



What We Heard Report

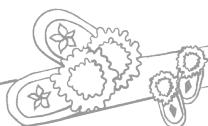
Towards a Certification Process, Wage Grid and New Funding Mechanism for Early Learning and Child Care

August 2023

Government of
Northwest Territories

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Executive Summary

The Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) Department of Education, Culture and Employment (ECE) is working with the Government of Canada to meet the targets identified within the *2021-2025 Canada – Northwest Territories (NWT) Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Extension Agreement* (Extension Agreement), [*2021-2026 Canada – NWT Canada-Wide ELCC Agreement*](#) (Canada-Wide ELCC Agreement) and merged *Action Plan* (2023-2026). This work is aligned with the vision of the NWT as outlined in the [*2030 Early Learning and Child Care \(ELCC\) Strategy*](#).

Development of a certification process, wage grid for early childhood educators working in licensed centre-based programs, and a new funding mechanism for licensed ELCC programs are key outcomes towards improving the quality, affordability, accessibility, and inclusivity of ELCC in the NWT.

These key outcomes will focus on:

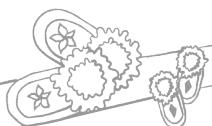
- Building from the current credentialing requirements to identify education, experience, and the professional role of early childhood educators.
- Outlining the minimum salaries for early childhood educators working in licensed centre-based programs.
- Exploring alternate ways to provide operational funding to offset the cost of licensed ELCC programs.

From May to June 2023, ECE engaged with community-based partners, including the NWT Early Childhood Association (NWTECA) to share information on the certification process, wage grid and the new funding mechanism. The purpose of this engagement was to provide opportunities to discuss the critical elements to be considered in designing the approach of all three key outcomes.

This What We Heard report provides a summary of findings from the engagement period. Overall, participants emphasized the importance of ensuring that the development, implementation, and transition of key outcomes would not create additional barriers for early childhood educators while supporting long-term sustainability for licensed programs.

The feedback from participants suggested that the certification process should be flexible and consider post-secondary education equivalencies, as access to post-secondary education was identified be a challenge for many educators. Additionally, respondents recommended a wage grid that is comparable to other positions within the ELCC field, and one that will attract and retain educators. Lastly, participants acknowledge the shift from an attendance-based approach to the Early Childhood Program operating subsidy and highlighted the need for additional funding to support long-term sustainability.

ECE values the input of those who participated in the discussions. The feedback gathered will be used to design the approach of the certification process, wage grid, and the new funding mechanism.



Introduction

The GNWT identifies the commitment to fostering a qualified early childhood workforce and supporting the creation and sustainability of licensed ELCC programs as outlined in the [2030 ELCC Strategy](#).

The *2030 ELCC Strategy* was developed through engagement with community-based partners and the [ELCC Funding Programs Review](#) (2021). These sources of information, as well as feedback from recent engagements, have identified:

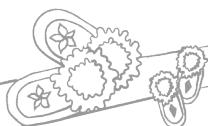
- Challenges of retention and recruitment in licensed centre-based programs.
- The wage disparity between early childhood educators in licensed centre-based programs and those working in other comparative roles.
- That the attendance-based model of funding provided through [Early Childhood Program \(ECP\) operating subsidy](#) does not benefit all programs.
- A need for reduced administrative burdens when designing and implementing funding agreements.

Recruitment and retention, as well as operational sustainability were expressed as challenges during recent engagements with community-based partners, including Indigenous Governments and licensed program operators and early childhood educators, and the NWTECA.

A certification process, wage grid for early childhood educators working in licensed programs, and a new funding mechanism are necessary steps towards improving the quality, affordability, accessibility, and inclusivity of ELCC programming in the NWT, as well as key outcomes associated with creating a Canada-wide system of ELCC.

In October 2022, ECE implemented the [Retention Incentive](#) funding as an initial step to address those challenges in advance of a wage grid by 2024-2025. This two-year transitional funding replaced the Early Childhood Staff Grant and combined with the new federal funding as a wage supplement for early childhood educators.

Following engagement on amendments to legislation and regulations, changes to the [Child Day Care Act](#), [ELCC Standards Regulations](#) and [ELCC Funding Regulations](#) came into effect May 1, 2023. These changes were necessary to allow for implementation of a wage grid and certification process in 2024-2025. Additional regulatory changes will be implemented in 2024-2025 to further support these initiatives, along with the new funding mechanism being developed in response to the ELCC Funding Programs Review (2021).



Methodology

The engagement sessions to discuss the development of a certification process and wage grid for early childhood educators working in licensed programs were held separately from the engagement to discuss the development of a new funding mechanism for ELCC programs in the NWT.

Licensed centre-based programs were sent information on the engagement sessions specific to the certification process and wage grid ahead of the sessions, and five sessions were held between May 27 and May 31, 2023. Operators were invited to attend one of three sessions and educators were invited to attend one of two sessions.

Licensed ELCC programs were sent information on the engagement for a new funding mechanism. Five sessions were held between June 13, and June 17, 2023. Operators of centre-based programs were invited to attend one of three sessions and operators of home-based programs were invited to attend one of two sessions.

Unfortunately, prior to the beginning of the engagement period, an Evacuation Order for Kátł'odeeche First Nation and Hay River was issued due to a wildfire near the communities. To ensure community-based partners impacted by this evacuation had the opportunity to attend and discuss the certification process and wage grid, additional sessions were held for the evacuees once they were able to safely return home. Four additional sessions were held between June 19 and 22, 2023, two for operators of centre-based programs and two for educators.

All sessions were one-hour virtual engagements facilitated by an ECE staff member with French interpretation available. A notetaker was in attendance to accurately capture all discussions. Each session consisted of a PowerPoint presentation to share information on how the certification process, wage grid, and new funding mechanism will support the ELCC system within the territories followed by a discussion on the critical elements that participants felt were needed to develop each key outcome. The critical elements shared were based on feedback gathered from previous engagements and allowed for participants to validate, discuss, ask questions, and include additional factors that could be considered to inform the work. Table 1 lays out the critical elements for each key outcome.

Table 1: Critical Elements

Key Outcome	From	To
Certification Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No certification requirements • Credentialing documents (i.e., Criminal Record Check with Vulnerable Sector Search, immunizations, primary staff education requirements) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certification requirements that consider education experience, and knowledge of local Indigenous culture, beliefs, language, and traditions • Credentialing documents (i.e., Criminal Record Check with Vulnerable Sector Search, immunizations, primary staff education requirements) are still required to work in a licensed program
Wage Grid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance-based Early Childhood Program (ECP) subsidy • Retention Incentive paid direct to program operators to enhance wages for educators working directly with children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A new funding mechanism that shifts away from attendance-based model for Early Childhood Program (ECP) operating subsidy • Funding to support implementation of a wage grid for early childhood educators working in licensed centre-based programs who directly with children • Consideration of certification process (i.e., education, experience)
New Funding Mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance-based Early Childhood Program (ECP) subsidy • Retention Incentive paid direct to program operators to enhance wages for educators working directly with children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift away from attendance-based to more predictable funding with less variability • Fewer funding streams • Less administratively complex • Offsets cost but does not fully fund • Improved sustainability

Any additional feedback was encouraged to be sent to earlylearning@gov.nt.ca.

Engagement sessions with the NWTECA were held to seek their feedback toward development of a certification process, wage grid, and the new funding mechanism.

In total, fourteen virtual engagements were held, and one written response was received. Community-based partners from all regions were represented to varying degree. A summary of the findings from the engagement period is provided below and organized according to the three key outcomes: a certification process, wage grid, and new funding mechanism. General responses that were not specific to the key outcomes are also included. All feedback will be considered as ECE moves forward with this work.

Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

Table 2: Limitations, Impacts, and Mitigations for Limitations

Limitation	Impact	Mitigation Strategy
Relatively small size of the program's target group posed threats to confidentiality of early childhood professionals and operators interviewed.	<p>The limitation does not directly impact validity or reliability of the findings.</p>	<p>In the process of transcription and reporting, summary of discussions was edited to exclude identifiers in the document.</p>
Dependence on voluntary participation of community-based ELCC partners.	<p>Low participation rates in the engagement may adversely affect the reliability and representativeness of the data. Unrepresentative and unreliable data cannot be used to confidently make decisions on this basis.</p>	<p>To create favourable conditions for participation, ECE sent invitation to targeted audiences and hosted multiple engagement opportunities during various times of day, and days of the week for all sessions.</p>
Engagement and report conducted internally by ECE.	<p>Engagements coordinated and facilitated by those (ECE) seeking feedback may receive more positive feedback than an external facilitator, as respondents feel less anonymous.</p>	<p>The findings as presented in this report were provided to all participants, wherever possible, for review for accuracy and additional input. This provided participants the opportunity to reconsider or add to their feedback with more anonymity.</p>

What We Heard

Certification Process

From	To
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• No certification requirements• Credentialing documents (i.e., Criminal Record Check with Vulnerable Sector Search, immunizations, primary staff education requirements)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Certification requirements that consider education, experience, and knowledge of local Indigenous culture, beliefs, language, and traditions• Credentialing documents (i.e., Criminal Record Check with Vulnerable Sector Search, immunizations, primary staff education requirements) are still required to work in a licensed program

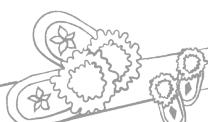
What does it mean?

A certification process will build on the current credentialing requirements and support early childhood educators working in licensed ELCC programs. These changes would identify education and experience to support the establishment of professional standards and criteria for early childhood educators and would also assist establishing a wage grid for early childhood educators in licensed centre-based programs.

Why is it important?

A certification process will support early childhood educators, program operators and early childhood staff in their professional growth and improve the quality of licensed programs in the NWT.

Respondents acknowledged post-secondary education qualifications would be a factor in developing a certification process but also reiterated the ongoing challenge of attracting and maintaining individuals who meet these requirements. Time and geographic location were identified as main barriers to accessing post-secondary education. Educators often work other jobs, as well as have family responsibilities, leaving little time available. Participants noted that those living in smaller communities face additional challenges as post-secondary education may not be easily accessible and may result in needing to leave their home community to obtain formal education. Other barriers such as, limited access to internet, high financial cost, and lack of motivation to attend post-secondary were also mentioned.



Respondents who highlighted challenges regarding post-secondary education requirements also indicated a preference for the implementation and evaluation of the certification process to be flexible. This was especially requested for individuals currently working in the ELCC system. It was suggested to consider post-secondary education equivalencies to help avoid creating obstacles for educators and ease the transition.

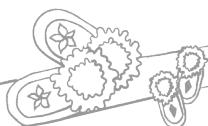
Professional development workshops were discussed as an additional method to post-secondary education, as annual learning is apart of the licensing requirements. Many respondents commented they have utilized the NWT Early Childhood Essentials online training course and recommended the free course as an appropriate workshop for educators working with young children, as well as operators of family day homes. However, it was noted that the training seemed to lack content related to programming for school-aged children attending out-of-school programs.

Many of the post-secondary barriers previously mentioned were expressed as also applying to access to professional learning opportunities. Some program operators stated they provided time for their staff to complete assignments, while others expressed hesitancy to ask staff to complete the training. Many felt compensation for an individual's time to complete the workshop would be reasonable.

Discussions of online professional workshops led into in-person training and on-site mentoring. Many participants expressed that in-person training, such as ECE's in-person ELCC Symposium, was better, and on-site mentoring was the most effective. Providing in-person or on-site training that results in educators getting certified was suggested to be a method of post-secondary education equivalency, as it would support individuals who expressed concern with the perceived need to leave their communities.

While post-secondary and professional learning were mentioned to be valued aspects to providing quality ELCC, it was not the only element identified as critical to the certification process. Respondents expressed concern for staff that do not have formal education and may not be interested in obtaining any post-secondary education but have worked in the program for many years. Consideration for individuals who fall into this category was recommended as they have valuable work and community experience, knowledge learned from the land and culture, and can promote children's growth and learning. It was noted this process could be done with the assistance from program operators as they can speak to the qualification of the educators in their program.

Incorporating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into the certification process was highlighted as important by respondents as the integration of Indigenous culture and language is critical in ELCC programs. Some programs commented on the ways they include Indigenous cultures and languages in their program, such as hiring a language coordinator, working with knowledge keepers, or inviting Elders into the program. The department of ECE's Mentor-Apprentice Program was suggested as something to consider in the certification process.



Participants commented on the certification process for family day homes, specifically inquiring as to whether operators of family day homes will be expected to go through the certification process and, if so, that incentives should be considered. They noted there is a unique distinction within home-based programs, as some operators may establish a licensed program for the purpose of child care in the early years for their own children, while others are long-standing programs.

Wage Grid

From	To
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attendance-based Early Childhood Program (ECP) subsidy• Retention Incentive paid direct to program operators to enhance wages for educators working directly with children	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A new funding mechanism that shifts away from attendance-based model for Early Childhood Program (ECP) operating subsidy• Funding to support implementation of a wage grid for early childhood educators working in licensed centre-based programs who directly with children• Consideration of certification process (i.e., education, experience)

What does it mean?

This means establishing a wage grid to outline the minimum salaries for early childhood educators working in licensed centre-based programs. While the certification process and wage grid could be developed and implemented independent of one another, they are interrelated and will be completed by 2024-2025 as defined within the Canada-wide ELCC Agreement.

Why is it important?

This change is one of the necessary steps towards addressing the multifaceted challenges of recruitment and retention of early childhood educators in the ELCC workforce. The initial wage grid will offer a starting point toward building a system of ELCC in the NWT.

Many respondents recommended that the salaries for early childhood educators should be communicated to community-based partners in advance of implementation. Although the structure and components of the wage grid are still being determined, many respondents provided suggestions for the wage grid criteria that they hoped to see incorporated.

As the certification process and wage grid are interrelated, often the discussion of one would lead to the other. During discussion of the multifaceted challenges with retention and recruitment of educators who meet post-secondary requirements, respondents mentioned that low wages for educators is a significant factor that influences them to work additional jobs. Many respondents emphasized that higher wages would enable educators to access post-secondary education and professional learning, as additional jobs can limit educators' ability to attend staff meetings and training.

Educators who obtain a post-secondary certificate, diploma, or degree in child development often leave their position to move into other comparable roles within the early childhood development field, as wages in licensed programs cannot compete. Respondents expressed the need for the wage grid to bridge the disparities between the salaries for educators working in licensed centre-based programs and those working in other child development roles. Suggestions included development of a wage grid for early childhood educators that provides wages comparable to that of teachers working in schools, as well as consideration for a funding program to support staff who want to pursue education with a requirement for them to stay employed at the program for a minimum amount of time.

Participants expressed the importance of considering a living wage for the wage grid, given the high cost of living in the north. In addition to this, they recommended that the location be considered as the concept of a living wage varies between communities in the territories. Participants expressed that the minimum wages within the wage grid should be high enough to retain educators. Some program operators noted the current wage that educators receive is comparable to other less demanding employment opportunities within the community and that these opportunities often lack the requirement for post-secondary education. In some instances, these other employment opportunities include equivalent or higher pay along with benefits.

Respondents also discussed the importance of recognizing experience within the wage grid. Although there were questions about what kind of experience should be considered, most respondents agreed that it was essential to recognize staff based on the length of time they had worked within the same program.

Some participants expressed concerns about educators working in out-of-school programs and how these individuals would fit into the wage grid. They noted that recruitment and retention for these programs is significantly challenging, given the limited number of hours they work per day.

Additionally, participants who work in unionized environments where additional wages are outside of the scope of their collective agreements questioned how the wage grid and the funding associated would be utilized within these programs.

New Funding Mechanism

From	To
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attendance-based Early Childhood Program (ECP) operating subsidy• Retention Incentive paid direct to program operators to enhance wages for educators working directly with children	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Shift away from attendance-based to more predictable funding with less variability• Fewer funding streams• Less administratively complex• Offsets cost but does not fully fund• Improved sustainability

What does it mean?

The new funding mechanism for licensed ELCC programs will move away from the attendance-based model to another approach that will continue to offset expenses, including funding to support wage increases for early childhood educator working in centre-based programs. This new funding model is intended to replace the multiple smaller funding programs and reduce administrative requirements.

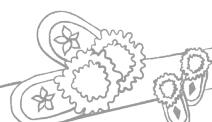
Why is it important?

The development of a new funding mechanism is part of an important step towards building a sustainable ELCC system in the NWT. This funding model will simplify funding processes and streamline accountability.

Participants welcomed the shift towards a funding model that is not attendance-based. Feedback received from participants showed that many respondents were curious about the reporting requirements for the new funding mechanism. Respondents suggested incorporating the [Child Care Fee Reduction \(CCFR\) Subsidy](#) reporting with the new funding mechanism would help alleviate administrative burden. Additionally, it was suggested that having one annual report with all the required information would be more efficient and effective.

Regarding the approach for the new funding mechanism, participants suggested providing funding based on registered spaces. Respondents recommended increasing funding for out-of-school spaces, as some participants indicated that programming for this age range cost more than what the current rate of ECP operating subsidy provides. Similar comments were mentioned in relation to increasing funding for children with exceptionalities or specialized needs.

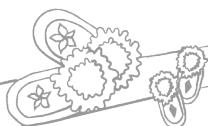
Responses on the timing of funding varied among participants. Many participants had no issue with continuation of quarterly payments, while others suggested that payments be received at the beginning of each month. Anything beyond quarterly payments was expressed as problematic.



Participants indicated that the new funding mechanism should continue to consider location as an important factor, as the cost of operating varies by community. Respondents suggested that this would ensure that funding is allocated fairly and effectively.

Many participants noted that the requirement of the CCFR Subsidy to limit child care fees had limited programs from receiving additional outcome. Respondents expressed that the new funding mechanism must ensure programs receive sufficient funding to support the long-term sustainability of programs. Some participants question how the funding mechanism would provide additional fund to offset operational cost, if the retention incentive funding and smaller amounts funding programs were going to be combined.

Participants expressed concern that the new funding mechanism would result in a relocation of existing fund, resulting in little to no change in the amount of funding received. This was especially concerning for family day home operators who identified that they do not have access to some of the funding streams available for licensed programs. These respondents emphasized their preference for Health and Safety funding beyond the licensing stage to access funds for maintenance for their program when needed.



General Findings

Some responses did not directly relate to the certification process, wage grid, or the new funding mechanism. It was suggested during the certification process and wage grid to also provide health benefits and retirement planning for early childhood educators. Some respondents discussed the value of establishing an ELCC curriculum framework, as it would support quality in programming and professionalism for educators. Discussions around the new funding mechanism included comments on the need to provide more funding for infrastructure as communities and families need more access to child care spaces.

In addition to the feedback gathered above, most participants expressed a positive reception to the engagement as it focused on strategies to address ongoing challenges community-based partners have previously identified. Some participants acknowledged ECE's efforts to collaborate with licensed programs.

Next Steps

The feedback and information in this What We Heard report will help inform the development of a certification process, wage grid for early childhood educators working in licensed centre-based programs, and a new funding mechanism for licensed ELCC programs in the NWT.

ECE will share the approaches to a certification process, wage grid and new funding mechanism with Indigenous Governments, licensed program operators and educators in December 2023.

ECE will work to develop future regulations to support implementation of a wage grid, certification process and new funding mechanism beginning in 2024-2025. These initiatives will contribute to ongoing transformation of the ELCC system in the NWT.

