

ECE Training Engagement Program Project

What we heard

The Project

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) 2016 Action Plan, Affordable, Quality Child Care: A Great Place to Grow! committed to

- strengthening the early childhood education workforce to increase salaries
- raising education levels leading to a fully trained workforce by 2021
- providing employers with the leadership they require to recruit and retain early childhood educators (ECEs) to ensure quality programs are delivered

To achieve this, government made a commitment to ensure existing untrained staff have an opportunity to obtain the necessary training to support a career in early childhood education.

Nova Scotia's post-secondary education system offers early childhood education degree and diploma programs both online and in person. These programs are provided in English, French, and, most recently, Mi'kmaw through a new program offering some coursework reflecting the Mi'kmaw language, history, and culture.

Additionally, several financial assistance options are available to help students enrol in post-secondary training. One such program is the Early Years Continuing Education Program. This program offers reimbursement to individuals working in regulated child care either part time or full time following successful completion of online or in-person coursework. Eligible training programs are those offered by recognized post-secondary institutions in Nova Scotia offering the early childhood education diploma or degree programs.

Although a variety of training options and financial assistance are available for current and prospective ECEs, several individuals without formal early childhood education post-secondary training remain working. These same individuals are likely earning a wage at, or slightly above, the provincial minimum wage, as they are outside the legislated minimum wage floor set by government for regulated child care. With some post-secondary training, specifically the coursework required to be eligible for a Level 1 classification, individuals working in regulated child care would be entitled to a minimum wage of \$15/hr.

To learn more about why untrained individuals working in child care are not engaging in formal training, EECD initiated a project to directly engage those affected to inform future training and funding activities. Government's Poverty Reduction Strategy program funded this project.

Our Approach

EECD partnered with YWCA Halifax – A Turning Point for Women to manage the consultation phase of the project by engaging an independent consultant to consult with individuals working in the field and those providing academic or employment services or resources. An advisory committee was also established to support the project. Information was gathered through in-person focus group sessions held in Kentville, Sydney, and Halifax. Individual conversations and written communication took place to provide alternative options, when necessary. In total, 60 ECEs, directors, and stakeholders were engaged across the province. Furthermore, consideration was taken to ensure individuals from our Indigenous, African Nova Scotian, and newcomer communities were involved.

What we heard

The process revealed five key themes:

1. Access: waitlists, program length, and a lack of value of training
2. Financial: cost of education, paying upfront, loss of work hours
3. Personal: lack of time, transportation, parental duties and child care
4. Coursework: training rigour, course availability, completion of practicums
5. Technology: Internet access, computer access, computer literacy

Participants in under-represented populations shared additional barriers that exacerbate their inability to participate in training. Those barriers were as follows:

- Indigenous people: Existing funding tends to be targeted to high school graduates transitioning directly to post-secondary education rather than working in entry-level positions
- African Nova Scotians: Transportation from isolated communities; balancing family and work obligations with returning to school
- Newcomers: Language proficiency for training programs is considered too high; administrative proof of proficiency and competency is onerous and costly; challenges with credential assessment

General Sector Concerns:

Participants also raised concerns about barriers or challenges in the general sector that had an impact on their decisions related to training. These include

- the availability and consistency of information to support staff; communication from employers of ECEs
- the perception by others that the profession is low value; perception of a static career (e.g., few opportunities); belief job experience provides equal knowledge obtained through training
- low workplace morale; high demand on staff (e.g., lack of substitutes and access to mentors); low wages and no benefits in regulated child-care centres

Recommendations

The following recommendations were proposed based on the information gained through the process:

1. Support the enhanced delivery of general information about the sector and training and tailor information for individual situations.
2. Increase opportunities to have training paid for upfront for those eligible for reimbursement.
3. Change regulations to ensure that all practicums are paid for students working full-time hours in a centre.
4. Provide financial support/reimbursement to cover services that will facilitate students' success in training (e.g. transportation, computer, child care).
5. Support the development and provision of training options that are more accessible to part-time students working full-time in centres.

Next Steps

The findings tell us we do not need to create new training models. Rather, we need to find a new way of offering existing training programs—one that will address barriers and provide better support to those working in our early childhood education programs.

We heard people want to enrol in training, but do not know where to turn for information, do not have the financial ability, or lack access to technology to complete training requirements.

In response, EECD designed a pilot project, in partnership with Nova Scotia Community College, to offer a Level 1 Training Program pilot project. The pilot will be offered over one year, beginning March 16, 2020, for up to 40 people working in a licensed child-care centre, or Pre-primary Program.