

UNDERSTANDING ONTARIO'S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION WORKFORCE



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Knowing Our Numbers (KON) is a comprehensive, province-wide study involving the College of Early Childhood Educators and 43 out of 47 children's service system managers in Ontario.

Almost 6,000 educators responded to surveys targeted to RECEs, non-RECEs, program directors, and home child care providers. The data were supplemented by regional focus groups, service system analysis, and related demographic and labour force information.

The sector is far from monolithic—it is impacted by differences in geography and organizational structure. As is the norm for studies of this type, respondents are likely to be RECEs and more vested. When their answers are put in the context of the other data, they reveal a workforce under stress and ill-supported to meet the demands placed on it.

Most pressing is the severe shortage of qualified staff. Key informant interviews reveal areas without a single RECE for over 3,000 children attending licensed child care. Shortages are particularly pronounced in the north and in French and Indigenous-led centres, where trained educators gravitate to jobs in schools or with government.

While educator shortages impede expansion efforts, they also impact program delivery. A single staff absence can force room closures. The dearth of replacement staff requires directors and support staff to step in, diverting them from their administrative and leadership duties. Over one-third of directors say they fill in for program staff at least three times a week.

Burnout plagues the workforce. Educators often deal with high levels of stress and mental health challenges, both their own and that of the children and families they serve. The constant demand to manage behavioural challenges without adequate support leaves many questioning their career choice. Only one-third of respondents see themselves remaining in the sector.

High turnover further exacerbates workforce burnout. As staff leave, the remaining educators are burdened with additional responsibilities, leading to a vicious cycle of burnout and attrition. Not only is this situation detrimental to the educators' well-being, it also negatively impacts the children who experience a revolving door of caregivers.

Expectations that the \$13 billion delivered to Ontario under the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement would bring relief from stagnated wages have gone unmet. Only a handful of RECEs received the \$1 per hour offered in 2023, which brought hourly earnings to \$19. Non-RECEs, who are more likely to earn below the threshold, are not eligible for the payment. Compared to other jurisdictions where educators saw their wages increase by as much as 60%, wages for Ontario's child care workers increased by a modest 3% between 2020 and 2023.

Wage disparities are evident across different regions and operators. On average, a \$7 per hour wage differential separates RECE earnings in public programs from those in for-profit programs. Unionization appears to play a significant role. Being a member of a union adds \$2.20 to the hourly wage rate of RECEs working in all types of licensed child care. A multi-country study by the OECD shows, wage rates correlate with job satisfaction, stress levels, and the ability to retain staff.

The insights gathered through KON are invaluable for shaping policies and practices to support the early years workforce. The initiative's collaborative approach, involving multiple stakeholders and leveraging local expertise, ensures that the findings are relevant and able to promote evidence-based policy responses.

For more detailed information, see the full [Knowing Our Numbers: Executive Report](#).