



LOWERING THE BAR: How Reducing Early Childhood Educator Qualifications Threatens Child Care Quality

The shortage of qualified early childhood educators (ECEs) has stifled space expansion efforts under the [Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care](#) (CWELCC) plan. This scarcity of educators has caused some Ontario policymakers to look for shortcuts, including questioning the need for a two-year diploma to qualify as an ECE. Reducing educator qualifications or other de-qualification strategies, such as increasing ratios, are not solutions. ECEs are critical to positive child and family outcomes and are the [foundation of a high-quality early learning and child care](#) system.

CURRENT EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR ECES IN ONTARIO

A two-year [diploma](#) in early childhood education from an accredited college in Ontario provides graduates with the [knowledge](#) and experience to effectively support children's learning and development. ECE students also learn to identify vulnerabilities and recognize children who may be at risk of harm.

In year one, students study the foundations of brain and behavioural development, health, nutrition, and safety. They are introduced to curriculum, pedagogy, professional practice, and the building of relationships with children, families, and their communities. Under the supervision of a registered early childhood educator, students:

- obtain hands-on experience in co-designing curriculum for child-centred, play-based learning;
- learn how to respond to children's unique needs and interests; and
- practise positive behaviour guidance.

An ECE diploma enables graduates to identify vulnerabilities and recognize children who may be at risk of harm.

In year two, students dive deeper into curriculum and learn how to apply their knowledge in early childhood settings. They gain a more mature understanding of working with children and families from diverse backgrounds, refine their professional practice, and begin using professional learning strategies. This is their opportunity to develop a more holistic approach to the early years by learning how to:

- incorporate land-based learning and Indigenous ways of knowing and being;
- develop anti-racism, anti-oppressive, and decolonization approaches to practice;
- promote and participate in community collaboration; and
- incorporate related policies, [legislations](#), and the [code of ethics and standards of professional practice](#) in their work.

Their year-two field placements align with academic expectations and include

- engaging with parents, as well as community organizations and resources;
- a heavier focus on diversity and inclusive curriculum;
- planning for individual versus group learning environments;
- incorporating land-based learning; and
- taking on more leadership roles within the early years program.

The richness of the two-year diploma cannot be compressed without losing foundational knowledge that is required to provide safe and high-quality early years programming for children and families.

When programs closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, students lost many essential experiences. Numerous child care programs no longer accepted students due to pandemic restrictions. In addition, colleges had to adjust placement experiences to accommodate centre closures. The impact of this is still rippling throughout the sector. Many directors and service system managers report reduced professionalism among new graduates, which in some cases has led to increased incidence of serious occurrences.

HOW ONTARIO COMPARES TO OTHER PROVINCES AND TERRITORIES

ECEs and Non-RECEs

[No jurisdiction in Canada](#) requires **all** individuals working directly with young children in regulated child care settings to hold post-secondary credentials. The minimum international standard recommends that at least two-thirds of staff working with children complete **degree**-level training in child development and early education.

[Ontario is one of only four](#) jurisdictions in Canada where positions recognized in ratios do not require any training. The only legislated requirements for non-RECEs are a police background check and medical clearance. All other provinces and territories have at least some mandatory orientation for all staff working with children.

Minimum training leading to ECE [certification](#) varies from a one-year certificate in New Brunswick, British Columbia, and the Northwest Territories, to a two-year diploma in the remaining nine provinces and territories. Nunavut currently has no legislated early childhood education training requirements. Ontario is also among those provinces and territories that do not provide additional recognition for educators with degrees.

The ratio of certified to uncertified staff refers to the proportion of staff working in licensed child care who must hold legislated levels of training specific to early childhood development.

For infant and toddler groupings, Ontario requires only one-in-three staff to hold a diploma. For older age groups, the legislation stipulates one-in-two. Given the low concentration of trained staff, quality can only suffer if training is reduced.

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Quebec’s auditor general documented the impact of downgrading educator qualifications in a 2024 report. During the pandemic, Quebec reduced the ratio of trained staff from two-thirds to one-third. Evaluations found a sharp increase in the number of facilities that failed to meet government quality standards. Over 21% of publicly managed centres and a shocking 59% of its private centres [failed](#). The report also identified a sharp increase in inappropriate child handling.

Program Directors

Manitoba is the only jurisdiction with [additional training requirements for program directors](#). Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, and Ontario require minimal hours of experience in addition to the basic diploma. The remaining jurisdictions have no additional requirements above and beyond that of an ECE. Quebec, British Columbia, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut do not reference supervisors in their legislation.

In Ontario, a program director must be a registered ECE with two years of experience working with the age groups they will be overseeing. Being responsible for a centre’s financial viability, human resource management, and pedagogical leadership necessitates knowledge and training beyond what is currently legislated.

[A recent study of the Ontario early childhood workforce](#) found that almost 95% of director respondents have been registered with the [College of ECE](#) for less than five years, demonstrating the low level of leadership experience. Reducing educational requirements for ECEs also means reducing the qualifications of leadership.

Workforce shortages have coincided with an increase in director approvals (permission to fill a position with someone who does not have the legislated training and/or experience), even in manager positions. This further contributes to reduced program quality.

DE-QUALIFICATION ACROSS CANADA

Qualifications are under review across Canada. Alberta’s accreditation program, which encouraged the hiring of qualified staff, was ended. In Ontario, those with a recreation and leisure diploma can now be considered the qualified person in a room within certain age categories. Although individuals with diplomas in recreation and leisure *may* have certain relevant skills, they are not part of the [registered profession](#). They therefore lack accountability to the [code of ethics and the standards of professional practice](#) that registered ECEs must meet.

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It has taken decades to professionalize the early education and child care sector in Ontario. This work has improved the quality of programs for children and their families. The CWELCC plan is an opportunity to build on these gains. The price of access without quality is ultimately paid for by children.

Ontario could take a page from Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia. Both provinces are routing their CWELCC dollars into higher wages and good benefits to keep qualified educators working in the sector. They are also using innovative recruitment strategies to grow the workforce.

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