

Excellence in Early Childhood Education

Nova Scotia's Workforce Strategy for Early Childhood Educators

Introduction

Nova Scotia is preparing for a Canada-wide early learning and child care system.

There is sound research that shows a direct link between a child's success and time spent with highly educated and trained early childhood educators (ECEs).

Nova Scotia's workforce development strategy "Excellence in Early Childhood Education" will ensure a strong, qualified, and stable workforce in early learning and child care now and in the future. This will ensure our children are learning and growing with the support of trained professionals with education and expertise in early childhood education, resulting in positive outcomes for young children now and in the years to come.

Excellence in Early Childhood Education builds on our success to date in providing more education opportunities and increasing diversity in the early childhood education workforce since 2017. The eleven actions outlined in the strategy will keep our currently working ECEs engaged and committed to the field while attracting new people to the exciting opportunities for ECEs in the province. The strategy is based on best practice and research from Canada and around the world, and feedback from ECEs practicing across Nova Scotia.

In November 2019, at the direction of the Minister, the Early Childhood Educators Working Group (ECEWG) was formed. The purpose of the ECEWG was to give ECEs an opportunity to directly engage in discussions that are meaningful and relevant to their work in regulated childcare. The ECEWG identified several key areas impacting ECEs, especially those working in regulated childcare: wages and benefits, workforce qualifications and training, and the existing classification system. The Excellence in Early Childhood Education strategy aims to address these key issues.

Excellence in Early Childhood Education

Nova Scotia's Excellence in Early Childhood Education workforce strategy is grounded in the belief that educated and qualified ECEs are the key to success of high-quality early learning and child care programs. The strategy sets out to ensure that ECEs are valued for the role they play in supporting and educating young children, and that ECEs are professionally recognized, highly skilled, and committed to lifelong learning.

Excellence in Early Childhood Education recognizes the staff currently employed in the early learning and child care sector in Nova Scotia who have been unable to access ECE education opportunities due to a lack of financial resources. The strategy aims to provide those without a diploma an opportunity to advance their education, which will result in improved practice as well as higher wages. In addition to supporting those currently in the sector, the strategy targets under-represented groups in Nova Scotia by ensuring there are opportunities for those who identify as Mi'kmaq/Indigenous, Black/African Nova Scotian, Acadian/francophone, 2SLGBTQ+, persons with disabilities, and newcomers. Nova Scotia recognizes the importance of diversity in early learning and child care, and the power that comes from children and their families seeing themselves and their communities reflected in their ECEs.

Three pillars guide the Excellence in Early Childhood Education workforce strategy:

- Professional Recognition of Early Childhood Educators,
- Pathways to Education, and
- Lifelong Learning in Early Childhood Education

In 2021–22, Nova Scotia will receive one-time early learning and child care workforce development funding totalling \$10.8 million from the Government of Canada. This historic investment will allow Nova Scotia to advance initiatives to help us reach our workforce vision:

Early childhood educators in Nova Scotia will be the most qualified and provide the highest quality early learning and child care in Canada.

Background

While workforce funding from the Government of Canada is a one-time investment, Nova Scotia's workforce strategy is a long-term plan for the future of the early childhood education workforce. The initiatives outlined in this document build on the successful work accomplished to date using both provincial and federal funding through the *Early Learning and Child Care Agreement*. Initiatives we are building on include:

- **Continuing Education Fund:** Continuing Education funding has allowed hundreds of individuals working in regulated child care to access funds to support their ongoing education. ECEs working part time can access up to \$1,000 per year and ECEs working full time can access up to \$5,000 per year.
- **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL):** RPL provides individuals with experience, international training, and/or related training in early childhood education the opportunity to demonstrate they have the knowledge and abilities as described in the Level 2 Early Childhood Educator Competency Profile. To date, 41 individuals received their Level 2 classification using the RPL process, with more expected to complete the assessment in spring/summer 2021.
- **Tuition Support Program:** The Tuition Support Program helped reduce the cost of early childhood education training, at one of three approved Private Career Colleges in Nova Scotia, for over 180 students. Full-time students enrolled in an early childhood education program at Jane Norman College, Island Career Academy, or the Nova Scotia College of Early Childhood Education were eligible to receive up to \$2,000 per year, to be applied toward the cost of tuition.
- **Cultural Bursary:** Nova Scotia is committed to increasing cultural representation in the early childhood education workforce. The bursary program Promoting Cultural Representation in Early Childhood Education was created to attract individuals from under-represented communities to participate in early childhood education training and to support employment in the ECE field in Nova Scotia. The bursary provided financial support to Nova Scotians of Mi'kmaq/Indigenous ancestry, Black/African Nova Scotians, Acadians/francophones, and newcomers interested in pursuing a career in early childhood education at one of the approved ECE training institutions in Nova Scotia.
- **Africentric ECE Diploma Program:** The intent of this initiative was to support access to an inclusive and culturally responsive educational experience in the field of early childhood education with an Africentric lens. The Nova Scotia Community College (NSCC) worked with an African Nova Scotian advisory committee to ensure the program was tailored to the needs of Black/African Nova Scotian students and delivered within an African Nova Scotian learning environment. Twenty-six Black/African Nova Scotians received a full bursary for two years including tuition and program costs.

- **Mi'kmaq Work and Learn:** In partnership with Mi'kmaq Kina'matnewey (MK), 13 Mi'kmaq ECEs working in child care in their communities were funded to complete their diploma in ECE through a work and learn pilot with NSCC, allowing them to maintain their employment while studying. The program used a Mi'kmaq curriculum that was developed specifically through this initiative.
- **Level 1 Pilot:** Individuals working in child care and the pre-primary program identified a number of barriers to accessing training, including paying for tuition costs up front and waiting for reimbursement. In response, Nova Scotia worked with the NSCC to design an online training program that allowed those working already to pursue Level 1 training. Since 2019, Nova Scotia has supported over 250 individuals to complete training requirements for their Level 1 classification.

We've accomplished a lot in the last couple of years to provide opportunities for ECEs, but we are not done. We are building on our success and moving forward to support ECEs in Nova Scotia to be the best in Canada. The three pillars of our workforce strategy will continue to guide our work going forward.

The Three Pillars of Nova Scotia's Workforce Strategy

Pillar 1: Professional Recognition of ECEs

Nova Scotia recognizes the importance of a systematic approach to early childhood education. This means restructuring and creating the conditions needed to develop and grow the profession. Professional recognition of ECEs supports quality early learning and child care environments that will nurture and advance children's growth and development province wide.

Action 1: Develop a compensation framework for ECEs working in government-funded licensed child care facilities.
Date: 2022–23

ECEs are the backbone of a high-quality early learning and child care system and they deserve a compensation framework that reflects the important role they play in the growth and development of young children.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development will work with specialists to develop a compensation framework that will reflect ECEs' education, specialty training, and years of work experience.

Action 2: Define the role and competencies of ECEs in Nova Scotia
Date: 2022–23

Nova Scotia will take the first step toward professional recognition by introducing a regulated certification process for ECEs in the province. We will define competencies and scope of practice for ECEs and introduce new certification categories for ECE assistants and advanced practitioners in early childhood education.

Currently, anyone working directly in child care or pre-primary is called an ECE in Nova Scotia. By 2023, only those individuals with recognized diplomas and degrees in early childhood education will be certified as ECEs and have responsibility for the educational leadership in an early childhood classroom.

Staff with current Level 1 classification will transition to an Early Childhood Educator Assistant and will play a support or assistant role. Anyone holding a Level 1 classification and currently working may apply for financial support until 2023 if they are interested in earning their diploma.

By the end of 2023, Nova Scotia will begin to transition from our current classification system to a new ECE certification model. This means that to work in child care or pre-primary in Nova Scotia you will need to be a certified ECE or ECE Assistant and be required to work within the corresponding scope of practice.

Legislative and regulatory changes will be required to move from classification to certification.

This is a big change; ECEs and operators will be kept informed and have lots of opportunities to give advice and ask questions along the way.

Pillar 2: Pathways to Education

The research evidence is clear that the only way to offer high-quality early learning and child care programs is to rely on the expertise of trained and qualified ECEs. In Nova Scotia, we have over 900 individuals working in child care and pre-primary with no formal training in early childhood development. Earning a diploma in early childhood education not only enhances quality, but it also improves significantly the wages and opportunities available to individuals. Pillar 2 of the workforce strategy is focused on ensuring there are enough trained ECEs to meet the needs of a Canada-wide system now and in the future.

It can be daunting to go back to school after being away for many years, but we have seen first-hand, through the Level 1 pilot, ECEs' desire to learn and ability to be successful.

In preparation for the new certification model in 2023, we are providing multiple opportunities for individuals without a diploma or degree to upskill and advance their career.

Nova Scotia will work hard to ensure that those interested in beginning a career in early childhood education and those already in the field without formal education will have the supports they need to be successful in reaching their education and career goals.

Action 3: Career Navigation to support and guide ECEs in their career path

Date: 2021–22

The field of early childhood education in Nova Scotia is constantly changing and evolving. This can make it hard for individuals to determine a career path that is right for them.

For this reason, we are partnering with the Department of Labour and Advanced Education to provide Career Navigation support to ECEs.

Through the services of Nova Scotia Works Employment Services Centres, this career assistance will be provided virtually and will support career decision making for ECEs interested in furthering their studies. This will help ECEs develop a career path, establish learning plans, support them in the application processes, and be available to students while they study.

Career Navigation will be available to all ECEs currently working in child care or pre-primary looking to participate in one of our Pathways to Education opportunities.

Action 4: Free tuition and books for more than 300 people currently working without a diploma

Date: 2021–22, one-year investment

Nova Scotia will fully fund more than 300 staff currently working in child care and pre-primary to participate in accelerated ECE diploma training (upskilling). Of these seats, there will be designated seats for Mi'kmaq/Indigenous peoples, Black/African Nova Scotians, Acadian/francophone Nova Scotians, and newcomers.

Action 5: Bursaries for full time ECE diploma/degree students

Date: 2021–22, one-year investment

Nova Scotia will provide 300 students currently enrolled in full-time ECE diploma/degree programs in Nova Scotia with a one-time bursary of \$3,250 in 2021–22. There will also be funds for up to 25 students enrolled full time at Mount Saint Vincent University in the Child and Youth Study program (Bachelor of Arts) with an emphasis on early childhood education.

Action 6: Bursaries for full-time ECE diploma/degree students from equity seeking groups

Date: 2021–22, one-year investment

To support Nova Scotia's focus on the development of a diverse and inclusive workforce, students in the following six identified groups will be eligible for \$7,500 in assistance: Mi'kmaq/Indigenous, Black/African Nova Scotian, Acadian/francophone, persons with disabilities, 2SLGBTQ+, and newcomer at approved ECE diploma/degree programs in Nova Scotia.

Action 7: Improvements to the Continuing Education Fund

Date: 2021, ongoing investment

Nova Scotia will adjust the existing Continuing Education Fund criteria to make it more accessible for part-time students pursuing diploma and advanced practitioner courses and to ensure it continues to meet the needs of today's students.

Action 8: Support for Cost of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Date: 2021–22

Nova Scotia will continue to eliminate barriers for ECEs who are interested in the RPL process by helping to reduce the cost of the RPL process. Nova Scotia will support up to 60 students to reduce the overall costs of participation in this initiative. This funding will cover part of the application/assessment and exam fees to reduce the overall costs for applicants by over \$700 dollars.

Action 9: High School Transitions to ECE Diplomas

Date: 2025

We know that it is tough to decide what's next after high school. We want to work with school counsellors, high school teachers, and others in public schools to ensure that students know that ECE is a great career option. We will develop a variety of tools and resources to help counsellors, educators, and students explore early childhood education careers and to determine if ECE might be a good fit for a student's future career plan. We will also work with the Nova Scotia Community College to create opportunities for high school students interested in ECE to graduate high school with some NSCC credits (recognition of prior learning) meaning they finish their diploma sooner.

Pillar 3: Lifelong Learning in Early Childhood Education

As we work toward creating the highest quality early childhood education and care environments in the country, we must ensure that in addition to excellent education and compensation, ECEs are supported by access to high quality professional learning. This will allow them to fill in gaps in their knowledge or skills, or update their learning based on emerging best practice.

Action 10: Develop and implement a new approach to professional development

Date: 2021 and ongoing

Professional learning and ongoing development for ECEs is crucial to ensuring ECEs continue to grow and learn throughout their career. In 2021, Nova Scotia will define and develop a model that will support professional development for ECEs in the future.

Nova Scotia's new approach to professional development will centre around three key areas:

- Foundational Professional Development for Early Childhood Educators will focus on mandatory foundational professional development including Early Learning Curriculum Framework, Pyramid Model, Duty to Report protocols, etc.
- Continuous professional learning will be self-directed and determined individually by the ECE and/or their workplace (i.e., child care centre) based on factors such as interest, gaps in knowledge, or as part of a professional development plan.
- Advanced Practitioner Program will support ECEs seeking specializations (see Action 11).

Action 11: Advanced Practitioners in Early Childhood Education

Date: 2022 and ongoing

ECEs want a career path and Nova Scotia wants to ensure that ECEs stay current in their practice. As the science of early childhood education evolves, ECEs' knowledge and practice needs to evolve as well. That is why Nova Scotia is introducing post-diploma certificate training programs in early childhood education through the Advanced Practitioner Program in Early Childhood Education (APP).

Designed to be a post graduate in-service certificate program, the APP will allow qualified ECEs to specialize and advance their knowledge and competence in a particular area of practice, such as infant and toddler care and learning, outdoor play, or pedagogical leadership.

There will be 4 post-certificate programs developed initially, and bursaries will be available for up to 100 people to participate.

Conclusion

Nova Scotia is on the cusp of a historic moment with the introduction of a pan-Canadian system that will have economic and social benefits for the citizens of our province for generations to come. Using a made-in-Nova-Scotia approach to the Canada-wide system will support young children to be happy, successful, and the best they can be. ECEs are at the centre of the early learning and child care system. Excellence in Early Childhood Education is designed with ECEs in mind. It is meant to be flexible and supportive, and guide ECEs in their career paths for years to come. As Nova Scotia and the rest of Canada embarks on a Canada-wide system of early learning and child care. We will continue to talk to ECEs and listen to their advice and recommendations for the development of the profession. If we need to change or improve something so that it can benefit more ECEs and ultimately have better outcomes for children, we will. ECEs in Nova Scotia have asked for professional recognition and we believe this strategy will help us get there.

Through this strategy, Nova Scotia will provide ECEs with the professional recognition they deserve, long-term career options, and a system they can be proud to be part of. Nova Scotia's ECEs will be the most qualified and provide the highest quality early learning and child care in Canada. This will have monumental benefits for our children now and for decades to come.