

# CHILD CARE IN NORTH FACES UNIQUE CHALLENGES



**DR. EMIS AKBARI**  
ATKINSON CENTRE SENIOR POLICY FELLOW /  
GEORGE BROWN COLLEGE PROFESSOR AND PROGRAM COORDINATOR

***"I feel like we have been forgotten in this equation"***

The Knowing Our Numbers study of the Ontario early childhood education workforce has just [released its findings](#) on the status of the sector in Northern Ontario.

Workforce challenges in the North are unique. Its small population is spread across a vast geographical area that spans two time zones. Its land mass covers 90% of the province but is home to only 5.1% of the population. Low population density, high cost of food and building supplies, transportation barriers, extreme weather conditions, seasonal and shift work, and workforce shortages in other sectors all impact child care operations. Delivering child care services to Indigenous communities presents additional challenges related to historical and ongoing systemic inequities.

The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement aimed to address access, affordability, and inclusion. Almost all child care programs in Ontario's North joined CWELCC, however its implementation has been complicated. Expansion targets and associated funding allocations set by the province often fail to address the specific needs of this vast and diverse region.

I travelled to five Northern Ontario communities that participated in the study to conduct focus groups. My goal was to help ensure the voices of those who live and work in the region—which are often diluted in province-wide surveys—were included.

Staffing shortages are even more pronounced in the North, I was told. There is burnout across the board in a sector still dealing with the trauma of the COVID-19 epidemic. Centres rely heavily on director approvals (permission to hire staff without the necessary training). Director approvals are also seen at the supervisor level—a role requiring administrative and pedagogical leadership that is often predictive of program quality.

Waitlists have increased under the CWELCC agreement, yet some regions report operational capacity as low as 40%. Many times, it's "all hands-on deck." Daily, centres must repurpose head teachers, along with EarlyON and enhanced staff (who are there to support children with disabilities), to maintain legislated ratios. And sometimes even these measures are not enough. A single staff absence can lead to room closures, especially infant rooms, as operators balance staff shortages with disrupting the fewest number of families.

The impact on children with disabilities is particularly distressing. About 45% of directors in the North report having to send children with disabilities home due to staff shortages—nearly double the provincial average of 26.6%. Some have de-enlist children altogether. Child care for children with [Jordan's Principal](#) funding, intended to guarantee services to Indigenous families, isn't available when educators can't be found.

The vast and variable geographic and demographic differences in Northern Ontario mean a single province-wide approach to policy can benefit some, but to the detriment of others.

Directors of some francophone centres told me they are operating without a single French-speaking educator, while Indigenous educators are snapped up by employers who can offer higher wages and more benefits. The province's wage floor of \$23.86 per hour for registered early childhood educators has done little to attract or retain staff in the North. It underscores the need for wage policies that

recognize the unique cultural and linguistic contributions of francophone and Indigenous educators. These educators are essential to providing equitable access to early education for traditionally marginalized communities.

Expansion funding is also exclusionary. Unlike urban areas, where real estate can be leased or purchased, northern and remote areas need capital funding to build. This is not possible with the current funding models.

The list goes on, pointing to the need for northern-specific solutions for staff training, recognizing actual operational costs, addressing transportation barriers, and more.

The CWELCC agreement is an opportunity to elevate the status of early education and care in Canada. However, a cookie-cutter approach to implementation may increase the inequity gaps it was supposed to address.