello, 2026; McCuaig, 2025). Research is necessary to understand the change in federal support for the ECEC sector, and, by capturing front-line experiences, future policy development can better address goals of childcare accessibility, affordability, high quality, and inclusivity and sustainability of early childcare funding. These implementation gaps matter for the ECEC workforce because the workers shape the everyday conditions under which they are able to deliver high-quality, accessible, and inclusive childcare services (Costello, 2026).

This paper examines how Ontario ECEC operators experienced the early stages of implementation of the CWELCC system, and how they interpreted the extent

to which the stated objectives were being realized in practice. Drawing on mixed-methods survey data and the political economy of care framework (England, 2005; Folbre, 2006), this paper explores the tensions between policy intention and the realities of implementation, with particular attention to the role of ECEC operators in the early years sector. In doing so, this paper poses the question, “How do Ontario ECEC operators interpret and experience the tensions between CWELCC policy goals and the early implementation realities, particularly in relation to workforce sustainability?”

This paper begins by situating the CWELCC system within the Ontario ECEC policy context. It then outlines the study’s methodological framing, followed by an analysis of the survey data. The paper concludes by discussing what the findings reveal about the tensions between policy objectives and the operational realities in Ontario’s ECEC sector.

Both authors have worked in the ECEC sector, one as a practitioner and doctoral researcher focused on the CWELCC system and the other as a former educator and academic who navigated the rollout as a parent. These perspectives shaped the questions that were asked and how the data was read; these perspectives are addressed directly in the reflexivity statement in the Methods section.

Policy Implementation Challenges in Early Childhood Education and Care Systems

Research within the ECEC sector in Canada has consistently demonstrated that the success of large-scale public funding initiatives depends not only on policy designs but also on how they are implemented and delivered by those on the frontlines (Akbari et al., 2020; Cleveland, 2022; Farewell et al., 2022; McCuaig et al., 2022; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025). Reports that have examined ECEC policy implementation highlight the recurring challenges related to funding adequacy, workforce capacity and retention, administrative complexities, and alignment between policy objectives and operational realities (McCuaig et al., 2022; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025). When these aspects are misaligned

or overlooked, the implementation gaps undermine policy objectives, even if those objectives are widely supported (Ingriselli & Schempp, 2019).

Within Ontario, longstanding concerns related to workforce shortages, sustainable compensation, training, and retention have created structural vulnerabilities within the ECEC sector (Akbari et al., 2020; Cleveland, 2022; Farewell et al., 2022; McCuaig et al., 2022; McLean et al., 2022). Policy interventions such as the CWELCC system are intended to expand the affordability and accessibility that frequently intersect with pre-existing issues in childcare and place additional pressures on childcare centre operators who are responsible for managing staffing, finances, regulatory compliance, and other operational administrative tasks. Recent reports (Cleveland, 2024; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025) have emphasized how rapid policy rollouts, particularly those introduced with limited communication and instruction, exacerbate uncertainty and administrative burden for childcare operators, further complicating the policy implementation efforts and limiting the capacity of operators to respond effectively.

Ontario’s implementation of the CWELCC system reflects many of the implications and challenges mentioned. The province’s late adoption of the agreement, the over-reliance on a temporary revenue replacement funding model, and evolving administrative requirements have all contributed to sector-wide uncertainty throughout the implementation of the CWELCC system (Cleveland, 2024). Ontario was the last province to opt into the CWELCC agreement and pushed their rollout date to November 1, 2022 (Government of Canada, 2022). The revenue replacement funding model was supposed to replace the portion of frozen fees that families were no longer paying as determined by the Ontario Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2023; Toronto Children’s Services, 2023). By 2023, centres that opted in had to reduce the frozen fees by 52.75% to a minimum of \$12/day (City of Toronto, n.d.). However, with the impacts of inflation and concerns with cost escalations, the supposed temporary funding model left many centres unable to cover their expenses (Cleveland, 2024). While policy analyses and media reporting have documented concerns related to funding formulas and workforce sustainability (e.g., centres declaring bankruptcy, families struggling with long waitlists), there remains limited research

capturing how these implementation dynamics were experienced by ECEC operators themselves.

The paper draws upon a political economy of care framework (England, 2005; Folbre, 2006) that examines how care work is socially organized, valued, and distributed within broader economic and political systems (England, 2005; Folbre, 2006). This framework highlights the ways in which care labour, including ECEC, has been historically undervalued, feminized, and inadequately supported by public policy (Folbre, 2006; Michel & Mahon, 2002). This framework is useful in analyzing the CWELCC system's implementation in Ontario as the stated objectives depend on a care workforce and infrastructure that have historically been underfunded and unevenly supported (Costello, 2026; McCuaig, 2025). Additionally, this framework makes it possible to examine the structural conditions that the CWELCC objectives are being implemented under, including challenges like staffing shortages, financial pressures, and the way in which the early years operators take on the burden of implementation on the frontlines (Costello, 2026; McCuaig 2025). Within this perspective, the challenges faced by ECEC operators can be understood not simply as implementation failures but also as reflections of deeper structural contradictions in how care is positioned within market-based economies. When education and childcare systems are organized through market mechanisms rather than public provisioning, the costs of care are disproportionately absorbed by workers (e.g., through low wages and poor working conditions), families (e.g., through high fees or long waitlists), and operators (e.g., through financial precarity and administrative burden). A political economy of care lens thus situates the findings of this study within a broader critique of how ECEC services have been historically marginalized within Canadian social policy and foregrounds the need for systemic transformation rather than incremental adjustment.

CWELCC Objectives as Policy Constructs

In this paper, *policy constructs* refer to the CWELCC objectives, assumptions, and categories that are interpreted and operationalized. These constructs are not fixed, rather they are interpreted and translated through the implementation process. Treating the CWELCC objectives as policy constructs allows for

a critical examination of how the objectives are understood, prioritized, and enacted during the early implementation of the system. Rather than assuming that the stated objectives are inherently realized through participation in the CWELCC agreement, this paper recognizes that the CWELCC objectives may be unevenly achieved, partially fulfilled, and in tension with one another depending on local conditions and administrative requirements (e.g., affordability for families who are able to obtain a childcare space, but unaffordable for centres to operationally survive).

When the CWELCC system was first introduced, it was structured to address five core objectives: affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and flexibility. (See Figure 1) This paper includes “flexibility” as one of the objectives as it was listed in the initial CWELCC agreement, although there was confusion over what “flexibility” entailed (Government of Canada, 2022). In 2025, the objective was simplified to “data sharing and reporting” (Government of Canada, 2025) to reflect the definition provided. These objectives are articulated in federal and provincial agreements as interrelated policy goals that are intended to collectively strengthen CWELCC systems.

Policy research and reports suggest that the CWELCC objectives framed at a national level may function differently once implemented within provincial governance structures and funding mechanisms, and further municipal organisation (McGinn, 2026; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025). Since Ontario follows a decentralized, multi-tiered governance model (i.e., federally funded, provincially implemented, municipally organized), the province's structure can lead to issues of miscommunication, inconsistent funding, and disparities in access and quality (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025).

In Ontario, implementation guidelines and funding approaches have shifted since the initial rollout, including changes in how the objective of flexibility has been interpreted and operationalized, the switch to a cost-based funding model in 2025, and the opt-in dates for childcare centres (Moran, 2024; Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2025). Such changes underscore the importance of examining not only whether the CWELCC objectives are conceptually sound, but whether they are practically attainable within existing system constraints.

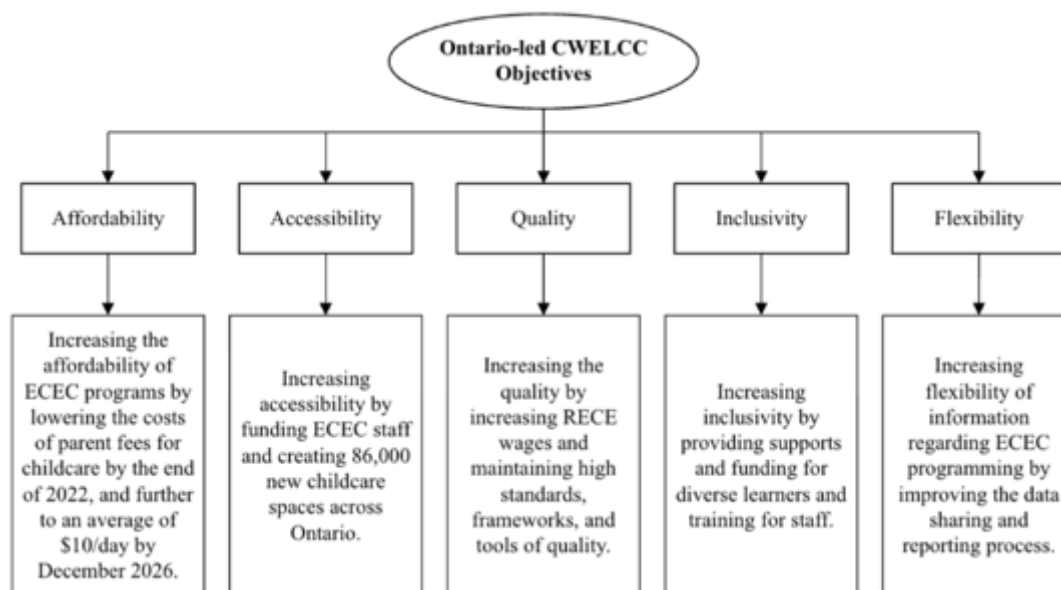


Figure 1: Flowchart of Ontario-led CWELCC objectives

Note: This flowchart was created by the authors to visually represent the CWELCC objectives (Government of Canada, 2022) listed in the Ontario agreement.

The Role of Operators in Translating Policy into Practice

ECEC operators play a crucial role in the decision-making process to opt in/opt out of the CWELCC system. They translate childcare policies into practice. As the decision makers at the childcare centre level, operators are responsible for navigating funding agreements, managing staffing and wages, recruiting and retaining staff, maintaining regulatory compliance, and communicating policy changes to families they serve (Government of Canada, 2022). These responsibilities position them as daily intermediaries between government policy and service delivery, particularly during periods of new policy transitions. Existing research (Cleveland, 2023, 2024; McCuaig et al., 2022) has increasingly recognized the value of capturing operator perspectives to better understand policy implementation processes and outcomes.

Operators are uniquely situated to assess how the policy decisions and actions affect financial sustainability, workforce stability and development, and programme delivery within their centres. Their experiences provide insights into the practical implications of policy design choices and developments, including how funding models, reporting requirements, and multiple communication channels shape their day-to-

day operations (Cleveland, 2023, 2024; McCuaig et al., 2022). Within the context of the CWELCC system in Ontario, operators have been tasked with implementing fee reductions, navigating evolving funding guidelines, maintaining service quality amid workforce shortages, rising operational costs, and quickly growing waitlists for childcare spaces (Government of Canada, 2022).

Despite these operators' central role, their perspectives and voices remain underrepresented in empirical analyses of the CWELCC system's early implementation in Ontario. Examining their experiences will offer a critical lens for evaluating whether the CWELCC objectives are being met as intended and identifying areas where policy adjustments may be necessary as the policy undergoes negotiations for a five-year extension (2026-2031).

Methods

The study used an online mixed-methods survey that included closed-ended items designed to capture demographic data and open-ended questions that invited participants to elaborate on their experiences, interpretations of the objectives, and their concerns with the implementation.

Participants

Participants were recruited from the 47 regions across Ontario (representing 5,776 centres). The term *operators* is used for participants, which included owners, directors, supervisors, and ECEs who had opted into the CWELCC system by Ontario's November 1, 2022, deadline and were responsible for their centre's operations. Recruitment occurred through indirect distribution channels including municipal service system managers and community sector organizations. A total of 105 responses were received. After applying exclusion criteria (i.e., removing incomplete responses, ineligible participants, and respondents who had not opted into the CWELCC system), the remaining 68 responses were used for quantitative analysis. Of these, 53 participants provided qualitative responses to open-ended questions and were included in the qualitative analysis.

Participant demographic information was collected to contextualize the perspectives represented in the data. Information such as organizational roles, program settings, and geographic location situated the capacity in which the participants encountered the CWELCC implementation. Participant characteristics included years of experience, centre types (i.e., not-for-profit, for-profit), and urban or rural contexts across Ontario. (See Table 1) The majority of participants reported over 20 years of experience in their profession, and many were working at their current centres for over 10 years, establishing their familiarity and knowledge of their centre's administrative duties and operational needs. Participants in the study offered a balanced representation of both urban and rural regions, and the majority of respondents worked in not-for-profit centres.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information – total of 68 participants

Baseline Characteristics	n	%
Current Role		
Owner	6	8.8
Director	41	60.3
Supervisor	16	23.5
ECE	5	7.4
Other	6	8.8
Years of Experience		
Less than 5 yrs	2	2.9
5-9 yrs	5	7.4
10-14 yrs	2	2.9
15-19 yrs	9	13.2
20-24 yrs	13	19.1
25-29 yrs	10	14.7
30-34 yrs	13	19.1
35-39 yrs	7	10.3
40+ yrs	7	10.3
Years of Working at Centre		
Less than 1 yr	2	2.9
1-3 yrs	7	10.3
3-5 yrs	5	7.4
5-10 yrs	9	13.2
10-15 yrs	13	19.1
15-20 yrs	10	14.7
20-25 yrs	10	14.7
25+ yrs	12	17.6
Region of Centre		
Rural	34	50.0
Urban	34	50.0
Type of Centre		
Not-for-profit	58	85.3
For-profit	10	14.7

Age groups at Centre *

Infant	48	70.6
Toddler	63	92.6
Preschool	66	97.1
Grade school	23	33.8
Before & After programs	52	76.5

Fee subsidies

Less than 25%	39	57.4
25-50%	13	19.1
50-75%	9	13.2
75-100%	6	8.8
Not sure	1	1.5

Purchase of Service (POS) agreement

Yes	62	91.2
Not Sure	6	8.8

* Participants were able to select multiple age groups

Data Collection Instrument

An online survey was used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data, allowing for descriptive analysis of operator perceptions alongside in-depth elaboration of their experiences. The survey was administered between September and October 2023. The design was well suited to capturing the initial implementation-level insights during the active policy rollout, when the system’s conditions and guidelines were still evolving. The instrument included likert-style items that assessed operators’ perceptions of whether each CWELCC objective (affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and flexibility) was being met in Ontario. Open-ended questions invited participants to elaborate on their responses and share experiences in relation to the CWELCC system implementation and impacts. The survey was designed to align directly with the CWELCC objectives, allowing for deductive analysis of operator perspectives in relation to stated policy goals.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (Vetter, 2017) to give the context of the participant demographic represented. Qualitative

responses were analysed using deductive thematic coding that was informed by Braun and Clark’s six phases of thematic analysis (2008). Leaning on Fife and Gossner’s (2024) deductive qualitative analysis approach, the five CWELCC objectives (affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and flexibility) were used as predetermined analytic categories. This approach enabled systematic examination of operator experiences in relation to stated policy goals. While the coding process identified recurring perspectives in participants’ responses, the political economy of care framework supported how these perspectives were interpreted. Rather than treating the implementation concerns as isolated issues, the framework allowed the analysis process to reflect how the perspectives were connected to a broader structure of poor workforce conditions, staffing shortages, and uneven administrative and financial responsibilities.

Reflexivity Statement

The researchers navigated this study with a background in education that informed their understanding of educational structures, pedagogical practices, and systemic inequities. Such experiences serve as insight and potential bias in relation to how issues of access, quality, and inclusion are conceptualized throughout the paper. As two researchers with direct ties to the ECEC sector, our positionality shaped this study in ways we want to be clear about. One of us worked in childcare before the CWELCC rollout and is now a doctoral student whose research focuses on the CWELCC system. The other is a former early childhood educator and teacher who now works as an academic in ECEC and had a child in childcare during the implementation period.

These backgrounds meant we came to this data with prior knowledge of how childcare centres operate, what workforce pressures feel like from the inside, and what the policy meant for families navigating the system in real time. That proximity was useful, and it helped us read operator responses contextually. We came with a structural orientation, inclined to read the implementation challenges as systemic rather than as the result of individual decisions or circumstances. The choice to use a political economy of care framework reflected that orientation. We recognized the risks of this: that we might overidentify with certain accounts or that our experiences in the sector would lead us to emphasize patterns that confirmed what we had already seen. We tried to hold that tension honestly throughout the analysis. Rather than attempting to speak for the

ECEC operators (Alcoff, 1991), the decision to foreground operators’ perspectives reflects a commitment to sharing the realities of the operators as they incorporate new policy into their daily practices. The researchers recognize and position the participants as key knowledge holders whose perspectives are essential to understanding the gap between policy intent and practice realities.

Findings

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the Ontario ECEC operators’ perspectives on Ontario’s early implementation of the CWELCC system were organized according to the five objectives (affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and flexibility). (See Table 2) Quantitative findings provided an overview of operators’ assessments of each objective, while the qualitative findings offered insight into how each objective was experienced in practice. Across each of the objectives, operators described uneven progress with the CWELCC system and highlighted the interconnected nature of the implementation challenges. The findings of this study emphasize how operators experienced the early implementation of the CWELCC objectives as an integrated whole rather than as independent, separate objectives. Although the survey was organized around sections of affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and flexibility, participants’ responses repeatedly showed how the objectives were experienced as interconnected concepts and were often in tension with one another. Across the data, workforce instability, funding uncertainty, and increased administrative burden emerged as the main conditions that were shaping how policy goals were being interpreted and enacted into practice.

Table 2: *Percentage of each CWELCC objective reported being met/not met*

Objective	Agree that objective is being met (%)	Disagree that objective is being met (%)
Affordable	86	14
Accessible	28	72
Inclusive	29	71
High Quality	35	65
Flexible	40	60

The Affordability Conundrum

The conundrum of affordability was reflected in many of the operators’ responses. As above, 86% of participants indicated that the objective was being met *for families*, with responses frequently acknowledging how reduced parent fees gave families more financially accessible childcare options, and, in some communities, increased the appeal of licensed childcare services. As one participant noted, “Opting in has made childcare more appealing for families requiring care in our community. The rates have become more reasonable for families with more than one child to manage” (Participant 47). These responses suggest that affordability was supported as the most publicly tangible and immediately recognisable success of the CWELCC system from the perspectives of families.

However, operators’ qualitative responses indicated that the gains for families were accompanied by operational pressures that complicated how the objective of affordability was experienced at the centre level. Participants described the difficulties of frozen fees, retroactive refunds, revenue caps, and uncertainty in funding disbursements all as challenges and constraints on financial autonomy and operational sustainability. One operator explained, “So far, we really regret opting in ... it is the right decision for families, but the program has not offered the financial support that our staff deserve and has made meeting our operational budget very challenging” (Participant 29). Another added, “Childcare is not a profitable business, and we were concerned that we would not be able to pay our bills especially our staff or rent if there were governmental delays in deposits” (Participant 2). These comments suggest that affordability was not experienced as a straightforward, ECEC-wide success. Operators were not opposed to lower fees for families, but there remains the challenge that where fees are reduced for families, childcare centres remained responsible for absorbing rising operational risks and inflation costs.

Workforce Sustainability as a Constraint on Objective Success

Quantitatively, the rest of the CWELCC objectives received substantially lower levels of agreement compared to the objective of affordability. Only 28% of participants agreed that accessibility was being met, 29% agreed that inclusivity was being met, and 35% agreed that quality was being met. (See Table 2)

Workforce instability emerged as a major challenge influencing the success of whether the CWELCC objectives could be achieved in practice. Throughout the operators' responses, workforce sustainability did not appear as a single issue, rather it functioned as a bottleneck situation where affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, and quality were all being compromised. This was reflected across the qualitative responses as operators repeatedly connected difficulties in staffing shortages, recruitment challenges, and difficulties retaining qualified ECEs, to the reduced capacity for expansion of space, limits on inclusive practices, and a growing concern about the ability to provide high-quality programming. Operators linked the inability to increase the number of available spaces not only to increased demand but also to staffing shortages that limited centres' capacity to expand. This suggests that accessibility could not be simply represented as a matter of policy intent or family needs, but rather it was contingent on the ability to have a stable workforce to support expansion. Similarly, inclusivity was described as requiring specialized staff, professional development, external supports, and sufficient time for individualized planning and collaboration with families. One participant stated, "Providing inclusive childcare is expensive. There are no provisions or incentives for centres to retrofit spaces to meet needs of individual children or hire additional staff to support children with special needs" (Participant 29). In this case, inclusivity is not framed as a matter of willingness alone but also as dependent on labour and resources that were not available. Participants raised similar concerns regarding quality. They consistently described the workforce instability as central to whether high-quality programming could be maintained. One participant wrote, "Quality childcare is still left up to individual centres to define and manage (again with burnt out staff who aren't able to give quality every single day because they are just surviving the day)" (Participant 40). Another explained, "Without the investment in all staff working in the field we won't have the staff training and those willing to be trained as an ECE to be able to fill the gaps" (Participant 12). Even where operators expressed pride in sustaining strong programming, they often attributed this to staff commitment and resilience instead of the CWELCC system implementation itself, noting, "We are holding our own. Our staff are creative and resourceful. We have a quality daycare thanks to our staff – not CWELCC" (Participant 28).

Operators Taking on the Burden

Rather than navigating the CWELCC system implementation as a stable and coherent system of support, participants described having to deal with budgeting uncertainties, overwhelming reporting requirements, shifting expectations, and increased administrative workloads while still having to maintain staffing, communication with families, and sustainability of the childcare services. Their perspectives suggest that the implementation responsibilities were not distributed evenly among all actors across the system, but rather they became concentrated in the day-to-day responsibilities of operators. These concerns were particularly evident in responses pertaining to funding and budgeting. Operators described delays and uncertainty with reimbursements and revenue restrictions that complicated financial planning. At the same time, operators remained responsible for all previously existing administrative and operational obligations. Administrative burden was also described as increased reporting and implementation workload that diverted time and attention away from leadership, staff support, and pedagogical priorities. One participant shared, "The workload of implementation is huge on admin, the increase in space and increase in needs has created a huge gap" (Participant 12). The responses also suggested that implementation pressures were not only financial but also organizational and relational as more time was being devoted to compliance, reporting, and policy navigation, and less time remained to support educators, plan the programming, and respond to community needs. The findings indicate that operators were expected to bridge the gap between the promise of policy reform and the practical realities of program delivery. In doing so, they became responsible for managing these accumulated pressures.

Flexibility as a Strain

Among the original CWELCC objectives that Ontario agreed to, "flexibility" was the one objective that was most consistently described as unclear, inconsistently interpreted, and difficult to operationalize. Quantitatively, only 40% of respondents indicated that the objective was being met. Qualitatively, operators' responses suggested that flexibility was not simply underachieved, but also conceptually unresolved and misunderstood. Participants frequently indicated that they did not know what the objective meant in practical terms, how it was being interpreted across municipalities, or what forms

of service adaptation it was intended to support. As one operator stated, “Not sure what flexible childcare means. Still same centres, same hours being offered with CWELCC” (Participant 31).

Such ambiguity matters as operators’ ability to describe how “flexibility” was related to program models, fee structures, and service options (i.e., part-time versus full-day programming) was limited. The lack of clear guidance and explanation of the objective appears to have created hesitation and inconsistency in interpretation. In some cases, operators suggested that the funding and waitlist pressures associated with implementation had actually reduced their ability to offer flexible programming arrangements. One participant explained, “If anything, we’ve reduced flexibility to guarantee our spaces are full (maximize income) and this has reduced the amount of families we can now take. We could not afford to continue with the flexible options we’ve had in the past and stay viable” (Participant 35). Responses indicated that the objective was not clearly defined in operational terms, and operators had difficulties assessing, enacting, and aligning their responsibilities with the objective. This is significant because it shows that the implementation challenges not only arise when the objectives are underfunded or unsupported, but also when they are insufficiently specified. The replacement of “flexibility” with “data sharing and reporting” further underscores the degree to which the original objective lacked clarity.

Summary of Findings

Overall, across the objectives, findings indicate that operators experienced uneven progress in meeting the CWELCC goals during the early implementation of the system. While affordability was widely recognized as having been relatively successful for families, other objectives were constrained by workforce shortages, administrative burdens, and funding uncertainties. Many operators expressed their overall support for the core vision of the CWELCC system and were pleased that attention was being brought to the ECEC sector. Their criticisms of the system implementation are not rooted in resistance to change, but rather in a desire to see the policy’s success through realistic, well-supported, and long-term sustainable planning. These findings highlight the interconnected nature of the CWELCC objectives and demonstrate how challenges in one area influence operators’ capacity to meet objectives in another.

Discussion

This study suggests that there is misalignment between the policy and implementation, that is reproduced through the uneven local implementation capacity, inadequate workforce investment, administrative pressures, and continued reliance on undervalued labour. The findings illustrate how Ontario ECEC operators experienced the CWELCC system during its early implementation as a set of unevenly realized policy objectives rather than a cohesive support system.

Operators’ responses pointed to a deeper issue in which the implementation depended on organizational and workforce capacities that are already under immense strain. The patterns observed across all five objectives (affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, flexibility) suggest that challenges in one domain often had a cascading effect on each other, shaping operators’ capacity to implement the policy as intended. What these findings point to is not simply that policy and implementation were misaligned, as this is a recurring feature of public policy reform, but that the misalignment followed a recognizable pattern rooted in how care work has historically been organized and undervalued.

The CWELCC system transferred financial risk downward to the operator level through frozen fees, revenue caps, and delayed reimbursements, without providing the structural supports that would allow operators to absorb that risk sustainably. This reflects a broader tendency in market-based childcare governance where the state articulates public goals while offloading delivery risk onto the private or non-profit sector (Folbre, 2006; Michel & Mahon, 2002). At the same time, the implementation framework proceeded as though a stable and sufficient workforce already existed; no structural provisions for workforce retention or stabilization were built into the rollout. This assumption reflects the historical undervaluation of care work as feminized labour that is expected to continue regardless of whether the material conditions make it possible or sustainable (England, 2005). As operators described navigating unclear guidelines, shifting expectations, and inconsistent communication across municipal and provincial levels, they absorbed the ambiguity of an insufficiently specified policy, becoming responsible for translating into practice what had not been adequately resolved at the governance level. These

dynamics did not emerge from poor provincial planning alone; they reflect structural features of a policy context that continues to treat childcare as a residual social good rather than a foundational public investment.

The findings reflect the broader limitations inherent in childcare reforms that are still governed and operated within market-based funding and implementation systems. Despite the significant public investment, the CWELCC system operates within a broader neoliberal policy context that continues to treat childcare as a market commodity rather than a public good. This market-oriented approach places the burden of implementation on individual operators who must navigate competitive pressures, revenue constraints, and workforce challenges while attempting to deliver publicly articulated objectives of universality and accessibility. The tensions experienced by operators reflect the fundamental contradictions of attempting to achieve universal childcare objectives through funding mechanisms that remain embedded within capitalist logics of efficiency, competition, and cost containment. These contradictions are not new to the ECEC sector, but the CWELCC implementation brought them into sharper relief. The persistent underfunding of workforce wages and professional development in Ontario's childcare sector predates the CWELCC system and has been well-documented across multiple policy reviews (Cleveland, 2022; McCuaig et al., 2022). What the CWELCC implementation added was a new layer of administrative demand and financial constraint on top of already strained conditions, not a structural remedy to them.

The policy deepened existing inequities by raising demand for childcare spaces while not simultaneously addressing the workforce crisis that constrains supply; by lowering fees for families while freezing the revenue available to operators; and by requiring more reporting and accountability from operators while providing less operational support. This goes some way toward explaining why operators who were broadly supportive of the policy's goals were nevertheless experiencing greater strain during implementation. This misalignment is not merely a gap between intention and execution. It is a reproduction of the same structural conditions that have historically made the ECEC sector precarious: care work that is expected to expand in scope without commensurate investment in the workforce and infrastructure that make it possible.

The findings indicated that workforce sustainability functions as a foundational condition of the success of the CWELCC implementation in Ontario. Although the formal objectives of the CWELCC system were outlined in the agreement, operators noted that meeting each of the objectives was dependent on the availability, retention, and support of the early years workforce. The study underscores the importance of examining policy implementation through the perspectives of those responsible for delivering services on the frontlines (e.g., operators, ECEs). ECEC operators are positioned as critical intermediaries between government policy and family experiences within the childcare sector and are responsible for navigating funding structures and administrative processes that continue to prioritize cost control and organizational risk management funding structures. Yet, operators' capacity to enact the public policy objectives of affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, quality, and flexibility is constrained by poor workforce conditions and administrative burdens. Without adequate alignment between policy design and operational realities, even well-intentioned initiatives struggle to achieve their intended outcomes and instead reproduce existing inequities and logistical pressures. Through a political economy of care lens, these findings illustrate how the undervaluation of care work is structurally embedded within current policy frameworks.

The challenges operators described (e.g., funding inadequacy, workforce instability, and administrative overload) are not isolated implementation problems but rather manifestations of a broader system that has historically treated early childhood education as a private responsibility rather than a public good. The political economy of care framework deepens the interpretation and perspectives of the ECEC operators as these challenges reflect broader structural conditions. The CWELCC system, while representing a significant shift toward public investment, continues to operate within market-based structures that distribute the revenue for, and costs of, care unevenly across workers, families, and operators. A sustainable workforce is essential to the success of the CWELCC system, yet the conditions necessary to sustain retention and commitment are insufficient. This analysis emphasizes the need for policy approaches that move beyond incremental funding adjustments toward a fundamental revaluation of care work within Canadian social and economic policy.

The findings are significant for the ECEC sector as they show how misalignment of policy and implementation conditions are felt in staffing shortages, increased workloads, difficulty in maintaining high-quality and inclusive care, and the burden of responding to families when the demand exceeds what childcare centres can provide.

It is worth being direct about what elements the political economy of care framework led us to foreground and what elements the framework led us away from. Framing the analysis around how care work is structurally organized and undervalued meant we read operator responses as evidence of systemic conditions rather than individual or institutional shortcomings. It helped us connect workforce instability and administrative burden to a longer history of care labour being feminized and underfunded rather than treating each challenge as discrete. What we pursued less fully was variation within the data, specifically how different operators in different communities, centre types, and geographic contexts may have navigated the implementation. A framework centred on local governance or organisational capacity would have drawn out those factors. We chose to prioritize the structural over the situational and that choice was shaped by our own histories in the sector and, for one of us, by doctoral research that has followed the CWELCC system closely since its rollout.

The pattern documented in this study is not unique to childcare. Across other feminized public service sectors, including nursing, social work, and teaching, reform efforts have repeatedly expanded service entitlements without resolving the workforce conditions that make those services deliverable (Armstrong & Armstrong, 2000; Neysmith & Aronson, 1997). The gap between what a policy promises and what workers can sustain tends to get absorbed at the frontline, by people who are too committed to the work to walk away and too under-resourced to do it well. What makes the CWELCC case worth examining carefully is that workforce investment was not incidental to the policy. The CWELCC agreement is explicitly committed to increasing RECE wages and addressing workforce retention. That commitment makes the gap between intention and implementation harder to explain as an oversight and raises the question of what it means when a policy simultaneously acknowledges a structural problem and reinforces it. The CWELCC experience shows how the devaluation of care work can persist even when it has been identified, named, and written into a federal agreement as something to be

corrected. For ECEC specifically, this matters because access to care is not only constrained by what families can afford. It is also constrained by whether there are enough supported, retained educators to make care available at all. Policies that address fees without stabilizing the workforce do not fully resolve the problem of unequal access; they simply shift the location of that inequality to where it is most visible.

The findings from this study have major implications for ongoing CWELCC implementation and future policy refinement. Incorporating operator feedback and perspectives into the creation of funding models, clarifying policy expectations, and prioritizing workforce sustainability are all essential to strengthening the early years sector. Continued monitoring of implementation experiences will be critical to ensuring that the CWELCC objectives are not only articulated but also achievable in practice. An effective implementation of the CWELCC system would require centring the voices of those on the frontlines within ongoing policy design and rollout. Their voices provide a critical lens on implementation gaps and practical solutions moving forward.

Recommendations

With the negotiations to extend the CWELCC system for an additional five years (2026-2031) being brought to the table, there are a few policy-relevant recommendations that should be considered. First, there is a need for greater clarity and consistency in implementation guidance. Operators reported uncertainty about how certain objectives were defined and operationalized across municipalities, which limited their ability to adapt their services to local community needs. Clearer policy articulation (to families, communities, and operators), alongside consistent communication across municipal and provincial levels, would support a more effective and cohesive implementation.

Second, findings highlight the necessity of addressing workforce sustainability as a foundational condition to achieving the CWELCC objectives. Recruitment and retention challenges constrain operators' capacity to expand access, maintain quality, and provide inclusive programming. Policy efforts need to prioritize competitive compensations, professional development, and stable staffing structures to strengthen the success of implementation and mitigate any unintended consequences while developing the early years sector.

Third, for better long-term sustainable approaches, funding models should better account for the operational and administrative demands placed on centres. Incorporating operator feedback into funding designs and review processes will help ensure that financial mechanisms align with practice realities.

Limitations

There are limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the study relied on self-reported data from a sample of Ontario ECEC operators who had opted into the CWELCC system; as such, perspectives of operators who did not opt in or who subsequently withdrew are not represented. Future research should consider exploring the experiences of operators who chose not to opt in and/or withdrew from the program (e.g., due to financial constraints, bankruptcy, lack of support). Second, the cross-sectional design captured perspectives at a single point during the early implementation of the CWELCC system in Ontario, and operator experiences may have evolved as the system has matured and been further implemented. Third, recruitment through municipal service managers and sector organizations may have introduced response bias as operators with stronger opinions about the CWELCC system may have been more likely to participate in comparison to those who may not have had strong opinions and/or did not have enough time. Fourth, the sample size, while sufficient for exploratory analysis, limits the generalisability of quantitative findings. This paper used self-reported data from a smaller sample of only Ontario ECEC operators who opted into the CWELCC system. Future research should look to assess a greater demographic of ECEC operators from across Canada, as their experiences may differ based on their provincial/territorial funding allocations and/or varying relationships with their respective education ministries.

Concluding Thoughts

Overall, this paper demonstrates the value of incorporating operator perspectives into evaluation of ECEC policy implementation. As key intermediaries between government policy and childcare programming experiences, operators provide critical insights into how policy objectives are enacted, adapted, or constrained in practice. Ongoing monitoring of the implementation experiences, particularly as a system extension is

negotiated, can support evidence-informed policy refinement and reduce the risk of misalignment between policy goals and system capacity. At present, there is a clear disconnect between policy and practice that highlights a deeper concern that focuses on the lack of consideration of the experiences of the early years workforce. Operators have shown their growing frustration and disillusionment with the CWELCC system as many of them feel overextended and under-supported.

While the CWELCC system represents a significant investment in the ECEC sector, its success not only depends on the stated objectives but also on the conditions under which those objectives are effectively implemented and sustained. Attending to operator experiences, workforce sustainability, and implementation coherence is essential to strengthening and ensuring that the CWELCC objectives are sustainable and responsive to the needs of the ECEC sector and the families they serve. Without stable, well-compensated, and professionally supported educators, even the best-designed policies will fall short. Viewed through a political economy of care framework, the operators' experiences documented in this study reveal how deeply the undervaluation of care work shapes policy outcomes. Meaningful reform requires not only adequate funding but a fundamental shift in how childcare is conceptualized within Canadian society, moving from a market commodity to a public good and from a private family responsibility to a collective social investment. Until such transformation occurs, even well-funded initiatives like the CWELCC system will continue to place disproportionate burdens on the predominately female workforce who provide this essential care.

What this study makes clear is that the CWELCC system is not simply a story of good intentions poorly executed. It is an example of how structural inequities in care work persist when reform efforts expand entitlements without addressing the conditions that make care possible. Ontario ECEC operators are not passive recipients of policy. They are the people who have kept this sector functioning under sustained pressure. Their experiences represent an important source of knowledge about what any future reform will need to be in order to get it right. As negotiations for a five-year extension proceed, centring their perspectives is not just good research practice. It is a precondition for achieving a system that actually works.

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Nourishing Care: Conceptualizing School Food within a Multi-Level Framework

Ashley Garlick, BA, RECE

Abstract

In 2024, Canada's federal government committed \$1 billion toward a national school food program to increase food access for children and youth. The current provincial policies focus on nutrition standards while neglecting feeding relationships, which raises questions about their effectiveness. This policy analysis examines how Ontario school food frameworks could include care-based feeding using a School Food Care framework that is adapted from Black and Byun's (2025) multi-level theory of food care and Satter's (2007) Division of Responsibility. Analysis reveals that current policies privilege measurable nutrition outcomes and efficiency over care relationships, creating structural conditions that leave open space for practices that undermine children's food autonomy and reproduce existing power imbalances. While this interpretation requires further empirical validation, this paper offers policy recommendations that include revising procedures to specify responsive feeding practices as pedagogical care work.

Keywords

care work, feminized labour, full-day kindergarten, Ontario, responsive feeding, school food policy

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Ashley Garlick is a Master of Education candidate at Queen's University. Her experience as a Registered Early Childhood Educator has inspired her current research, which examines the social and systemic influences shaping feeding practices and mealtime routines in Ontario's kindergarten program. Ashley has held roles as an educator in childcare and school settings, a pedagogical leader, and a post-secondary instructor. Her teaching philosophy emphasizes reciprocal relationships that empower children and families while honoring diverse perspectives and lived experiences.

Acknowledgements

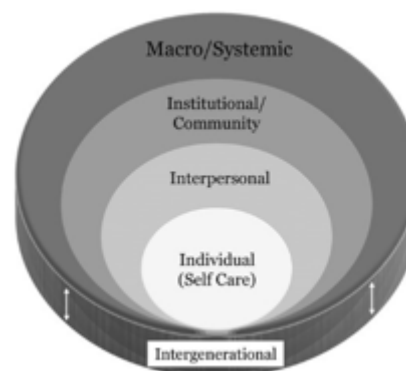
The author would like to sincerely acknowledge Dr. Kristy Timmons for her thoughtful guidance and editorial support, and Dr. Rebecca Stroud, whose instruction and feedback gave rise to this work, and for her encouragement toward publication.

Nourishing Care: Conceptualizing School Food within a Multi-Level Framework

Canada has four years remaining to meet its commitments under the United Nations' 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Office of the Auditor General of Canada (OAG), 2025). Of interest to this report, Canada is not on track to meet SDG 2 goal of ending hunger and has made the lowest improvement of the G7 countries (OAG, 2025). Rising obesity rates, which are closely linked to low income, remain a major challenge (Sachs et al., 2025) signaling that food access alone may not fully address this issue. Collaboration across sectors and levels of government has been identified as a key component to making progress toward the SDG goals. In 2024, the federal government committed \$1 billion to a National School Food Program (NSFP), subsequently releasing the National School Food Policy to guide its implementation (GoC, 2024). The NSFP requires such coordination between provinces, territories, and Indigenous partners to ensure children can access nutritious meals (OAG, 2025). The NSFP comes at a critical time as the number of families experiencing food insecurity continues to rise (Sarangi et al., 2026). School food programs reduce hunger and the inequalities stemming from limited access to nutritious foods (Maximova et al., 2025; Zhong et al., 2023). The vision of the National School Food Policy aims to address some of those issues within an "inclusive, non-stigmatizing environment that fosters healthy practices" (GoC, 2024, p. 14). Yet, current evidence suggests there is a gap between this vision and what is currently happening in schools. Recent news reports highlight parents' concerns about school staff judging packed lunches (Marfo, 2025). While research shows packed lunches typically have low nutritional quality (Neilson et al., 2022; O'Rourke et al., 2020), parents feel a gap exists between policies supporting healthy eating initiatives and the reality that many families are experiencing food insecurity (Marfo, 2025).

These tensions reveal a fundamental problem in how school food policy is conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated. To provide children with nutritious food in stigma-free environments, policies must ensure staff interactions are informed by evidence and respond to children's and families' diverse identities and lived experiences. The disconnect between nutrition-focused policies and the relational care work required to meet children's food needs reflects a broader gap in scholarly and policy discourse. Black and Byun (2025) recently proposed "food care" as a multi-level framework for understanding how individuals and organizations recognize and respond to the food needs of children (p. 3). Operating across individual, interpersonal, institutional and community, and systemic, and intergenerational levels (see Black & Byun, 2025, Figure 1), this framework defines many processes involved in caring for children's food needs that extend beyond parental feeding practices.

Figure 1.



At the interpersonal level, responsive feeding refers to a relational approach that supports children's nutritional needs while also forming the attitudes, habits, and social meanings around mealtimes. Satter's Division of Responsibility (Satter's DoR) (Satter, 2007) operationalizes these principles by clarifying the distinct

roles of adults and children so that children's hunger and fullness cues are recognized and respected. Satter's DoR has been applied to adult and child relationships to develop responsive feeding environments within the context of both home and childcare settings (Dev et al., 2017). How these principles translate to school settings and where parents and educators share this responsibility remains underexplored in both research and policy.

Researching and Evaluating Current School Food Programs

In their systematic review, Everitt et al. (2022) revealed that evaluations of Canadian school food programs have not assessed health equity, cultural responsiveness, or social benefits. This paper addresses these conceptual gaps by proposing a new school food care framework, adapted from Black and Byun's (2025) food care model and Satter's DoR (Satter, 2007). This framework has been developed for examining the K-12 school food environment in which children and youth access and consume food. However, underlying research on responsive feeding environments is most established for childcare settings, where early years pedagogy and responsive feeding research logically connect with kindergarten and primary grades. As this is also a formative period where children's eating behaviours and attitudes are likely to persist into adulthood (Haines et al., 2019), it remains the central focus of this paper's framework development. Further iterations would consider how responsive feeding principles shift as children age and take on more responsibility for their food choices. The school food care framework serves two purposes: (a) building the capacity of school communities for collaborative, evidence-informed inquiry into developing responsive mealtimes across interpersonal, institutional, community, and systemic levels, and (b) informing iterative policy recommendations that create and strengthen the structural considerations to establish and maintain those processes.

The second part of this paper provides analysis of Ontario's school food program policy landscape across federal, provincial, and municipal levels using the school food care framework, revealing how the current decentralized and inconsistent state of school food program policies inadequately address the complex realities of staff-child mealtime interactions.

Conceptualizing the School Food Care Framework

Reconceptualizing school food as care work is itself a political act that challenges neoliberal ideologies by making visible the feminized, relational, and emotional labour that has been systematically erased in frameworks that privilege measurable nutrition outcomes and cost efficiency over the care relationships essential to feeding. Subsequent recommendations will address how food care principles can be embedded across each framework level. This work contributes to a growing body of research involving Canada's school food programs with the specific lens of caring, responsive feeding relationships.

Education and Care

This work emerges from the author's experience as a parent and Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE) in childcare and school settings, where feeding practices were often in conflict with evidence-based guidance and policies rarely reflected the lived realities of food access experienced by many families. This tension reflects a consistent pattern in which feeding children is care work, and care work, by virtue of being relational and feminized, has historically been denied sustained policy attention or adequate resourcing (Langford et al., 2018; Murray, 2021). The school support staff, volunteers, and early childhood educators at the heart of this framework are not separate from the conditions it seeks to address. Many of these workers experience low wages and poor working conditions (Childcare Research and Resource Unit, 2026), signaling that food insecurity may be as familiar to those implementing this framework as to the children and families it is designed to support. This is not a coincidence, but rather a lived consequence of systematically positioning care work as less worthy of compensation, policy attention, and professional recognition than academic work. The ethics of care challenge this hierarchy by insisting that caring relationships are morally and practically foundational rather than supplementary to human development and institutional life (Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1993). This principle is reflected in *How Does Learning Happen?* (HDLH), which informs Ontario's kindergarten program and positions caring, reciprocal relationships as essential to children's learning and well-being (Ontario Ministry of Education (OME), 2014). Within this paper, the ethics

of care provides the moral grounding that runs through the school food care framework, connecting food care, Satter's DoR, and HDLH within a shared commitment to why caring relationships must be protected at the policy level.

Langford et al.'s (2017, 2018) analyses show how the separation of education and care was replicated in the kindergarten program. Teachers, aligned with academic instruction, hold positions of greater professional recognition and compensation than RECEs whose work is grounded in care and relationships. Mealtimes inherit undervaluation by default. The school food care framework challenges this assumption directly by positioning responsive feeding as a form of pedagogical care work that demands professional knowledge, reflective practice, and sustained systemic support, mirroring HDLH's vision of the educator not as a technician to be instructed in correct procedures, but rather as a reflective, collaborative professional whose role is to observe children closely, respond to their cues, and engage in ongoing critical reflection and collaborative inquiry about practice (OME, 2014).

A Relational Systems Approach

Integral to this role is attention to the environment itself. HDLH's focus on the environment as the third teacher reminds us that whether children eat in crowded hallways or at shared tables, whether mealtimes are rushed or transitions protected, whether food honours cultural diversity or normalizes dominant preferences, the environment is not a logistical detail but an explicit pedagogy that current school food policy leaves entirely unaddressed. Black and Byun's (2025) theory of food care captures this complexity, situating children's food experiences within the systemic, community, and institutional conditions that either enable or constrain responsive feeding environments, rather than focusing solely on the feeding practices of individual adults.

Although Black and Byun (2025) treat institutional and community processes as a combined level, this framework distinguishes between them to reflect their distinct roles in the school food context. Institutional conditions refer to school and board level policies, physical environments, and organizational structures. Community conditions encompass local food systems, community partners, and consideration of the cultural context of the school community, including the intergenerational knowledge

and food traditions that families bring to school food environments. At the systemic level, federal and provincial policies establish the legislative and strategic frameworks that are translated into board-level programs, school procedures, and daily practice. This separation allows for a more nuanced understanding of how different processes interconnect across the levels to shape the structural conditions for responsive environments.

Interpersonal Feeding Relationships

Strategies used to encourage children to eat, known as feeding practices (Vaughn et al., 2016), play a significant role in shaping children's eating behaviour and later health outcomes (Haines et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2022). Satter's DoR promotes healthy eating attitudes through responsive feeding practices that support children's development of eating competence through structure and autonomy (Haines et al., 2019; Satter, 2007; Vaughn et al., 2016). The adult is responsible for what, where, and when to eat and the child is responsible for deciding how much to eat, if any at all (Satter, 2007). Conversely, coercive feeding practices such as pressuring children to eat, increase children's risk of obesity (Smith et al., 2022; Vaughn et al., 2016) and disordered eating (Smith et al., 2022). Self-determination theory further supports responsive feeding by grounding it in children's fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Cormack et al., 2020). Within the school food care framework, autonomy is protected when children decide whether and how much to eat without adult pressure, competence is supported when adults observe and scaffold children's developing food skills, and relatedness is fostered through trusting, responsive feeding relationships. HDLH offers important conceptual resources for reconceptualizing who children and families are within this context.

HDLH defines the child not as a passive recipient of adult decisions but as "a capable and competent learner" (OME, 2014, p. 11) whose curiosity and agency extend to learning about food, bodies, and mealtimes. This understanding is fundamentally incompatible with feeding practices that, however well-intentioned, override children's hunger and fullness cues or treat their food choices as deficits in need of correction. This is particularly significant in school settings where children interact with multiple adults across mealtimes and food literacy activities, making consistent application of Satter's DoR across relationships essential.

Families are critical partners in this relational vision, recognized by HDLH as “the first and most powerful influence on children’s learning, development, health, and well-being” (OME, 2014, p. 6). They carry cultural knowledge, relational history, and an intimate understanding of their children’s food needs that no institutional policy can substitute for. The school food care framework accordingly positions children as capable participants and families as genuine partners in responsive mealtime environments, rather than targets of nutritional correction.

Taken together, these conceptual resources provide the normative and pedagogical foundation for the school food care framework. Black and Byun’s (2025) food care model provides the multi-level structure, Satter’s DoR clarifies relational roles within mealtimes, and the ethics of care establishes why responsive feeding environments are a matter of professional obligation foundational to children’s learning and well-being. The framework serves as an analytical lens for examining how school food policies enable or constrain school food care across five interconnected levels, with indicators revealing whether policies support responsive feeding or create space for controlling practices, detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 School Food Care Framework	
Level	Definition and Indicators
Individual	Children’s autonomy and eating competence • Children decide whether and how much to eat from available foods • Mealtimes and transitions provide adequate time for skill development
Interpersonal	Reciprocal feeding relationships within the context of care • Adults decide what, where, and when food is offered • Adults engage in intentional pedagogical practice to create and maintain responsive feeding environments • Neutral, non-judgmental language to describe food is used
Institutional	School policies, resources, and environments support feeding relationships • Physical and organizational structures enabling responsive feeding practices including adequate staffing • Infrastructure supporting the division of responsibility in partnership with families
Community	Local food systems and cultural contexts inform collective care responsibilities • Community partnerships supporting school food programs • Families meaningfully involved in decisions about school food programs • Cultural and economic diversity of families is reflected in school food programs, resources, and relevant policies
Systemic	Federal, provincial, and board policies, right-to-food frameworks, and broader social norms ensure feeding is recognized as care work and adequately resourced across all system levels • Funding structures that support trained staff, mealtime conditions, and nutritious food • Policies include a focus on responsive environments such as feeding practices and neutral language

Examining the Current Food Policy Landscape

A grey literature search (sources outside of academic journals) was conducted to identify relevant policy documents through government websites, school board websites, and public health online resources using key words including “school food,” “nutrition,” “feeding,” “lunch,” and “health.” This search was supplemented by reviewing references and related policy documents identified within initial sources. Policies and supporting documents that directly referenced school food, nutrition, or were otherwise used to inform decisions regarding food in schools or classrooms were included.

The following documents were reviewed chronologically to ensure clarity of historical analysis and intentions of subsequent documents: (a) *Healthy Food for Healthy Schools Act* (2008), (b) *School Food and Beverage Policy* (2010), (c) *Student Nutrition Program Guidelines* (2020), (d) *National School Food Policy* (2024). These findings were then compared with academic literature examining similar policies and school environments. Additional sources were selected to diversify the collection of evidence used to analyze the influence of school food environment on eating behaviours and subsequent outcomes relating to obesity, inclusion, and stigma. This process allows for empirical conclusions to be drawn that aim to reduce uncertainty when government decisions do not align with real-world conditions (Howlett et al., 2020). This analysis is shaped by the author’s positionality as a parent and RECE situated within predominantly white, English-language institutional contexts. The author does not claim to speak as or for racialized, immigrant, or otherwise marginalized families whose encounters with school food systems are shaped by dynamics of race, class, and culture beyond the author’s experience. This analysis draws on scholarship produced by and about these communities (e.g., Seko et al., 2025) and recognizes that the framework proposed here must be developed in ongoing dialogue with those communities rather than on their behalf.

Ontario’s Healthy Food for Healthy Schools

Ontario’s approach to school food has historically centred on what foods are available to students. Although intended to address childhood obesity through nutrition regulation, Ontario has produced policies that fail to address the complex realities of food insecurity and staff-child mealtime interactions. Provincial

initiatives to reduce obesity began with the *Healthy Food for Healthy Schools Act* (2008), which mandated 20 minutes of daily activity and restricted the amount of trans-fats in foods sold at school. This early policy established a pattern of treating childhood obesity as a technical problem, solvable through regulations about food content and daily exercise requirements within the institutional level. Community level interactions were identified by ensuring vendors providing food adhere to food regulations (OME, 2010). Additionally, the trans-fat regulation can be exempted for special event days. This exemption acknowledges that celebrations often centre around food. However, there is no mention of feeding practices. Failure to address the interpersonal context of food care on a systemic level created further implementation inconsistencies making it unclear how children’s eating behaviours are influenced at school.

Ontario’s School Food and Beverage Policy

The *Healthy Food for Healthy Schools Act* (2008) led to the creation of Policy/Program Memorandum No. 150 (P/PM 150), *School Food and Beverage Policy* (OME, 2010) that mandates all food for purchase in publicly funded schools must adhere to nutrition standards based on Canada’s Food Guide and restricts marketing of unhealthy foods (OME, 2010). School personnel must read food labels and ingredient lists and compare the information with specific nutrition criteria to determine compliance, although ultimate responsibility falls to the school principal. To support this process, there are three categories for food: sell most, sell less, and not permitted for sale (OME, 2010). The policy aims to create supportive school nutrition environments while allowing flexibility for special occasions and cultural events (OME, 2010). P/PM 150 includes little about how adults interact with children during mealtimes or how food is discussed in classrooms (OME, 2010).

Various government and non-government groups informed P/PM 150’s development, which included resource links and nutritional guidelines (Chaleunsouk & Kutsyuruba, 2014). Still, the implementation plan for P/PM 150 was unclear (Orava et al., 2017), and Ontario school boards needed to demonstrate compliance within a little less than a year (OME, 2010). Subsequent local policies were developed by school boards to support interpretation of P/PM 150 and improve skills, knowledge, and attitudes toward healthy eating (Chaleunsouk & Kutsyuruba, 2014).

For this paper, two board level policies were reviewed for interpretations of P/PM 150. Limestone District School Board's (LDSB) *Administrative Procedure 210—Creating a Healthy School Nutrition Environment* includes indicators from P/PM 150 regarding the sale of foods but fails to address eating environments or feeding practices (LDSB, 2018). Modeling from educators is included but only refers to adults eating foods with high nutritional content, rather than relational approaches to feeding practices (LDSB, 2018). In comparison, Toronto Catholic District School Board's (TCDSB) policy *Cafeteria Services and Food and Beverages Sold in Schools* outlines indicators from P/PM 150 and references collaborating with community partners and parents as a necessary component to a healthy eating environment (TCDSB, 2025). However, there are no specific details of what this collaboration entails (TCDSB, 2025). While policy ambiguity can in theory protect space for locally responsive collaboration, without explicit guidance and family partnership, this space is more likely to be filled by dominant social norms about food and feeding, reproducing rather than disrupting existing power imbalances.

P/PM 150 addresses the institutional level by mandating nutritional standards for food sold in schools but says nothing about how adults interact with children during mealtimes. P/PM 150 acknowledges the community level by stating, “[s]chool boards and schools are encouraged to continue to work with students, parents, school staff, community members, public health professionals, and food service providers to ensure that appropriate strategies are in place” for successful implementation and monitoring (OME, 2010, para. 6). However, there is little clarity as to what that might look like in practice at a local level. As a result, local policies lack clear monitoring strategies and guidance on the collaborative reflection necessary to develop and maintain responsive mealtimes.

Monitoring Food Policy Implementation

Principals by nature of their job description are commonly named as those responsible for monitoring and evaluating the food environment. However, Chaleunsouk and Kutsyuruba (2014) interviewed principals and vice-principals and found that other issues often took priority for these administrators, with some participants indicating that it was unreasonable to expect monitoring of all food and beverage items sold. Minimal time for dissemination and training was

also identified as a key challenge as available resources were not referenced prior to implementation. Many participants indicated that a gradual implementation process would have been helpful not only for school staff but also to increase parent education and engagement. Orava et al. (2017) evaluated 25 elementary (n=8) and secondary (n=17) schools and found similar results. Healthy eating did not take priority, and many of the resources made available were not utilized consistently (Orava et al., 2017). Dissemination of this policy was likely unclear because none of the participants used or were aware of the online modules and resources provided by the Ministry (Chaleunsouk & Kutsyuruba, 2014). Without a detailed dissemination strategy or mandated training on how to implement nutrition policy in ways that respect children's dignity and family circumstances, even clear nutritional guidelines can cause unintended harm.

This lack of prioritization is not surprising. Viewing care work as a key component for mealtimes is necessary for children to develop a positive relationship with food, health, and their bodies (Murray, 2021). Without this explicit guidance on the processes of food care (such as how to talk about food with children, create inclusive mealtime environments, and avoid stigma) well-intentioned policies will remain a lesser priority.

Beyond monitoring challenges, the vague language in local board policies that support P/PM 150 created interpretive problems at the institutional level that directly impacted the individual experiences of children. The policy's “80/20 rule” allowed exceptions for school wide special occasions to include food and beverage items of less nutritional value (OME, 2010) but was often interpreted differently by principals (Chaleunsouk & Kutsyuruba, 2014).

Another item left open to interpretation falls under the heading “Practices for Consideration” (OME, 2010). Framing the avoidance of food rewards as a consideration rather than a requirement leaves room for the practice to continue. This pattern was confirmed by Orava et al. (2017), who found that some teachers indicated the use of food as rewards. Rewarding children with food (typically for behavioural compliance) undermines children's self-regulation and is often associated with poorer dietary outcomes, including obesity (Vaughn et al., 2016). Similarly, P/PM 150 offers no guidance on classroom celebrations, how staff should respond to packed lunches of varying

nutritional quality, or how to discuss food with children without moralizing, shaming, or increasing obsession with foods of lower nutritional value.

Limited supervision was also brought up as a concern by parents at a board-level Education Policy and Operations Committee meeting. Parents became aware that school staff were playing videos or shows for children to watch during lunch in place of adequate supervision, raising concerns that this practice distracts children from recognizing their hunger and fullness cues and removes opportunities for social connection (Burra, 2024). The Director called for a review of best practices for lunch supervision to address these concerns (Burra, 2024), but no follow-up was found. Additionally, Seko et al. (2025) found that immigrant parents in Ontario expressed concerns that limited supervision during lunch times subjects their children to food shaming by their peers. This often led to children requesting packed lunches that incorporate more Western food items (Seko et al., 2025). This example clearly highlights how a systemic-level policy such as inadequate funding for staffing interacts with a child's choices on an individual level. Calls for increased staffing and reduced class sizes from frontline educators reflect the same pattern of systemic underfunding that leaves mealtime supervision inadequate and contributes to rising violence in schools (ETFO, 2025). In combination with the lack of monitoring, the mealtime environments and interactions that children experience appear dependent on the interpretations and practices of individual staff members and the number of available staff. This variability means some children may encounter respectful, supportive adults and peers while others face pressure, restriction, or judgement. Policy omissions in the areas of supervision and other uses of food leave critical interpersonal food care practices unaddressed.

Ontario's Student Nutrition Programs

Ontario's P/PM 150 focuses primarily on foods that are for sale, however locally developed policies also include references to foods that are available to children as part of Student Nutrition Programs (SNP) intended to alleviate hunger for students experiencing food insecurity (Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services (MCCSS), 2020). Currently, school boards work with community partners to develop SNP that provide free nutritious foods for all students (MCCSS, 2020).

Since food in this program is not for sale, the nutritional standards outlined in P/PM 150 do not apply. Instead, nutritional quality is to be followed as outlined in the *Student Nutrition Program Guidelines* (MCCSS, 2020). SNP can offer combinations of snacks, breakfast, and lunches. Funding sources for these organizations vary, comprised of contributions from MCCSS, SNP grants, donations from fundraising events or individual community members, and, in some cases, municipalities (Carducci et al., 2025; Coalition for Healthy School Food, n.d.; Rutez & McKenna, 2021). Funding is mainly used to procure food items since many individuals who operate these programs are volunteers (Orava et al., 2017; Rutez & McKenna, 2021).

This funding model presents challenges across multiple levels. Schools in low-income areas face the greatest need for nutrition support while having the fewest resources to fundraise, attract volunteers, and prepare food, essentially compounding existing inequity and limiting the nutritional quality of food available to students who need it most (Everitt et al., 2022). This model positions school food as a charitable intervention rather than as a right or public good, contributing to social stigma. Additionally, without paid, trained staff, SNP creates variability in the nutritional quality and feeding practices children experience.

Notably, the SNP guidelines do contain some guidance related to feeding practices. For example, the guidelines state "a pleasant eating environment is encouraged, where children are supported to respond to their internal cues for hunger and fullness" (MCCSS, 2020, p. 4). This language aligns with responsive feeding principles in Satter's DoR. However, this language is not reflected in Ontario's P/PM 150, nor has it been found in local board policies. Even where this language does exist, the lack of consistent monitoring strategies leaves room for de facto policies where school staff monitor the consumption of packed lunch content before children can access SNP or generally use coercive feeding practices. The presence of responsive feeding language in the SNP guidelines demonstrates awareness that how food is offered matters, not just what food is provided. This awareness is disconnected from the broader school food policy landscape and not currently included in monitoring or evaluation procedures provincially or locally.

Across Ontario's school food policies, the limitations of a nutrition-focused approach emerge. Almost fifteen years after the implementation of Ontario's P/PM 150,

Canadian obesity rates, which can increase children's risk of physical and emotional health problems, have remained relatively unchanged (GoC, 2023). Although factors that influence childhood rates of obesity are not limited to school policy outcomes, considering unintended consequences of policy decisions can help identify alternatives. For example, the intended outcome of influencing student selection by restricting the sale of school foods to those that are most nutritious is to reduce obesity. Unfortunately, this does not stop children from choosing to eat less nutritious foods outside of school. Chaleunsouk & Kutsyuruba, 2014 found that "students are voting with their feet" by walking to nearby food establishments when healthy school options were unappealing (p. 23). Similarly, Micha et al. (2018) found that while policies setting nutritional standards for school meals reduced caloric intake at school, these policies did not significantly reduce children's total daily caloric intake, suggesting children compensate outside of school. This is consistent with evidence that restriction and control can have the opposite effect, often leading to binge eating or increasing obsession with less nutritious foods (Birch & Fisher, 2000; Public Health Ontario, 2024).

Ontario's experience reflects a broader national pattern. Carducci et al. (2025) found that among evaluated Canadian school food interventions, results related to dietary intake and measures of children's physical growth and weight status were mixed with many showing no significant long-term effect, while Everitt et al. (2022) found that health equity outcomes, social benefits, and cultural knowledge and practices have rarely been evaluated. What these findings make clear is that nutritional standards alone are insufficient, and that monitoring and evaluating school food programs is complex in part because how children experience food at school matters as much as what food is provided. This demonstrates the need to reconceptualize school food as relational care work, and to develop monitoring frameworks that reflect the multi-level contexts through which children's food care needs are met.

Preliminary Review of Canada's National School Food Policy

The National School Food Policy envisions that all children in Canada will "have access to nutritious food at school, in an inclusive, non-stigmatizing environment that fosters healthy practices, while strengthening connections with local food systems, the environment and culture" (GoC,

2024, p. 14). Still, the level of funding allocated to these programs will not sufficiently support this vision. Blais et al. (2025) found that the initial bilateral agreements fall short on what would be considered enough to cover the cost of a nutritious meal. For example, the combined federal and provincial funding would cover \$0.51 per student per day. According to Blais et al. (2025), this might amount to "half of a medium-sized apple" (p. 2). Canada's current level of funding cannot support the institutional infrastructure (such as adequately trained and compensated staff) required for comprehensive food care. The inadequate funding ensures that programs will continue to rely on volunteers and charitable donations, replicating the model that has created inconsistency and inequity at the provincial level.

Additionally, the third objective in the policy aims to support children's development of healthy food-related behaviours and attitudes including enjoying meals and snacks with others, being open to trying new foods, and taking time to eat (GoC, 2024). These indicators acknowledge the relational aspects of eating, with little guidance provided about mechanisms for how adults should support them. The school food care framework offers a structure for examining what that coordination would require across interpersonal, institutional, community, and systemic levels.

Discussion

The previous chronological examination of Ontario's school food policy landscape reveals challenges to fostering responsive feeding environments. Policies at provincial and now federal levels address nutrition and access but neglect relationships that are foundational for comprehensive food care and related positive health outcomes. The school food care framework shifts the understanding of children's food needs from a technical nutrition focus to a relational care model. Fundamental to this reframing is ensuring school staff understand responsive feeding practices and the factors that influence them through access to professional development opportunities. Current evidence in childcare settings highlights the significance of this. For example, Levin et al. (2024) identified a variety of factors that influence educator feeding practices within childcare settings, interviewing 45 early childhood educators and finding they often receive training focused on nutrition rather than responsive feeding strategies. Levin et al. also identified

misconceptions among educators about what constitutes pressure to eat. When educators lack training or clear policy guidance, they tend to rely on personal beliefs (Dev et al., 2017; Love et al., 2020) and childhood experiences (Zhang et al., 2023). In doing so, they inadvertently impose dominant standards of what constitutes a “healthy lunch” or “appropriate food” on children and families whose lived experiences may differ significantly. Although all children and families can experience negative outcomes, marginalized groups face greater risk. Immigrant children often experience lunch-shaming from peers when parents pack cultural foods (Seko et al., 2025), and the physical, mental, and emotional labour of meeting lunch expectations without fear of judgement from teachers or peers compounds existing pressures on families already navigating the cost of food (O'Rourke et al., 2020; Niimi-Burch & Black, 2024). Failure to provide explicit guidance within policies enables existing power imbalances to operate within daily mealtime interactions, transforming what should be caring relationships into mechanisms that reproduce inequity.

Given that schools have larger child-to-adult ratios and less relational focus than childcare settings, these patterns likely represent a conservative estimate in schools. Responsive feeding practices in school settings remain largely unexamined empirically, pointing to the need for research in this context.

Moving Forward with the School Food Care Framework

The school food care framework proposed in this paper provides a conceptual foundation for understanding what comprehensive food care in schools requires (Table 1). Centring care in school food policy requires resisting mechanisms organized around productivity and efficiency (Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1993; Held, 2006). These recommendations are therefore grounded in the understanding that educators, families, and school communities are not subjects of policy surveillance, but capable professionals and partners whose relational expertise needs to be supported, not simply directed.

First, exploratory research is needed to document current mealtime practices and role perceptions among parents and school personnel across diverse school contexts. Such inquiry should be designed collaboratively, centring the voices of educators, families, and children, including those from racialized,

immigrant, and food-insecure communities whose experiences are most directly shaped by existing policy gaps. Findings from this research can identify tensions that undermine mealtime responsiveness while surfacing the knowledge and relational capacities already present in school communities.

Second, it is recommended that Ontario school boards revise procedures governing school nutrition environments to reflect evidence-based responsive feeding principles. Drawing on public health evidence (MCCSS, 2020; Public Health Ontario, 2024) and the College of Early Childhood Educators' (2025) *Professional Advisory on Practices that Harm Children*, board policies should establish clear expectations that ensure: (a) adults actively support children in recognizing and responding to their own hunger and fullness cues; (b) families' food choices are respected without comment on content or quantity; (c) children are supported to eat from offered foods in the order of their own choosing; and (d) food is never used as a reward or withheld as punishment. These expectations should be framed as professional standards that protect children's dignity and autonomy, consistent with HDLH's understanding of children as competent and capable learners (OME, 2014).

The mechanism for implementing these standards matters as much as the standards themselves. Compliance reviewed through top-down monitoring sits at odds with both the ethics of care and HDLH's pedagogical model, which positions critical reflection and collaborative inquiry, not surveillance, as foundational to transformative practice. This requires educators to observe children closely, sit with difficult questions about their own assumptions, and revise their approaches accordingly (OME, 2014). School personnel involved in SNP require dedicated time to reflect on mealtime practices, and develop consistent, responsive approaches across the school day. For RECEs, daily planning time is equally essential — not only for responsive feeding environments but also for effectively implementing play-based programming alongside their teaching partner.

Families must be central to this process, viewed as competent and capable partners whose cultural knowledge and values must be honoured (OME, 2014). Family engagement should be genuinely participatory where possible, creating space for families and educators to learn alongside one another

as co-inquirers and decision-makers in shaping mealtime culture, rather than positioning families as passive recipients of nutrition information or parent education programming. Genuine partnership requires recognizing the range of barriers that shape families' food choices, including cost, culture, and meeting school lunch expectations, while trusting that families are doing the best they can within those constraints.

Third, the provincial government should increase funding for staffing in school food programs. Not only could this staffing ensure school food programs have the personnel needed to make nutritious foods available, each elementary classroom could have at least one staff member present at all times to supervise and support peer interactions, effectively reducing stigma around diverse foods (Seko et al., 2025), reduce instances of violence (Bas, 2018; ETFO, 2025), and address lunch-time technology use (Burra, 2024) that has been observed. Without adequate staffing, the vision of the educator as a reflective, responsive professional embedded in both ethics of care and HDLH cannot exist.

Finally, offering nutritious food in an environment that is stigma-free, inclusive, and fosters healthy practices requires a relational focus that recognizes care and education as inseparable. Countries with universal school food programs like Japan, Finland, and France demonstrate this approach through family-style meals, educators eating with children, and community involvement in planning and implementation (Hoyer et al., 2025). These examples illustrate what is possible when school food is integrated into the curriculum.

Realizing this vision means Canada invests in a school food program as a public good and a site of pedagogical care work, not a charitable supplement to what families are presumed to be unable to manage on their own. Allocating resources to ensure this investment is guided by comprehensive food care principles rather than nutrition standards alone represents a critical step toward creating school food programs where all children experience responsive relationships with food, develop eating competence, and build foundations for lifelong health and well-being.

Conclusion

This paper proposed a school food care framework grounded in ethics of care to analyze Ontario's school food policy landscape, revealing that policies consistently privilege nutrition standards over interpersonal feeding relationships, creating conditions that risk reproducing the inequities Canada's National School Food Policy aims to address. The recommendations establish a research agenda focused on documenting current feeding practices and how educators and families interpret shared mealtime responsibilities. Making this possible requires that Canada's historic investment in a school food program be guided not only by nutrition science but also by a commitment to the responsive relationships that nourish children's sense of belonging and their relationship with food. The proposed school food care framework offers a starting point for that reorientation, one that must be examined, refined, and co-developed with the school communities, families, and children it is designed to serve.

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