



## The Early Childhood Education Report 2014: Moving beyond counting spaces and towards quality ECE systems

**T**he reach of early childhood education (ECE) is broad, including the education, care and well-being of young children. Early education is also central to family policy and is associated with economic development and productivity. It is linked to a range of equity issues, including women's employment, anti-poverty strategies, the promotion of social cohesion and the settlement of new Canadians.

Reflecting the main recommendation of the *Early Years Study 3* – that all children from age 2 through to elementary school have access to high quality, early childhood education—the Early Childhood Education Report 2014 focuses on indicators promoting this goal. It is the second status update on the policy frameworks that the evidence indicates supports quality and access in early education services.

The report defines ECE as programs for young children based on an explicit curriculum delivered by qualified staff and designed to support children's development and learning. Settings may include childcare centres, nursery schools, preschools, pre or junior kindergarten, and kindergarten. Attendance is regular and children may participate on their own or with a parent or caregiver. When organized so it also supports parents' labour force participation, ECE can also be a very cost-effective policy lever; returning in financial terms more than it costs.

### DEVELOPING THE REPORT

The benchmarks for the ECE Report were established following an extensive review of monitoring tools developed in Canada and internationally, and in consultation with experts involved in the development of these measures. Nineteen benchmarks were selected and populated using available data, an analysis of government publications and reports, Statistics Canada data (including population estimates), and customs runs from the Survey of Young Canadians and the Labour Force Survey. Provincial/territorial profiles were developed using the above

data, supplemented by a survey of, and key informant interviews with, provincial and territorial officials. Report results and draft profiles were provided to officials for comment.

Reviews of early childhood education in Canada have traditionally focused on counting child care spaces and per capita funding levels. Research has either evaluated child outcomes or the quality of programs offered. Until the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 2004 review of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Canada, there had not been an extensive evaluation of the policy frameworks that shape the environments that service providers operate in and in which small children learn and are nurtured. The ECE Report picks up on this work.

### THE INFLUENCE OF THE OECD AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL MEASURES

The *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2006) analysis identified key elements of successful policy that were common to 20 member countries who took part in the OECD's review of their early education and care systems. The ECE Report is rooted in the recommendations of the OECD review. Not all the 17 major policy areas addressed by the OECD in its Canada report are included in the ECE Report 2014. In important areas, such as the affordability of ECE services, consistent data are not available. Insufficient data also prevented the inclusion of the Yukon, Nunavut and First Nations in this round, something the originators hope to address in future iterations.

While being guided by the OECD directions, the selection of benchmarks was limited by the availability of consistent data across jurisdictions and the likelihood that similar information would be available in the future to allow for ongoing monitoring. Benchmark thresholds were influenced by those established by UNICEF in 2008 to promote the potential for continued international comparisons, and those included in the UNESCO

2010 cross-national study on the integration of early childhood education and care (Kaga, Bennett & Moss, 2010). Adapting the Report to Canadian reality, all benchmark thresholds in the ECE Report have been achieved, or are close to being achieved, in at least one jurisdiction.

The authors recognize that there is always sensitivity to monitoring and reluctance to make comparisons. Canada is a very large and highly diverse country. However in the development of other levels of education from elementary through to post-secondary, there has emerged a remarkable similarity based on shared values and research. Arm's length assessments are part of democratic oversight and allow the sharing of best practices and push for better systems to improve outcomes for children. A parallel rationale exists for early childhood education. Indeed, all provinces and territories already agree on a number of comparable inputs to promote program quality, including the need for staff qualifications, child/staff ratios, group size, facilities, etc.

## THE ECE REPORT 2014 CATEGORIES

The 19 benchmarks selected for the ECE Report 2014 are ordered into five categories:

**Governance** Four benchmarks look at policy and operational oversight—is it split between multiple departments, or does it have coherent direction, a common policy framework with goals, timelines and consistent support for service providers?

**Funding** Three benchmarks examine the adequacy of funding and its influence on supporting program quality and equitable access.

**Access** Three benchmarks assess the numbers of children attending ECE programs and if barriers to participation are addressed.

**Learning environment** Six benchmarks examine whether curriculum, program standards and trained and adequate staffing support the quality of programming.

**Accountability** Three benchmarks assess whether jurisdictions are meeting their reporting commitments, have standards for program quality, and are monitoring and reporting child outcomes.

Each category is assigned 3 points for a possible total of 15. Full and half points are assigned with the intention of providing equal weight to each category.

## ATTAINING THE BENCHMARKS

Benchmarks are not aspirational goals; instead, they express the basic requirements that jurisdictions should meet to establish and maintain acceptable quality and access in their early childhood systems. For this reason, partial marks are not assigned. A mark was given if policies are in place or if the province has embarked on a particular initiative with a commitment to take it system-wide. Many jurisdictions have ambitious plans for their ECE systems, however if these policies are still in development the benchmark was not attained. Future efforts and commitments will be reflected in upcoming iterations of the ECE Report. A complete review of provincial/territorial ECE policies and programming may be found under Provincial/Territorial Profiles on the [TimeForPreschool.ca](http://TimeForPreschool.ca) website.

### I. Benchmarks focused on governance for integrated early childhood education

The OECD recommended that Canadian jurisdictions take steps to “build bridges between child care and kindergarten education, with the aim of integrating ECEC both at ground level and at policy and management levels”.<sup>1</sup> Evaluations demonstrate the importance of assigning responsibility for young children to one ministry that combines policy making, funding and regulatory powers. A single ministry/department facilitates the development of a common vision of early education, with agreed-upon objectives. Split administration tends to entrench child care as a welfare service with all its inherent weaknesses—poor public perception, poor funding and underpaid and undertrained staff. Canadian research reveals the cost returns from combining

<sup>1</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Directorate for Education. (2004). *Early childhood care and education policy: Canada country note*. Paris, FR: OECD Secretariat.



education and care at the service delivery level to support parents' workforce participation. Common oversight also avoids the duplication of administrations and budgets. From a pedagogical perspective, integrating education and care allows administrators and educators to better address the continuum of learning that begins at birth and continues throughout life.

Four benchmarks are allocated to the governance of ECE systems.

### **Benchmark 1: ECE under common department/ ministry**

The minimum for the benchmark is a single ministry/department with oversight for child care as well as kindergarten and other education-funded preschool programming (Figure 1.2).

### **Benchmark 2: Common ECE supervisory unit**

This benchmark drills down to see if integration has gone beyond co-locating the two streams under the same roof while they still operate as distinct entities. It assesses whether all ECE services are under a common supervisory unit, where specialized staff members have shared responsibilities for both public (school-offered) and private (child care/preschool) ECE programs (Figure 1.2).

### **Benchmark 3: Common ECE policy framework**

Administrators, systems managers and educators need a clear, and clearly communicated, policy direction, with vision, objectives, timelines and benchmarks to guide their work. Some provinces have developed policy directions for child care and/or school-offered ECE programs. The minimum for this benchmark determines if policy directions encompass both education and child care/preschool, aligning them to support the learning continuum (Figure 1.2).

### **Benchmark 4: Common local authority for ECE management and administration**

The integration of policy frameworks at the provincial level should be reflected in service management and delivery on the ground, thereby removing the necessity of parents and children to navigate between service silos. All ECE services, both public and private, should link to a common local authority responsible for supporting standards reflected in provincial policies. Local authorities would be responsible for organizing ECE service delivery to facilitate smooth transitions from preschool into kindergarten and the primary grades. Some progress has been made by having school boards offer both education and child care for kindergarten and school-aged children, but few jurisdictions direct a local authority to manage the continuum of ECE programming. It is acknowledged that there are many collaborative tables including education and children's service

providers. These bodies are not mandated to enforce systems delivery or quality standards. The benchmark requires local governance with this level of authority (Figure 1.2)

## **II. Benchmarks focused on funding to promote quality, access and equity**

The OECD noted Canada's market-determined fee structure results in high parent fees and an inefficient subsidy system with widely varying and complex eligibility criteria. It encouraged Canadian jurisdictions to "devise an efficient means of funding a universal early childhood service".<sup>2</sup> There is a general consensus across the OECD countries that substantial government investment is necessary to support a sustainable system of high quality, affordable services (OECD, 2006).

Without strong government investment and involvement, it is difficult to achieve broad system aims, such as child health and well-being, equitable access, social inclusion, and quality learning goals. Funding levels are important, but how services are funded also makes a difference. A universal approach appears to be more effective at including children from low-income families. Mixed enrollment in ECE is also associated with better-quality ratings than programs targeted to children from low-income families. Direct funding to programs appears to have a positive impact on staff wages and program stability, whereas funding through fee subsidies or tax transfers has less effect. Since subsidies to parents seldom reflect the actual cost of child care, they tend to hold down staff wages and leave a gap between what parents receive and the fees programs must charge. This can exclude low-income families from using ECE centres.

Three benchmarks look at funding levels and how funds are directed.

### **Benchmark 5: At least two-thirds of child care funding goes to program operations**

Percentage allocations to program operations, special needs integration and parent fee subsidies are determined through public reporting and are based on the last year a funding breakdown was available. Provinces may have announced global increases for child care in their most recent budgets, but unless specified, it was assumed that new funding would follow the established breakdown. Funding for children with special needs is included as part of operations, since most jurisdictions deliver this funding to child care programs rather than through parent fee subsidies. The two-thirds benchmark for program funding was chosen because it is associated with greater system stability (Figure 2.4).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 72.

### **Benchmark 6: Mandated salary and fee scale**

This benchmark reflects provincial policies establishing a maximum parent fee scale and a minimum wage scale for educators.

### **Benchmark 7: At least 3 percent of provincial budget is devoted to early childhood education**

Percentages were calculated using total 2014/2015 spending estimates and total allocations for early childhood education as stated in government budget documents. ECE spending includes total 2014/2015 estimates for the operation of licensed child care and child care support programs for infants to 12 years of age, kindergarten, prekindergarten and other early education services, including school-based parent/caregiver/child programs. Capital funding is not included. The 2014 estimates for kindergarten and education-offered programs were obtained from government documents or informant interviews. Where kindergarten funding was not specified, estimates were made based on per pupil spending in elementary school as reported by Statistics Canada and, if applicable, pro-rated for half-time kindergarten.

Spending on ECE and other child care programs at 3 percent of provincial budget was chosen as a benchmark because it approaches the 1 percent of GDP that is considered a minimum investment in the care and education of young children (UNICEF, 2008). It represents a modest and fair share for children in their preschool years (Figure 2.2).

## **III. Benchmarks focused on equitable access**

The OECD recommended Canada “continue efforts to expand access while promoting greater equity”.<sup>3</sup> Equitable access is more associated with entitlement programs such as kindergarten. However, kindergarten does not address parents’ need for child care. Equity is but one more of the benefits of organizing ECE to meet the educational needs of children, at the same time as facilitating their parents’ workforce participation. Barriers to ECE participation are many: economic, geographical, cultural, language, hours of service, etc. One area where all jurisdictions have made an effort is to target resources to enable programs to include children with special needs.

### **Benchmark 8: Full-day kindergarten offered**

Kindergarten is the sole early education program that is universally available across Canada. Full-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds has become the norm across Canada; it is now offered by 7 out of 13 jurisdictions and is set to roll out in Newfoundland in 2016. Full-day kindergarten also reflects the duration threshold, which research indicates is more likely to improve academic and social outcomes for children (Reynolds, 2011).

### **Benchmark 9: Fifty percent of 2 to 4 year olds regularly attend an ECE program**

This benchmark focuses on 2 to 4 year olds, the group for which there is high unmet demand for ECE. Five year olds were excluded since the majority already attend kindergarten. Infants are a less likely group to participate in ECE programs because of extended parental leave. Determining the accurate enrolment of children in ECE programs is challenging. Schools tend to report enrolment numbers. Child care maintains a record of spaces, which may be used by more than one child, while other programs report capacity.

The number of 2 to 4 year olds attending ECE programs was estimated using government reports on school offered prekindergarten programs including parent/child programs in British Columbia and Ontario, child care, nursery school and Aboriginal Head Start availability. These were supplemented with by a custom tabulation from the Survey of Young Canadians (SYC). Care was taken not to double count children attending prekindergarten who also attend child care.

UNICEF’s benchmark is set at 80 percent of 4 year olds regularly attending an ECE program and 25 percent of children under 3-year-old. Fifty percent of 2 to 4 year olds represents a reasonable and achievable benchmark for Canada (Figure 3.2).

### **Benchmark 10: Funding is conditional on including children with special needs**

The threshold for this benchmark is provincial/territorial policy that requires programs to give equal consideration to the enrollment of children with special needs as a policy direction or condition of funding. Funding as an incentive without policy directions does not provide parents with recourse if their child is excluded from participation.

## **IV. Benchmarks focusing on quality in the early learning environment**

Well-established research confirms that quality in early education programs depends on staff trained in child development who are resourced and valued for the work they do. This part of the ECE Report looks at progress in this area. Is there an evidence-based curriculum to support the work of educators? Is it aligned with the school system to support children’s transition into school? Are educators in all ECE settings trained in early childhood development? Are salaries and recognition reflective of the important work educators do? Six benchmarks are included in this category.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

### **Benchmark 11: An early childhood curriculum/framework**

ECE curriculum frameworks are organic documents resulting from broad consultation. They are holistic and child-centred, with clear goals across a range of developmental areas to which educators and children can aspire. The primary role of parents is recognized and parents are welcomed as partners in their children's learning. A curriculum review populated in Figure 4.5 determined if provinces have developed a curriculum framework for early education settings. The threshold does not require the use of the curriculum in all ECE settings.

### **Benchmark 12: Alignment of early childhood framework with kindergarten**

Children move from preschool into kindergarten at different ages and stages of development. The kindergarten and early childhood curriculum frameworks should align to reflect this. A curriculum review populated in Figure 4.5 determined if ECE policy addresses this issue.

### **Benchmark 13: Programs for 2 to 4 year olds require at least two-thirds of staff to have ECE qualifications**

Child/staff ratios across jurisdictions are quite similar, but the number of qualified staff required by policy or regulation varies widely. For this benchmark, qualified represents the period of post-secondary training provincial regulation considers necessary to be recognized as a qualified staff member in an ECE setting. It is acknowledged that ECE qualifications are not standard across jurisdictions. UNICEF recommends at least 50 percent of staff have three or more years of post-secondary training and 80 percent of staff working directly with children have post-secondary training in child development. No Canadian jurisdiction meets this standard. Two-thirds of staff with provincially-recognized qualifications was considered a reasonable compromise (Figure 4.4).

### **Benchmark 14: Kindergarten educators require ECE qualifications**

Public kindergarten is a dominant form of ECE provision. For many children it will be their only preschool experience. Quality in ECE settings depends on educators trained to understand the developmental needs of young children. A review of provincial policies determined if ECE training is required for educators in kindergarten classrooms. Prince Edward Island requires its kindergarten educators to obtain a teaching certificate with an ECE specialty. Ontario was recognized because its legislated staffing model for full-day kindergarten requires at least one staff member who is a registered ECE. A kindergarten specialty is recognized towards teacher certification in the Northwest Territories.

### **Benchmark 15: Salaries of early childhood educators are at least two-thirds of teacher salaries**

Low compensation levels for early childhood educators are recognized in the literature as contributing to recruitment and retention challenges, which in turn impact the quality of ECE programming. The compensation gap between elementary school teachers and early childhood educators reflects the challenge. These issues become more evident as early childhood educators move into school settings to work alongside teachers. This benchmark looks at the salary gap between teachers and early childhood educators by jurisdiction as an indicator of the relative value placed on the professions. Teacher salaries were obtained from *2013-2014 Canadian teachers salary rankings: Provinces and Territories* prepared by BCTF Research for the British Columbia Teachers Federation. BC's category 5 was used as the most suitable match. Early childhood educator salaries were obtained from government sources. Where information was not available, a custom run of the Labour Force Survey provided 2012-13 hourly wages for self-identified early childhood educators with post-secondary qualifications who are employed in the sector. This was used to estimate full-time annual salaries. The two-thirds benchmark reflects a reasonable salary gap between the two professions based on differences in educational requirements (Figure 4.1)

### **Benchmark 16: ECE professional certification and/or professional development**

Registration, certification and classification are all processes that provide official recognition as an early childhood educator and enable the registrant to work in an ECE program. These processes are proxies for the value placed on the profession. Ongoing professional development is critical to maintaining a workforce that is knowledgeable about current education practice and is closely associated with high-quality early childhood settings. The benchmark reflects provincial policy requiring professional certification as a condition of practice and/or regular professional development as a condition of maintaining good standing in the ECE profession (Figure 4.4).

## **V. Benchmarks focused on accountability**

Monitoring is an integral part of democratic accountability to children, families and the public. It is essential for informed decision-making, ensuring that societal resources are deployed productively, resources



distributed equitably and social goals reached. The challenge is to develop monitoring systems that capture how programs are operating, how children are developing and if system goals are being met. Monitoring on its own does not deliver results, although it is a crucial part of a larger system designed to achieve them.

### **Benchmark 17: Annual progress reports are current and posted (2011 or later)**

Federal/provincial/territorial early childhood agreements include annual reporting by each jurisdiction on progress made in meeting the terms of the agreements.

As part of the March 2003 Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Child Care governments committed to providing annual reports on early child programming, including the following information:

- Descriptive and expenditure information on all early learning and child care programs and services;
- Indicators of affordability, such as number of children receiving subsidies, income and social eligibility for fee subsidies and maximum subsidy by age of child; and
- Indicators of quality, such as training requirements, child/caregiver ratios and group size, where available.<sup>4</sup>

The minimum benchmark proposed is that the responsible ministry/department/agency has published a comprehensive report on ECE services within the last three years (Figure 5.1). Quebec was not a signatory to the agreements and has its own reporting process.

### **Benchmark 18: Standards for ECE programs (including kindergarten)**

Learning outcomes for children cannot be considered apart from the inputs they experience in ECE settings. Standards governing health and safety, facilities and class size are important minimums for all ECE programs. Also important are standards outlining pedagogical practices, implementation of curriculum goals and the set-up of the learning environment. The benchmark proposes these minimum program standards for all ECE settings including kindergarten.

### **Benchmark 19: Population measures for preschool learning collected and reported**

Public reporting informs communities about how their children are doing and what can be done to improve children's early learning environments. The minimum benchmark is that a province has used the Early Development Instrument or an equivalent tool and reported on the findings at least once in the past three years.

### **NEXT STEPS FOR THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION REPORT 2014**

The five equally-weighted categories in the Report and their benchmarks reflect current research and international reports. System-level indices comparing jurisdictions must balance the desire for appropriate, comparable data and the reality of what is available. The content validity of the ECE Report 2014 appears to be good. It is a tool for conversations about next steps.

The ECE Report 2014 is housed at the Atkinson Centre, Ontario Institute of Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. The Centre regularly brings together academic expertise to further review the ECE Report and improve aspects of its validity. It hosts a number of conferences, roundtables and reviews to delve more deeply into the individual benchmarks. To date the Centre has reviewed integrated governance, population monitoring, early learning curriculum frameworks, quality monitoring and the status of the early childhood workforce. Reports and presentations are on the Atkinson Centre website.

Awareness of the importance of development in early childhood has caught the attention of policy makers and they have responded. This is an important start. However we can't overlook the limited number of benchmarks the Report was able to populate and the constraints that excluded two of the Territories and First Nations. The modesty of the thresholds reflects the persistence of low standards common to the split delivery of ECE systems. Yet there are reasons for optimism. Much progress has been made since the OECD's international review exposed Canada as an ECE laggard, not all of which can be captured in a report.

<sup>4</sup> Multilateral Framework Agreement on Early Learning and Child Care (March 2003). Retrieved from [http://www.ecd-elcc.ca/eng/elcc/elcc\\_multiframe.shtml](http://www.ecd-elcc.ca/eng/elcc/elcc_multiframe.shtml)

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