Enhancing Career Pathways for the Childcare Sector

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents 2
List of Acronyms in This Report 3
Introduction 4
  Purpose and Background 4
  About Career Pathways 4
  Our Approach 5
  In This Report 7
Sectors Needs and Opportunities 7
  Sector Requirements 7
  Current Education and Training Options 8
  Needs and Challenges 10
  Opportunities 12
  Key Findings 18
Existing Promising Practices 18
  Ontario Scan 18
  Other Jurisdictions 20
  Key Findings 22
Synthesis of Findings and Proposed Model 23
  Prototype Model 24
Opportunities for System Change 26
Appendix: About This Project 28
References 29
List of Acronyms in This Report

**ECA:** Early Childhood Assistant  
**ECAD:** Early Childhood Education Alternative Delivery  
**ECE:** Early Childhood Educator  
**LEF:** Learning Enrichment Foundation  
**NACC:** National Association of Career Colleges  
**NCFS:** Native Child and Family Service  
**OCWI:** Ontario Centre for Workforce Innovation  
**PLAR:** Prior Learning Assessment Recognition
Introduction

Purpose and Background

This is the final report for the Enhancing Career Pathways for the Child Care Sector project. The goal of this project is to generate knowledge about the feasibility of using a Career Pathways approach to address needs and challenges in the early childhood education sector workforce in Ontario. This project is a partnership between the Ontario Centre for Workforce Innovation (OCWI), The Learning Enrichment Foundation (LEF), Mothercraft College of Early Childhood Education, and Blueprint-ADE.

About Career Pathways

This project is part of OCWI’s Career Pathways portfolio, which includes several projects focused on generating evidence about the feasibility and effectiveness of Career Pathways approaches in different sectors across Ontario. The Career Pathways approach provides a framework for organizing and aligning the education, workforce, and supportive services needed by a wide range of individuals to attain the credentials required for sustainable employment. This model helps individuals advance in their career path through accelerated, stepped credentials that translate into more highly skilled and paid career options. For more information about Career Pathways models, see Box 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model Component</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expedited credentials and placement</td>
<td>Minimizes the time taken to get credentials and subsequent employment to reduce the economic burden of training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support services</td>
<td>Gives participants from diverse backgrounds the support needed to progress towards additional program steps</td>
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<td>Employment engagement</td>
<td>Ensures program is aligned with industry needs and facilitates placement of participants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduced or subsidized costs</td>
<td>Makes training program accessible to low-income adults, and individuals with families</td>
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Adapted from Werner et al. (2013)
Our Approach

This report draws on multiple lines of inquiry:

- Scan of relevant resources on current needs, opportunities, and promising practices related to Career Pathways in the early childhood education sector
- A survey and focus groups with a sample of individuals currently employed as Early Childhood Assistants (ECAs) or child care practitioners in Ontario
- A survey and interviews with a sample of Ontario-based employers in the early childhood education sector
- Interviews with key informants from post-secondary institutions that deliver early childhood education programming, required for registration, and practice as an early childhood educator (ECE) in Ontario

Employer Assessment

We conducted an online survey of early childhood education sector employers in spring 2018. The survey was distributed by LEF to members of the Quality Early Learning Network, a group of 18 non-profit early learning and family support agencies. Ten members, all of whom are multisite child care and early years program providers, completed the survey. The ten employers that completed the survey provide services in urban and rural communities and are located across Southern Ontario in the Greater Toronto Area, Hamilton, Ottawa, Durham, Halton, Peel and York. 50% of the ten employers employ over 100 ECEs, and combined, the employers hire close to 600 ECEs each year. The survey focused on understanding features of the current workforce, hiring challenges, and the desired skills that each employer look for when hiring ECEs.

We also conducted eight interviews with employers in June and July 2018, all of whom had also completed the survey. The interviews explored challenges employers face in recruiting and retaining skilled workers and sought their input into a proposed prototype model to help individuals currently working as ECAs obtain their ECE diploma.

ECA Assessment

We conducted a survey of 52 ECAs in summer 2018. Respondents were recruited by LEF, Mothercraft College, and Native Child and Family Service (NCFS) through their child care centres. The survey focused on understanding the ECAs’ perceptions of the early childhood education sector, career goals, and the barriers they face to advancement. As the survey was not designed to randomly sample ECAs, our survey respondents are not a representative sample of ECAs across the organizations of the sector more broadly.

47% of our sample had worked five or more years. 58% of respondents work full time (30 or more hours per week), and 36% work split shifts in a Before and After School Care Program. Most have an education level below a Bachelor’s degree, although 25% have some college or university education and 33% have a certificate or diploma from a community college or university certificate below Bachelor’s level.
85% of survey respondents have completed an ECA training program. It is worth noting that the employers we spoke to estimated that only 15% of their ECAs have completed a formal training program. While our respondents may have more formal training than an average group of ECAs, this discrepancy could also stem from different understandings of what is meant by formal ECA training.

We conducted two focus groups with a non-representative sample of 17 ECAs in summer 2018. 16 out of 17 focus group participants had completed some formal ECA training, and they had an average of seven years’ work experience. The focus groups further explored ECAs’ goals and sought their input on the proposed prototype model, with a focus on understanding whether the model would meet their needs.

We also conducted telephone interviews with representatives from three post-secondary institutions that deliver programs in early childhood education. The interviews focused on promising practices and lessons learned from education and training initiatives focused on
enhancing Career Pathways in the early childhood education sector.

In This Report

This report has four sections:

1. **Sector Needs and Opportunities**: Discusses needs and opportunities in the early childhood education sector in Ontario and the potential for a Career Pathways approach to address these needs.

2. **Scan of Promising Practices**: Provides an overview and lessons learned from early childhood education training initiatives in Ontario and other jurisdictions that are aligned with the Career Pathways model.

3. **Key Takeaways and Proposed Model**: Summarizes takeaways and lessons learned from research and proposes a prototype model to test the feasibility of a training program that is aligned with the Career Pathways approach.

4. **System Implications**: Discusses the broader implications of research for workforce development and Career Pathways in the early childhood education sector.

Sectors Needs and Opportunities

This section provides an overview of current workforce needs and opportunities in the early childhood education sector and explores whether a Career Pathways approach could help address these needs.

**Sector Requirements**

Early childhood education is a regulated profession in Ontario, meaning that individuals seeking to practice and use the title of **Early Childhood Educator (ECE)** must hold a certificate of registration with the College of Early Childhood Educators. The College is established by legislation and regulates the practice of registered ECEs in Ontario by establishing registration requirements, standards of practice, and ongoing education for its members. The Government of Ontario has also legislated staffing qualification requirements for the child care sector, including requirements for the proportion of Early Childhood Educators present in a given child care setting.

To become an ECE, individuals are required to hold a diploma or degree from a program related to early childhood education from a recognized post-secondary institution. In addition to working in child care centres, ECEs can also work in EarlyON Child and Family Centres, schools, and other settings.

Individuals working in child care centres who are not ECEs are generally employed as **Early Childhood Assistants (ECAs)**. ECA is not a regulated profession and has no formal educational requirements.
Current Education and Training Options

The standard entry to practice to become a registered ECE is to complete a diploma program in early childhood education at an Ontario College of Applied Arts and Technology. The College of Early Childhood Educators has also identified other educational programs that meet the education and training requirements for ECE registration, including the completion of the ECE diploma program offered by Mothercraft College of Early Childhood Education, related degree programs offered at post-secondary institutions in Ontario, and programs offered at institutions elsewhere in Canada. There is also a pathway to registered ECE for individuals who complete the Child Development Practitioner apprenticeship program in Ontario.

To confer ECE college diplomas, institutions must meet the program standards established by the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (2012).

While there are no formal educational requirements for ECAs, there are several education and training options available for those interested in obtaining work in the child care sector as an ECA. The content and format of these programs varies widely, and there is no common or consistent pathway into employment as an ECA.

The National Association of Career Colleges (NACC) has developed curriculum for an Early Childcare Assistant certificate program that is delivered by several private career colleges in Ontario. Other employment and training organizations also offer a range of short-term ECA training options. For example, The Learning Enrichment Foundation offers ECA training for newcomers that includes occupation-specific language training, placement, and pre-employment services as well as wrap-around supports.

In a limited number of cases, individuals with ECA training can be granted advanced standing in ECE programs. Mothercraft College of Early Childhood Education has articulation agreements with private career colleges offering NACC’s ECA certificate. Graduates of the NACC ECA certificate program who apply and are accepted into Mothercraft’s ECE Diploma program are granted advanced standing in several courses and placement hours. Individuals with relevant training and experience may also earn academic credit towards their ECE diploma through colleges’ Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition (PLAR) process.

ECE degree programs provide an opportunity for individuals in the sector to further upgrade their skills and qualifications. In many cases, individuals with ECE diplomas are eligible to enter ECE degree programs with advanced standing.

Figure 3 summarizes common education and training pathways in the early childhood education sector.
Enabling Career Pathways for the Childcare Sector

ECE Diploma programs
- Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies
- Bachelor of Early Childhood Leadership
- Other similar programs

EMPLOYMENT AS ECA
- Child Development Practitioner Apprenticeship
- Advanced standing based on previous training/experience
- Completion of additional general education courses

EMPLOYMENT AS ECE
- Advanced standing based on previous education/training

FIGURE 3: CURRENT ECE TRAINING PATHWAYS
Needs and Challenges

Stakeholders in the early childhood education sector have identified several critical challenges in building a sustainable, high-quality early childhood education workforce. Employers in the sector report that they are having difficulty finding enough qualified ECEs to ensure the success of their programs. Many individuals both inside and outside the sector are unaware of potential career paths and opportunities, and both employers and educators have identified gaps in capacity in the sector in areas like leadership and management, diversity and inclusion, and supporting parents and families.

Several of these issues were recently highlighted in Growing Together: Ontario’s Early Years and Child Care Workforce Strategy (2018), which highlights action areas needed to support the recruitment and retention of a high-quality early childhood education workforce, including a focus on enhancing skills and opportunities.

The following is a summary of our findings on some key challenges facing the early childhood education sector in Ontario, drawn from our employer interviews and survey, as well as a scan of the literature.

Demand for high-quality ECEs

The early childhood education sector has experienced rapid growth due to Ontario’s Renewed Early Years & Child Care Policy Framework & Expansion Plan with the investment to create 100,000 new Child Care spaces, and the implementation of full-day kindergarten for four- and five-year-olds (Ministry of Education, 2017). Since 2003, the number of licensed child care spaces in Ontario has more than doubled from 187,131 to 406,395.

Because of this growth, all employers that we interviewed reported that they face difficulty in hiring skilled ECEs. When employers were surveyed about reasons for this difficulty, 67% noted that they face an insufficient number of applicants, and 75% noted that applicants did not possess the right skills or attributes.

An important factor in the growth of licensed child care space is the introduction of full-day kindergarten in 2010-11, which increased the number of before and/or after school spaces by 93% from 116,103 to 224,069. This has implications for the workforce as the before and after school programs usually hire staff for part-time positions that are split-shift with hours from 7-9am before school, and from 3-6pm after school. Of the eight employers that were interviewed, all said they have difficulty recruiting or retaining ECEs, and six employers noted the reason as ECEs choosing to work for school boards because of better wages, full-time hours, and having summers off work. Many employers are trying to attract ECEs to the before and after school programs by combining split shifts with lunch supervision to create a full-time job, or by increasing wages and benefits.
Perceptions of sector and career awareness

One factor that may contribute to the shortage of high-quality ECEs is negative perceptions of the early childhood education sector. In interviews conducted with employers and representatives from education and training institutions, R.A. Malatest & Associates (2017) found that many interviewees view public perceptions of the sector as a barrier to attracting and retaining a qualified workforce. Many members of the public assume that child care is an easy job that does not require specialized skills. Because of such perceptions, those seeking employment in the sector sometimes lack awareness of the skills required to be an effective educator, and more specifically, awareness of the education and qualifications required to become a registered ECE. Sector stakeholders interviewed by Malatest noted that many high school students are encouraged to enter ECE programs without strong knowledge and awareness of program requirements and career opportunities in the sector more broadly. Interviewees most frequently cited educating job candidates about the various career opportunities available within their organization as a successful strategy to attract and retain employees.

Workforce entry and retention

A related challenge in the sector is the need for a more reliable pipeline of new ECEs entering the sector. There is emerging evidence that many graduates of ECE diploma programs choose not to seek employment in the early childhood education sector. Interviewees from educational institutions consulted by Malatest reported that only about half of students who complete an ECE diploma program continue to work in the sector. During our interviews a few employers expressed frustration at new graduates’ lack of commitment to the sector, and job candidates frequently not showing up for interviews or responding to job offers. Those who do enter the sector do not always stay long. Eighty-three percent of the employers we interviewed said that retention of qualified ECEs is a challenge, although they noted that this problem is most pronounced for filling part-time split-shift positions.

Training quality

Many employers, as well as workers themselves, have expressed concerns about the readiness of new ECE graduates entering the sector. Many ECEs enter the workforce without the skills needed to provide high quality childcare. The employers we interviewed identified a number of key areas that ECEs need to improve, including: knowledge of child development; behaviour guidance skills; mental health and special needs support skills; family dynamics management and awareness of socioeconomic issues; creating an inclusive environment; and soft skills such as teamwork, cooperation, and listening.

These results are echoed in other research reports. Malatest’s survey of individuals working in the early childhood education sector found that only 34% of those surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that “registered early childhood educators have the appropriate training when coming out of post-secondary education.”
Interviews with key representatives in the early childhood education sector conducted by Malatest also revealed concerns about the preparation of new graduates. Many interviewees commented that there is a need to improve the communication and interpersonal skills of new graduates, particularly in working with children and families with diverse needs and backgrounds.

In addition to skills gaps for new entrants into the sector, many stakeholders have identified a need for additional capacity in the sector related to management and leadership. Malatest found that most sector stakeholders they interviewed noted that specific training gaps exist in the areas of leadership, human resources, administration, and communication.

Opportunities

Could a Career Pathways approach help address current challenges in the Ontario early childhood education workforce? A key feature of the Career Pathways approach is that it supports individuals to effectively combine work and learning and progressively increase their skills and credentials to prepare for in-demand jobs. Currently, many individuals working as ECAs in Ontario who may be interested in pursuing further education and progressing their careers face barriers to do so. This highlights that there may be an opportunity to help meet the demand for quality ECEs by providing the right supports and training options for those who currently work in the sector as ECAs to pursue their ECE credential.

The employers we interviewed were aware of only 96 ECAs over the past five years who had been able to upgrade to an ECE certification while working within their organization. To place this in context, the employers we interviewed currently employ over 1400 ECAs collectively. At the same time, employers felt overall that 69% of the ECAs employed¹ would be good ECE candidates, and all noted that it would be valuable to have additional options to help ECAs upgrade to become ECEs. During interviews, employers recognized the skills and experience of ECAs, and the need to acknowledge these skills when upgrading qualifications.

To explore this issue further, we consulted with a group of ECAs about their goals, priorities, and perceived barriers to advancement in the sector. While our survey and focus groups draw from a non-representative sample of ECAs², they provide useful insights on the experiences of this group. Our findings highlight that supporting ECAs to advance in their careers could be a promising strategy for addressing many of the needs and challenges in the early childhood education workforce.

¹ As part of ongoing project activities, we plan to consult with employers about reasons why they do not see other ECAs as good candidates for upgrading. Potential reasons not recommending some ECAs could include: they are close to retirement; they prefer part-time work; or they lack language or literacy skills.

² As the survey was not designed to randomly sample ECAs, our survey respondents are not necessarily a representative sample of ECAs from LEF, Mothercraft and NCFS. It is also important to note that our sample includes employees of only three organizations. Therefore, these results should not be considered representative of the opinions of ECAs more broadly.
Positive perceptions of the sector

Our survey respondents generally held a positive view of the early childhood education sector. Most were proud to work in the early childhood sector and felt respected and valued by the general public (See Figures 4 and 5).

It is notable, however, that almost 30% of respondents were neutral or disagreed that the public respects those who work in the early childhood education sector (see Figure 5). This echoes the feelings of many colleges and employers who feel that negative public perceptions are an issue for the sector.

Respondents were generally more positive about public perceptions of the importance of early childhood development, relative to perceptions of the sector.
Learning and training goals

The respondents to our ECA survey were overwhelmingly committed to becoming registered ECEs and were generally confident that they could complete these steps. Figure 6 demonstrates that 90% of respondents reported that becoming an ECE is an important goal for them. In addition, 88% of our survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they could complete the steps needed to become a registered ECE, and 80% know what steps they would need to take to achieve this goal.

Focus group respondents also highlighted their enthusiasm to become ECEs and continue progressing in their career and skills. They expressed a desire to not only become trained as ECEs, but also to learn how to improve their approach to special needs children, behavioural issues, interacting with diverse families, and management skills to better support children and their families.
Commitment to the sector and career fit

The ECAs who participated in our survey and focus groups saw themselves remaining in the field for several years. Figure 7 demonstrates that the clear majority of respondents (88%) believe that they will be working in the sector in one year, and 78% see themselves working in the sector in five years.

Our focus group respondents reiterated this commitment to the early childhood education sector, and many of them shared their interest in pursuing further opportunities as supervisors and managers in the child care sector.

In addition, the clear majority of respondents see the early childhood education sector as a good career fit for them, and most are happy with their decision to pursue a career path in the sector (see Figure 8). Focus group respondents emphasized how much they value their work and enjoy working with and learning from children. They also spoke about the satisfaction they draw from working in service of children and their families.
FIGURE 7: LONG-TERM CAREER PLANS

FIGURE 8: PERCEPTIONS OF CAREER FIT
Barriers to advancement

Despite the commitment and interest of our respondents in becoming ECEs, many face complex, intersecting barriers that make it difficult to access ECE training. The majority of our respondents indicated that becoming an ECE is an important goal for them and that they understand the steps required to become an ECE. However, 81% of respondents also reported that they had considered pursuing ECE training in the past but did not ultimately enroll or finish their course.

Our survey respondents were asked to identify barriers that might make it difficult for them to pursue training to become an ECE (see Figure 9). The most commonly identified barrier was finances, with 43% of respondents reporting that financial issues create challenges for them in pursuing further training. Transportation, work, and family responsibilities were the next most commonly reported challenges.

Further details on these barriers emerged in the focus groups. Family obligations place a great demand on respondents’ time and resources, making it difficult for them to undertake lengthy training programs. English is not the first language of many respondents, and they expressed doubts over their ability to write exams or complete official documentation. Respondents were concerned not just about having enough quantity of time during their day to work and study, but also ensuring the quality of their work and personal interactions do not suffer.

![Figure 9: Barriers to Becoming an ECE](image-url)
Key Findings

Our analysis of needs and opportunities in the early childhood sector highlights some important takeaways:

There are challenges in developing a sustainable, high quality ECE workforce

Employers in the early childhood education sector report that it is extremely difficult to find and retain high quality ECEs. Challenges related to public perceptions, lack of career awareness, and an unreliable pipeline of new graduates contribute to this difficulty. Employers also report gaps in the capacity of the current workforce related to specific skills and competencies.

A Career Pathways approach focused on supporting ECAs to advance in their careers could be a promising strategy to address demand for high-quality ECEs

Our research suggests that upgrading the qualifications of ECAs currently working in the sector could help to address some of these challenges. The ECAs that we consulted with, while a limited sample, have positive perceptions of the sector, are aware of and willing to pursue an ECE qualification, are generally committed to staying in the sector long-term, and seek to develop many of the same skills identified by employers as key gaps. They also face many barriers to pursuing further ECE training. The Career Pathways model, which focuses on helping individuals combine education and work to advance in their careers, could be a promising strategy for helping to address some of these barriers.

Existing Promising Practices

This section outlines existing promising practices in Ontario and other jurisdictions that are aligned with or related to the Career Pathways model and are designed to address many of the same needs and opportunities identified in the previous section. These approaches include key features like:

- Enhancing learner pathways through accelerated/alternative training delivery options
- Removing barriers to training opportunities through skills upgrading and additional supports
- Supporting individuals to effectively combine learning and working

Ontario Scan

Cambrian College Early Childhood Alternative Delivery (ECAD) program

Cambrian College currently offers an Ontario College Diploma in Early Childhood Education in an alternative delivery format geared specifically to those who are currently working in the field of early childhood education. Participants must have been working full-time for at least six months in the field.

The program is completed over five semesters (two years) and includes a combination of facilitated distance (online) study and intensive on-campus sessions. Individualized Prior Learning Assessment
Recognition (PLAR) processes are used to identify whether entrants into the program can receive advanced standing credit towards any of the program courses. Program faculty develop individualized placement plans for the practicum portion of the program that recognize students’ previous work experience.

Representatives involved with the program noted that it was implemented in response to an identified community need. A study of the sector found that only 34% of the workforce in Northern Ontario were qualified ECEs. Some individuals working in the sector had no previous experience or training. In response, Cambrian staff designed a program that would enable participants to receive a full ECE diploma while working. The program uses a mix of online and in-person delivery that encourages connections and teamwork among students in each cohort. The program was launched at the same time as the ECE Qualifications Upgrade Program (see below) which provided a useful supplementary funding source for participating students.

To help program participants combine learning and work, Cambrian staff work with employers to arrange paid practicums. Where possible, they also work with employers to provide paid release time for participants to attend in-person classes.

Anecdotally, college stakeholders report that the program has been successful. They noted that many students have significantly changed their practice, and faculty have observed that students were engaged because they are able to immediately apply what they have learned. They also noted that the program has been successful in engaging a diverse group of learners. Program participants have generally been older than students in the standard ECE diploma program and have been quite diverse in terms of demographics and academic experience.

George Brown Early Childhood Assistant Certificate

George Brown College currently offers an Early Childhood Assistant College Certificate. The program is delivered over two semesters with a focus on preparing individuals to work with young children in a variety of settings. The program emphasizes basic skills development, as well as the integration of theory and practice. George Brown is the only Ontario public college that offers this certificate.

This program is a “ladder” into the Early Childhood Education diploma program. Students who complete the program and meet minimum academic standards can apply directly into the second year of the diploma program. Program representatives noted that about half of program graduates start working as an ECA while the other half enters or are waitlisted for an ECE diploma.

Seneca Child Development Practitioner Pre-Apprenticeship

Seneca College offers a pre-apprenticeship program for those who are working towards becoming an Early Childhood Educator through the Child Development Practitioner Apprenticeship program. The program provides a smooth transition into the Apprenticeship program by offering:

- Academic upgrading credits
Enhancing Career Pathways for the Childcare Sector

- Completion of the first year of the Child Development Practitioner Apprenticeship Program
- Direct pathway to Seneca’s Early Childhood Education diploma
- Work experience

The program focuses on supporting students who do not currently meet the entry requirements for the apprenticeship program, with an emphasis on participants who might have experienced barriers to education in the past (including those with learning needs and newcomers to Canada). Participants enter academic upgrading and also complete three courses in the apprenticeship curriculum in their first semester, and complete their Level 1 apprenticeship training in the second semester, followed by an 8-week work placement. They can then either enter the CDP apprenticeship program or enter straight into the ECE diploma program. College representatives shared that they feel the program has been successful. Because it is fully funded, it removes barriers to access for diverse participants. Completion rates have also been high.

Early Childhood Educators Qualifications Upgrade Program

The Early Childhood Educators Qualifications Upgrade Program is an initiative of the Ministry of Education to financially support individuals working in the early childhood education sector to obtain an ECE diploma and become eligible to apply for membership with the College of Early Childhood Educators. The program is available to those who have been working with an eligible agency (including a licensed child care agency, Head Start program, or school) in the sector for 12 months.

Financial support is offered through:

- **Education grants** – covers tuition fees related to a recognized Early Childhood Education diploma. Funding is not guaranteed and is distributed on a first come, first served basis
- **Travel grant** – assists education grant recipients with daily commute expenses incurred to attend classes and or complete the placement component of their program
- **Training allowance** – assists education grant recipients with living expenses and other costs while pursuing their diploma

Students studying full-time and part-time are both eligible for financial support under the program. Apprenticeship fees are not eligible.

Other Jurisdictions

All of the Career Pathways initiatives in early childhood education identified in our broader jurisdictional scan come from the United States, where Career Pathways approaches were developed and have been most widely adopted.

T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Initiative

The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Initiative is a program operating in 24 US states and the District of
Columbia to remove barriers to advancement for those working in the early childhood education sector.

Employers are active partners in the program and offer increased compensation for participants who complete educational requirements. The program has five components:

- Scholarships to pursue a certificate or degree in early childhood education
- Career and academic counselling
- Increases in compensation (through a bonus or raise) for completing education steps
- Contract between the employee and employer to ensure retention after training
- Completion of credit hours at a postsecondary institution

T.E.A.C.H. is financed as a public-private partnership with contributions from local, state and federal governments. The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® National Center provides technical assistance, resources, standards, and accountability to licensed state non-profit organizations that operate the scholarship initiative.

**Nicolet and Waukesha County Technical Colleges**

Nicolet and Waukesha County Technical Colleges in Wisconsin have introduced an initiative to support those already working in early childhood education to increase their credentials. Participants can attend courses on Saturdays to accommodate work schedules.

Students can take courses towards their Infant Toddler Credential, a short-term credential focused on building basic skills needed to care for young children. Credits from this credential can then be transferred to an associate’s degree at the Colleges. In addition, the College provides funding for some of the courses to be offered tuition-free. Finally, students with substantial work histories can request credit for prior learning through a portfolio process.

Waukesha County Technical College also delivers bridge programs into early childhood credential programs that offer contextualized basic skills instruction to individuals with lower skills.

**EarlyEdU Alliance**

The EarlyEdU Alliance is a US post-secondary collaboration focused on making relevant, affordable bachelor’s degrees accessible to the early childhood education workforce. The Alliance is focused on increasing the access and affordability of degrees in the sector.

To help educators get the skills they need to succeed, the Alliance has developed a complete suite of competency-based higher education courses built with an intentional teaching framework, which are taught by participating universities and colleges. Institutions use the Coaching Companion, a video sharing and coaching feedback app, to give students individualized support for improving their teaching practices, as part of the program.
Family Child Care Higher Education Academy – Project Vistas

Project Vistas, an initiative of the East Lost Angeles Foundation, provides academic supports and services to family child care providers to increase educational attainment. The program targets family care providers with ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The project aims to improve the quality of ECE instruction and practices, and to provide a bridge between the child care providers and the local community college. The program includes a wide range of wraparound support services including financial assistance, tutoring, mentoring, and other supports. Supports are available in the evening and on weekends to ensure accessibility.

Key Findings

Our scan highlights some key trends that suggest promising directions for Career Pathways initiatives in the early childhood education sector.

Focus on reducing barriers to access and advancement

Many initiatives, both in Ontario and internationally, are focused on supporting individuals who might otherwise face barriers to pursuing education in early childhood education to enter and progress in the sector. This includes strategies like offering financial supports to pursue further training and skills upgrading to prepare individuals for further credentials, especially in the early stages of their career.

Emphasis on providing advancement opportunities for those already working

Our scan of U.S. approaches highlighted a strong emphasis on supporting individuals who are currently working in the early childhood education sector to upgrade their skills and credentials through flexible, accelerated training options, alternative delivery formats, and collaboration with employers to ensure that they support individuals pursuing further training. There are fewer examples of these types of approaches in Ontario, with the Cambrian College Alternative Delivery program standing as a notable exception.

Offering wraparound supports to ensure success

Some of the programs identified in our scan offer wraparound supports that help support learner success including career and academic counselling (offered through the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood Initiative) and tutoring and mentoring services (Project Vistas).

Stackable credentials

Our scan also highlights examples of programs that are focused on offering credentials that help individuals build relevant skills and allow them to “ladder” up to further credentials. For example, the Nicolet and Waukesha County Technical Colleges initiatives has developed a short-term credential focused on building basic skills that provides transferable credits towards an associate degree.
Synthesis of Findings and Proposed Model

Our research highlights the potential for a Career Pathways approach to help address some of the pressing needs in the early childhood education workforce in Ontario. Most notably there is clearly a demand for more qualified ECEs and a potential opportunity to address this demand by better supporting those currently working in the sector to pursue further education and training opportunities. Based on our analysis of needs and opportunities in Ontario as well as trends and promising practices identified in other jurisdictions, we have identified four key takeaways that could inform Career Pathways training approaches for the sector:

Offer flexible, accelerated training options

Training options should help remove barriers for ECAs through delivery formats and schedules that allow them to effectively combine learning and work. This will help ensure that ECAs have the time and resources to pursue ECE training.

Ensure employer input

To ensure that training for early childhood assistants and educators is aligned with employer needs and addresses current gaps in skills and capacity, it is critical to ensure that employers have input into training content and delivery approaches. Buy-in from employers can also help secure paid release time and/or other supports to help current employees upgrade their training.

Focus on career awareness and fit

Training programs should help participants learn about career opportunities in the sector and ensure that learners have the right information and advice to navigate potential career paths. This will help ensure training participants are well-informed about career options and the potential for advancement.

Ensure learners have the right supports

To ensure learner success, programs should ensure that learners are connected to the supports needed to help them progress on their career path. This includes logistical supports (such as help with finances or child care), academic supports (such as basic skills upgrading or tutoring) and personal supports (such as counselling). Our research also highlighted the importance of supporting individuals to “earn while they learn,” recognizing that many face financial issues related both to the cost of training and the loss of income while in training. Providing these supports will also help increase access to training pathways for those who may currently face barriers to entry (such as skills gaps and financial barriers).
Prototype Model

Drawing on our research, we have developed and refined a prototype training model designed to support ECAs who are currently working in the early learning and care sector to upgrade their training through a combination of prior learning and experience assessment and an accelerated academic program. The model design was led by Mothercraft College of Early Childhood Education which currently offers an ECE diploma program that qualifies graduates to become Registered ECEs. Consultations with employers and ECAs were also used as an opportunity to receive feedback on a draft version of this model. LEF and Mothercraft in collaboration with other partners are leading the continued and further development with a plan to test and implement this accelerated learning model.

The program is designed to support eligible ECAs to obtain their ECE Diploma in ten months while continuing to work. Focus group respondents were enthusiastic about the ten month time frame, which is significantly shorter than many other program options.

Program participants do not need to have previously completed any formal ECA training.

The program has three key features:

1) A standardized admissions process comprised of:
   a. Application package
   b. Entrance exam
   c. In-person interview
   d. Employer support letter
   e. Observation of current practice (for those with less than five years of experience and/or no formal ECA training)

2) A 10-month program that incorporates:
   a. Ongoing part-time study including day, evening and/or Saturday classes,
   b. 4 weeks of employer release time to attend full-time classes

3) Supervised and evaluated placement practicums for students who do not have experience with particular age groups (i.e., infant, toddler, and/or preschool). Placements will ideally be with the ECA’s current employer.

The proposed program offers a shorter program length than Mothercraft’s existing ECE Diploma, and a significantly shorter program length than Cambrian College’s comparable 2-year ECAD program. The program also offers flexible class attendance options and individualized practicum placements. The table below provides a comparison of the three programs:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Prototype Model</strong></th>
<th><strong>Mothercraft ECE Diploma</strong></th>
<th><strong>Cambrian College ECAD Program</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Program Length</strong></td>
<td>10 months (4 weeks full-time, remainder part-time)</td>
<td>1 year (full-time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Admissions Requirements</strong></td>
<td>Application package, in-person interview, employer support letter, observation of practice (if applicable)</td>
<td>Application package, in-person interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Class Attendance</strong></td>
<td>Flexible (Day, evening, and Saturday classes available)</td>
<td>Monday-Friday, 9am-4pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Placement Requirements</strong></td>
<td>Placements only required for age groups the student does not have experience working with</td>
<td>3 placements required, one for each age group (infants, toddlers, and pre-schoolers)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on feedback from ECAs and employers about the proposed model, Mothercraft and LEF are working to incorporate the following key considerations:

**Admission**

The admission process, including the entrance exam, could pose a challenge to some ECAs with essential skills or language skills gaps. To address this, Mothercraft and LEF are developing options to support individuals who may need additional supports before they are ready to pursue this program. This support may include referral to ESL or upgrading programs and career counselling and assisting applicants to explore options to upgrade their skills and reach their career goals.

**Program length and full/part-time structure**

ECAs expressed some concerns about the ability to secure employer release time to participate in the four weeks of full-time study required by the program and questioned whether they would be required to use vacation time or take unpaid leave. The employers who participated in interviews all reported that they would be willing to provide four, one-week blocks of release time, but several were uncertain about being able to provide paid leave. LEF and Mothercraft are committed to working within their own organizations to support paid release time for participating ECAs and to working with other employer partners and ECAs to explore options for supporting leave options.

**Class timing and location**

ECAs generally reported that classes offered on Saturdays or in the evenings would be feasible options.
They expressed some concerns about ensuring adequate time and transportation options to attend classes, particularly in the evenings, and many highlighted the importance of having an option to attend classes close to where they work and live. Recognizing this, Mothercraft and LEF are planning to offer transportation supports and are exploring potential delivery sites at LEF where many ECAs will be able to easily attend training. The ECE Qualifications Upgrade Program also offers travel grants that could be used to support participants who need to travel to attend classes.

Wraparound supports

In addition to assistance with the key barriers identified in this report, particularly finances and transport, focus group respondents requested support to prepare them to be in an academic environment. For instance, respondents discussed preparation supports for the admission package written exam and interview, as well as assistance with general study habits. In particular, respondents with lower level English skills requested support with reading and writing skills. Mothercraft and LEF are working to develop options for ensuring learners have the supports they need.

Opportunities for System Change

Promising local initiatives that focus on removing barriers to advancement can act as building blocks for the development of a more comprehensive Career Pathways approach in the sector. A fully realized Career Pathways approach would offer a clear, consistent, pathway of education and training requirements that align with career advancement opportunities. Our research highlights several opportunities for system change that could promote Career Pathways in early childhood education. Box 2 provides examples of system-wide Career Pathways initiatives undertaken in other jurisdictions.

Build stackable, portable credentials aligned with progressive career opportunities

Effective Career Pathways models offer post-secondary education and training that is organized as a series of steps leading to successively higher credentials and employment opportunities. While some elements of this model already exist in the sector, there are opportunities to continue building a more consistent system-wide credential pathway that clearly maps connections between multiple levels of training and aligns this training with progressive career opportunities. This could include a standardized, widely recognized ECA training credential that builds the skills needed for entry-level positions and provides a clear bridge into further ECE training. It could also include additional credentials or programs that build skills related to supervision and management that are clearly linked to leadership roles in the sector (such as director of a child care centre). However, funding would need to be made available to assist those who could not afford the ECA credentialing necessary to enter the field.

Develop stronger links between post-secondary institutions and employers

Our research identified a need for training in the early childhood education sector to be more closely aligned with employer needs. Stronger links between employers, post-secondary institutions and other training providers across the province will help ensure that educators have the skills and knowledge needed to be successful on the job. These linkages are also critical for building employer buy-in to
support learner advancement and ensure that credentials are linked to career advancement opportunities.

Align funding and supports

A key component of successful Career Pathways models is the provision of supports that ensure learner success at each point along the pathway. Moving forward, there are opportunities to align funding and support systems to ensure that learners at all stages of the early childhood education pathway have the help they need, including financial help with training as well as academic counselling, career advice, and connections to other community supports.

Collect detailed workforce data and evaluate progress

Regular collection of data on the early childhood education workforce, including wages, education levels, and turnover rates, could help inform training approaches and make it possible to evaluate progress in building a stronger and more sustainable workforce.

**BOX 2: SYSTEM-WIDE CAREER PATHWAYS INITIATIVES**

**Wales Childcare, Play and Early Years Workforce Plan**

Wales recently introduced a new early years workforce plan that clearly outlines a structured training and development route and a new suite of qualification levels for those working in the early childhood education sector.

The plan outlines five levels of qualifications, from Level 1 (introduction to the sector), to Level 5 (management-level positions). Each Level is associated with the completion of specific educational credentials.

The plan also commits to developing an enhanced recruitment framework for the sector with a focus on providing high quality career advice to those wishing to pursue a career in the sector. The goal of the recruitment framework is to recruit and retain high quality new entrants into the sector.

**US Early Learning Career Pathways Initiative**

The US Early Learning Career Pathways Initiative is a project focused on mapping out the current state of career pathways in the ECE field and identifying promising practices to support states and local organizations to develop and expand ECE career pathways systems and programs.

The project includes a comprehensive review of credentialing requirements and patterns and identification of minimum qualifications for workers in the sector, and profiles of approaches that are currently used to support education and training in the ECE sector.
Appendix: About This Project

Identifying the need for a new evidence-informed approach to ECE training

The partners involved in this project came together through an OCWI-led workshop process to explore the application of a Career Pathways model to the child care sector in Ontario. LEF and Mothercraft College of Early Childhood Education had recognized the shortage of qualified ECEs and identified Career Pathways as a potential promising solution to this issue. Given that a Career Pathways model has not been explicitly used before in the early childhood education sector in Ontario, the project partners recognize a need for further research and consultations to inform a prototype model design and to explore larger system-scale questions about the feasibility of a Career Pathways approach for the child care sector in the Ontario context.

Collaborating to conduct research

The project partners worked collaboratively to design and execute the research agenda for this project. Mothercraft College led the design of the prototype ECE training model, while LEF led consultations with employers. OCWI also engaged Blueprint-ADE, a non-profit research organization, to provide research support for the project. Blueprint led the ECA consultations in collaboration with LEF and Mothercraft College, and conducted the environmental and jurisdictional scan on existing promising practices.

Knowledge dissemination

To ensure that key stakeholders were informed about the project purpose and objectives, the project partners developed a short summary of the project, including the value proposition for various stakeholders and a description of the early prototype model, that was shared widely with stakeholders in government and the broader sector. LEF also presented about the project at a meeting of the Quality Early Learning Network.
References


The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada or the Government of Ontario.