

Monitor Assess Share

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION REPORT

An evaluation

Dr. David Philpott

April 2022



Cite this publication as:

Philpott, D. (April 2022). *Monitor. Assess. Share. The Early Childhood Education Report*. Philpott Consulting: St. John's.

CONTENTS

Evaluation Highlights	3
Introduction	5
Methodology and Limitations	6
Early Childhood Education Report: Background	8
What We Heard	11
On the Structure of the Report	11
On the Use of the Report	15
On the Impact of the Report	19
On the Future of the Report	21
Summary	26
Appendix A: Key Informants	28
Appendix B: Interview Questions/Survey	31

EVALUATION HIGHLIGHTS

Four cycles (covering 2011–2020) of [the Early Childhood Education Report \(ECER\)](#) have been published to date. Produced by the Atkinson Centre at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto, the ECER uses available data, focused on 21 benchmarks to track and assess provincial/territorial policies governing early learning and child care.

In October 2021, the Atkinson Centre commissioned an evaluation to inform future editions of the ECER in the context of past experiences and in light of the intended development of a [Canada -Wide Early Learning and Child Care](#) system. This new policy direction and accompanying increase in public investment will require comprehensive data collection and monitoring to promote children’s equitable access to quality programming and provide accountability for public funding.

Dr. David Philpott, a recently retired professor from Memorial University with an [extensive research and publication history](#), conducted the review. A total of 93 key informants representing four groups participated in the research: government officials in divisions of early learning and child care; academics and advocates; faculty in Early Childhood Education (ECE) training programs; and the ECER’s authors and funders, who provided background information, analytics and suggested key informants.

Current political context

There is excitement that years of advocacy are coming to fruition with the promise of a Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC)

plan. At the same time, there is universal concern that the federal focus on reduced fees and increased capacity may sacrifice quality. There is also fear that governments may downgrade standards or turn to poorly trained staff to address workforce shortages. The rapid rollout and specific targets in the CWELCC agreements heighten the importance of monitoring and public reporting.

Impressions of the ECER

Feedback fell across a continuum of opinion, predominately positive with a minority of critical comments. While there was an initial dislike of the “report card” feature of the ECER, comfort grew with each edition as trends emerged and progress became visible. Participants report using the ECER as a “road map” to inform their own policy and monitoring exercises. Support was highest among government officials who indicate they draw on it and its authors, who they refer to as “our go-to people,” for critical data and information about the sector. The benchmarks and scores have also earned respect and anchor the report in research. The provincial/territorial profiles, which feature regional initiatives and innovations, are well received as they paint a more comprehensive picture of each region. Respondents indicate

politicians monitor the report and it is routinely used and referred to in department presentations and cabinet papers.

The report has achieved significant distribution and usage, both nationally and internationally. It informs other research and has contributed to an interest in ECE outside of the sector, including among business organizations such as the Conference Board of Canada, the TD Bank, the Prosperity Project, and Deloitte.

Participants value the ECER and want it to continue, with one evaluation participant saying, “These are the momentous years in ECE...all eyes are on the next report.” There are also expectations that the report will adapt to align with federal/provincial agreements and will benefit from expanded data collection mandates. As another participant stated, “Some changes need to be made, but I think this will be a continuation and an enhancement of the fundamental mission of the ECE Report.

Recommendations:

1. In consultation with the Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Secretariat and provincial/territorial ELCC directors, revise the ECER indicators to align with Canada-wide ELCC Agreements and pending legislation.
2. Maintain neutrality through arms-length relationships with government and sector professional and advocacy organizations.
3. Create modules describing how to use the ECER in post-secondary education and professional learning.
4. Initiate conversations with Indigenous communities to capture the nuances of their cultural practices, teachings, and beliefs in the report.
5. Seek out increased print, broadcast, and social media strategies to further facilitate the report’s use.



INTRODUCTION

[The Early Child Education Report \(ECER\)](#) is produced by the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development¹ at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. It is now in its fourth iteration and has enjoyed growing attention in both the Canadian and international contexts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fragmented nature of child care in Canada, while demonstrating its vital support to labour market participation. A significant increase in federal investment in the sector, most recently through federal funding agreements with the provinces/territories (hereafter referred to as the regions), has moved the country closer to a pan-Canadian early learning and child care strategy. As a result, the regions are positioned to make dramatic improvements in the education and care of young children.

The attention that the sector is currently experiencing underscores the need for data collection and monitoring of increased public investment. In addition, scrutiny is needed in terms of the impact this investment is having on children's equitable access to child care and to program quality. It also points to the need for an evaluation of the ECER and the contribution it can make going forward.

The [Lawson Foundation](#) agreed to fund the evaluation, and a call for proposals subsequently went out through the University of Toronto. Dr. David Philpott was the successful candidate. Dr. Philpott is a recently retired professor in child development from Memorial University of Newfoundland with an [extensive research and publication history](#). In recent years he has been keenly interested in quality early childhood education as a way to proactively reduce the need for special education.

The four areas of interest for this evaluation were as follows:

1. Who is using this report and how is it being used?
2. What impact is it having?
3. Are the [benchmarks](#) helpful?
4. Is the ECER still needed, and if so, what should be considered for future editions?

¹ The Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development is a collaboration between the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and the School of Early Childhood at George Brown College, in partnership with the Centre for Excellence on Early Childhood Development at the Université du Québec à Montréal and the Science for Early Childhood Development at Red River College, Manitoba.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

This review relied on a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. An initial group of key informants (Appendix A) was identified, representing four distinct groups.

These four distinct groups are comprised of: government officials in divisions of early learning and child care, ECE policy advocates/researchers, faculty in ECE training programs, the ECER’s authors and funders. Participants were identified by the report authors (government officials and other stakeholders with whom they work in developing the ECER), the Lawson Foundation, the [Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation](#) (the report’s funders), and other leaders in the ECE sector.

The initial informants were emailed invitations to participate via written submissions, telephone interviews, or Zoom calls. Word of mouth expanded the number of informants as respondents either invited colleagues to join in their conversations with the researcher, or suggested others for the researcher to contact. The following table identifies the number of initial requests sent to the four targeted groups and the actual number of people interviewed.

Key informants

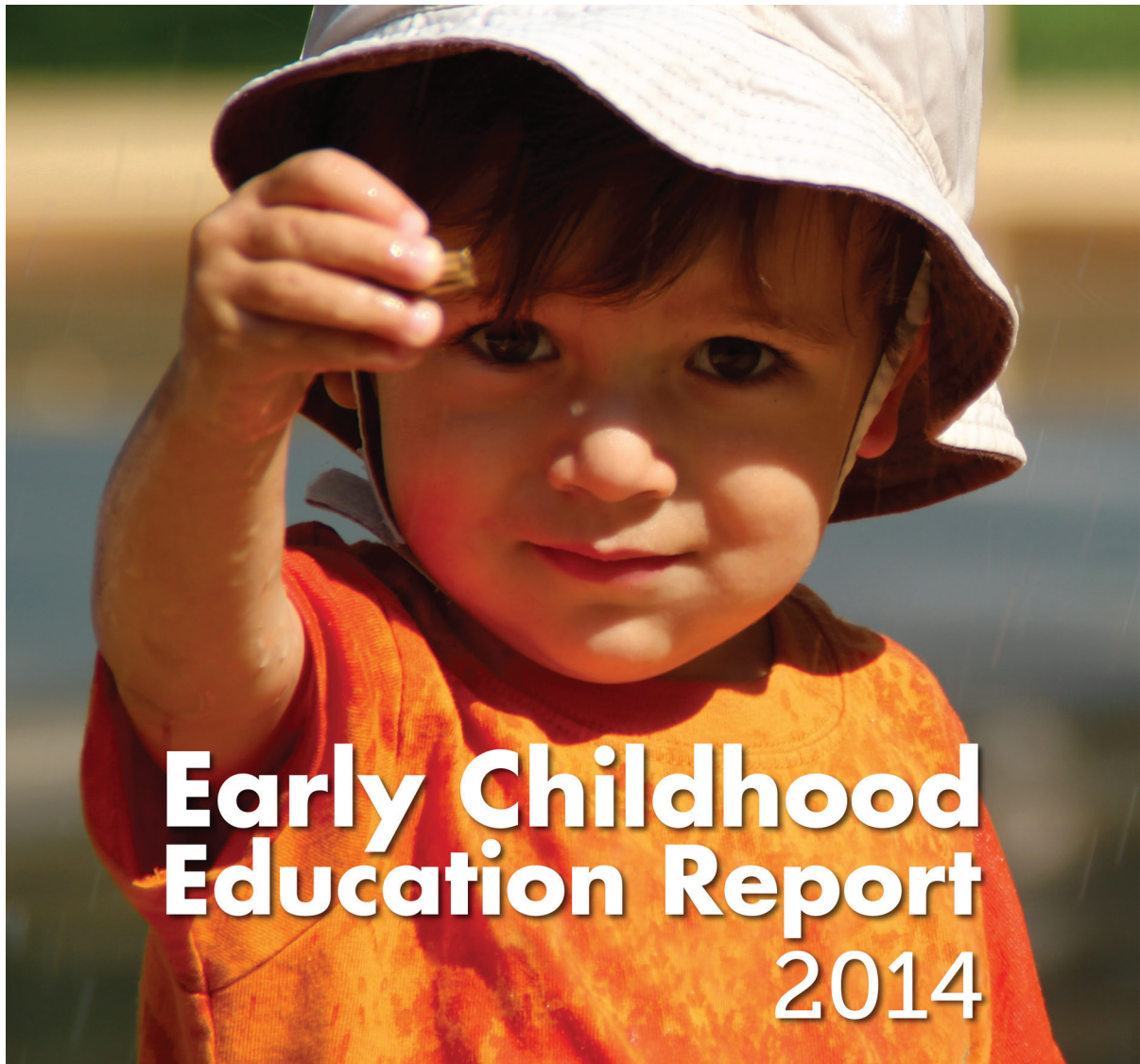
Target Group	Invitations	Responses	Actual Participants
Government officials in divisions of early learning and child care	13	13	25
ECE policy advocates/researchers	28	23	43
Faculty in ECE programs	28	16	16
The ECER’s authors and funders	16	14	14
TOTAL	85	66	93*

*Five respondents had dual roles crossing two groups (counted once as total respondents).

The researcher used a series of open-ended questions and a short survey for educators (Appendix B) to guide feedback around the four lines of inquiry. The majority of interviews took place over Zoom, while some informants opted for telephone calls. Conversations flowed easily with rich, thoughtful feedback. Several participants preferred to answer in writing, or supplemented their Zoom interviews with responses which ranged from detailed documents to emails on specific topics of particular interest to the respondent.

A limitation of the review was the lower response rate among faculty in ECE programs. A small

representative faculty group was identified for participation, attaining a 57% response rate. While a small sample was consistent with the intention of the review, the author suggests caution in interpreting these findings, in large part due to the diversity and breadth of ECE post-secondary education programs in the country (ranging from one-year courses at community colleges and private training institutions, to graduate and doctoral programs at universities). Faculty associated with universities were the most likely to respond and report using the ECER, this is understandable since their students are involved in research.



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION REPORT: BACKGROUND

Bilateral agreements with the federal government to strengthen early learning and child care are not new.

In 2006, the then-Liberal government had successfully negotiated similar agreements with all ten provinces, but those plans quickly evaporated after a snap federal election and a change in government. While the agreements with the federal government were never enacted, the regions did pursue, as much as possible, the planned initiatives to improve both access to, and the quality of, early childhood education. By 2010, policy leaders were noticing those improvements and a plan emerged to formally monitor these changes, believing that if improvements could be measured, they could be compared and monitored and demonstrate the possibilities. The idea for an Early Childhood Education Report was thus conceived.

The initial ECER² design was heavily informed by reports from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), [Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care](#) (2004, 2006, and 2007). It was structured around the OECD's description of the social, economic, conceptual, and research factors that influence ECE policy in 20 OECD countries. It outlined a number of policy lessons, and from those a series of basic requirements, or foundational features, emerged to characterize a quality ECE system.

A number of philanthropic organizations pooled resources to conduct an extensive review of monitoring tools and research, including reports by UNICEF, the Children's Rights Alliance, Campaign 2000, as well as those by individual US states and from Australia. The ECER developers also considered *The American State of Preschool Yearbook* at [The National Institute of Early Education Research](#) (NIEER), completed annually since 2003. That report identifies key features that must be in place for a quality system of early learning and care to be constructed. Each iteration of the NIEER report then monitors and reports on progress toward this construction.

The ECER developers settled on [19 benchmarks](#) where publicly available data was accessible. They selected the most advanced policies and/or practices in the country and used them to form the blueprint of the report. They organized the benchmarks under five categories: governance, funding, access, learning environments, and accountability. These are the "pillars and beams" upon which a quality child care system is constructed. The intention was to monitor whether these structures were in place and their subsequent evolution in each region of the country. Each of the five categories was assigned three points, reflecting the interconnection of the

² The *Early Childhood Education Report* (ECER) was co-developed in 2011 by Kerry McCuaig and Jane Bertrand. Subsequent editions of the ECER were authored by Dr. Emis Akbari, Kerry McCuaig and Daniel Foster.

five categories on ECE policy and outcomes, for a possible total score of 15.

To support communication, a scoring system was adopted to allow for quantifying progress in the regions and to ensure the ability to monitor over time. The benchmarks were meant as a gauge of growth towards a target. Grading systems are not unique to the ECER, used by many social justice organizations as well as mainstream institutions, such as the C.D. Howe Institute, the MacLean's university ranking systems, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and more.

While many standards of quality were identified, the authors were limited to those where data was both available and comparable. Data was collected from public sources such as Statistics Canada and provincial/territorial websites, and the authors worked closely with the regional directors of early years programs to collect, interpret, and present the data. Key informant interviews were included to ensure that the report was comprehensive and captured, as much as possible, the directions taken by the regions. This data contributed to a "Profiles" section in the report, a deep dive into each region that allowed the authors to more directly address noteworthy regional initiatives, innovations, and efforts that could not be captured by the benchmarks.

The initial version of the ECER was launched in the [Early Years Study 3 \(2011\)](#), published by the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation and supported by the [Early Child Development \(ECD\) Funders Working Group](#) and the [Atkinson Centre](#) (University of Toronto). The report then moved to the Atkinson Centre, where academic expertise could further review and improve the report's validity, refine its presentation, and ensure that it remained anchored in scholarly research. The intention was to release updates every three years to capture and report on policy changes. Initially, the territories could not participate because the data

was not available, but by 2017 all of the regions were included.

The report uses the term "early childhood education" and defines it 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 parent/child centres, childcare centres, nursery schools, preschools, or school-operated programs such as pre- or junior Kindergarten, pre-primary, école maternelle, and Kindergarten. Attendance is regular and children may participate on their own or with a parent or caregiver. When organized to support parents' labour force participation, early childhood education can also be a very cost-effective policy lever; returning socio-economic benefits greater than the service costs.³

The ECER differs from most other Canadian reviews of early childhood education and care in that it includes school-delivered ECE programs in its analysis. Other services that fall under regional child care legislation, such as family or home care and parent drop-in cooperatives, do not meet the report's definition for ECE and are therefore excluded when calculating the benchmarks.

The inclusion of school programs reflects the growing role education plays in providing early learning opportunities for preschool-aged children. It also allows for comparisons with ECE and child care systems in other OECD countries where schools are major providers of early childhood education.

While the report set out to follow the blueprint and monitor progress toward the construction of an efficient system of early education, it was also explicit in its goal to provoke an informed public discussion. Strategically, the authors established an accessible writing style with a graphic presentation of findings, allowing for quick overviews to ensure that the report would educate as well as document.

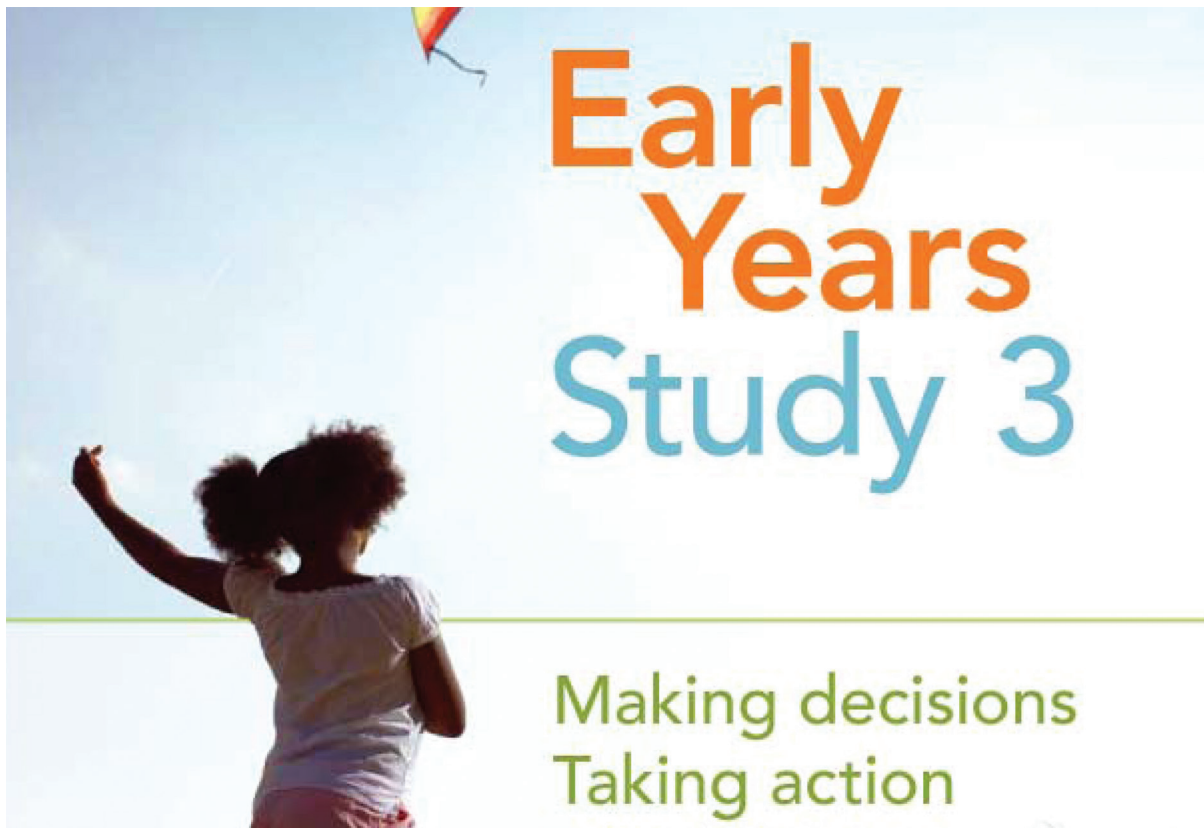
³ <http://ecereport.ca/en/methodology/>

Narratives explain the report and policy directions, while extensive notes and footnotes further clarify the data and identify limitations and challenges. An accessible website with additional resources was developed, and government briefings, presentations, conferences, and media interviews continue public conversations between reports.

The authors work closely with the regional directors in collecting the data and discussing its presentation. The directors are given an embargoed copy prior to release, and the authors work with them to clarify and explain their sections. Following the release of the report, the directors are brought together for discussion, to review the process and provide input into the report's evolution. Those conversations led to the [addition of two new benchmarks](#) for the 2020 report for a new total of 21, while the weighting of the scoring system remained the same.

Perhaps the best description of the report for this evaluation came from a respondent:

“The Early Childhood Education Report is designed for a specific purpose: to benchmark the performance of provinces and territories in funding, operating, and monitoring their early childhood education systems. It was designed following the concerns raised by the OECD in *Starting Strong* and particularly in relation to Canada's performance relative to Starting Strong criteria. Each jurisdiction gets a single total score out of 15 based on (now) 21 items, which roll up into five sub-scales. The strength of the benchmarking is its breadth, in two senses. Breadth in the sense that governance, funding levels, access, quality, and accountability mechanisms all contribute to the total performance of each jurisdiction as presented by the index. It is not enough to do well on one or two items — a jurisdiction must do well in all areas to get a good score. But breadth also in the sense that both licensed child care and Kindergarten in the school system are considered as part of early childhood education.”



WHAT WAS HEARD

This evaluation was conducted in late 2021 / early 2022 at a time of great enthusiasm in the early years sector following commitments made in the 2021 federal budget and the establishment of funding agreements with most provinces and territories.

Conversations were marked by excitement and optimism that years of advocacy had paid off, and that ECE in Canada is finally coming to fruition. Respondents felt that the COVID-19 pandemic had illustrated the need for a stronger system of early learning and care, and that the sector is enjoying unprecedented attention and recognition. As one participant stated, “These are the momentous years in ECE in Canada.”

At the same time there was nearly universal apprehension involving quality assurance, with concern that the federal push to increase spaces and reduce fees would lower qualifications, produce new poorly trained educators, and reduce standards. Participants stressed the importance of monitoring and reporting on the sector now more than ever. Undoubtedly, government attention to ELCC influenced the high response rate. Participants saw the conversation as timely and important.

Overwhelmingly, participants were positive in their feedback, although it was evident early in the review that it has taken four editions of the report for it to earn broad recognition and credibility. Unquestionably, this was influenced by both the excitement and concern emerging from the federal funding agreements as respondents now appreciate the need to monitor quality and report on it.

It should also be noted that very few participants provided suggestions for changes or criticism of specific benchmarks, and no themes emerged since no two respondents made similar comments. Specific feedback was forwarded (with anonymity) to the report authors for their consideration. Every opinion and voice were significant.

Feedback fell across a continuum of opinion, ranging from effusive to a few highly critical voices.

What follows is a summary of this feedback. As much as possible, exact quotes are used to allow the personal eloquence of the respondents to be heard. This is their evaluation of the ECER.

ON THE STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

Benchmark and Scoring System

The benchmark and scoring system proved to be the most frequently discussed aspect of the report. Respondents had mixed opinions, which they acknowledged have evolved over time. Initially, there was a fair amount of skepticism for what they felt was more like a “report card and a grade” than a checklist for building an early learning and child care system.

For example:

“It put us on the defensive and we had to explain low scores.”

“Being placed in a defensive position ensures accountability but it also becomes awkward. That’s as much a good thing as it is a bad.”

“Who were they to grade how well we were doing?”

“...the index suffers the same potential problems that any composite index does. The weight given to different components is somewhat arbitrary. The value for any item given to any jurisdiction is generally binary — yes or no — full marks or nothing for each item... this compresses reality.”

In the United States, the [State of Preschool Yearbook](#) at NIEER also uses benchmarks for comparing the individual states’ progress toward an effective system of ECE; however, they do not assign scores. In commenting on the ECER, a NIEER spokesperson stated: “The point system is difficult. We have avoided it but not entirely succeeded in that our ten benchmarks often are reported as if they are a scale even though we say each is independently but not equally important. One test is to see if there are other reasonable ways to allocate the points that many experts would be equally comfortable with and how this would change the score and rankings. My guess is that reasonable variations lead to different outcomes and that is potentially a problem.”

Given this, it was not surprising that the first few meetings of the directors of early learning and child care divisions, following release of the first report in 2011, were somewhat strained, with the authors having to defend the structure and the method. One respondent explained, “We were blind-sided by this. It was public before we knew what it was but yet we had to explain it.” However, respondents acknowledged that their perspectives started to shift with time, and even those who were most negative or skeptical

acknowledged that the report has improved and grown, earning higher credibility and respect. For instance:

“Over time it did what it set out to do — drive a conversation on what quality could look like here, how to get to a minimal level of care that we could expand on. It has persisted across changing governments and shifting political agendas. It has informed the public and put government in the position of having to account.”

“My initial skepticism for rigour and validity of the benchmarks and scoring system got thrown out as I watched how it functioned and how people used it as a conversation lever. It got people talking and wondering, and strategizing. If it is possible in that province, then it is possible in mine.”

A number of respondents expressed frustration with reporting median data that does not factor in nuances such as anglophone/francophone families, wealthy neighbourhoods/low-income areas, Indigenous communities, new Canadians, and urban/rural divides, especially as it relates to funding allocation and costs. Respondents cautioned that in regions with great population disparity, the binary nature of the benchmarks can be misleading. The concern was that these factors make the report less relevant or helpful to sub-populations. They suggested that the ECER authors consider geo-targeting data and documenting differences. The ECER relies on data that the regions collect and publish. There would need to be more extensive data collection and reporting to allow for a deeper analysis of these differences.

Another example of the limitations of using median data emerged for the benchmark that early child educators’ salaries should be two-thirds of teachers’ salaries. Although respondents agreed that a fair wage for early educators is pivotal to a quality system, outcomes for this benchmark have barely moved across the four editions of the ECER, despite increased government support for ECE wages.

The concern was that median salary is not helpful since the wages of early educators and teachers are heavily tiered to the levels of training.⁴

One respondent said, “Québec⁵ is the only province that meets this benchmark but it is not because they pay early educators well, but because they have the lowest teacher salaries in the country.” Another respondent pointed out that teachers are unionized and often receive salary increases with contract renewals which, along with online master’s degrees continuously raising teacher credentials, makes the benchmark “an impossible bar to reach.” One respondent pointed out that an even greater disparity is the absence of benefit packages for early educators: “People would stay in the field if they had fair benefits. They can get health insurance at Tim Hortons.” These respondents were also quick to point out that collecting the data to tier the salaries and comment on benefits will be a significant challenge.

Nonetheless, the vast majority of respondents, including those still uncomfortable with scores, acknowledged that the conceptual construct of the benchmarks is consistent with international and domestic evidence about the core requirements for a rights-based, quality, and accessible early learning and child care system. In addition, they felt the benchmarks promote accountability while monitoring progress. For example:

“Those benchmarks have scholarship behind them and have earned credibility.”

“The opportunity for cross-jurisdictional comparison encourages a vigorous process of advancement, demonstrating what is possible in practice and what is fair and achievable.”

“The language of benchmarks is incredibly important and helpful — it implies goal posts,

minimal levels, baselines. You hear people discussing them as a goal achieved or aspired to.”

“The continuity of those benchmarks is very much appreciated. They map the trail of progress. It’s very accessible and user friendly with great graphics.”

Interestingly, regions that score high reported that the scores allow them to defend initiatives, and they caution their ministries that if policy changes “we will lose the point and regress in our ranking.” Others made the opposite claim, saying that a simple policy decision could result in a higher score. For example, as one respondent said, “I have a love-hate relationship with those scores. I’ve grown to understand and appreciate them and know what they are, but I wish there was an easier way. But I suspect government likes them as they show progress. It is a well-organized source of data that can help inform those who are trying to make policy changes.”

All respondents were clear on one point: provision of any data on the sector, in pretty much any format, is welcomed because of the dearth of available data. There is a consensus that data drives and informs public policy and is increasingly critical to justify increased public investment. Here are some of the comments respondents made about the lack of data in the sector:

“The regions do not collect the same data in the same way, limiting analysis and comparison. There is little evidence of attendance rates, program site, duration, or quality of program/staff.”

“This is a sector that is really data poor. We are missing so many crucial metrics.”

“There is no federal department or agency to collect and analyze data on the early years

⁴ The two-thirds salary benchmark was established through a pay equity evaluation process, which determined a pay differential between the two positions based on educational requirements. The benchmark compares the top earnings of a qualified early childhood educator to those of an elementary school teacher at tier 5 seniority (the halfway mark in a 10 tier progression) as determined by collective agreements. Where regions do not report salaries in child care, the ECER uses Statistics Canada Job Bank data.

⁵ Newfoundland and Labrador reached the salary benchmark in ECER 2017. Quebec did not.

underscoring, by default, the importance of reports such as the ECER.”

In addition, the vast majority of respondents, even those who dislike its format, were quick to point out that ECER helps fill a void. As one respondent said, “The ECER mobilizes knowledge to inform conversations at community, regional, and federal levels.”

Many respondents held out hope that the federal funding agreements’ stipulation of data collection might afford an opportunity to add new benchmarks.

“Hopefully there will be enough common in those agreements to provide richer data and reporting. ECER has done an amazing job in profiling the sector where there is poor data collection. I can only imagine what they will be able to report on with richer data.” Two reporting areas widely seen as missing and where there might be potential for new benchmarks are affordability and quality monitoring. We discuss both of these topics later in this report.

Profiles

While a somewhat love-hate relationship with the benchmarks continues, the [provincial/territorial profiles](#) are very well received. Here, the ECER authors have the opportunity to step away from the limitations of reporting on aspects where public data is available and present regional initiatives and innovations, painting a more comprehensive picture of each region. Here are some of the comments respondents made about the profiles:

“We particularly appreciate the Profiles section. It tells the story of what is really happening and allows us to see what is being done in other regions that is unique and innovative and what trends are starting to emerge. It puts a finger on the pulse of what people are doing in other regions.”

“[The Profile section is] really crucial. It adds context and texture, it engages the provinces/territories to tell their own story.”

“The Profile section is really helpful as it shows the nuances and tells the story. While we may miss points, the authors are eager to work with us to help us tell our story and be proud of our initiatives and efforts. That is really important and has helped build a trusting relationship with the report.”

Role of the ECER Authors

Several respondents reported that this relationship with the authors has been central to their growing appreciation of the report. For example:

“The meetings with the directors have been so helpful. The authors really listen to us and work with us to collect data, interpret it, and use it to help us make more progress.”

“The authors are very kind and helpful. They walk you through what information is needed and are patient and understanding of our challenges in providing it.”

“We particularly appreciate receiving early drafts of our profile, where the authors want our input and response. It gives us time to review, check, and prepare for the release. They are very open to our involvement.”

“It is always obvious that they want us to be well presented and to do well. They really go out of their way to help us brief our ministry.”

“[The authors] are eager to hear what we are doing and they want to profile it. They’ve become our champions.”

It is evident that this trust in the authors has strengthened the respondents’ understanding of the limitations of the benchmarks, as well as their ability to inform how to move forward.

Report Autonomy

Respondents identified the report’s autonomy and independence as being central to its structure. Being completely independently funded allows the authors to be seen as not aligned with any

political party or government. This neutrality also allows civil servants to engage with the report's authors and politicians to be less suspicious of agendas. For example:

"They have worked across all parties and changing governments, maintaining neutrality and being apolitical despite very political and rapidly shifting agendas."

"We trust the report and can argue that these people have nothing to gain or lose in presenting this. It is research-based and not a political lobby effort."

Report Format

There was also widespread support for the format of the report, with respondents describing it as being accessible and clear, very well-organized, and easy to follow. For instance:

"The accessible language has proven essential. Stats presented and explained in a way that the person on the street can engage with it is exceptionally helpful. Communication has been its biggest asset."

"They have improved the graphics so much, making access so fast. The report improves with each new version."

"In many ways it is a master of marketing the early years landscape in this country."

"For many, probably most consumers of the ECE Report, it presents data in a very approachable and digestible way, with ready visual comparisons between different jurisdictions in the multiple charts it contains."

Participants were also asked if the report duplicated other monitoring and reporting systems; the vast majority said that the ECER is a unique report. A few respondents referenced [Early Child Education and Care in Canada](#) by the Childcare Resource and Research Unit (known as the CRRU report), but felt it was a totally different document: "ECER fills a unique role, it's

value added. CRRU report also presents helpful data, but in a totally different way. The reports don't compete but complement each other."

Limitations of the Report

A few respondents raised concerns about the report's ability to capture the nuances of Indigenous cultures. For example: "In these days of truth and reconciliation, what is missing in the report is recognition that how we provide quality ECE in Indigenous communities is radically different from the rest of the country. ECE is not one size fits all...As we work to decolonize our communities, that really requires that we rebuild and revitalize the cultural values that have always provided strength and resilience to those communities. When we are talking about supporting the early years, we have to be talking about supporting the cultural and language development of children, to make sure that their identities are not just being safe-guarded in their early childhood experiences but are being valued and recognized. We need to have cultural practices, teachings, and beliefs deeply embedded in pedagogy and curriculum. This has to be a part of early child programs going forward."

ON THE USE OF THE REPORT

As respect for the ECER has grown, so has its use. Quantifying and qualifying use is complicated by shifting models of collecting analytics and a move to a new website. Nonetheless, patterns are evident and the respondents clearly articulated how they use the report. Chart A identifies the number of unique visits to the ECER website from 2014 to 2021.

A: Annual unique visits to the ECE website

2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
14,605	20,883	20,810	13,133	48,832	36,016	39,344	51,256

On average, 65% of these visits were made by users in Canada, leaving 35% as international. For a report that is so specific to Canadian policy, such a consistently large international audience is interesting. This pattern has not changed since analytics started to track it in 2017. An international audience is also acknowledged in Academia.edu, a research-sharing platform, which identifies the ECER as being referenced 1,122 times in 189 universities from 90 countries in 2021. This profile is impressive for a report that targets policy influencers and decision-makers.

The Atkinson Centre has a strong social media presence which, while not exclusive to the ECER report, does reference it. The Atkinson Centre

weekly e-Newsletter has 1,159 subscribers, as well as 2,106 followers on Twitter, 720 on Facebook, and 127 on YouTube. Other social media accounts held by the report's authors are also very active.

These numbers tell only part of the story of the reach of the ECER. The report has also been referenced in many publications and reports, which significantly extends its reach at a global level. A number of articles in Conversation Canada, an independent source of news from the academic and research community, are based on ECER data. This illustrates its global reach, as shown in Chart B.

B: Articles in Conversation Canada

Article Date	Reads	Republished	International Reads
August 15, 2021	8,256	17	37%
June 3, 2021	3,772	20	38%
May 11, 2021	2,379	8	37%
March 29, 2021	11,509	31	68%
June 22, 2020	10,766	22	36%
October 19, 2020	5,617	26	40%
March 4, 2019	20,789	23	71%
February 19, 2019	13,245	39	27%
February 7, 2018	25,365	17	28%

It is difficult to measure this wide “Doppler effect” of the ECER, but it can be estimated. Other reports and documents that have relied on data from the ECER illustrate this effect:

- [The Preemptive Nature of Quality Early Child Education on Special Educational Needs in Children](#) was viewed over 1,800 times. It went on to be profiled in a special edition of the scholarly journal [Exceptionality Education International, 29\(3\) 2019](#), where several articles blending ECE and special education were viewed over 2,100 times in 28 countries, mostly by students and researchers conducting their own research.
- [Ready for Life](#), a report by the Conference Board of Canada, which relied heavily on the ECER, has over 8,300 unique views and has been reposted numerous times.
- The ECER was featured prominently in [Early Years Study 4](#), receiving significant national and international attention with nearly 100,000 visits since its release.
- [UNICEF, 2019 Canada Index of Child and Youth Well-being](#) was informed by the ECER and was downloaded over 2,000 times.
- The ECER is well referenced in the [Science of Early Child Development](#) out of Red River College, which is used by over 50 Canadian colleges and universities in pre-entry, diploma, undergraduate, and graduate programs as content for online and in-person courses. Two provinces have purchased open-access to the resource, allowing anyone living in those provinces full access.
- The ECER is heavily referenced in at least two textbooks that are in wide usage in early childhood education programs.⁶

How the Report is Used

Respondents were quick to point out that the frequency of reads, downloads, or publications tell only part of the story about how this report

is used. The Atkinson Centre continues to house the report, and the centre’s [website](#) has become a valuable resource hub pushing information through its weekly e-Newsletter, profiling timely resources and publications, and monitoring policy. The Atkinson Centre’s [Policy Monitor](#), provides regular updates on early childhood programs and policy across Canada, by region.

Respondents find the Policy Monitor helpful and accessible, but they were quick to add that the staff and the authors of the report have also become a valuable resource. Respondents were clear that it is this instant access and willingness to converse that informs the field and drives the narrative. For example:

“ECER makes knowledge so accessible and the authors are such a resource. There isn’t an email that goes unanswered. The speed with which they respond is remarkable. It is so helpful and important that we have this access.”

“[The authors] have become my go-to people.”

As mentioned earlier, following each iteration of the ECER, the regional directors of early learning and child care are brought together to discuss the report. Initially those meetings focused on explaining methodology, but recently the meetings have become a forum for strategizing policy initiatives and sharing ideas. As one respondent said, “The report is a calling card, an invitation to join a discussion that starts with the assembling of the data and expands to an increasingly wide public discourse. It is during these discussions that change takes root.”

Government Officials and Policy-makers

Respondents indicated varied ways in which they use the report, ranging from “I don’t use it at all” to “we use it all the time.” Officials in the various ministries/departments responsible for early learning and care stood out as the

⁶ Bertrand, J. (2021). *Becoming and Being an Early Childhood Professional*. First Edition. Toronto, ON: Cengage; and, Bertrand, J. & Gestwicki, C. (2016). *Essentials of Early Childhood Education*. Fifth Edition. Toronto, ON: Nelson.

most vocal in how the report is used quietly but consistently. One region reported that the report is watched very carefully by “the administrative side (deputy minister, assistant deputy ministers) and on the political side (Office of the Minister), as well as the professional staff of the ministry.” They went on to elaborate that briefing notes, a fact sheet, a feature in an internal policy-watch newsletter, and an internal analysis document are all prepared on the report and circulated within the ministry.

Many respondents who have been in government since earlier editions of the ECER and who reported initial skepticism — and even dislike — of the report, now clearly say that it has earned credibility. Several added that governments are sometimes reluctant to acknowledge how closely they follow the report because they want ownership for the changes that they are making. For example:

“...even though ECER’s vision is resonating... verbiage is constantly filtering up.”

“I use the report constantly in writing briefing notes, but often I don’t cite the report but I’ll use the original source. ECER is so well referenced that it’s a guide on where to find what in each province. It’s one of the few places where data is rolled up in such an accessible format.”

“We use that report constantly. The quick access to numbers, stats, and trends allows us to pull from it in briefing notes for the minister, in presentations to cabinet, in policy papers. It is our map forward.”

“What I love is that you can pull it up on an iPhone in a meeting or, more importantly, in a hallway waiting to go into a meeting. It’s incredibly useful.”

“When I look at the ECER I see usable parts that are accessible and easy to understand. I always feel like I’ve learned something new every time I visit the report.”

The phrase “roadmap” surfaced repeatedly in discussions on how the report is used. Respondents continually described it as a roadmap for policy and a visual guide for trends and improvements, more prominently in regions that have made significant improvements: “It’s not that we follow the report, but we follow Canada and the report maps the way. It tells us who is doing what, it identifies trends and possibilities and we set our goals by that.” The few regions that reported less use of the report added that it is very important for it to continue and that they use it to follow what is happening in other regions.

Government officials also expressed varied ways in how they use the report. For instance:

“The ECE Report has, over the course of its four editions, become an important fixture on the research/knowledge scene for early childhood education in Canada.”

“I use it to rattle cages, and display the huge amount of variation in child care in this country. The report has helped close that variation by naming it, tracking it, and showing how others are closing it. It is incredibly helpful.”

Respondents maintained that in 2017, the regions used the report to influence the federal bilateral agreements; by 2020, the federal government was also using the report to influence their negotiations. In addition, The Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, various ministers, and the Office of the Prime Minister requested meetings with the ECER’s authors. The *Early Years Study 4*, which heavily relied on the ECER, was mentioned in the 2021 federal budget, and there is evidence that the benchmarks informed the bilateral agreements with a focus on non-profit child care, increased access, improved wages, and training for ECEs. For example:

“It’s incredibly helpful that the report illustrates the for-profit and public split in this sector and the impact of that. It shows what we are up against as we try and build a national strategy, especially

with a minority government, which will fall at some point...people like to think that we have scored a touchdown with those agreements but we haven't. We just have the ball in our hands."

"The Québec translation is excellent, with great terminology and quality of language. This is imperative to it being seen as high quality and credible in Québec."

Educators

Although the lowest response rate was among faculty, those who did reply said that they use the ECER in their teaching and have it embedded in teaching resources. Graduate level programs, which delve into policy development in greater detail and where student research is more prolific, appear to use it the most. A number of these respondents suggested that a module on how to use the report in the academic world would be helpful. Other comments included the following:

"It is a great teaching tool in post-secondary programs to communicate key targets for change for early learning systems."

"Students particularly like it as it is an accessible document that synthesizes all of the major pieces that come together to make a system work."

While endless examples of how the ECER is being used emerged, respondents acknowledged that the report is not used enough and they want to see it used more, especially as we move into future editions. We address this concern later in this report.

ON THE IMPACT OF THE REPORT

Impact on Public Awareness

Respondents were unanimous in stating that they have witnessed a groundswell of interest in, and awareness of, early learning in Canada over the last ten years, which has led to significant policy changes. While they acknowledge that the ECER was a part of raising awareness, it was by no

means the only contributor and it is impossible to assign credit or impact. For instance, increased advocacy has helped inform the conversation and fuelled a narrative to advance the sector. Numerous champions were named as part of this, including a number of philanthropic foundations, but again, identifying contribution and attribution is seen as an impossible task. Regardless, as one respondent said, "It is evident that the report has been an important asset in a policy advancement cycle linking evidence, advocacy and progress across Canadian provinces and territories, with the authors playing a key role in this cycle."

The importance of this conversation became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which unmasked the fragile nature of early learning. In their work with governments the [Prosperity Project](#) (a charity founded to support Canadian women impacted by the pandemic) relied on the ECER. For example:

"When economic leaders and advocates needed to know what quality ECE should look like, the ECER was there. Business leaders appreciated that quality was defended by stats and research, that a Canadian version of ECE is reflective of international standards articulated by the OECD. While we might not have used it before, we certainly did when the pandemic threatened health care and industry because moms could not come back to work."

"ECER is stellar. It enlightened us on what quality early learning is and how it differs from child care and why that difference was so critical. In many ways, the federal government was already there and they were relieved to see that the Prosperity Project was there as well. We didn't have to convince them."

Another respondent commented on this change in public awareness: "The broad movement is much better than it was 10 years ago; people have a much better understanding that we need a publicly managed and monitored system of early learning. While the pandemic shifted the

narratives back to child care for labour market participation, the public knows that it has to be quality. Reports like the ECER, [Toronto First Duty](#), and the Early Years Studies have informed the public of the science behind quality.”

Impact on Government and Policy

There is little doubt that the report has pushed for a certain model of early learning as proposed by the benchmarks, and that has had an impact on conversations guiding the regions toward its vision. This was especially evident among officials who were consistent in saying that governments want to show progress. For instance:

“It is much more of a road map than a report card — used in a continuous, ongoing way. When you look at the changes that have occurred in the provinces you see that people are following the map. They trust it.”

“We made a lot of progress, and comms [communications] people in our ministry really ran with the good news story.”

“The impact of the report has been strong because governments have felt the need to respond to its findings and up their game. Public policy has tended to follow the report, but much more among ‘progressive’ provincial and territorial governments than among ‘conservative’ ones. The reports have certainly helped to define in the public mind what good early childhood education policy is and will continue to be.”

As the use of the ECER report has increased over the four editions, so too has the perception of its impact. The report needed time to earn credibility, recognition, and influence. For example:

“The report has grown in popularity and respect. It has earned legitimacy.”

“The editions have worked — they have built on each other to improve children’s lives and continuously inspired a fluid conversation that has shifted the narrative in the country.”

“The report card/index has been successful in getting provinces and territories to care about how they score on the items composing the index. There have been lots of reforms in some of these items across jurisdictions over the four ECE Reports and these four reports are, in some important measure, responsible for this success.”

“Initially it was definitely seen as a lobbying tool but the fact it has persisted and evolved, that the provinces and territories are clearly using it and that governments are listening has helped it earn credibility. The Atkinson team has really helped this. They are eager to show progress and want to work with us. They are very helpful, not just in developing the report, but on sharing information and resources.”

“You know it has had an impact when the minister asks about it. It is closely watched.”

“We so underestimated the importance of this report. It has been an incredibly worthwhile project and we didn’t see that from the start. We knew it would fill a void but we didn’t factor in the conversations it would fuel and the public awareness it would raise. Over the years it has become increasingly evident why it is important.”

Mapping the changes in the regions across the four editions shows how the report can readily show policy change. The chart C below outlines the change in ECER scores by region between 2011 and 2020. Most regions have shown progress in ECE policy and practice as reflected by scoring. It should be noted that the Yukon entirely revamped its parent fee and educator compensation model on April 1, 2021, too late to be captured in the 2020 edition of the ECER.

C: Change in ECER scores

Year	NL	PE	NS	NB	QC	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC	NT	NU	YT
2011	1.5	9.5	5	4.5	10	6.5	7.5	4.5	3	4.5	n/a	n/a	n/a
2014	6	10	6	8	10	8.5	8	6	4.5	7	6.5	n/a	n/a
2017	8.5	11	8.5	9.5	10	9.5	8	7.5	6.5	7	8	5	5.5
2020	9.25	11.5	9.5	10.75	11.75	8.5	8.25	6.5	4	8.75	9.75	5	5
Change	+7.75	+2	+4.5	+6.25	+1.75	+2	+7.75	+2	+1	+4.25	+3.25	-	-0.5

Impact on Education System

The ECER explicitly links the early years with K–12 education to create a continuum of learning with consistent pedagogy, curriculum, and professional learning. A closer look at the benchmarks relevant to this shows there has been significant growth in this area, with ample evidence that public policy follows the report, especially around public education.

The report hoped to reduce the schism between the early years and primary education. In 2020, all of the provinces met the benchmarks for ECE curriculum frameworks in use, or in development, that are aligned with Kindergarten curriculum. Nine regions require educators in Kindergarten programs to have ECE qualifications. In 2010, only eight regions had curriculum frameworks, five were aligned with the Kindergarten, and only two required ECE qualified educators in Kindergarten. Then six regions had full day Kindergarten compared with ten in 2020. In 2020, eight provinces had integrated early years programs into the ministry of education, up from four in 2011. By 2020, half the four-year-olds in the country were in some version of a junior Kindergarten, while three other provinces are implementing plans to follow suit.

“Play-based learning is also creeping into primary education as other teachers are witnessing the pedagogical practices of their Kindergarten peers and the impact on students.”,

said one respondent. This has shone a light on the provision of ECE through the platform of the neighbourhood school. It has promoted what is possible for schools to do and documented the child development outcomes resulting from it.”

The Prosperity Project was also clear in speaking to the focus on education:

“The last number of years have seen a groundswell of public awareness of quality early education and how it differs from child care. It’s been burbling up for a while now, but the pandemic gave us a huge wakeup call for how fragile children’s lives are. Who would ever have thought that going to school, at any age, would become such a political football? We have learned that the right to an education is more fragile than we want to admit in this country and we must act. We can never be in this position again.”

ON THE FUTURE OF THE REPORT

While there were a range of comments in terms of the structure of the report, how it is used, and its impact, there was near unanimity on the importance of it continuing. Undoubtedly influenced by concern for the impact of the federal agreements on quality, respondents felt that now, more than ever, public monitoring and reporting are crucial to the sector. In this light, the ECER is seen as the only report that articulates what quality ECE is, monitors the regions’ progression

toward it, and holds governments accountable. It has taken four editions for the report to earn this level of credibility and recognition, but now that this stature has been achieved, respondents want it to continue. For example:

“If there was ever a time for this report, it is now.”

“Governments have been ideological in their approach, and this report tends to hold feet to the fire and map a progression of improvements. Going forward, this report will be critically important to monitor an increased public investment in ECE. The foundations who support this have served a vital role, albeit a defacto one, in holding feet to the fire and publicly monitoring and informing the impact of this. The 2023 report will get the most attention. 2019–2023 are the momentous years for this sector, from the devastation of COVID-19 to the federal investment. How will the needle move and what moved it?”

Interest in the upcoming 2023 report reflects this call for increased scrutiny of the sector. Comments included:

“All eyes will be on the next iteration.”

“2023 will be such a spotlight year.”

“2023 will be a bellwether year for the report.”

Respondents felt that with the increased federal investment in early years and the COVID-19 pandemic, the next report “will be the most scrutinized of them all.” A range of audiences will be considering the 2023 report:

- The federal government, which is now much more cognizant of the report, will be looking to see the impact of their investments.
- The provinces and territories that have been following the report will be looking to see how much improvement they have made with the influx of federal monies.
- Policy advocates will be looking to see how much regression occurred because of the pandemic and whether the federal investment mitigated that regression.

Even provinces that were less enthused about the report want it to continue. As one respondent stated, “I don’t use the report, but it is extremely important that it continues. We need these researchers and advocates to continue this work, to maintain the neutrality because governments change over time and this data is critical.”

Expand Benchmarks

While support was strong for the report to continue, there was almost equal impetus that it needs to continue to evolve, as it did with the addition of new benchmarks in 2020. The ECER was established as an on-going report, a living document with the authors constantly seeking input for revision. One identified area for future change is the addition of a benchmark to determine whether regions have a quality monitoring plan in place. Availability of data was seen as a possible obstacle for this benchmark, but there is optimism that, with a push for better data collection, the ELCC agreements might offer new possibilities to expand the benchmarks, within acceptable OECD standards.

Quality Monitoring

Quality monitoring was top of mind for nearly all participants. Concern that rapid expansion of child care spaces necessitates cross-Canada scrutiny, the unique role of the ECER in articulating, monitoring, and reporting on quality is appreciated. These concerns were underscored by a growing labour shortage, declining birthrate, and an aging population. For example:

“In the rush for more spaces, will quality slide? In the push for more ECEs, will training slide to lowest minimum standards?”

“We are already in such a recruitment/retention crisis for early educators that increased demand threatens to exacerbate it. We can’t afford to lower standards or churn out poorly trained educators to ensure more spaces.”

“The care economy will grow and migrant workers will fill that shortage, as is happening

in Québec. This is extremely dangerous to the early years sector where quality is essential. Lowering qualifications to increase space is extremely dangerous and would not be tolerated in any other profession. This has to be closely monitored.”

Respondents described qualifications of staff, salary, and curriculum framework, all of which are monitored in the ECER, as “proxies” or “surrogates” for quality, but increased public investment warrants increased scrutiny of these factors. Many respondents again referenced the Québec experience in illustrating the need for diligence in quality monitoring. For instance, one respondent stated, “Quality has to become a tangible marker. We have to track it better, especially with an increased focus on increasing space.”

While the ECER has articulated what quality means, there is concern whether it can continue to be the default quality monitoring medium, as it is independently funded with a limited budget and resources. In addition, several respondents called for a watchdog organization to support the work of the Atkinson Centre and push the federal government to use the report in monitoring the return on their investment. Another suggestion was for a national Child Care Advocate to operate at arm’s length from government but with a mandate to monitor and report on the sector. However it gets structured, advocacy and scrutiny were strong themes:

“Governments can’t evaluate or monitor their own investments objectively. An independent group, such as the Atkinson Centre, is better suited to do this and report on it.”

“The group needs to push for a scientific data approach to inform public policy. This is not to be critical, in any way, of the work Atkinson is doing, but the sector is going to outgrow Atkinson’s ability to do this, and certainly philanthropic groups’ ability to fund it.”

“An advocacy platform can be funded by philanthropic groups if the feds fund, at arm’s

length, the collection, analysis, and dissemination of the data. This will ensure neutrality and a standard of scientific rigour.”

“The existence of the report is not enough; it needs more visibility with a government relations strategy on the federal level.”

“Atkinson needs to be more overt in pushing the federal government to look to the report and use it more strategically.”

“Atkinson has been too humble in promoting this excellent work. They need to become more overt on how and why to use it.”

Indigenous Communities

A topic for careful consideration in future editions of the report is increasing the attention paid to the unique needs of Indigenous communities:

“Indigeneity is the cornerstone of any program serving Indigenous children, otherwise how will they know who they are as a people? We have to carefully consider how we foster first language and the cultural association necessary for identity otherwise it is a continuation of assimilation.”

“In this day and age this has to be a priority — to look at Indigenous-specific approaches and embrace them. How this is revitalizing language and culture and resilience. We have to paint this picture, that this is a strategic investment that will begin to not only address the wrongs of the past, but rebuild the strengths that many of our Indigenous communities need revitalized...There may even be a need for a separate report to look at this.”

Impact of Federal Agreements

Many respondents felt that it is inevitable that the report will eventually have to align, in some way, with the reporting structures presented in the federal agreements. While details of those agreements continue to emerge, people expect consistency among the regions and in required data collection and reporting processes. At the

same time, several pointed out that the agreements prioritize increased space, greater inclusion, and more accessible fees, while the ECER monitors the construction of a framework upon which to build a quality system. For example:

“There might be overlap between the vision of ECER and that of the federal agreements, but I doubt there will be a perfect match. The next ten years are going to be marked by intense political activism and any metric to inform that activism is going to be critically important. Comparing the provinces/territories further supports that activism, and unmasks priorities and spending directions.”

“Much is changing and much will change in the next years because of the huge federal commitments made to early learning and care. I think there will be tremendous interest in the next years in reports that chart the progress of provinces and territories toward (a) the goals that the federal budget has outlined and that forthcoming federal legislation will describe, perhaps in detail, and (b) the goals that the provinces and territories have outlined in their Action Plans and in the agreements signed with the federal government.”

Government officials were particularly articulate in discussing how reporting requirements for the agreements will dominate their work in the years ahead:

“Our world has totally changed with the bilateral agreements that come with their own framework and benchmarks that we have to be accountable to. Our parameters are now set by those agreements and we have targets to meet, and publicly report on, by 2025.”

“The bilaterals will set the direction and are setting a new set of benchmarks and while there is commonality there are differences, good and bad. ECER might have to change some to reflect that. The federal focus is on access and inclusion and we have to meet those expectations.”

“...to demonstrate that [meeting requirements of greater inclusion of diverse students], we will have to label kids to show increased inclusion, which is the antithesis of what we are about. We aren’t interested in the child’s ethnicity, diagnosis, or economic status of the parents, but we will have to be in order to show that we are meeting this new benchmark in the country. That is going to be difficult.”

“I think it would make sense for the ECE Report to align itself with this job of assessment more explicitly. That probably would mean a rethinking of the set of benchmarks and how to measure them (probably not in a binary way). And it would imply placing a larger emphasis on affordability than at present.”

Affordability

The theme of affordability surfaced in many conversations. For instance, one respondent stated, “The ECER focuses on the quality of early childhood services. But, presumably as a result of this focus, it deals very little with the affordability of early childhood services of different kinds. This is a somewhat odd omission in the current context, where the key driver of early childhood policy at the federal level is the desire to make early learning and child care much more affordable than it is at present.”

With the federal commitment to an average of \$10 a day child care by 2025/26, respondents were vocal that this is a somewhat misleading aspiration. Others pointed out that \$10 a day is still not affordable for many families, especially single parents, marginalized populations, or those with a number of children. Publicly available data is not currently available to have a benchmark on this, but as more data begins to be amassed there is hope that this might change. For example:

“It is a median cost and there will be variability, especially in larger cities where costs are already so much higher.”

“Regions will have to continue fee subsidies, and access to those supports will have to be monitored closely.”

“Affordability as experienced by parents (including the generosity of subsidies as well as direct operating funding) is a major factor in the overall health of the system, and this receives less attention than I would like.”

“[At present,] ...the affordability of early childhood services only enters the index and benchmarks in a couple of ways: indirectly through measures of the number of children using services, and more directly through the amount and focus (e.g., direct funding, set fees) of the funding policies of different jurisdictions. But

affordability as experienced by parents is not part of the benchmarks and scores.”

“The ECE Report would bring a lot to the table in these kinds of assessments. It would bring a strong emphasis on all the dimensions of quality, ensuring that this does not get lost in the rush to affordability. And, it would bring the emphasis on including both Kindergarten and licensed child care services into the definition of early learning and child care, which is important.”

“I’m actually more worried now than ever. What we really need is system change, qualitative data along with quantitative numbers. Will these federal dollars change a system or expand what we already have?”



SUMMARY

In the years since the ECER was first conceptualized, and across its four editions, the report has earned an important place in the landscape of early childhood education in Canada.

The ECER has contributed to a growing public discourse and a groundswell of support for quality and accessible child care, a conversation that peaked during the COVID-19 pandemic when the fractures of existing structures became a tangible block to restarting the economy. The report has also contributed to the federal agreements that are now serving as the foundation of a Canada-wide child care approach, long sought in this country.

While respondents' opinions varied in how important a role the ECER has played in this shift in public policy, there is ample evidence that the "blueprint" presented in the report, in many ways, now characterizes the emerging system. At a time when the quality of early child education is top of mind for all stakeholders, the ECER is seen as the only "road map" in Canada. While by no means perfect, and despite initial skepticism and some continued criticism, it has earned credibility; the

benchmarks that it uses are increasingly seen as the "pillars and beams" of a new system of early learning and care.

Respondents were very clear in wanting the report to continue. As one respondent said, "We have 13 experiments for early learning in this country, each trying to learn from, and build on, the others. There has to be room to compare the outcomes of these experiments and share what each is learning. Mitigating the disparities that emerge, as well as those innate to using median data, is crucial. The ECER does this and allows a longitudinal study to emerge across its numerous iterations."

In many ways, the rich conversations that characterized this evaluation have also informed the report's future. While the intention of this evaluation was not to develop a set of recommendations, several themes nevertheless emerged for consideration.

1. In consultation with the Early Learning and Child Care Secretariat and provincial/territorial ELCC directors, revise the ECER benchmarks to align with Canada-Wide ELCC Agreements and pending legislation.

Additional data could allow the report to expand, and consequently monitor and report on outcomes in greater detail. This would also help the report align with the data collection mechanisms in the federal agreements and to further solidify the sector around common policy initiatives. There is little doubt that an iterative report that is attuned to emerging research, as the ECER is, will explore areas of possible expansion.

2. Maintain neutrality through arms-length relationships with government and sector professional and advocacy organizations.

Respondents were also clear that neutrality is central to the report and central to the credibility it has earned. In a rapidly expanding sector that needs public monitoring and reporting, this impartiality cannot be lost. Funding for the report has to prioritize that independence and impartiality.

3. Create modules describing how to use the ECER in post-secondary education and professional learning.

The development of modules on how to use the report in the academic world, in both curriculum and research, would not only raise the profile of the report, but would encourage and facilitate additional research on the sector.

4. Initiate conversations with Indigenous communities to capture the nuances of their cultural practices, teachings, and beliefs in the report.

Indigeneity was an impactful conversation in this evaluation. While the few who spoke to the issue were passionate, the fact that so few of the respondents spoke to it at all underlines the importance of giving it careful consideration, especially in this era of truth and reconciliation. The report has to take a deeper dive into this.

5. Seek out increased print, broadcast, and social media strategies to further facilitate the report's use.

A public awareness campaign, coupled with advocacy targeted at the federal government, reflects great interest in “holding feet to the fire” on monitoring quality, but also influencing future data collection for a sector that desperately needs it.

The respondents gave credit for the success of the report to its authors who, despite a turbulent start, have earned respect and appreciation, especially among government officials who help provide data for the report and who then have to defend and use it in their departments. Such a theme is somewhat surprising for a report that is intended to hold governments accountable for the development of public policy. It does speak

to shared goals and the universal recognition of the importance of this work. As one respondent stated, “It is important for the ECE Report to carefully determine what its role will be going forward in this transformed early childhood landscape. Some changes need to be made, but I think this will be a continuation and an enhancement of the fundamental mission of the ECE Report.”

APPENDIX A:

KEY INFORMANTS

Maureen Dockendorf	Government of British Columbia ⁷
Elizabeth Lewis	Government of British Columbia
Asmeret Ghebremedhin	Government of British Columbia
Teresa Butler	Government of British Columbia
Shelley Kapraelian	Government of Northwest Territories
Colin MacDonald	Government of Yukon
Rachel Clow	Government of Nunavut
Jerri Chugg	Government of Alberta
Derek Pardy	Government of Saskatchewan
Shelly Marques	Government of Manitoba
Rob Raos	Government of Ontario
Cheryl Chung	Government of Ontario
Maxx Hollott	Government of Ontario
Joanie Migneault	Government of Québec
Alexandre Baillargeon	Government of Québec
Mélissa Parent	Government of Québec
Claude Lefrançois	Government of Québec
Nicole Gervais	Government of New Brunswick
Diane Lutes	Government of New Brunswick
Josée Nadeau	Government of New Brunswick
Anne Marie Smith	Government of Nova Scotia
Denise Stone	Government of Nova Scotia
Doreen Gillies	Government of Prince Edward Island
Carolyn Simpson	Government of Prince Edward Island
Mary Goss Prowse	Government of Newfoundland and Labrador
Linda White	University of Toronto
Charles Pascal	University of Toronto
Elizabeth Dhuey	University of Toronto
Gordon Cleveland	University of Toronto
Jan Pelletier	University of Toronto (Retired)
Christine Maclean	Mount St. Vincent University
Jessie Lee McIsaac	Mount St. Vincent University
Pam Whitty	University of New Brunswick
Michel Boivin	Université Laval
Pierre Fortin	Université du Québec à Montréal
Isabelle Vinet	Université du Québec à Montréal

⁷ Responsibility for early child education and care rests in various ministries and divisions. For ease of recording, government officials were listed with their provincial/territorial government.

Christa Japel	Université du Québec à Montréal
Elin Ibrahim	Red River College Polytechnic
Rob Santos	Red River College Polytechnic
Laurie Kocher	Capilano University
Margo Greenwood	University of Northern BC
Armine Yalnizyan	Economist and Atkinson Fellow on Future of Workers
Craig Alexander	Deloitte Canada
Matthew Stewart	Deloitte Canada
Karen Grey	City of Toronto
Ashley Burger	City of Toronto
Michelle Schurter	Chatham-Kent Municipality
Tove Mogstad Slinde	Ministry of Education, Norway, former chair OECD ECEC Network
Stephen Barnett	NIEER, Rutgers, University
Kristal LeMartret	Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development
Lisa Wolff	UNICEF
Annie-Claude Fournier	Association québécoise des CPE
Shirley Tagalik	Aqqiumavvik Society, Nunavut
Jessica Lue	YMCA, Vice President
Lorrie Huggins	YMCA, Ontario
Linda Cottes	YMCA, Ontario
Amelia Swanson	YMCA, Ontario
Sibel Cicek	YMCA, Ontario
Fiona Cascagnette	YMCA, Ontario
Susan Emerson	YMCA, Manitoba
April Morton	YMCA, New Brunswick
Cathy Poole	YMCA, Vancouver
Annalise Yuzanda	YMCA, Northern AB
Christine Avery Nuñez	Future Skills Canada
Mary Shortall	Federation of Labour (Newfoundland and Labrador)
Skye Taylor	Association of Early Childhood Educators (NL)
Don Giesbrecht	Canadian Child Care Federation
Morna Ballantyne	Child Care Now
Katie Davey	Public Policy Forum
Robin Liu Hopson	People for Education
Cathy Bennett	Prosperity Project
Penny Collette	Prosperity Project
Laurel Broton	Prosperity Project
Margaret Norrie McCain	Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation
Jane Bertrand	Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation and U of T
Marcel Lauzière	Lawson Foundation
Christine Alden	Lawson Foundation
Laura Manning	Lyle S. Hallman Foundation
Lynn Baptist	McConnell Foundation
Neria Alyward	Jimmy Pratt Foundation
François Lagarde	Chagnon Foundation
Jean Marc Chouinard	Chagnon Foundation
Christopher Smith	Muttart Foundation

The Atkinson team who suggested key informants and provided data, history, and context:

Jennifer Jenkins	Atkinson Centre, University of Toronto
Patricia Chorney Rubin	School of Early Childhood, George Brown College
Kerry McCuaig	Report author, Atkinson Centre, University of Toronto
Emis Akbari	Report author, Atkinson Centre, University of Toronto/School of Early Childhood, George Brown College
Daniel Foster	Report author, Atkinson Centre, University of Toronto
Stacey Mudie	Atkinson Centre, University of Toronto

Four individuals who asked to remain anonymous.

APPENDIX B:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/SURVEY

Interview Questions for Government Officials

Is the structure of the report appropriate and efficient?

1. Do the benchmarks and scores accurately reflect the status of early childhood services in your province/territory? Why?
2. Is this structure an appropriate way to present the data?
3. Does the provincial/territorial profile contained in the report offer a broader picture of what is happening in your province/territory?
4. Does the report help make cross-country findings more accessible?
5. Are the developers of the report responsive to feedback?

How is the report used?

6. Who pays attention to the report?
7. Is the report helpful in your work?

What impact has the report had?

8. Has the report helped inform early learning and child care policy in your province/territory?
9. Has the report promoted greater collaboration between child care and other early years programming and school based programs i.e. Kindergarten?
10. Is the report useful as an assessment of early learning and child care policy and practice across Canada? Is it redundant to other similar reports?

What considerations need to be made for the report's future?

11. How do you see the report evolving in the years ahead?

Interview Questions for Researchers/Policy Advocates

Is the structure of the report appropriate and efficient?

1. Do the benchmarks and scores accurately reflect the status of early childhood services in Canada?
2. Is this structure an appropriate way to present the data?
3. Does it help make cross-country findings more accessible?

How is the report used?

4. Is the report respected as research-based and credible?
5. Who pays attention to the report?
6. How have you used the report? Has it been helpful?

What impact has the report had?

7. What has been the impact of the report?
8. Has public policy followed the report?
9. Is the report useful as an assessment of early learning and child care policy and practice across Canada?

What considerations need to be made for the report's future?

10. How do you see the report evolving in the years ahead?
11. Is it redundant to other similar reports?

Survey for Academics

[The Early Child Education Report](#) released by the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto is now in its fourth iteration and has enjoyed considerable attention in the Canadian context. The time has arrived for an evaluation. With the recent federal investment in early years programs, a review is particularly timely to help inform and guide future editions.

The evaluation is being conducted by [Dr. David Philpott](#), retired professor of education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Any questions or concerns can be forwarded directly to him at: david@davidphilpott.ca. While key informants who contribute to the evaluation will be listed alphabetically in the final evaluation report (unless individual anonymity has been specifically requested), at no point will any individual comments be attributed to individual key informants. Complete anonymity is assured, and all documentation will be destroyed as per standard research practice.

Part of the evaluation explores how the report is being used in the academic world, both in teaching and research. As someone who has taught early child education at the post-secondary level, you have been identified as a key informant. You are asked to share your thoughts on two areas: how the report is being used in the academic world and your perceptions of the impact of the report. The two questions are open ended with some probing questions for you to consider in forming a response. The survey should take about 10–15 minutes to complete. Your answers can be entered directly into the text boxes provided and returned to the evaluator as either a PDF or WORD document. Attachments will be separated from the sender's email for later analysis. The only identifying information on the document is province/territory of origin, to explore regional variation.

Your province/territory:

Use of the report:

Have you followed the Early Childhood Education Report?

How is it being used in post-secondary education programs?

How is it being used in research/writing, both student and your own?

Impact of the report:

What impact has the report had in educator preparation and research?

What impact has the report had on shaping public policy for early years programs in your province/territory?

Do you wish to add any other thoughts or feedback on the Early Childhood Education Report?

Your time and insight are very much appreciated. Thank you.