Credentialing with Purpose

A Pathway to Inclusive and Equitable Qualification Standards for Ontario's Early Childhood Educators

January 26, 2026

Métis Nation of Ontario

Introduction

On December 4, 2025, Canada and Ontario announced a one-year extension of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreement (CWELCC): the national program Ontario entered into almost four years ago aimed to reduce child care fees to an average of $10-a-day by the end of 2025-26. As part of its strategy to achieve affordable child care, Ontario's agreement included a workforce strategy to support Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) employed by CWELCC-enrolled child care centres. Since 2022, the provincial government has pursued this strategy by promoting the recruitment and retention of qualified educators, expanding professional development opportunities, and raising the wage floor for lower-paid educators working in licensed child care. At its core, this strategy rests on a simple premise: a sustainable child care system cannot function without a sustainable workforce.

Since Ontario entered the CWELCC program, however, the provincial government has fallen short of its workforce development targets for RECEs. Under the federal child care agreement, the provincial government committed to increasing the proportion of RECEs within the sector to at least 60 percent by March 31, 2026. In 2022, when Ontario signed on to the agreement, 58.9 percent of full-time staff in licensed child care programs were RECEs – a number not far off the goal that the provincial government agreed to. Yet, in 2024, Canadian media reported that this share had *declined* to 56 percent. This trend not only indicates that Ontario is lagging on its workforce benchmarks; it suggests current measures are ineffective in stabilizing a labour force marked by chronic volatility. As a result, the scarcity of RECEs is stifling the provincial government's efforts to increase licensed child care spaces, undermining the effectiveness of CWELCC's implementation in Ontario

This position paper examines Ontario's early learning and child care workforce crisis and its relationship to qualification standards for early childhood educators. Drawing on studies from leading child care policy advocates, the paper assesses the limitations of Ontario's early childhood education credentialing framework, demonstrating how horizontal job architecture, labour uniformity, and broader misalignment between RECE credentials and compensation contribute to ongoing attrition across the sector. Using the United Kingdom's early years sector as a comparative case study, the paper recommends that the Ontario provincial government consider adopting an alternative policy that maintains the ECE diploma as the minimum qualification standard while formalizing a tiered workforce model that enables educators to progress through successive levels of practice. As a policy prescription, this model would engender the workforce stability Ontario needs to achieve its space creation targets.

Summary

Ontario's early learning and child care workforce challenges predate the signing of the CWELCC agreement. Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, the sector experienced high attrition as qualified educators continued to leave licensed child care settings. This period was marked by a sustained outflow of RECEs from centre-based care, as growing numbers disengaged from the licensed sector altogether or transitioned into adjacent fields. This trend was exacerbated by the prolonged absence of a provincially mandated wage grid, non-standard employment arrangements, a policy orientation that prioritized reducing parental fees over improving working conditions, and the introduction of Ontario's Full-Day Kindergarten program, which created a parallel labour market that drew educators into school board employment offering improved compensation, standardized hours, benefits, and union representation. These conditions created the context for the labour shortages that persist in licensed child care today.

At the same time as Ontario's early learning and child care sector was experiencing heightened workforce instability, the province also undertook a significant step toward professionalizing early childhood education through the establishment of the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) under the *Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007*. As Canada's only provincial regulatory body governing the practice of early childhood education, the CECE was created to protect the public interest by regulating the use of the RECE title, setting entry-to-practice requirements, and establishing standards of practice and professional conduct, thereby strengthening the credibility and accountability of the profession. Yet despite this increased regulatory oversight, Ontario continued to experience a substantial loss of qualified educators from licensed child care. This trend becomes apparent when we examine membership data from the CECE: for example, in 2012-13 (five years after the College's founding), CECE reported 3,374 members not in good standing, representing 9.49 percent of all RECEs. However, by 2019-2020, that figure had risen to 20,699 members, representing 26.6 percent of all RECEs. In other words, even as Ontario advanced the regulation and formal recognition of early childhood education, it was unable to stem the loss of qualified educators from the sector.

The loss of qualified educators stems from long-standing workforce pressures in early learning and child care linked to high turnover, burnout, and stress on workers. In much of Ontario, educators – many of whom were underpaid, overworked, or employed with limited benefits – chose to leave the profession. These trends accelerated with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As fee revenue collapsed during the pandemic, many staff worked under conditions that jeopardized both their employment security and their health and safety. Survey data from nearly 4,000 Ontario child care workers highlighted persistent concerns around paid sick leave, inadequate safety protocols, overcrowding, and insufficient staff-to-child ratios. Amid mounting risks, many educators left the sector altogether: one report from the Atkinson Centre used Statistics Canada data to estimate that employment in child care in Canada decreased 21 percent during the pandemic, compared to only 3 percent among other workers. In effect, the pandemic revealed the precarity that had come to define the early learning workforce.

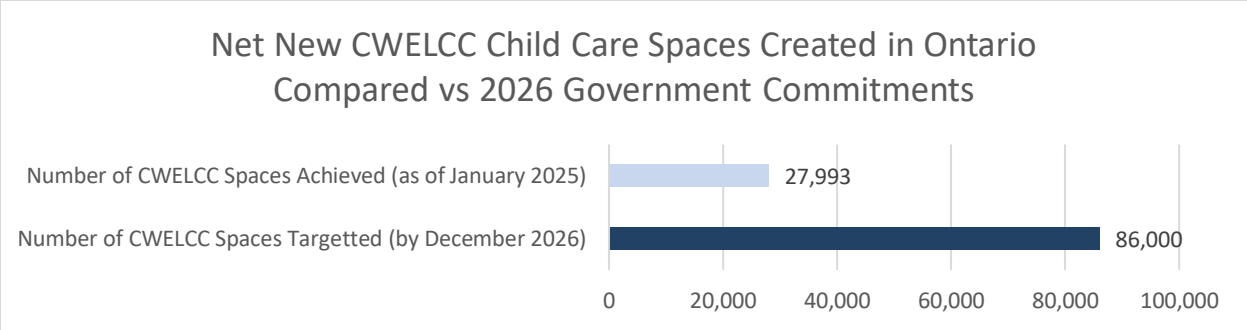
Despite this trend in the labour market, demand for licensed child care in Ontario surged through 2021 and 2022. This demand was driven by the rollout of fee reductions under CWELCC, the re-entry of women into the labour force as the economy reopened, and high population growth driven by elevated levels of immigration in urban and suburban centres. At the same time Ontario entered the CWELCC system, the province set out to add 86,000 net new CWELCC spaces, bringing the total to 289,111 licensed spaces in Ontario in March 2019. From the outset, this expansion target was inseparable from workforce sustainability, as licensed child care spaces could not legally operate without sufficient numbers of qualified educators to meet legislated staffing ratios and supervision requirements.

14,700

The **number of additional RECEs** needed in Ontario for the provincial government to achieve **CWELCC space creation targets**, according to estimates from Child Care Now (2025).

However, Ontario's child care licensing plans eventually outpaced workforce capacity. By January 2025, only 27,993 new spaces were added – a number representing 32.55 percent of the provincial government's CWELCC target. Child Care Now attributes this shortcoming primarily to staffing shortages, which limit centres' ability to operate at full capacity (let alone expand). In 2022, the Ontario Ministry of Education estimated that, by December 2026, an additional 8,500 RECEs would be required in the child care sector to meet CWELCC space creation targets. Since then, the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario has revised that estimate to 10,000 new RECEs. Indeed, this estimate may be conservative: Child Care Now estimates that as many as 14,700 new RECEs will be needed by

December 2026. In other words, if Ontario cannot increase the rate of RECEs remaining in the sector, the provincial government cannot achieve its goals for expanding licensed child care. This discrepancy in estimates points to a fragmented system where government estimates are not accounting for the real need of Ontario families.

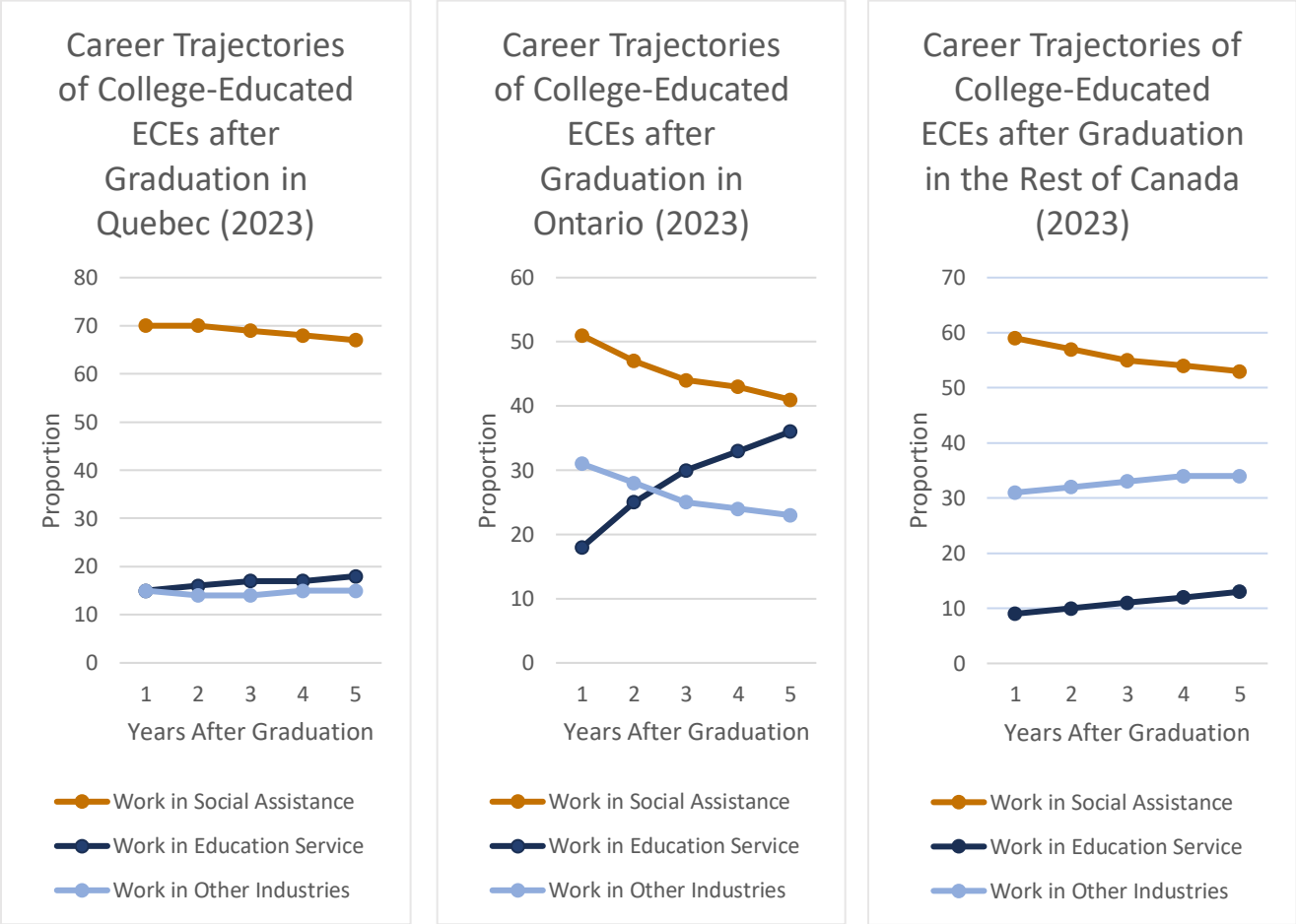


Source: Child Care Now. (2025, January 30). *Ontario faces a decline in the proportion of qualified RECEs working in the child care sector.* Child Care Now. https://childcarenow.ca/2025/01/30/ontario-faces-decline-in-proportion-of-qualified-reces/

As of January 2026, Ontario is continuing to struggle to address what advocates have called the "worst workforce crisis child care has ever faced." Rather than recruitment, the key barrier in this crisis is the *retention* of qualified educators. This challenge is particularly pronounced in licensed child care. Using data from 2023, we see that the province enrolled 4,200 new students in early childhood education programs, with about 2,900 net new graduates per year. However, among those graduates, only about half chose to work in licensed child care. Worse, RECEs who do enter licensed child care face a high risk of exit in subsequent years – particularly in Ontario. For instance, one study tracked the career trajectories of RECEs five years after graduating from college or university, dividing them into three tracks: those who went into "social assistance" (or education below kindergarten), "education services" (or education at kindergarten or above), and work in other industries. The study found that only about 41 percent of RECEs in Ontario worked in social assistance five years after graduating; in contrast, around 67 percent in Quebec and 53 percent in the rest of Canada continued to work in child care after five years – a trend the authors attributed to earnings growth between sectors.

Similarly, data from the College of Early Childhood Educators shows that twice as many RECEs working in licensed child care resign their membership after three years compared to those working in the public education system. As qualified educators continue to leave the profession, child care centres are increasingly unable to maintain enrollment levels that the province needs to meet CWELCC space expansion targets. As RECEs depart from licensed child care, Ontario families are increasingly turning to unlicensed providers. What this social shift indicates is a child care system under strain, where families rely on less regulated care not by preference but because licensed spaces cannot be sustained without a stable workforce.

Proportion of RECEs Working in Child Care After Graduation: Ontario, Quebec, and Canada, 2023



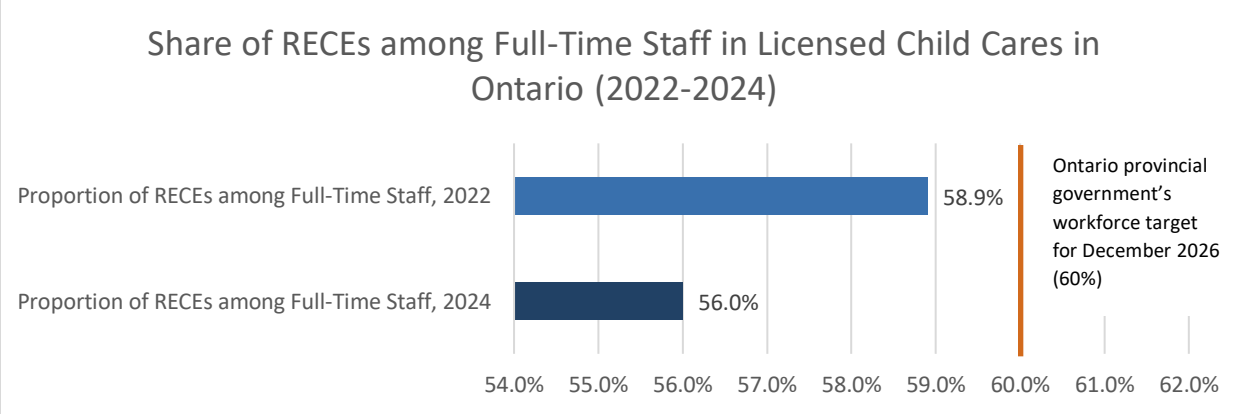
Source: Seward, B., Dhuey, E., & Pan, A. (2023, September 14). The big short: Expansion of early childhood education in post-pandemic Canada. *Canadian Public Policy, 49*(3), 306-329. https://utppublishing.com/doi/full/10.3138/cpp.2022-059#d4584e123

In the absence of qualified educators, Ontario has increasingly relied on regulatory workarounds to sustain the operation of licensed child care programs. In Ontario, staffing shortages have increasingly been managed through the expanded use of director approvals (DAs) – a regulatory mechanism intended as a temporary measure that permits individuals without RECE qualifications to assume supervisory roles. Data from the Ministry of Education indicates that the use of DAs surged from 2020 to 2025 by 1,156%. At present, about 21 percent of supervisors now operate under such approvals. The growing dependence on director approvals makes clear that Ontario is coping with its child care crisis, not resolving it – and it's Ontario's families who are paying the price.

For parents with young children, workforce instability has become a primary barrier to access of licensed child care. Across Ontario and other provinces, child care centres are limiting enrollment because of challenges with finding qualified staff. Communities with acute labour shortages have left some child care programs to close their doors outright (or, alternatively, to operate *without a single RECE*). This shortage has led to what Quebec observers have described as "ghost spaces" – where centres with fully-funded rooms cannot legally open because they cannot meet required staffing ratios. Research indicates that this issue is especially pronounced in Ontario. According to an analysis by David MacDonald of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, for example, Ontario is one of only three provinces whose trajectory for

creating licensed child care spaces falls well below the 5.9 spaces per 10 children agreed to in the CWELCC plan.

Importantly, inadequate staffing levels have not only led to longer child care waitlists, but are eroding the quality of care itself. For instance, since 2022, reported instances of improper handling of children by early childhood educators have increased. What this trend suggests is that diminished access to qualified educators increases risks by relying on workers with less formal training. As the Executive Director of Child Care Now, Morna Ballantyne, put it, improving the quality of licensed early learning and child care programs in Canada is not possible "without addressing the barriers of bringing into the sector qualified registered early childhood educators" as well.



Source: Jones, A. (2024, December 23). *Percentage of early childhood educators in Ontario child care is declining, despite goal.* The Canadian Press. https://www.thecanadianpressnews.ca/politics/percentage-of-early-childhood-educators-in-ontario-child-care-declining-despite-goal/article_87400c25-da5c-55a7-9a2a-a84a071cb42c.html

50%

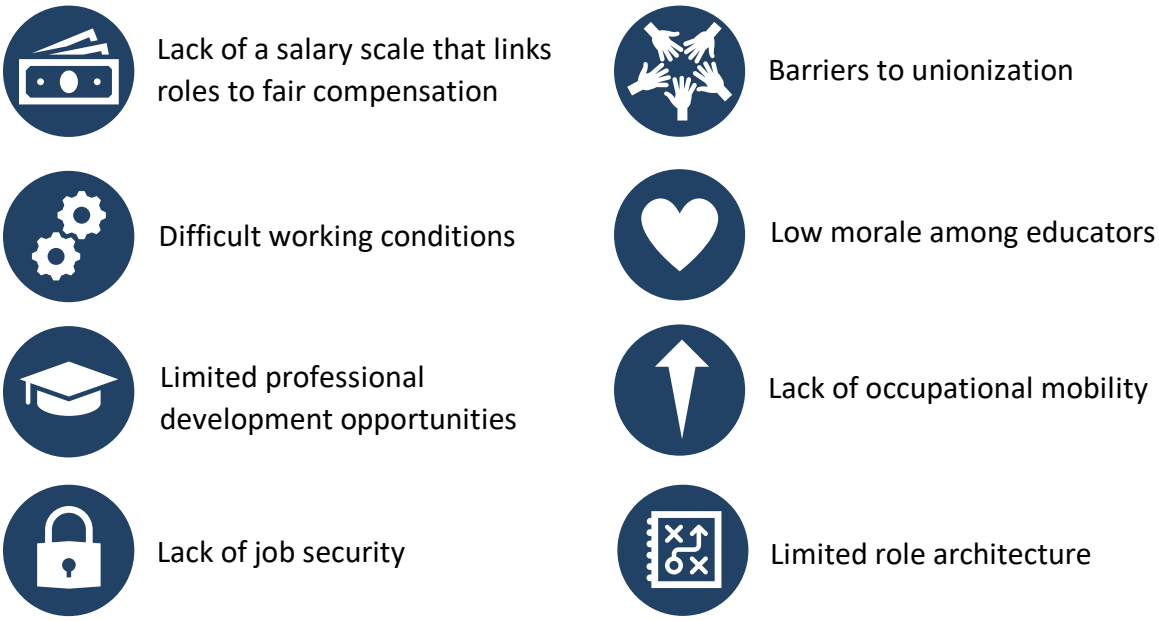
The **share of Ontario RECEs who enter licensed child care** after graduating from early childhood education programs, according to estimates from the Government of Ontario (2023).

Research on RECE recruitment and retention shows that the workforce crisis is linked to a series of interrelated issues affecting workers across the sector. For example, a survey by the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario identified low wages as the primary reason RECEs left the profession. Employment in the sector is not only difficult but also often precarious, with many positions part-time, contract-based, or contingent on unpredictable funding. Barriers to paid professional development opportunities limit pathways to advancement within the field. Relatively low rates of union membership weaken educators' ability to organize for better working conditions, fair pensions, and employee protections relative to public-sector educators – an issue reinforced by the fact that RECEs in full-day kindergarten are largely unionized, while those in licensed child care sector working with the youngest children have far fewer protections.[1] Limited occupational mobility reinforces the perception of child care as a short-term or transitional occupation rather than a sustainable career. The lack of career progression results in high-volume turnover as educators have few incentives to remain in the sector long-term. Lastly, low morale across the sector – reinforced by a

[1] Some early childhood educators operated by municipal governments in Ontario are represented by public-sector unions, such as CUPE. By contrast, many licensed child care programs delivered by non-profit or community-based organizations, including large service providers, typically operate outside collective bargaining frameworks, which contributes to the variation in wages, benefits, and employment protections across settings.

provincial funding model that finances spaces rather than professional salaries, effectively treating child care as a commodity – perpetuates the structural conditions that undermine retention. Solutions, therefore, must be embedded in a comprehensive workforce strategy that addresses the holistic needs of early childhood educators.

Primary barriers to the recruitment and retention of RECEs in Ontario



Early learning and child care advocates have proposed valuable solutions to address this crisis – including changes to qualifications standards. For example, in 2023, Carolyn Ferns, a Policy Coordinator of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care, and Alana Powell, the former Executive Director of the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario, analyzed the drivers of Ontario's RECE shortage amid rising demand for child care spaces. According to Ferns and Powell, the primary cause of the early learning workforce crisis is inadequate compensation. Data from Ontario's 2022 Early Years and Child Care Annual Report show that 46 percent of RECEs in licensed child care centres earned between $20 and $25 per hour, while 32 percent earned under $20 per hour. Since then, the Ontario provincial government has promised to raise the wage floor for RECEs by $1/hour per year, up to $25.86 in 2026. While this policy offers a *real* increase in wages, analysts have noted that the increase remains insufficient to address years of wage suppression in the sector. One study from Gordon Cleveland from 2022, for instance, found that ECE hourly wages compared to those in other occupations indicate that educators are paid as if they *only had a high school diploma*. As Cleveland concluded, if Ontario wants to expand early childhood education as a profession, "there is no real alternative to raising the wages."

Advocates have argued that the Government of Ontario's solutions fall short of what is required to stabilize the workforce. Instead, they point to the need for more substantial reforms – in particular, a salary grid that offers fair compensation tied to job roles and responsibilities, scope of work, and years of experience. The case for such a salary grid stands in sharp contrast to the province's current approach, which has focused on lowering qualification requirements and expanding the use of non-RECE staff rather than improving wages. This strategy risks creating a de-professionalization cycle in which reduced standards justify lower pay, driving qualified educators out of the sector and deepening the shortage. In

this regard, while compensation is the primary barrier to labour stability, that issue is inseparable from the question of what constitutes qualification.

In the early learning sector, we know that retention is fundamentally a *material* problem: educators cannot be expected to remain in a profession that does not compensate them for the value of their work labour. However, policymakers cannot fully understand the workforce crisis without acknowledging the limitations of how qualifications are rewarded in the system. In practice, advocates have acknowledged that RECEs' level of skill, knowledge, or credential attainment – whether a two-year diploma, a bachelor's degree, or a master's degree – does not reliably translate into higher pay, leadership roles, or meaningful opportunities for career growth. In some settings, qualified and unqualified staff perform essentially the same work, a staffing model that diminishes the value of ECE credentials. Despite the availability of post-secondary credentials and funding opportunities to support them, the sector offers few clearly defined roles that reflect these qualifications. Educators, in turn, are left without the kind of job architecture that aligns credentials with specialized positions, such as Supervisors, Directors, Pedagogy Specialists, or Early Learning Resource Consultants. Until the Child Care and Early Years Act mandates specialized roles for those with higher credentials, the career ladder will remain a theoretical concept that has no real impact on retention.

In response to mounting workforce pressures, provinces and territories across Canada have adjusted qualification standards in education to maintain service continuity. Significantly, these measures have often focused on broadening eligibility for practice, rather than strengthening qualification pathways across the sector. For example, Ontario has tried to increase staffing in extended day programs by recognizing graduates of the Recreation and Leisure Services diploma as qualified to work with licensed primary/junior school age group. Alberta has permitted 16- and 17-year-olds to work in licensed child care under adult supervision. Many other provinces, such as Nova Scotia, have allowed programs temporary leave to operate without the requisite number of qualified staff – effectively creating a two-tiered system in which some children receive care from RECEs, while others do not.

Against these currents, advocates have cautioned policymakers against easing qualification standards that come at the expense of child care quality. Child care policy researchers Emis Akbari and Kerry McCuaig, for example, have argued that attempts to address the shortage of RECEs through a process of "de-qualification" – that is, lowering qualification standards for RECE candidates – are not viable solutions. According to Akbari and McCuaig, qualified educators are the foundation of a strong early learning and child care system that fosters a safe, inclusive, and nurturing environment for the child. The cornerstone of that qualification is a diploma from an accredited college, which provides the theoretical and practical knowledge needed to effectively support children's learning and development. Without this knowledge, the early learning sector risks recruiting educators who lack the profession's core competencies, such as curriculum design, identification of vulnerable children, and responsiveness to children's unique needs and interests. Consequently, lowering qualification standards not only undermines the foundation of what

makes the profession a "profession"; it creates a system that prioritizes the quantity of learners over the quality of their learning.

The college diploma in early childhood education – reinforced by the regulation of child care work through the Early Childhood Education Act, 2007 – remains the cornerstone of a professional child care workforce in Ontario. However, the diploma must be understood as the minimum threshold for qualification as an educator. The diploma, then, must serve as the floor of the profession, supported by a coherent career ladder that enables educators to advance into higher-skilled roles. In a sector of skilled educators with diverse pedagogies, learning practices, and knowledge systems, qualification cannot be reduced to a single credential. The problem is that Ontario's current framework insufficiently recognizes competencies that fall outside the formal qualification designation. A modern workforce strategy must therefore preserve the diploma as the starting point for qualification while broadening qualification frameworks to recognize necessary but undervalued competencies. What the workforce needs is not a lower qualification standard but an alternative that recognizes qualification alongside the diploma.

ECE Qualification Standards in Ontario

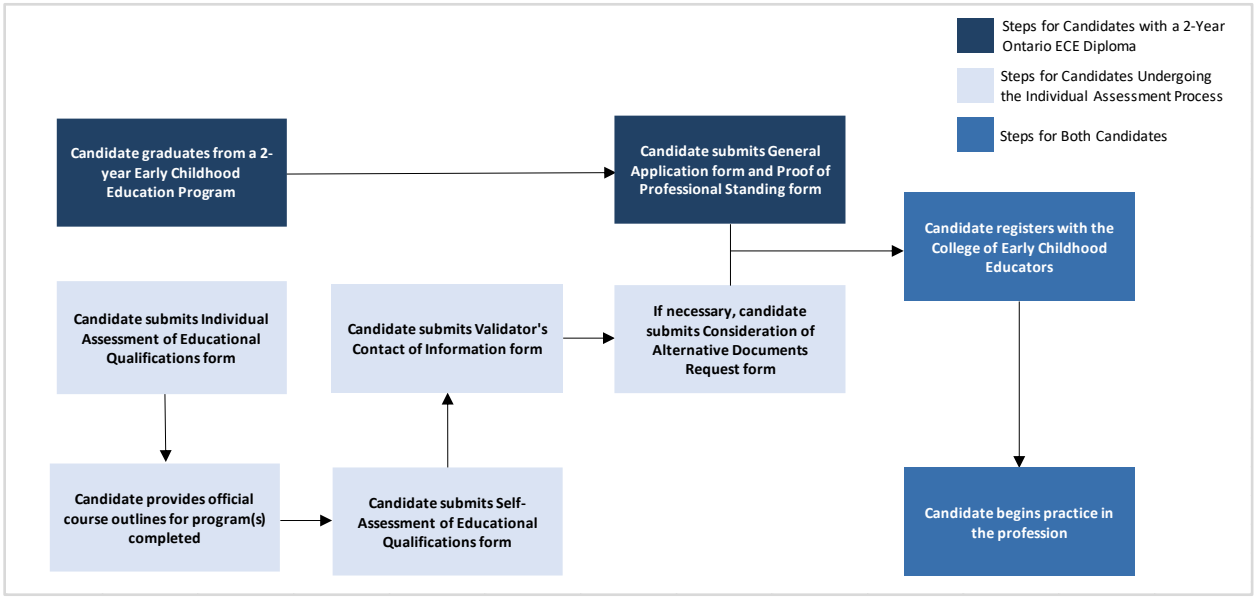
Despite attempts to amend Ontario's ECE qualification standards, the province's model remains anchored in the traditional requirement of a formal college diploma. Understanding what it takes to become an RECE will help clarify why this model is so limiting in practice for educators.

To register as a RECE in Ontario, students must complete a two-year program at an accredited post-secondary institution. This program provides foundational knowledge of child development, health, safety, and pedagogy, along with applied learning through supervised placements in licensed child care settings. In the first year, students are introduced to early learning pedagogy, professional practice, and the fundamentals of children's cognitive and behavioural development. In the second year, students build on this foundation by developing advanced skills, including engaging community partners, planning for individual and group learning, and integrating principles of diversity and inclusion into the curriculum. Upon graduation, RECEs have the foundational knowledge to enter the profession as skilled, capable, and confident educators.

Applicants who did not obtain a formal diploma from an accredited post-secondary institution in Ontario may still qualify through the Individual Assessment process. Administered by the College of Early Childhood Educators, the Individual Assessment is a case-by-case evaluation used to determine whether an applicant's education and professional experience are substantially equivalent to an approved Ontario ECE program. The Individual Assessment comprises two phases. In phase one, applicants complete an Individual Assessment Application Form that includes personal information, academic record, language fluency, professional registration, and a background check. In phase two, the applicant provides references on a Validator's Contact Information Form and a statement in the Self-Assessment Form

describing how they demonstrated key vocational outcomes. The College also permits applicants to submit an Alternative Document Request Form if they are unable to obtain the required documents for assessment. Once the applicant has submitted the documentation and paid the registration fee, they must then apply for registration with the College of Early Childhood Educators to be recognized as a qualified ECE.

Certification Pathways for RECE Candidates in Ontario



Ontario's certification framework is on par with most provinces and territories in Canada. Indeed, in some respects, Ontario is among the more highly regulated jurisdictions: it is the only province in which the practice of early childhood education is governed by a statutory regulatory body. In most other jurisdictions, early childhood educators are licensed or classified for employment purposes, but the profession itself is not regulated through legislation that establishes a protected title or a standardized benchmark for entry to practice. However, in other respects, Ontario's requirements remain limited. For example, Ontario is one of only four Canadian provinces or territories where positions recognized in ratios do not require any formal training[2]; one of only three that require minimal hours of experience alongside the diploma to become a program director; and the *only* province that does not mandate an orientation for non-RECE staff working with children. Moreover, all but four jurisdictions require a diploma that is at least as long as Ontario's two-year standard (British Columbia, New Brunswick, and the Northwest Territories require a one-year certificate, while Nunavut has no post-secondary requirements for practice in licensed child care). Furthermore, while other provinces and territories require educators to complete up to five qualification levels to advance, Ontario requires only one.

The issue, therefore, is not that RECE training requirements are overly prohibitive; rather, they are too rigid. Applicants with the skills or knowledge to be otherwise qualified educators cannot advance toward certification unless they complete the full two-year ECE diploma – even when their competencies are

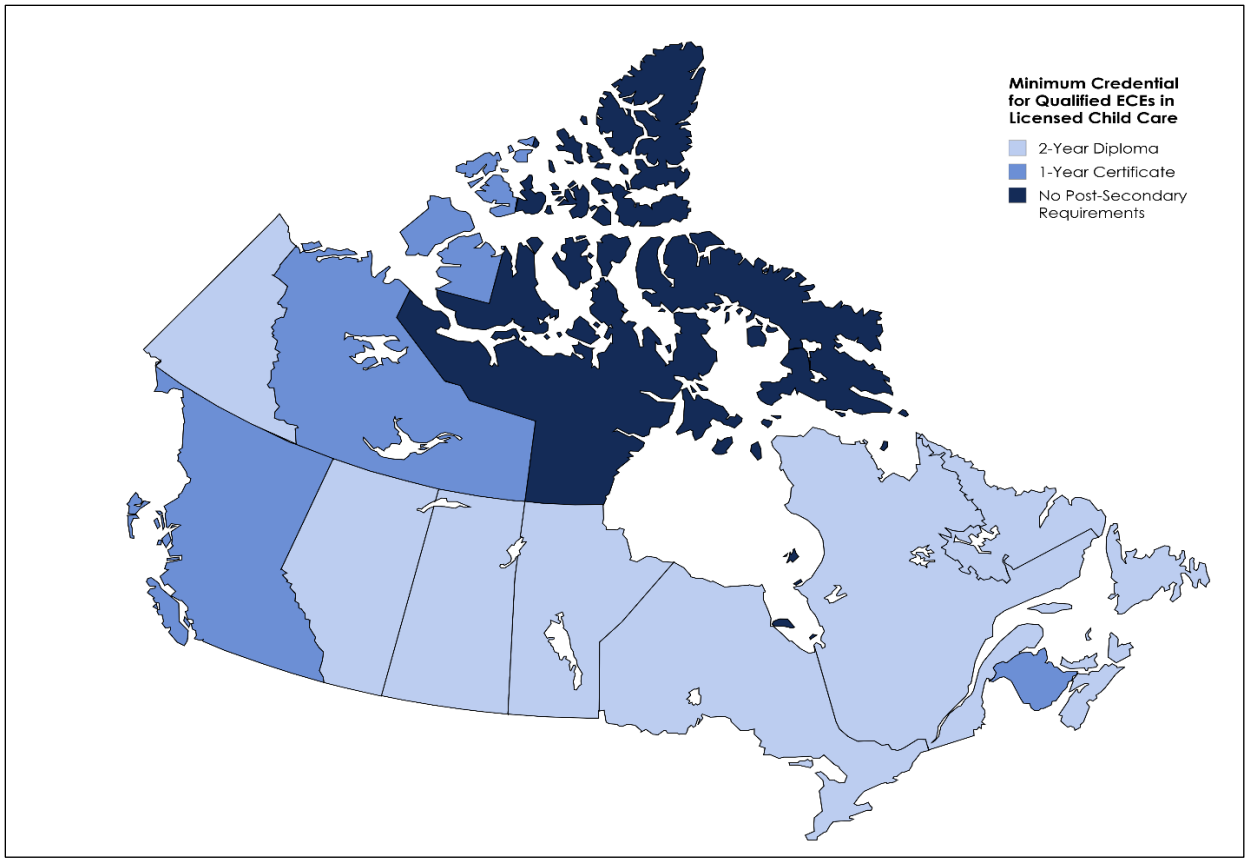
[2] In Ontario, regulatory requirements mandate the presence of at least one Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE) in each licensed child care room at all times, a standard that permits the remaining positions within staff-to-child ratios to be filled by non-RECE personnel. As a result, the staffing framework allows licensed programs to operate with a majority of staff who do not hold formal early childhood education qualifications.

demonstrably equivalent to those outcomes. The current framework requires only a diploma for practice, with little to no incentive for educators to pursue additional qualifications. As a result, ECEs with unique talents, such as language, land-based learning, or trauma-informed practice, are disincentivized from remaining in the sector when those competencies are not formally recognized within the certification framework.

Mandating that RECEs hold a 2-year ECE Diploma is foundational to the sector's quality, credibility, accountability, and professionalism. The Diploma matters because it represents not only a formally awarded credential but also a marker of early learning pedagogies, principles, and best practices essential to child care. Yet Ontario's current framework treats the Diploma as the primary indicator of qualification and offers limited recognition for other equivalent competencies gained through further education, training, or professional experience. In practice, this creates barriers to recruiting and retaining a wide range of educators whose competencies exceed the Diploma's minimum requirements. Consequently, the lack of recognition for early childhood education competencies limits career advancement, marginalizes specialized skills, and pushes RECEs out of the sector.

Qualifications Required in Licensed Child Care by Canadian Province and Territory

Subnational Jurisdiction	Minimum Credential	Levels of Qualification
British Columbia	1 Year Certificate	4
Alberta	2 Year Diploma	3
Saskatchewan	2 Year Diploma	4
Manitoba	2 Year Diploma	3
Ontario	2 Year Diploma	1
Quebec	2 Year Diploma	1
New Brunswick	1 Year Certificate	2
Nova Scotia	2 Year Diploma	5
Prince Edward Island	2 Year Diploma	3
Newfoundland and Labrador	2 Year Diploma	4
Yukon	2 Year Diploma	3
Northwest Territories	1 Year Certificate	1
Nunavut	No legislated requirements	1



Source: ECE Report. *Qualifications Required in Licensed Child Care by Province/Territory* (2023). ECE Report. https://ecereport.ca/en/resources/charts-graphs-2023/overview/qualification-required/

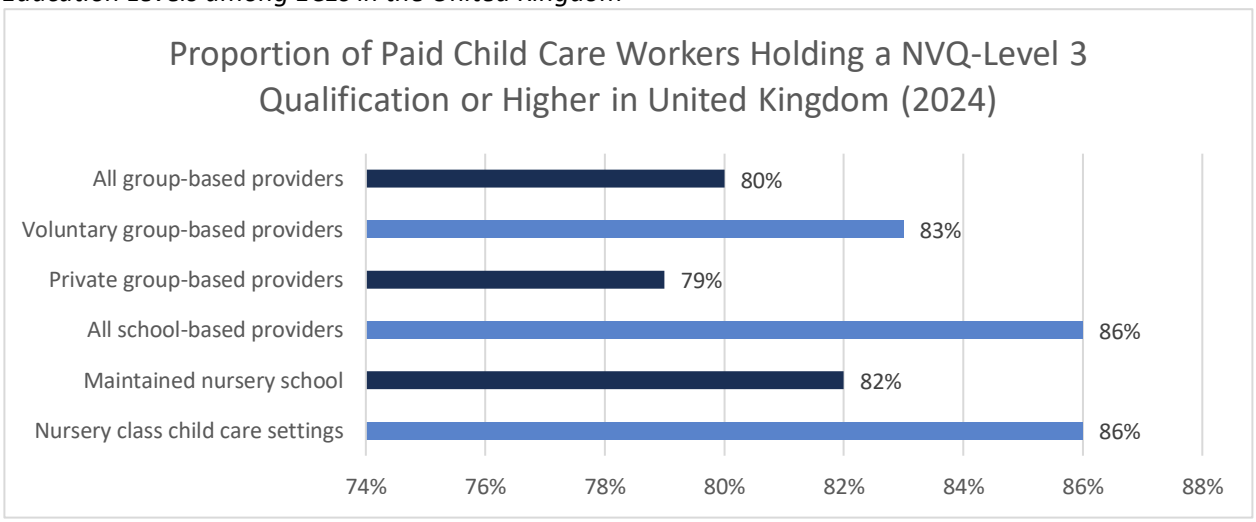
Policy Alternatives in a Vocational Qualification Standard

Ontario policymakers could strengthen qualification standards by introducing a new workforce model based on vocational qualifications (VQ), creating a career ladder that enables educators to progress based on demonstrated competencies rather than on a single credential.

A VQ standard offers another pathway into regulated professions by assessing an individual's practical competencies rather than relying exclusively on formal academic credentials. In contrast to traditional diploma-based models, VQ standards recognize that workers often acquire sector-relevant skills through on-the-job experience, supervised practice, or prior learning. Under a VQ framework, candidates demonstrate proficiency in clearly defined occupational competencies aligned with the role's duties and responsibilities. These competencies are organized into levels that reflect core domains of practice, including child development, curriculum planning, health and safety, and family engagement. Assessment is conducted by qualified evaluators who observe practice. In practice, the VQ model maintains professional standards by ensuring that all candidates meet the same competency thresholds to practice. This provides a structured mechanism for accrediting educators with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in their roles.

Perhaps the most successful example of a VQ-based system in the education sector is the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system in the United Kingdom. VET is offered at both secondary and post-secondary levels through public and private providers, with qualifications available across a wide range of sectors and pathways. Provision includes school-based programs that combine general academic study with vocational elements, as well as broad vocational and specialist occupational programs that incorporate work-based learning in provider settings and workplaces. Most VET programs are accessible from age 15 or 16, delivered on a full- or part-time basis, and offered through flexible formats such as block release, day release, or evening and weekend study, with durations typically ranging from one to four years. VET learners complete apprenticeships that combine instruction with on-the-job training, enabling candidates to earn qualifications while remaining in paid employment. However, VET learners may also become accredited through entry to selected university programs with level 4 qualifications and advanced standing from level 5 programs. Progression is not automatic and depends on institutional requirements. All qualifications are then reviewed and accredited by the UK Governing Body, Ofsted, with support from employers, unions, and sector bodies.

Education Levels among ECEs in the United Kingdom



Source: Department for Education of the United Kingdom. (2024, December 12). *Childcare and early years provider survey: 2024.* Retrieved from the Department for Education of the United Kingdom website: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2024

Within the VET system, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) were added as competency-based credentials designed to assess and certify occupational skills. The Conservative Party introduced NVQs in 1987 as part of a labour market reform agenda to improve access to regulated occupations for experienced workers without formal academic credentials. Established by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, the NVQ system was designed to expand certified training in sectors with low

rates of certification. Advocates endorsed NVQs in the early learning sector as a response to a multitude of workforce issues during the 1980s: Inconsistency in training requirements across the sector, creating barriers to career progression for child care workers; irregularity in skills and knowledge among child care workers doing similar work; and growing research that showed child care workers were interested, but unable, to further their education without compromising their personal or professional duties. In defining national occupational standards, NVQs aimed to formalize existing skills while maintaining regulatory oversight to promote coherence in the profession.

NVQs eventually became a key recruitment mechanism for ECEs in the early learning sector – and continue to be a dominant feature among British educators. For example, the British Department of Education has measured the prevalence of NVQs among workers in the early learning sector, with several studies tracking the proportion of workers who have obtained the Level 3 NVQ (the minimum qualification required to practice as a qualified educator). Department of Education data shows that NVQs are widely used across both roles and sectors. In 2021, 80 percent of staff and 99 percent of senior managers within group-based providers held an NVQ in early years or another relevant discipline at level 3 or above, and 82 percent of staff and 94 percent of head teachers within school-based providers held an NVQ in early years or another relevant discipline at level 3 or above. In 2024, the proportion of paid child care workers holding a level 3 NVQ in early years or other relevant disciplines ranged from 79 percent to 86 percent across provider categories within the early learning and child care sector. The prevalence of VQs among British educators demonstrates their viability as a dominant credentialing model in early learning and child care.

For Ontario legislators, the NVQ model is relevant because it offers a policy alternative for a qualification standard that certifies educators through demonstrated competencies, creating a tiered system for career advancement for RECEs. Adopting a similar model would lay the groundwork for a framework that differentiates roles and responsibilities based on skills and knowledge, establishes a clearer roadmap for career advancement, and creates tangible incentives to encourage qualified educators to remain in the sector.

Advantages of a Vocational Qualification System

The education model in the United Kingdom demonstrates that a VQ-based system can protect the quality of early learning outcomes if certifications remain accountable, controlled, and consistent across the sector. Under the Early Years Foundation Stage framework, educator competence is recognized as a core determinant of quality, with defined qualification thresholds linked to roles and responsibilities within early years settings. For example, in group settings, managers must hold at least a full and relevant level 3 qualification, while 50 percent of all other staff must hold at least a relevant level 2 qualification. Moreover, the manager must have at least two years of experience in an early years setting or at least two years of other relevant experience. While there is no requirement for graduates in private child care settings, staff who lead classes in licensed settings must hold qualified teacher status, which may be at level 6 or 7. These qualification requirements are maintained alongside low staff-to-child ratios relative to OECD averages, enabling higher levels of interaction and attention in the classroom. In turn, the British model provides a template for Ontario to reform qualifications not by lowering them, but integrating them in a graduated framework that anchors roles in demonstrable levels of skill.

Advantages of a Vocational Qualification System in Early Learning and Child Care

Encourages **retention** of qualified educators by establishing a system of progressive qualifications

Furthers **transparency** for employees in their career pathways

Delivers **hybrid training** that integrates on-the-job learning with instructional time to negate the choice between work and education

Promotes **career mobility** by linking qualifications to defined levels of competency

The value of a VQ model in an education context lies in how it interprets *who is qualified* as an educator and *what makes them qualified* for practice. This aspect offers four advantages for employees, employers, and parents in the child care sector.

The VQ model recognizes the value of alternative qualifications relevant to early childhood education. It does so by enabling workers to accumulate credentials incrementally, rather than treating qualification as a single point of entry into the profession. This approach supports retention by rewarding sustained skill development and specialization, thereby encouraging qualified educators to remain in the sector to advance their careers. Of course, the UK experience shows that competency-based qualifications are not sufficient on their own to prevent workforce instability. Nonetheless, they provide the framework for qualified workers to advance through a clearer, competency-based career pathway, mitigating the stagnation that often pushes educators out of the sector.

The VQ model also strengthens workforce participation by embedding hybrid training pathways that integrate paid, on-the-job learning with structured instructional time. By allowing educators to earn credentials through supervised practice alongside funded coursework, the model reduces the financial and logistical barriers associated with returning to school while employed. This work-integrated approach supports retention by enabling educators to advance their qualifications without exiting the workforce or delaying career progression, reinforcing continuity for both workers and employers.

Additionally, the VQ model increases transparency in career progression by organizing qualifications into sequential levels that build on one another. Each level clearly defines the additional competencies, responsibilities, and scope of practice required to advance, making progression predictable rather than ad hoc. This creates a pragmatic career pathway that links skills to professional advancement, enabling educators to be distinguished by expertise, experience, and scope of practice.

Lastly, the VQ model promotes coherence among employers, regulators, and inspectors by organizing qualifications into standardized levels. By establishing benchmarks recognized across employers and spaces, the model reduces barriers to staff transitioning between roles, supporting a more fluid and resilient workforce amid sector-wide shortages. As a result, educators experience greater career mobility, with clearer pathways to move across positions, settings, and regions in ways that reflect their demonstrated competencies rather than the limitations of a single entry credential.

To be fair, the utility of a VQ model like the one in the UK is still limited without a holistic policy shift. The British early years sector continues to face its own retention crisis because the link between higher qualifications and professional advancement is often undermined by familiar barriers like stagnant wages and benefits; for example, a 2023 analysis by the Trades Union Congress found that 62 percent of child care practitioners earned below the United Kingdom's real living wage in of £10.90 an hour. With that said, the model is still worth considering because it provides an example of how workforce models can integrate a form of career architecture that encourages a more stable workforce. Here, we do not mean to suggest this model *guarantees* a steady supply of qualified workers; rather, it is a necessary foundation for building the kind of career architecture that supports an effective workforce model compared to what exists in Ontario.

Comparison of RECE Certification Frameworks in Ontario and the United Kingdom

Area	Ontario	United Kingdom
System Type	Professional regulatory model	Vocational qualification model
Governing Body	College of Early Childhood Educators	Department of Education with government-approved awarding bodies
Qualified Personnel	Registered Early Childhood Educator	Level 3 Early Years Educator or equivalent Regulated Qualifications Framework Level 3
Credential	Early Childhood Education college diploma or equivalent	Regulated Qualifications Framework – Level 3 Early Years Educator
Completion Time	24 months	12-18 months
Legal Status	RECE is a protected title; registration is legally required	No protected title; qualification enables employment
Assessment Framework	Academic coursework and field placement	Work-based evidence portfolios and observations
Standardization	Applicant-by-applicant evaluation	Standardized qualification framework
Role Adaptability	Only Registered Early Childhood Educators count as qualified staff in licensed programs	Level 3 Early Years Educators count in ratios; Level 2 and trainees may work under supervision
Professional Oversight	College of Early Childhood Educators oversees complaints, discipline, ethics	No regulatory college; oversight handled by employers/regulators

The Government of Ontario should consider the NVQ model as a template for addressing the province's current issues with RECE qualification standards. Recognizing the practical skill set of education workers, a VQ standard would widen the pool of candidates who can become qualified educators, easing shortages that currently constrain program expansion. It would allow experienced child care workers, internationally trained educators, and community-based practitioners to demonstrate competence without navigating barriers associated with formal academic programs. For employers, the model provides a structured approach to assessing and developing staff, thereby supporting career progression and improving retention. For workers, it provides a viable route to professional recognition while maintaining employment and income stability. For students, it offers a work-integrated pathway into the profession that reduces time-to-qualification, strengthens continuity between training and employment, and aligns training with the competencies required for good practice.

However, it is worth emphasizing that the qualification process is not the primary barrier to a stable workforce. The more significant barrier is poor compensation, which continues to drive educators out of the sector regardless of *how* they become qualified (as evidenced by the UK's own issues with retention). Without linking new work-integrated pathways to meaningful, non-incremental wage increases, a VQ model still bears risks with accrediting educators who continue to leave for higher-paid roles elsewhere. Reforming qualification standards, therefore, must begin with reforming compensation, ensuring that expanded pathways into the sector are matched by salaries that make long-term retention possible.

Stakeholders who would benefit from a competency-based qualification standard for ECEs

RECEs with specialized skills, knowledge, or experience, but no mechanism for those assets to support career advancement.

Employers who struggle to recruit and retain qualified workers to maintain child care centres at sufficient staffing levels.

RECE Candidates seeking entry to the profession, but are reluctant to commit to it without greater certainty on career prospects.

Families unable to access licensed child care as centres close or reduce capacity because of widespread labour shortages.

Looking Ahead

What might a revised qualification standard look like if Ontario sought to balance workforce expansion with the preservation of quality in early learning and child care?

Canada does not have a national vocational qualification system comparable to the NVQs, but relevant insights can still be gleaned from a domestic analogue: the K-12 education system. In Ontario, K–12 educators hold an Additional Qualification (AQ) and an Additional Basic Qualification (ABQ) framework, governed by the Qualifications Evaluation Council of Ontario (QECO). Under this model, teachers enter the profession with a base credential – the Bachelor's of Education – and then advance through a structured grid by completing recognized qualifications that attest to subject-matter expertise, pedagogical specialization, or leadership capacity. Importantly, AQs and ABQs are competency-oriented:

they certify discrete skills and knowledge areas that are directly tied to classroom practice and system needs. These qualifications are standardized, regulated, and portable across boards, providing clarity to both employees and employers. They are also cumulative, creating a career ladder that links professional learning to higher compensation. As a result, the AQ/ABQ system provides an effective credentialing mechanism to ensure that workers are properly recognized.

What makes the K–12 system particularly instructive is that its efficacy depends not only on the certification of competencies but also on the fact that those competencies are monetized through a collectively bargained salary grid. Professional development is rewarded with salary increases that correspond to clearly defined increments in expertise and responsibility. Without this, the AQ/ABQ structure would offer no meaningful incentives for educators to pursue additional qualifications, creating a sector with few levers for differentiating more experienced teachers from less experienced ones. This suggests that a qualification standard that recognizes specialized skills and knowledge requires an accompanying compensation framework to support retention in order to work.

This issue is not limited to RECEs in licensed child care, but extends to Designated Early Childhood Educators (DECEs) working within Ontario's publicly funded education system. While DECEs in Full-Day Kindergarten may complete Kindergarten AQ 1 and 2 courses, they are excluded from specialist-level qualifications – and unlike Ontario College of Teachers members, do not see these AQs reflected in their placement on salary grids. This arrangement undermines the incentive structure that gives the AQ/ABQ framework its effectiveness and reinforces a bifurcated workforce in which early childhood expertise is valued differently depending on role classification rather than demonstrated competency. If Ontario is to advance a qualification model that recognizes and rewards specialized skills in early learning, it must ensure that additional qualifications are formally recognized for DECEs and linked to compensation in the same manner as for their K–12 counterparts. Without this alignment, reforms risk perpetuating inequities across early learning settings and weakening retention by signalling that advancement opportunities remain uneven across the workforce.

In the early learning and child care sector, a similar framework might set the ECE diploma as the minimum entry requirement, but introduce additional qualifications aligned with occupational competencies. Under this model, educators could obtain post-diploma credentials in areas such as infant care, inclusion and special needs, language acquisition, or program leadership. These qualifications would be assessed through supervised evaluation within licensed settings. Progressing through these levels could confer tangible benefits to educators, such as access to higher wage bands or opportunities for managerial roles. This would establish a clearer pathway for a sustainable labour market that Ontario's early learning sector needs.

The argument for a new qualification standard is not abstract; it responds to a real policy misalignment between how ECE skills are *applied* and how they are *recognized* in the profession. The value of a potential realignment becomes apparent when we turn our attention to educators with unrecognized or under-recognized skills. Take, for example, an ECE trained in Métis pedagogies for early years. Here at the Métis Nation of Ontario, researchers are developing a community-based assessment framework to recognize, understand, and evaluate quality in early learning and child care for Métis children that draws on Métis pedagogies. In a new qualification system, an educator who has mastered this area of knowledge could have it formally assessed as an additional qualification in their practice. This recognition would not only enable this educator to translate their skills into advanced career growth but also enable the centre to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing into its early learning curriculum, thereby strengthening cultural programming for children and families. That, however, is only possible if we build a qualification standard that credits this kind of expertise as a valid qualification.

Conclusion

If Ontario is serious about meeting its CWELCC space-creation targets through 2026, it needs a new approach to qualify RECEs to support higher retention. The province cannot expand the capacity of licensed child care centres while the current credentialing framework lacks the structure to recognize and reward ECE competencies beyond the diploma. A reformed framework that links career progression to defined capabilities would help the province recruit and retain the qualified educators it needs to operate centres at full capacity, connecting licensed child care to more families. By creating a system that recognizes educators for the competencies they bring to the profession, Ontario can mitigate one of the key drivers of the workforce crisis standing in the way of $10-a-day child care. Taking action on this issue is essential to ensure that affordable child care becomes a reality for Ontarians across the province.

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