

# Early Learning and Child Care Centre Pilot



Year one evaluation summary of access to quality child care at \$25 per day

Children's Services, Government of Alberta

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ELCC Centre Pilot Year One Evaluation Summary

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Children's Services contracted with R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., to conduct the evaluation of the ELCC Centre pilot program. A full evaluation report will be produced at the conclusion of the pilot.

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# Introduction

In November 2016, the Government of Alberta announced<sup>1</sup> \$10 million to make quality child care spaces more accessible and affordable through the Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Centre pilot initiative. Following a call for proposal process, the first 22 centres were announced<sup>2</sup> in April 2017. The three-year pilot program is demonstrating quality child care for children 0 to kindergarten with maximum fees of \$25 per day. Additionally the Alberta-wide pilot supports children and families by focusing on improvements to address gaps in the child care system.

As part of the grant funding, ELCC Centres are required to participate in an evaluation process to ensure the Alberta government learns from these centres and are able to accurately assess how best to move forward with this initiative.

The Ministry of Children’s Services contracted R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., an independent Canadian research firm, to conduct the evaluation of ELCC Centres. The evaluators obtained and examined data through interviews, focus groups and surveys with ELCC Centre supervisors, educators, academic partners and parents. For comparison, the evaluators also obtained and examined data through interviews and surveys of supervisors, educators and parents from a group of 22 non-ELCC Centres child care programs. The evaluators also had access to administrative data provided by the Ministry.

## Impact on Family and Child Well-Being

According to the evaluation, ELCC Centres have had a positive impact on family and child well-being, are providing children with a solid foundation for their growth and development and are improving children’s behaviour.

Parents are reporting they are able to exercise more freedom of choice regarding their career, work and school arrangements. The financial burden of child care has been significantly reduced, which is alleviating stress, providing peace of mind, and allowing parents to focus on making ends meet, pay off debts, save for the future and afford to do fun activities with their children.



*“We have more time to spend together as a family and I can enjoy our family time more because I am not stressed”*

ELCC Centre parent in focus group

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=44830170BF308-9EA1-1AF9-50DB244D1B2BFBF3>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=46616A6639019-C1E2-0965-1D7AB37C24E9632C>

## Improved Accessibility

As a result of the first 22 ELCC Centres, 362 new licensed child care spaces were created. Between March 2017 and March 2018, the number of spaces in ELCC Centres increased from 771 to 1,133 (up by 47%). This includes the spaces added in new and existing ELCC Centres.

13 of 22 ELCC Centres were existing child care centres.

The increase in spaces compares to a 10% increase (from 46,343 spaces to 50,972 spaces) in the number of licensed spaces in daycare centres across Alberta.

## Improved Affordability

According to the responses received, the average parent fees to enrol one child in an ELCC Centre were \$474 per month, compared to the provincial average of \$885 for licensed child care. 98% of ELCC Centre parents and caregivers who participated in the evaluation process were very satisfied or satisfied with the cost of child care at their ELCC Centre. In comparison, only 52% of non-ELCC Centre parents who were surveyed were very satisfied or satisfied with the cost of their child care.

For families who need support the most, the Alberta Child Care Subsidy program makes child care even more affordable. Parents who are participating in the ELCC Centre pilot program and are eligible for the subsidy pay a fee less than \$25-a-day, or no fee at all if they are receiving the full subsidy. Approximately 35% of parents at both ELCC Centres and non-ELCC Centres are receiving support from the Child Care Subsidy program.

*"It has alleviated my financial stress. I am able to keep my head above water and keep on top of my bills. I am able to make ends meet"*

*"I am no longer living paycheck to paycheck"*

ELCC Centre parents in focus group



## Improved Quality of Care

ELCC Centres are implementing mandatory quality improvements to ensure children and families receive the highest quality of care possible including the implementation of *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework*<sup>3</sup>. The framework guides the decisions early childhood educators make every day in providing care and learning experiences for children.

The framework is grounded in research and helps to create a common language across programs; one that respects diversity and uniqueness. It focuses on the uniqueness of childhood and considers learning and care with broad holistic goals for children's development and learning, highlighting the importance of play, relationships and family diversity.



*"There are so many different activities for our children to get involved in at the day care. We wouldn't be able to do or afford all of those different activities at home. Our children are exposed to many different experiences"*

*"I no longer feel guilty when I drop my child off. I don't have to worry about the quality of care my child is receiving."*

ELCC Centre parents in focus group

## Impact on Labour Force Attachment

As of March 2018, the availability of ELCC Centres supported an estimated 328 Albertans to enter or re-enter the workforce. 92% of parents said their children's enrolment at a child care centre enabled them to return to work or school.

*"I was able to go back to work; it wouldn't have made sense to go back to work without \$25 per day child care"*

ELCC Centre parent in focus group



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<sup>3</sup> <https://flightframework.ca/>

# Key Findings

The first year evaluation report on the ELCC Centres gives an opportunity to assess the initiative holistically, evaluate the effectiveness of the pilot, and address areas of need moving forward. The report also demonstrates how ELCC Centres are having a positive impact on children and families, outlines the challenges and lessons learned through the implementation of the pilot and whether there is a continued need for ELCC Centres. Below are some highlights from the evaluation.

## Outcomes

The ELCC Centre pilot has impacted family and child well-being in a wide variety of ways. The accessibility, affordability and quality of care have all contributed to reducing parent stress and providing them with peace of mind.

ELCC Centres have also contributed to reducing the financial burdens that families' face and enabled them to make ends meet, pay off debt, save for the future and afford to do fun activities with their children. Additionally, the ELCC Centre pilot has enabled parents and caregivers to return to school or work and to exercise more freedom of choice regarding their career and work arrangements.

## Progress towards improved accessibility

The number of children enrolled in ELCC Centres increased by 72%, from 729 to 1,251. This compares to a 12.3% increase (from 40,424 to 45,398) in the number of enrolments across all centres in Alberta.

ELCC Centres have also implemented a number of improvements to enhance accessibility. This includes ELCC Centres offering flexible child care to support parents who work or go to school outside typical business hours, supporting child care in rural communities to increase child care accessibility in remote areas, and collaborating with other service organizations for co-location or new partnerships for the delivery of child care.

## Progress towards improved quality

As of March 2018, 13 of the 19 opened ELCC Centres were accredited and the six remaining ELCC Centres were pre-accredited. Accreditation<sup>4</sup> promotes excellence in child care settings in Alberta and helps families choose the best care for their children. It is based on standards of excellence that reflect current research and leading practices to provide high quality child care over and above licensing regulations for children from birth to 12 years of age.

The majority of ELCC Centre supervisors reported that most, if not all, educators had been introduced to *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework*. The implementation of the framework is beginning to increase ELCC Centre educators' ability to support children through holistic child-centred goal setting, be responsive to children, and provide opportunities and learning environments that offer children the freedom of choice, exploration and expression.

## Progress towards improved affordability

As of March 2018, the average daily fee for day care programs in Alberta was \$40.69 (\$885 monthly). Parents in \$25-a-day ELCC Centres were paying significantly less - an average of \$474 monthly.

For parents receiving full child care subsidy, the average daily subsidy funding received was \$25.46. For these parents, the parent portion of child care fees in non-ELCC Centre child care programs was \$15.23 per day. With \$25-a-day child care at ELCC Centres, parents and caregivers who receive the full subsidy do not pay any monthly parent fees.

Some evaluation participants noted that the cost of child care was a 'huge issue' for middle-income families, because they earned too much to qualify for the child care subsidy but still could not necessarily afford the high cost of child care alongside the high cost of living. These few respondents explained that families with multiple children had to make choices about whether or not to return to work.

The affordability of ELCC Centres increased access for low-income families, increased labour force attachment, reduced family stress, and increased family disposable income for 'extras' (e.g. extra-curricular experiences).

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<sup>4</sup> [aelcs.ca](http://aelcs.ca) Accreditation of Early Learning and Care Services



## Beyond Year One

In December 2017, Alberta signed a bi-lateral agreement with the federal government providing over \$136 million in funding over three years starting in 2018/19 for early learning and child care initiatives. Alberta allocated this funding towards the expansion of the ELCC Centre pilot initiative.

In April 2018, the Alberta government announced<sup>5</sup> an additional 100 centres across the province. As a result of learnings over the course of the first year, the criteria for acceptance in the expansion contained new and revised elements including changes to the grant amount, the introduction of voluntary wage floors and changes to the requirement for space creation. While space creation is valuable, it was considered an asset during the evaluation of grant submissions. Some programs who would otherwise be good candidates to become ELCC Centres are limited by the physical space of their Centres and cannot create new spaces. All programs were encouraged to examine ways to increase child care spaces and/or child care enrolment.

The evaluation of ELCC Centres will be ongoing for the duration of the pilot and include an evaluation process for the 100 centres launched in 2018.

For more information on the ELCC Centre initiative and a full list of current locations, visit [www.alberta.ca/elcc](http://www.alberta.ca/elcc).



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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=55831E7798907-0829-FAC5-20E7520126A6410F>