

Licensed Centre-Based Child Care Operator Staffing Survey

Community Engagement with Licensed Child Care Operators in Wellington-Guelph

Across Ontario and Canada, the early childhood education and care sector is facing a workforce crisis. Licensed child care programmes face challenges recruiting and retaining qualified staff due to inadequate compensation (e.g., competitive wages, benefits) and working conditions (e.g., limited planning time, professional development, and career advancement).¹ The workforce crisis creates staff shortages and, in turn, operational challenges for child care programmes² that negatively impact their ability to fully serve the families in their community.

To explore how the workforce crisis is impacting programmes in the Wellington service delivery area, which serves the County of Wellington and the City of Guelph (Wellington-Guelph), the County's Children's Early Years Division surveyed licensed, centre-based child care programmes in Wellington-Guelph using an emailed questionnaire.

Key Findings

- About one-third (32%) of programmes that responded to the survey indicated they are relying more on non-registered programme staff than on Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs).
- 84% of respondents reported that leadership staff, such as programme supervisors, had to step into programme at least once in the last 12 months to ensure that the programme meets ratios.
- 57% of programmes who responded to the survey indicated that their programme has had to make at least one type of operational change due to staffing shortages.
- Programmes expressed that they are struggling to manage the current state of the workforce and this ongoing stress is causing burnout for staff members.
- Greater advocacy efforts, improved recruitment strategies, competitive wages and benefits, and a centralized supply staff list were suggested as ideas to address the current workforce crisis.

The *Centre-Based Staffing Survey* ran from July 17 to July 28, 2023, and asked questions about the state of the workforce (e.g., number of RECE staff) and the impact of the workforce crisis on the programmes (e.g., pausing enrolment or closing a room). It was shared with the 89 centre-based licensed child care programmes³ in Wellington-Guelph via email. Of the 89 programmes, 58 programmes responded to the survey (65%). Of these 58 programmes, 64% are in the City of Guelph and 36% are in Wellington County, making this sample reflective of child care operators in Wellington-Guelph, where most licensed child care centres are in the city (66%) compared to

¹ McCuaig K., Akbari, E., & Correia, A. (2022). *Canada's children need a professional early childhood education workforce*. Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

² Steeve, J. (2023, January 5). Staff shortage threatens to hold back affordable child care in Ontario. toronto.com.

³ Number of programmes as of June 30, 2023.

the county (34%). Programmes indicated their auspice as not-for-profit (42 programmes, 72.4%), for-profit (14 programmes, 24.1%), or directly operated by the County of Wellington (2 programmes, 3.5%). Most programmes that completed the survey are single-site organizations (69%). The multi-site organizations (31%) completed a survey for each site. The programmes that responded serve children ranging from infant to school-age age groups, where toddler and preschool age groups were the most common age groups served.

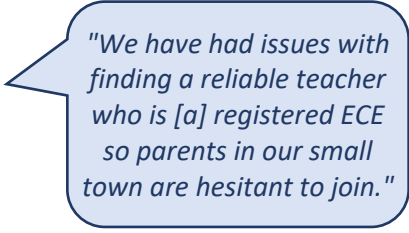
The survey collected quantitative and qualitative data from the leadership staff (i.e., supervisors, directors, owners) at licensed child care programmes within Wellington-Guelph. The numbers of programme and non-programme staff in the sample were calculated. Within each staff type, proportions of each staff qualification level were compared. The survey also included open-ended questions that allowed programmes a space to share their experiences with the workforce crisis. Summaries of the open-ended responses were created by looking at common themes or trends across the data. This report presents the results of the survey and brings together the advocacy on the workforce crisis and the lived experiences of the child care programmes to highlight the unique impacts of the workforce crisis in Wellington-Guelph.

The State of the Licensed Child Care Workforce in Wellington-Guelph

Across the 58 responding programmes, there were a total of 740 staff, ranging from a low of 2 to a high of 52 staff across programmes. Staffing teams are made up of programme staff (e.g., RECEs, non-registered educators) and non-programme staff (e.g., administrative staff, cooks, custodial staff). Based on survey results, approximately 76% of those working at child care centres are programme staff, and 24% are non-programme staff across Wellington-Guelph.

Programme Staff

Programme staff work directly with children and are required to meet the minimum staff-to-child ratios set out in legislation.⁴ Programme staff can be RECEs, non-RECE programme staff (e.g., teaching assistants), staff qualified by director approval,⁵ or other staff (e.g., supply staff, supervisors whose RECE status was not identified). Research indicates that having a higher proportion of staff with ECE training is associated with higher quality child care.⁶



"We have had issues with finding a reliable teacher who is [a] registered ECE so parents in our small town are hesitant to join."

Results from the survey show that over half (53%) of programme staff are RECEs, whereas non-registered educators, educators with director approval, and other types of staff make up the remaining proportion of programme staff (see Table 1). Notably, about one third of respondents (18 programmes) employ more non-registered programme staff than registered ECEs.

⁴ Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014, SO 2014, c 11, Sch 1, <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/14c11>

⁵ Director Approval: A person approved by a Ministry of Education-appointed director to work in the role of a Registered Early Childhood Educator.

⁶ Slot, P. (2018). Structural characteristics and process quality in early childhood education and care: A literature review. *OECD Education Working Papers*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/edaf3793-en>

Table 1. Proportion of RECE to non-RECE programme staff by auspice

Type of Staff	% out of total programme staff	For-profit	Non-profit
RECEs	53%	38%	58%
Non-RECEs	41%	48%	39%
Other	6%	14%	3%

Results also show that in programmes offering school-age spaces only, there is a greater proportion of non-RECE staff compared to RECE staff (see Table 2). On the other hand, for programmes that do not offer school age programming and only serve younger children (infants, toddlers, and preschoolers), just over half (54%) of programme staff are RECEs.

Table 2. Comparing proportion of staff qualification level by school-age group offering⁷

Staff Qualification	Total (n=56)	School age and other age groups (n=28)	School age only (n=16)	Does not serve school age (n=28)
RECEs	53%	50%	36%	54%
Non-RECEs	41%	48%	62%	37%
Other	6%	2%	2%	9%

A pathway for non-RECE programme staff to upgrade their qualifications is through the ECE Apprenticeship programme,⁸ which supplements work experience in child care with in-school training. From the sample, **31 programme staff (5%) are enrolled in an ECE apprenticeship programme.**

Non-Programme Staff

Non-programme staff support child care programmes, and their roles are essential to providing high quality care. A large proportion of non-programme staff include programme supervisors. While most supervisors are RECEs, they can also hold this role with director approval. Non-programme staff also include cooks, administrative staff, and custodial staff (see Figure 1).

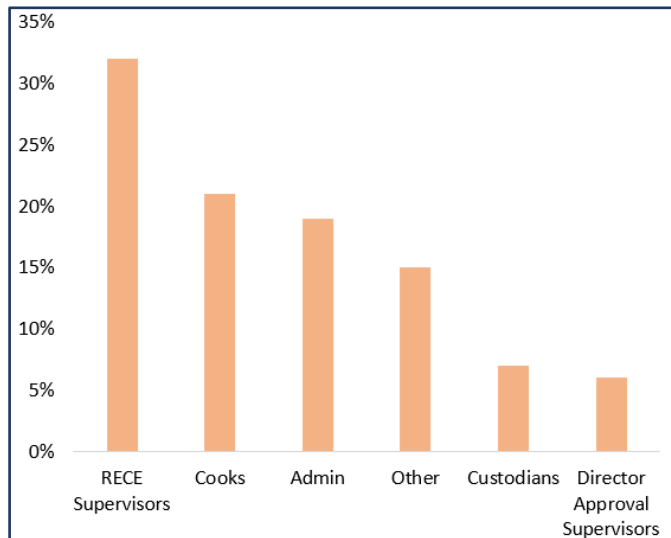


Figure 1. Distribution of non-programme staff by type.

When programme staff are absent, or there are longer-term vacancies, non-programme staff

⁷ Note. For this report, school age includes Kindergarten and School-age spaces.

⁸ Skills Trade Ontario. (2023). *Child Development Practitioner*. Skills Trade Ontario.

often step in to ensure that the programme meets ratios. For instance, 84% of survey respondents reported that leadership staff had to step into programme at least once in the last 12 months to cover staff absences and 57% reported that leadership had to step in four or more times. During these times, programme leadership responsibilities (e.g., recruitment, billing/accounting, coaching staff, meeting with families) are delayed or require additional, often unpaid time at work, creating added pressures and challenges for programmes.

“When the supervisor has to step into programme, the phones and emails go unanswered and parents are unable to get a hold of the programme in a timely manner, if at all.”

Staff Vacancies

- **8% of programme staff positions are vacant (47 positions)**
- **2% of non-programme staff positions are vacant (4 positions)**

Notably, the 8% vacancy rate for programme staff positions is much higher compared to Ontario’s job vacancy rate across all industries (3-5% in the last year)⁹

Impact on Programmes

Beyond moving staff around to cover vacancies and/or absences, programmes share more about how the workforce crisis is impacting the operations of their programme. **57% of participating programmes** indicated that they had to make operational changes due to staffing shortages. The following sections further expand upon the actions taken by programmes in the previous 12 months.

➤ **Many programmes are not staffed to serve their full licensed capacity.** A number of programmes indicated that they had operated at a reduced capacity due to staffing challenges over the last 12 months. When this occurs, access to child care in the community is negatively impacted.

“We are not able to operate at licensed capacity because we cannot find enough staff to be able to reliably operate at that capacity. We operate cautiously so that we greatly reduce the likelihood of having to tell parents that we cannot care for their children.”

“We are not able to meet the demands of care and offer out available spaces due to this. Not only that but it adds additional pressure onto the existing staff.”

➤ **36% of programmes paused enrolment– the programme has not been able to accept new children into their care.** Over the last 12 months, programmes paused enrolment an average of 16.2 different times. This resulted in enrolment being paused an average of almost 19 weeks.

⁹ Statistics Canada. (2023). *Job vacancies, payroll employees, and job vacancy rate by provinces and territories, monthly, unadjusted for seasonality*. Table 14-10-0371-01. Statistics Canada <https://doi.org/10.25318/1410037101-eng>

- **9% of programmes closed a room in the programme – moving the children and staff who usually have their own room, into a room with other children and staff in order to meet ratio.** In the last 12 months, 4 programmes closed a room between 1-5 times and 1 programme closed a room 6-10 times. Each closure lasted for less than 2 weeks.

“Moving staff or children is not ideal and it takes away from deep learning, connection, and so many other things for families, children and staff.”

“Staffing and maintaining staff is one of the most difficult parts of my job.”

- **4% of programmes shortened hours of operations – programmes closed earlier or opened later than they typically do to allow for staff coverage at all times of the day.** 1 programme shortened hours of operation for less than 2 weeks and has now resumed their regular hours. 1 programme shortened hours and is still operating with these reduced hours; this reduction in hours has lasted over 3 months.

While this data indicates that many programmes are struggling to continue their operations, the programmes' own words highlight the impact of these issues on the well-being of the programme (e.g., financially, programme quality) and of the programme staff (e.g., staff burnout).

The ongoing stress and additional work placed on all staff (i.e., programme and non-programme staff) is causing **burnout and mental health issues** for employees (e.g., *“Staff become burnt out picking up extra hours to cover vacant positions and feel guilty taking time off when they need it”*). This burnout has an **impact on the programming quality** and the experiences that programmes are offering to children and families (e.g., *“We must utilize supply staff to cover and there is no consistency for the children, families and other educators”*). Further, programmes are seeing a **negative impact on their business** as a result of these issues (e.g., *“The fact that we are not running at full capacity also affects the financial success of the Centre”*). Lastly, programmes share how the workforce crisis has **negatively impacted the reputation** of child care programmes (e.g., *“If we get walk in tours we cannot take them, emails all on hold, phone answered but then tell them to send an email - customer service aspect decreases and families are annoyed with the lack of response”*).

Ideas to Address the Workforce Crisis

Programmes were asked to draw on their experiences with the challenges described above and generate some ideas about how these challenges could be addressed in Wellington-Guelph, which may help to inform new strategies for supporting and strengthening the early childhood education and care workforce.

- Programmes indicated that an essential part of supporting staff is providing them with a **competitive compensation package** that includes wages, benefits, and adequate paid time off (i.e., sick time, vacation time)

- New **recruitment strategies** (e.g., collaboration with pre-service training programmes)
- Improved **recruitment processes** (e.g., updating job postings to include parallel skills, wage transparency in postings)
- Supports for programmes with vacancies (e.g., a **centralized list of supply and casual staff** that can be accessed by any programme)
- Greater understanding of the impacts of the workforce crisis from regulatory bodies
- More information for the public about the types of issues programmes are facing and the steps programmes are taking to continue to provide care for children and families

Discussion

As shared by the programmes in Wellington-Guelph, staff are stretching their capacity to serve the children and families in their community during the workforce crisis. This creates conditions for a cycle of burnout for programme staff and leadership.

The workforce crisis threatens the success of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system nationwide.¹⁰ The CWELCC funding aims to increase the number of licensed child care spaces, and decrease the barriers for families (e.g., reducing the cost of child care spaces for all families). These initiatives are successfully increasing access to affordable licensed child care, however, the CWELCC programme is dependent on Early Childhood Educators to staff the additional spaces created.

Prior research stresses the importance of compensation, benefits, access to professional learning, and a workplace culture that nurtures and supports the complex, relational work that early childhood education staff do.¹¹ Notably, Ontario’s Decent Work campaign highlights that *“the lack of decent work (e.g., competitive wages and benefits) has driven qualified professionals out of the sector and is deterring new graduates from entering the profession”*.¹² The concept of decent work, which also includes paid professional learning and planning time, is a cornerstone of child care advocacy.¹³

Next steps for the Children’s Early Years Division include reviewing the proposed solutions offered by programmes, in conjunction with the priorities listed in the 2023-2027 Child Care Service Plan,¹⁴ to see where additional work can be done to move these suggestions to action.

¹⁰ Macdonald, D., & Friendly, M. (2023). *Not Done Yet: \$10-a-day child care requires addressing Canada’s child care deserts*. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

¹¹ Ferns, C. & Powell, A. (2021). *Roadmap to Universal Child Care*. Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care & the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario.

¹² Ibid. p.14.

¹³ AECEO Decent Work Task Force. (2017). *Transforming Work in Ontario’s Early Years and Child Care Sector*. Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario.

¹⁴ Children’s Early Years Division. (2023). *2023-2027 Child Care Service Plan*. County of Wellington. Retrieved from: <https://www.wellington.ca/en/social-services/cey-planninganddata.aspx>