

VALUING THE EDUCATION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS



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Starting Strong III (OECD) confirms what those working in the early learning and child care (ELCC) field have long known: “well-educated, well-trained professionals are the key factor in providing high-quality early childhood education and care.” Yet despite the importance of the role and its connection to quality, there is no consensus in Canada on what educational standards constitutes a “well-educated and well-trained professional” and who may use the professional title “early childhood educator” (ECE).

Provinces and territories have developed their ELCC systems and staffing requirements over decades of independent stewardship with limited federal oversight and need for uniformity. However, times are changing: the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) plan is striving to create a national ELCC system, in part by establishing a national baseline of common measures and standards.

The [2023 Early Childhood Education Report](#) reveals a complicated maze of registration and certification levels with varying educational requirements for those working in ELCC programs across Canada. This current patchwork of credentials will make the process of establishing common standards a monumental task—a task that, if not carefully approached, risks lowering the educational standards in some jurisdictions to align with the lowest common measure.

A closer examination of certification levels reveals that, in most jurisdictions, the title “ECE” refers to anyone working with children in ELCC programs regardless of their level of training. Furthermore, in four jurisdictions, individuals with fewer than two years of post-secondary education may not only call themselves ECEs, but may also be counted as “qualified staff” for the purposes of staffing ratios. Only Manitoba, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, and Quebec make a connection between education and professional title and reserve use of the ECE title for those who hold a minimum of a two-year diploma.

Ontario is the only Canadian jurisdiction that both defines who can call themselves an ECE and restricts the use of the title in [legislation](#). It is also the only jurisdiction where ECEs are granted the privilege of self-regulation through the College of Early Childhood Educators. With this authority, ECEs are empowered to define the standards of their profession and establish a minimum educational requirement.

Identifying the minimum professional education in Ontario was a robust process. An appointed group of ECEs considered what skills, attitudes, and judgement they would need to plan, deliver, and assess quality ELCC programs. They also considered what level of education would produce ECEs who are able to scaffold learning through play-based approaches, nurture the developing brain, and support the socio-emotional growth of young children during one of the most sensitive periods of human development. Ultimately, they determined that the two-year diploma program is the minimum threshold for safe practice in Ontario. Some jurisdictions, but not all, have come to the same conclusion.

ECEs are unequivocally the backbone of ELCC programs; ensuring that anyone who uses that professional title is well-trained and well-educated is key to achieving quality. As a national ELCC system advances through the CWELCC, there is an opportunity to do just that—however, it will require resisting the urge to align with the lowest common measure, in favour of building an infrastructure that raises all to a standard of quality.

