

Early Years Study 3: Early Childhood Education Report

The Early Childhood Education Report: Moving beyond counting spaces and towards quality ECE systems

As indicated in the *Early Years Study 3*, the reach of early childhood education is broad, including the education, care and well-being of young children. However, early education is also central to family policy and is associated with economic development and productivity. It is linked to a range of equity issues, including women's employment, anti-poverty strategies, the promotion of social cohesion and the settlement of new Canadians.

Reflecting the main recommendation of the *Early Years Study 3* (EYS 3)—that all children from age 2 through to elementary school have access to high quality, early childhood education—the Early Childhood Education Report 2011 (formerly Index) focuses on indicators promoting this goal. It provides a status update on the policy frameworks that the evidence indicates supports quality and access in jurisdictions across Canada.

EYS 3 defines early childhood education (ECE) 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 child care centres, nursery schools, preschools, pre- or junior-kindergarten and kindergarten. Attendance is regular and children may participate on their own or with a parent or caregiver.

Developing the ECE Report

The benchmarks for the ECE Report were established following an extensive review of monitoring tools developed in Canada and internationally, and in consultation with experts involved in the development of these measures. Nineteen benchmarks were selected and populated using available data compiled from past environmental scans (Beach et al., 2009; Beach, 2010), an analysis of government publications and reports, Statistics Canada data (including population estimates) and customs runs from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) and the Labour Survey. Provincial/territorial profiles were developed using the above data, supplemented by a survey of, and key informant interviews with, provincial and territorial officials. Draft profiles were provided to officials for comment. Four seminars also helped to inform the content of the report. These are listed in the Acknowledgements section of *EYS 3*.

Reviews of early childhood education in Canada have traditionally focused on counting child care spaces and per capita funding levels. Research has either evaluated child outcomes or the quality of programs offered. Until the OECD's 2004 review of early childhood education and care in Canada, there had not been an extensive evaluation of the policy frameworks that influence the environments that service providers operate in and in which small children learn and are nurtured. ECE Report picks up on this work.

The influence of the OECD and other international measures

The *Starting Strong analysis* (2006) identified key elements of successful policy that were common to 20 member countries who took part in the OECD's review of their early education systems. The ECE Report is rooted in the recommendations of the OECD review. Not all of the 17 major policy areas addressed by the OECD in its Canada report are included in the report. In some cases they are no longer timely, such as Recommendation 1 (p. 69), which calls for refocusing provincial/territorial/federal ECD agreements. In other important areas, such as the affordability of ECE services, consistent data are not available. Insufficient data also prevented the inclusion of the territories and First Nations in this round, something the originators hope to rectify in future iterations.

Therefore, while being guided by the OECD directions, the selection of benchmarks was limited by the availability of consistent data across jurisdictions and the likelihood that similar information would be available in the future to allow for ongoing monitoring. Benchmark thresholds were influenced by those established by UNICEF in 2008 to promote the potential for continued international comparisons, and those included in the UNESCO 2010 cross-national study on the integration of early childhood education and care (Kaga, Bennett & Moss, 2010). Adapting the report to Canadian reality, all benchmark thresholds in the ECE Report have been achieved, or are close to being achieved, in at least one jurisdiction.

The authors recognize that there is always sensitivity to monitoring and reluctance to make comparisons. Canada is a very large and highly diverse country. However in the development of other levels of education from elementary through to post-secondary, there has emerged a remarkable similarity based on shared values and evidence-based research. Arm's-length assessments are part of democratic oversight and allow the sharing of best practices and push for better systems to improve outcomes for children. A parallel rationale exists for early childhood education; indeed, all provinces and territories already agree on a number of comparable inputs to promote program quality, including the need for staff qualifications, child: staff ratios, group size, facilities, etc.

The ECDI categories

The 19 benchmarks selected for the ECE Report are ordered into five categories:

- **Governance:** Four benchmarks look at policy and operational oversight—is it split between multiple departments, or does it have coherent direction, a common policy framework with goals, timelines and consistent support for service providers?
- **Funding:** Three benchmarks examine the adequacy of funding and its influence on supporting program quality and equitable access.
- **Access:** Three benchmarks assess the numbers of children attending ECE programs and if barriers to participation are addressed.
- **Learning environment:** Six benchmarks examine whether curriculum, program standards and trained and adequate staffing support the quality of programming.

- **Accountability:** Three benchmarks assess whether provinces are meeting their reporting commitments and have standards for program quality, and the monitoring and reporting of child outcomes.

Each category is assigned 3 points for a possible total of 15. Full and half points are assigned with the intention of providing equal weight to each category.

Assigning marks for benchmarks

Benchmarks are not aspirational goals; instead, they express the basic requirements that jurisdictions should meet to establish and maintain acceptable quality and access in their early childhood systems. For this reason, partial marks are not assigned. A mark was given if policies are in place or if the province has embarked on a particular initiative with a commitment to take it system-wide. For example, New Brunswick has aligned its French language kindergarten program and ECE curriculum and is working on doing the same in its English language section. Similarly, full-day kindergarten in Ontario is only available in French language schools and in 20 percent of English language schools, but the government is committed to universal access by 2014. Therefore, a mark was assigned for the respective benchmarks. Many jurisdictions have ambitious plans for their ECE systems, however if these policies are still at the discussion stage, a mark was not assigned at this time. Future efforts and commitments will be reflected in future iterations of ECE Report. A complete review of provincial/territorial ECE policies and programming may be found under [Provincial/Territorial Profiles](#) on the Early Years Study website.

The evidence for each benchmark is included in [chapter 5](#) of *EYS 3*. Where applicable, summaries are provided in figures throughout the chapter and noted in parentheses with the rationale for each benchmark.

I. Benchmarks focused on governance for integrated early childhood education

The OECD recommended that Canadian jurisdictions take steps to “build bridges between child care and kindergarten education, with the aim of integrating ECEC both at ground level and at policy and management levels” (p. 71). Evaluations demonstrate the importance of assigning responsibility for young children to one ministry that combines policy making, funding and regulatory powers. A single ministry/department facilitates the development of a common vision of early education, with agreed-upon objectives. Split administration tends to entrench child care as a welfare service with all its inherent weaknesses—poor public perception, poor funding and underpaid and undertrained staff. Canadian research reveals the cost returns from combining education and care at the service delivery level to support parents’ workforce participation (*EYS 3*, [chapter 4](#)). Common oversight also avoids the duplication of administrations and budgets. From a pedagogical perspective, integrating education and care allows administrators and educators to better address the continuum of learning that begins at birth and continues throughout life.

Because of the importance of leadership and governance in a still underdeveloped sector, four benchmarks are allocated to governance of ECE systems.

Benchmark 1: ECE under common department/ ministry

The minimum for the benchmark is a single ministry/department with oversight for child care as well as kindergarten and other education-funded preschool programming (see [Figure 5.13](#)).

Benchmark 2: Common ECE supervisory unit

This benchmark drills down to see if integration has gone beyond co-locating the two streams under the same roof while they still operate as distinct entities. It assesses whether all ECE services are under a common supervisory unit, where specialized staff members have shared responsibilities for both public (school-offered) and private (child care/preschool) ECE programs (see [Figure 5.13](#)).

Benchmark 3: Common ECE policy framework

Administrators, systems managers and educators need a clear, and clearly communicated, policy direction, with vision, objectives, timelines and benchmarks to guide their work. Some provinces have developed policy directions for child care and/or school-offered ECE programs. The minimum for this benchmark determines if policy directions encompass both education and child care/preschool, aligning them to support the learning continuum (see [Figure 5.13](#)).

Benchmark 4: Common local authority for ECE management and administration

The integration of policy frameworks at the provincial level should be reflected in service management and delivery on the ground, thereby removing the necessity of parents and children to navigate between service silos. All ECE services, both public and private, should link to a common local authority responsible for supporting standards reflected in provincial policies. Local authorities would be responsible for organizing ECE service delivery to facilitate smooth transitions from preschool into the primary grades. Some progress has been made by having school boards offer both education and child care for kindergarten and school-aged children, but no province directs a local authority to manage the continuum of ECE programming. It is acknowledged that there are many collaborative tables including education and children’s service providers. These bodies are not mandated to enforce systems delivery or quality standards. The benchmark requires local governance with this level of authority (see [Figure 5.13](#)).

II. Benchmarks focused on funding to promote quality, access and equity

The OECD noted Canada’s market-determined fee structure results in high parent fees and an inefficient subsidy system with widely varying and complex eligibility criteria (p. 8). It encouraged Canadian jurisdiction to “devise an efficient means of funding a universal early childhood service” (p. 72). There is general consensus across the OECD countries that substantial government investment is necessary to support a sustainable system of high quality, affordable services (OECD, 2006). Without strong government investment and involvement, it is difficult to achieve broad system aims, such as child health and well-being, equitable access, social inclusion and quality learning goals. Funding levels are important, but how services are funded also makes a difference. A universal approach appears to be more effective at including children from low-income families. Mixed enrollment in ECE is also associated with better-

quality ratings than programs targeted to children from low-income families. Direct funding to programs appears to have a positive impact on staff wages and program stability, whereas funding through fee subsidies or tax transfers has less effect. Since subsidies to parents seldom reflect the actual cost of child care, they tend to hold down staff wages and leave a gap between what parents receive and the fees programs must charge. This can exclude low-income families from using ECE centres.

Three benchmarks look at funding levels and how funds are directed.

Benchmark 5: At least two-thirds of child care funding goes to program operations

Percentage allocations to program operations, special needs integration and parent fee subsidies are determined through public reporting and are based on the last year a funding breakdown was available. Provinces may have announced global increases for child care in their 2011 budgets, but unless specified, it was assumed that new funding would follow the established breakdown. Funding for children with special needs is included as part of operations, since most provinces deliver this funding to child care programs rather than through parent fee subsidies. The two-thirds benchmark for program funding was chosen because it is associated with greater system stability (see [Figure 5.7](#)).

Benchmark 6: Mandated salary and fee scale

This benchmark reflects provincial policies establishing a maximum parent fee scale and a minimum wage scale for educators.

Benchmark 7: At least 3 percent of provincial budget is devoted to early childhood education

Percentages were calculated using total 2011 spending estimates as stated in provincial budget documents and total allocations for early childhood education. ECE spending includes total 2011 estimates for licensed child care programs from infants to 12 years of age, kindergarten, pre-kindergarten and other early education services, including school-based parent/caregiver/child programs. The 2011 estimates for kindergarten and education-offered programs were obtained from government documents or informant interviews. Where kindergarten funding was not specified, estimates were made based on per pupil spending in elementary school and, if applicable, pro-rated for half-time kindergarten.

Spending on ECE and other child care programs at 3 percent of provincial budget was chosen as a benchmark because it approaches the 1 percent of GDP that is considered a minimum investment in the care and education of young children (UNICEF, 2008). Compared to the 6 percent of GDP that provinces devote on average to elementary, secondary and post-secondary education, 1 percent represents a modest and fair share for children under five years of age (see [Figure 5.8](#)).

III. Benchmarks focused on equitable access

The OECD recommended Canada “continue efforts to expand access while promoting greater equity” (p. 8). Equitable access is more associated with entitlement programs such as kindergarten. However, kindergarten does not address parents’ need for child care. Equity is but one more of the benefits of organizing ECE to meet the educational needs of children, at the same time as facilitating their parents’ workforce participation. Barriers to ECE participation are many: economic, geographical, cultural, language, hours of service, etc. One area where all provinces have made a concerted effort is by targeting resources to enable programs to include children with special needs.

Benchmark 8: Full-day kindergarten offered

Full-day kindergarten has become the norm across Canada; it is now offered by 6 out the 10 provinces and is under consideration in others. Full-day kindergarten also reflects the duration threshold, which research indicates is more likely to improve academic and social outcomes for children (Reynolds, 2011).

Benchmark 9: 50 percent of 2–4-year-olds regularly attend an ECE program

The definition for this benchmark refers to regular attendance in a centre or school-based program that is staffed by qualified educators following a program designed to meet the educational and developmental needs of the children. This benchmark focuses on 2- to 4-year-olds, the group for which there is high unmet demand for ECE. Five-year-olds were excluded since the majority already attend kindergarten. Infants are a less likely group to participate in ECE programs because of extended parental leave.

The number of 2- to 4-year olds attending ECE programs by province was calculated using a custom tabulation of NLSCY data from a survey that asked parents their primary form of child care. The survey only captures child care use if the parent worked or went to school. It does not include school-offered ECE programs. Many children in families where a parent is not working also regularly attend some form of preschool. The calculation therefore includes a conservative estimate of 20 percent of children ages 2 to 4 years who have a non-working parent and who are not captured by the NLSCY survey. It also estimates enrollment in early childhood education programs that are offered as part of the public education system and uses government reports of attendance in pre-kindergarten. School-provided parent/caregiver–child programs offer an intentional program and are regularly attended by families. They are included in this calculation. Care was taken not to double count children attending pre-kindergarten who also attend child care.

UNICEF’s benchmark is set at 80 percent of 4-year-olds regularly attending an ECE program and 25 percent of children under 3-year-old. Fifty percent of 2- to 4-year-olds represents a reasonable and achievable benchmark for Canada (see [Figure 5.8](#)).

Benchmark 10: Funding is conditional on including children with special needs

The threshold for this benchmark is provincial policy that requires programs to give equal consideration to the enrollment of children with special needs as a policy direction or condition

of funding. Funding as an incentive without policy directions does not provide parents with recourse if their child is excluded from participation.

IV. Benchmarks focusing on quality in the early learning environment

Well-established research confirms that quality in early education programs depends on staff trained in child development who are resourced and valued for the work they do. This part of the report looks at progress in this area. Is there an evidence-based curriculum to support the work of educators? Is it aligned with the school system to support children’s transition into school? Are educators in all ECE settings trained in early childhood development? Are salaries and recognition reflective of the important work they do? Six benchmarks refer to this category.

Benchmark 11: An early childhood curriculum/framework

ECE curriculum frameworks are organic documents resulting from broad consultation. They are holistic and child-centred, with clear goals across a range of developmental areas to which educators and children can aspire. The primary role of parents is recognized and parents are welcomed as partners in their children's learning. A curriculum review populated in Figure 5.14 determined if provinces have developed a curriculum framework for early education settings. The benchmark does not require the use of the curriculum in all ECE settings.

Benchmark 12: Alignment of early childhood framework with kindergarten

Children move from preschool into kindergarten at different ages and stages of development. The kindergarten and early childhood curriculum frameworks should align to reflect this. A curriculum review populated in [Figure 5.14](#) determined if ECE policy addresses this issue.

Benchmark 13: Programs for 2–4-year-olds require at least two-thirds of staff to have ECE qualifications

Child: staff ratios across jurisdictions are quite similar, but the number of qualified staff required by policy or regulation varies widely. For this benchmark, “qualified” represents the period of post-secondary training provincial regulation considers necessary to be recognized as a qualified staff member in an ECE setting. It is acknowledged that ECE qualifications are not standard across jurisdictions. UNICEF recommends at least 50 percent of staff have three or more years of post-secondary training and 80 percent of staff working directly with children have post-secondary training in child development. No Canadian jurisdiction meets this standard. Two-thirds of staff with provincially-recognized qualifications was considered a reasonable compromise (see [Figure 5.12](#)).

Benchmark 14: Kindergarten educators require ECE qualifications

Public kindergarten is a dominant form of ECE access. For many children it will be their only preschool experience. Quality in ECE settings depends on educators trained to understand the developmental needs of young children. A review of provincial policies determined if ECE training is required for educators in kindergarten classrooms. PEI requires its kindergarten educators to obtain a teaching certificate with an ECE specialty. Ontario was recognized because

its legislated staffing model for full-day kindergarten requires at least one staff member who is a registered ECE.

Benchmark 15: Salaries of early childhood educators are at least two-thirds of teacher salaries

Low compensation levels for early childhood educators are recognized in the literature as contributing to recruitment and retention challenges, which in turn impact the quality of ECE programming. The compensation gap between elementary school teachers and early childhood educators reflects the challenge. These issues become more evident as ECEs move into school settings to work alongside teachers. This benchmark looks at the salary gap between teachers and ECEs by province as an indicator of the relative value placed on the professions. Teacher salaries were obtained for 2008–09 from Brockington’s *Summary Public School Indicators for Canada*. ECE salaries were obtained from government documents. Where information was not available, a custom run of the Labour Survey provided 2009–10 hourly wages of self-identified ECEs with post-secondary qualifications who are employed in the sector. This was used to estimate full-time annual salary. The two-thirds benchmark reflects a salary gap between the two professions based on differences in educational requirements (see [Figure 5.11](#)).

Benchmark 16: ECE professional certification and/or professional development

Registration, certification and classification are all processes that provide official recognition as an early childhood educator and enable the registrant to work in an ECE program. These processes are proxies for the value placed on the profession. Ongoing professional development is critical to maintaining a workforce that is knowledgeable about current education practice and is closely associated with high-quality early childhood settings. The benchmark reflects provincial policy requiring professional certification as a condition of practice and/or regular professional development as a condition of maintaining good standing in the ECE profession (see [Figure 5.13](#)).

V. Benchmarks focused on accountability

Monitoring is an integral part of democratic accountability to children, families and the public. It is essential for informed decision-making, ensuring that societal resources are deployed productively, scarce resources distributed equitably and social goals reached. The challenge is to develop monitoring systems that capture how programs are operating, what children are learning and if system goals are being met. Monitoring on its own does not deliver results, although it is a crucial part of a larger system designed to achieve them.

Benchmark 17: Annual progress reports are current and posted (2008 or later)

Federal/provincial/ territorial early childhood agreements include annual reporting in each jurisdiction on progress made in meeting the terms of the agreements. The minimum benchmark proposed is that the responsible ministry/department/agency has published a comprehensive report on ECE services within the last three years (see [Figure 5.15](#)). Quebec was not a signatory to the agreements and has its own reporting process.

Benchmark 18: Program standards for ECE programs (including kindergarten)

Learning outcomes for children cannot be considered apart from the inputs they experience in ECE settings. Standards governing health and safety, facilities and class size are important minimums for all ECE programs. Also important are standards outlining pedagogical practices, implementation of curriculum goals and set-up of the learning environment. The benchmark proposes these minimum program standards for all ECE settings.

Benchmark 19: EDI or population measure for preschool learning collected and reported

Public reporting informs communities about how their children are doing and what can be done to improve children's early learning environments. The minimum benchmark proposed is that a province has used the Early Development Instrument and reported on the findings at least once in the past three years, or the province has committed to using the EDI within a specified timeframe.

Next Steps for the Early Childhood Education Report 2011

The Early Childhood Education Report 2011 introduces a new measure that will continue to evolve. The five equally-weighted categories and their benchmarks reflect current research and international reports. The major findings from Early Years Study 3 were used to populate the benchmarks. System-level indices comparing jurisdictions must balance the desire for appropriate, comparable data and the reality of what is available. The content validity of the ECE Report 2011 appears to be good. It is a starting point for conversations about next steps. The review of experts to date suggests it is translating the construct of an integrated early childhood education system into a specific, practical test with observable measures. It is now ready for a period of critical review and broader consultation. Equally important, it is time to study how ECE Report can be aligned with other Canadian monitoring efforts.

The Early Childhood Education Report 2011 will be housed at the Atkinson Centre, Ontario Institute of Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. The Centre plans to bring together academic expertise to further review the ECE Report and improve aspects of its validity. The Centre will host a series of forums to examine the construction, application and communication of ECE Report. The Atkinson Centre is exploring the possibility of an international symposium in Fall 2012 to review the Report and other early childhood system monitoring tools.

As Canadians, we have great aspirations for our children. We want them to enjoy childhood as they grow to be the best they can be. Awareness of the importance of development in early childhood has caught the attention of policy makers and they have responded. This is an important start. However we can't overlook the limited number of benchmarks we were able to populate on this report and the constraints that excluded the territories and First Nations. The modesty of the thresholds reflects the persistence of low standards common to the split delivery of ECE systems. Yet there are reasons for celebration. Much progress has been made since the OECD's international review exposed Canada as an ECE laggard, not all of which can be captured in an report.

Hopefully ECE Report, both in its début and as it is refined through future consultation, will take its place with other public monitoring systems in Canada and internationally to inform public policy in using the most effective means of enriching early learning environments for young children.

FIGURE 6.1 Early Childhood Education Index 2011

BENCHMARKS	Value	NL	PE	NS	NB	QC	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC
Integrated Governance											
ECE under common department/ ministry	0.5		0.5		0.5		0.5		0.5		
Common ECE supervisory unit	0.5						0.5				
Common ECE policy framework	1		1			1		1			
Common local authority for ECE management and administration	1										
Funding											
At least two-thirds of child care funding goes to program operations ¹	1		1	1		1		1	1		
Mandated salary and fee scale	1		1			1		1			
At least 3% of budget devoted to early childhood education	1					1					
Access											
Full-day kindergarten offered	1		1	1	1	1	1				1
50% of 2–4-year-olds regularly attend an ECE program	1					1	1				
Funding is conditional on including children with special needs	1		1 ²					1			
Learning Environment											
Early childhood curriculum/framework	0.5		0.5		0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Alignment of early childhood framework with kindergarten	0.5		0.5		0.5	0.5	0.5				0.5
Programs for 2–4-year-olds require at least two-thirds of staff to have ECE qualifications	0.5			0.5		0.5	0.5	0.5			
Kindergarten educators require ECE qualification	0.5		0.5				0.5				
Salaries of early childhood educators are at least two-thirds of teacher salaries	0.5					0.5					
ECE professional certification and/or professional development required	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5			0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Accountability											
Annual progress reports are current and posted (2008 or later)	1		1	1	1	1 ³		1	1	1	1
Program standards for ECE programs (including kindergarten)	1										
EDI or population measure for preschool learning collected and reported	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	15	1.5	9.5	5	4.5	10	6.5	7.5	4.5	3	4.5

Notes:

1 Includes special needs funding

2 In Early Years Centres only

3 Quebec was not a signatory to the federal/provincial/territorial early childhood development agreements where the parties agreed to regular standardized reporting. Quebec has its own mechanisms for public reporting.

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