



When Inclusion Falls Short:

The Policy Gaps Affecting Children and Families

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CASJE/ACÉJS
Winnipeg, June 1, 2026

P

Policy

Inclusion as a system design issue

F

Fragmentation

Fragmentation across sectors

F

Funding

Funding and accountability

W

Workforce

Workforce capacity vs. workforce conditions

S

SNR Models

SNR models and their limitations

E

Equity

Equity beyond access



Early Years Governance

Federal Government

Provides funding and negotiates access and affordability targets.



47 Service System Managers (Ontario)

Responsible for planning, management, implementation, and accountability of Ministry policy and funding within their regions.



Ministry Responsible

Responsible for legislation, policy direction, and funding.



Early Years Programs

Service delivery agents.



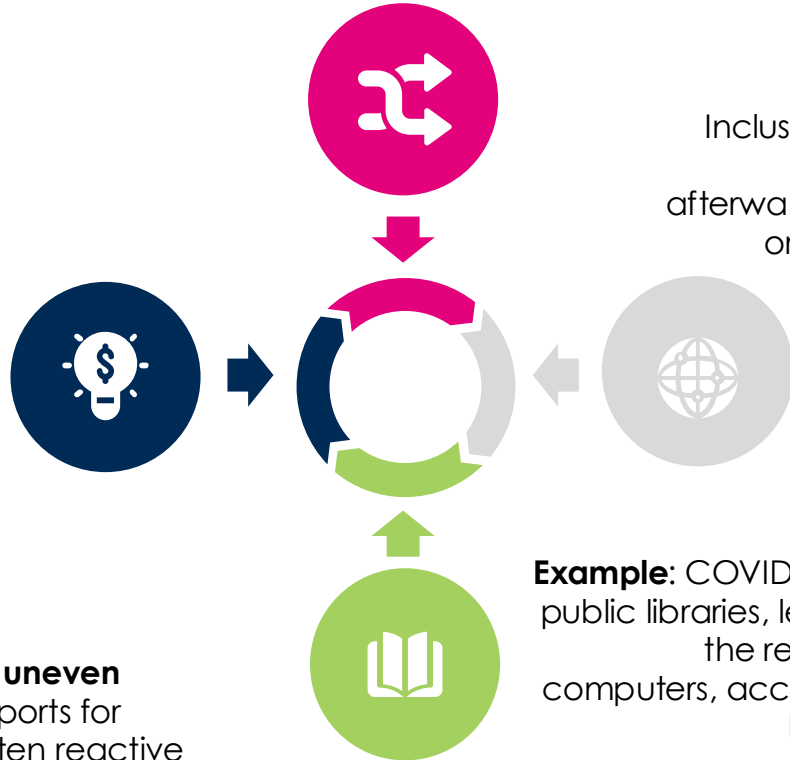
Let's push the conversation away from expecting individual programs or educators to "do inclusion better" - If inclusion depends on additional funding, staffing, or advocacy, is it truly built into the system?

01

Inclusion as a system design issue (not a program-level responsibility). Inclusion is shaped by **policy architecture**: funding, staffing models, ratios, eligibility criteria

02

Fragmented systems create **uneven** access and inconsistent supports for children and families and often reactive instead of intentional



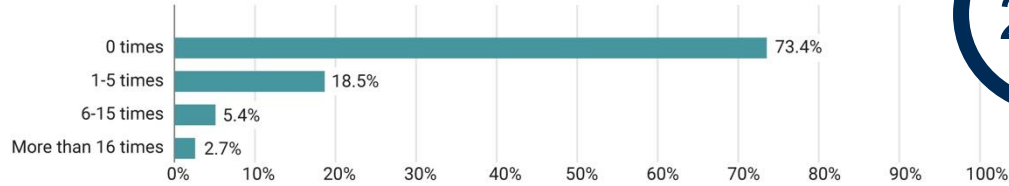
03

Inclusion should be **embedded** into system design, not added on afterward. Inclusion is either designed or not designed into the system

04

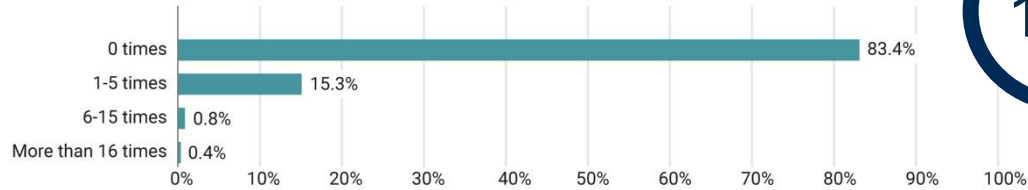
Example: COVID-19 shutdowns of schools and public libraries, left vulnerable families without the resources they needed such as computers, access to books, lunch programs. Inclusion was an afterthought

Percentage Reporting Frequency of Times in the Previous 12 Months Directors/Supervisors Sent Children with Disabilities Home Due to Staffing Shortages



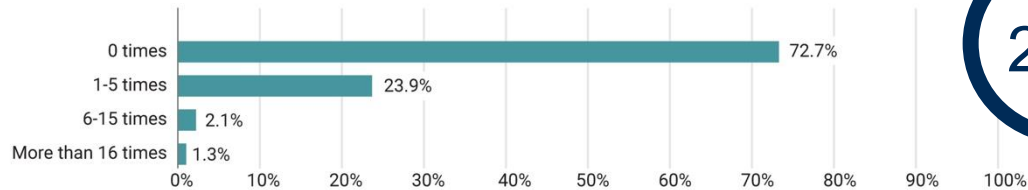
27%

Percentage Reporting Frequency of Times in the Previous 12 Months Directors/Supervisors De-enlisted Children with Disabilities Due to Staffing Shortages

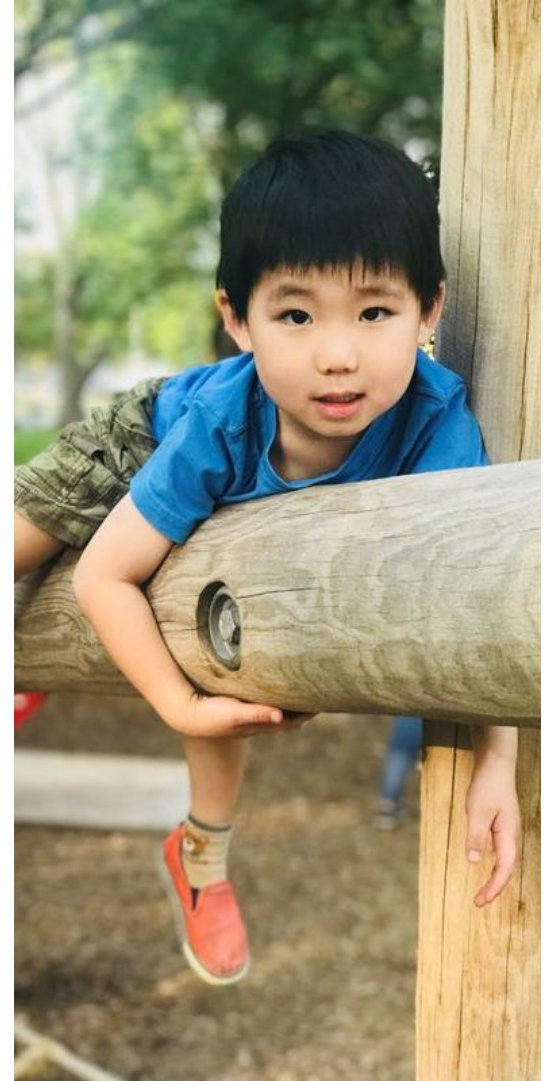


17%

Percentage Reporting Frequency of Times in the Previous 12 Months Directors/Supervisors Denied Admission to Children with Disabilities Due to Staffing Shortages



27%



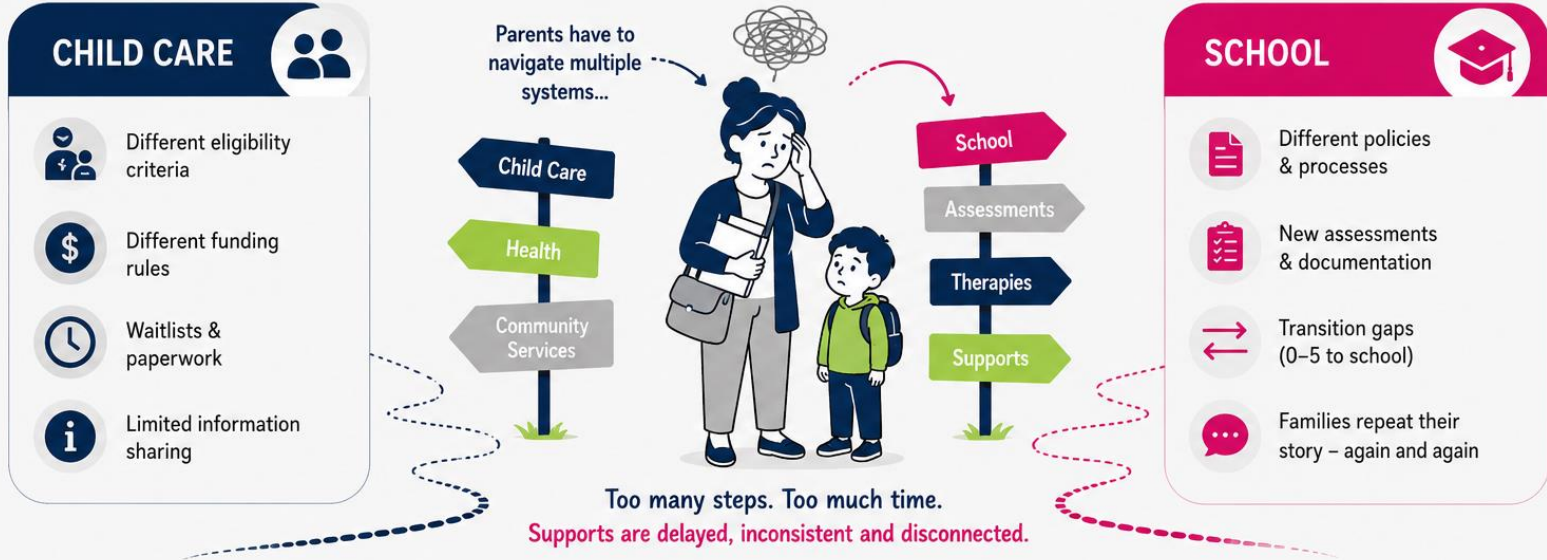


What policies or structural barriers currently make inclusion more difficult in your jurisdiction or organization?

Fragmentation across sectors (ECE, health, education)

FRAGMENTED GOVERNANCE \neq INCLUSIVE OUTCOMES

When systems don't work together, families face more barriers and children miss out.



When systems align, children and families can thrive.

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Which families are most disadvantaged by fragmented systems, and why?

How do language, income, geography, disability, or cultural barriers shape a family's ability to navigate disconnected supports?

FUNDING MODELS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

(CWELCC CONTEXT)



01

Expansion of child care spaces
has not always been matched by inclusion investments



02

Cost-based funding models
may not adequately account for complexity of need



03

Programs serving children with additional support needs
often face higher operational pressures



04

Separation between 0–5 and 6–12 funding structures
creates inequities in access to supports



05

Inclusion must be intentionally costed
into expansion, planning and system design



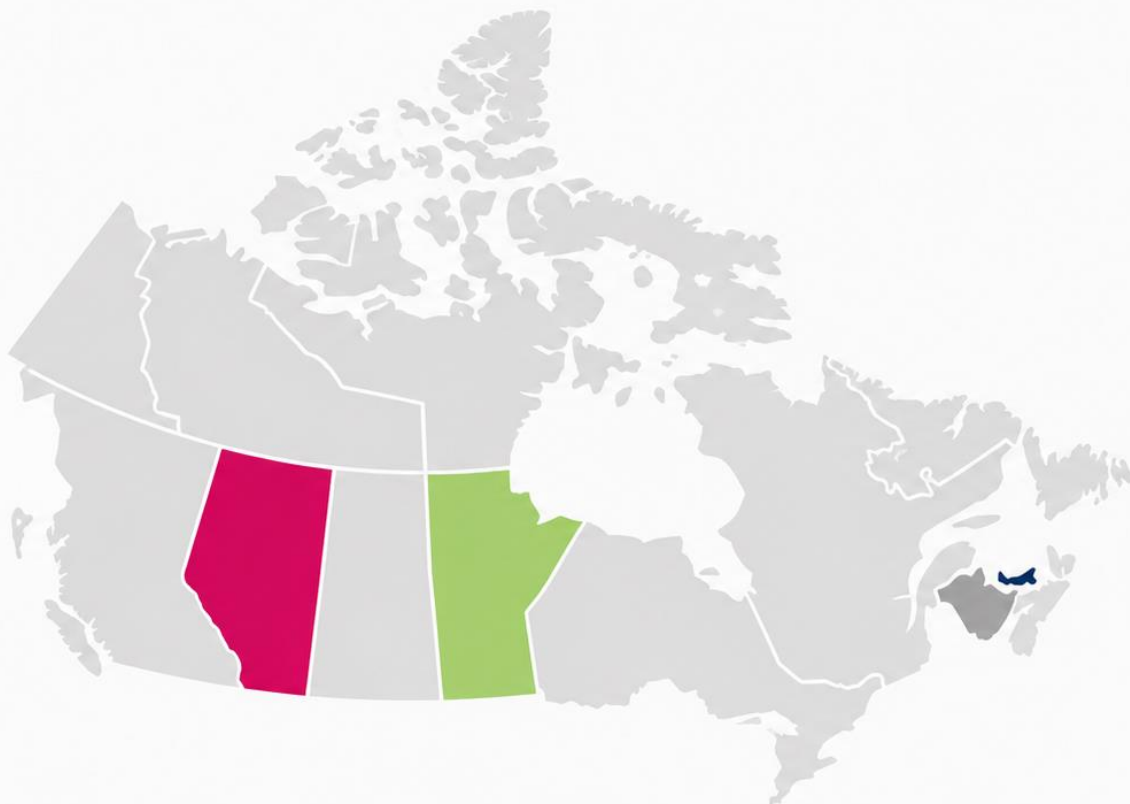
06

Risk of expansion goals
unintentionally increasing strain on already stretched programs



Sustainable expansion requires funding models that reflect the true cost of **inclusion** and support **equitable access** for all children.

JURISDICTIONS WHERE PUBLIC FUNDING FOR CHILD CARE IS CONDITIONAL ON INCLUDING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS



Prince Edward Island

In Designated Early Years Centres only

New Brunswick

In Designated Early Learning and Child Care centres only

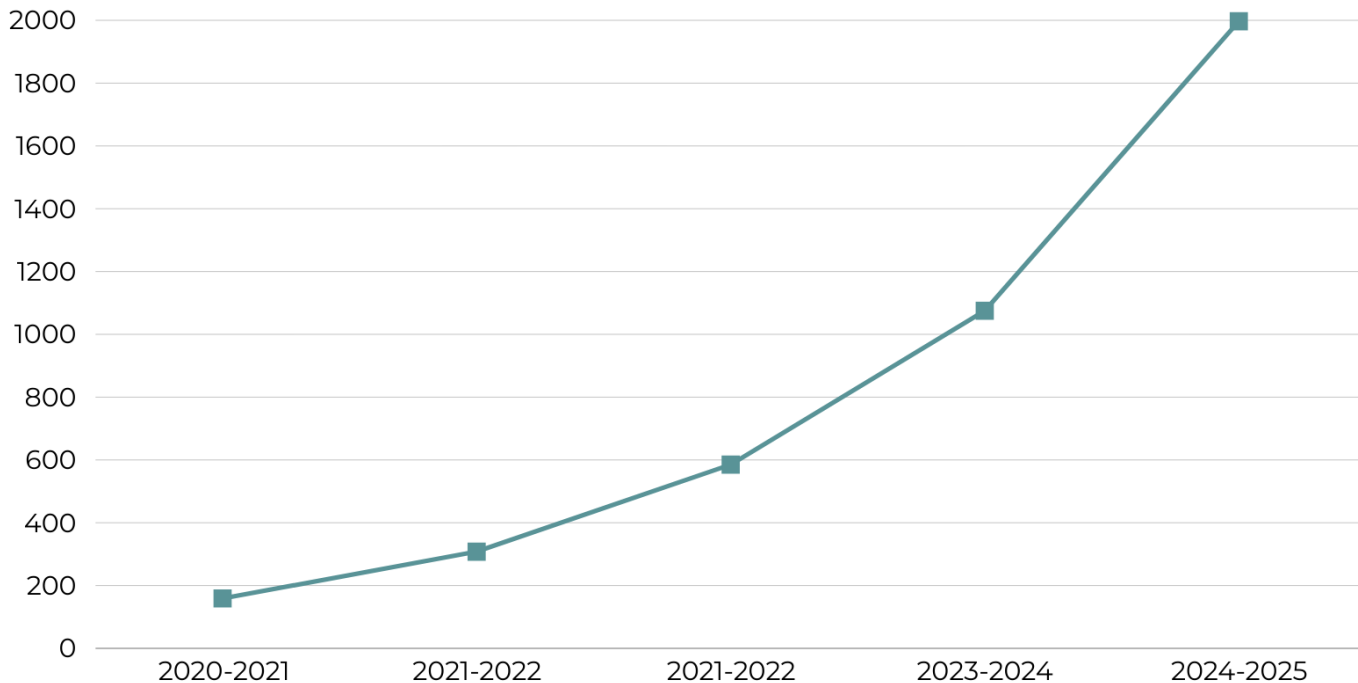
Manitoba

In all publicly funded child care programs

Alberta

In Early Childhood Services programs only

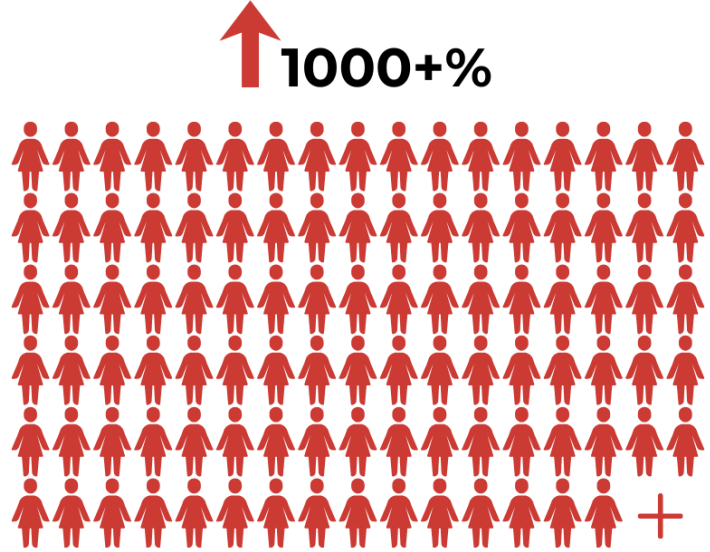
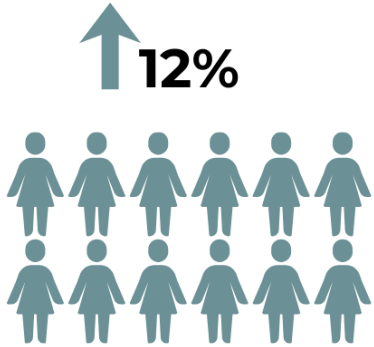
Director's Approval Granted Annually from 2020-2024



Source: Lee, M., Uthayakumaran, A., & Varmuza, P. (draft). Draft Report: Analysis of Director Approvals in Ontario's Licensed Child Care System (2020-21 to 2024-25) Based on FOI Data from the Ministry of Education. Building Blocks for Child Care.



RECE Membership Growth vs Director's Approval Explosion



Source: Lee, M., Uthayakumaran, A., & Varmuza, P. (draft). Draft Report: Analysis of Director Approvals in Ontario's Licensed Child Care System (2020-21 to 2024-25) Based on FOI Data from the Ministry of Education. Building Blocks for Child Care.

Data obtained through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to the Ministry of Education on the use of Director Approvals (DAs) under O. Reg. 137/15, s. 54(1), item 2 of Ontario's Child Care and Early Years Act between 2020 and 2025 (as of May 30).

The Shift from RECEs to Director's Approvals

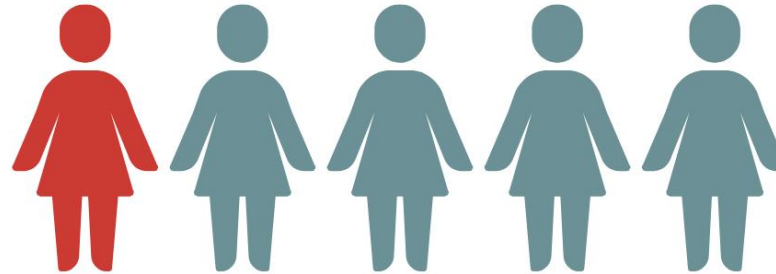


**By 2024-25, there was 1 DA for every 11 RECEs (8.83%),
up from 3.06% in 2022-23.**

Source: Lee, M., Uthayakumaran, A., & Varmuza, P. (draft). Draft Report: Analysis of Director Approvals in Ontario's Licensed Child Care System (2020-21 to 2024-25) Based on FOI Data from the Ministry of Education. Building Blocks for Child Care.



The Shift from RECEs to Director's Approvals



**By 2024-25, nearly 1 in 5 supervisors (21.1%)
held a DA rather than an RECE qualification**

Source: Lee, M., Uthayakumaran, A., & Varmuza, P. (draft). Draft Report: Analysis of Director Approvals in Ontario's Licensed Child Care System (2020-21 to 2024-25) Based on FOI Data from the Ministry of Education. Building Blocks for Child Care.

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DATA AND ACCOUNTABILITY GAPS

01



Many jurisdictions **lack consistent data** on inclusion and workforce capacity.

02



Limited data exists on:

- children with additional support needs
- educator preparedness and staffing capacity
- outcomes of inclusion initiatives

03



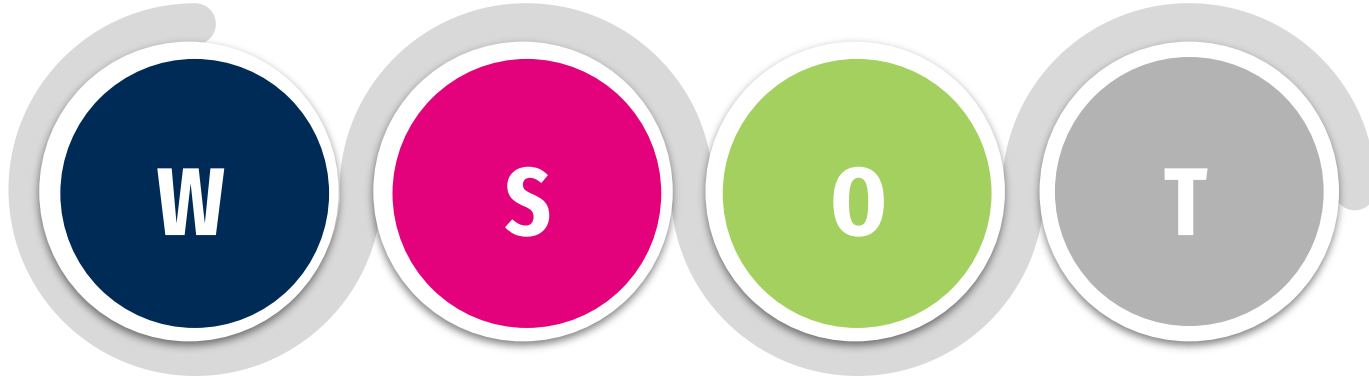
Without measurable indicators, inclusion remains **aspirational** rather than **accountable**.

04



Better data can support **workforce planning**, **funding decisions**, and **policy evaluation**.

We need to challenge the default narrative that inclusion is a “training issue.”



WORKING CONDITIONS

Preparation matters, but working conditions determine whether inclusion is possible



STAFFING

Staffing levels, RECE density, turnover, and burnout directly impact inclusion




OPPORTUNITIES

Reliance on one-off professional development without structural investment is insufficient



COMITTMENT

Workforce conditions are a core inclusion strategy, not separate from it



We are so involved dealing with behavioural challenges with no support that we can no longer be educators

- Program ECE

We want to be inclusive, but the reality is we can't. We have no staff. We have had to de-enlist children. We have to say no to families with children with special needs. Parents are hiding their children's diagnosis in fear of being rejected. This is not right.

- Program ECE

The working environment of educators is the learning environment of children – Kerry McCuaig

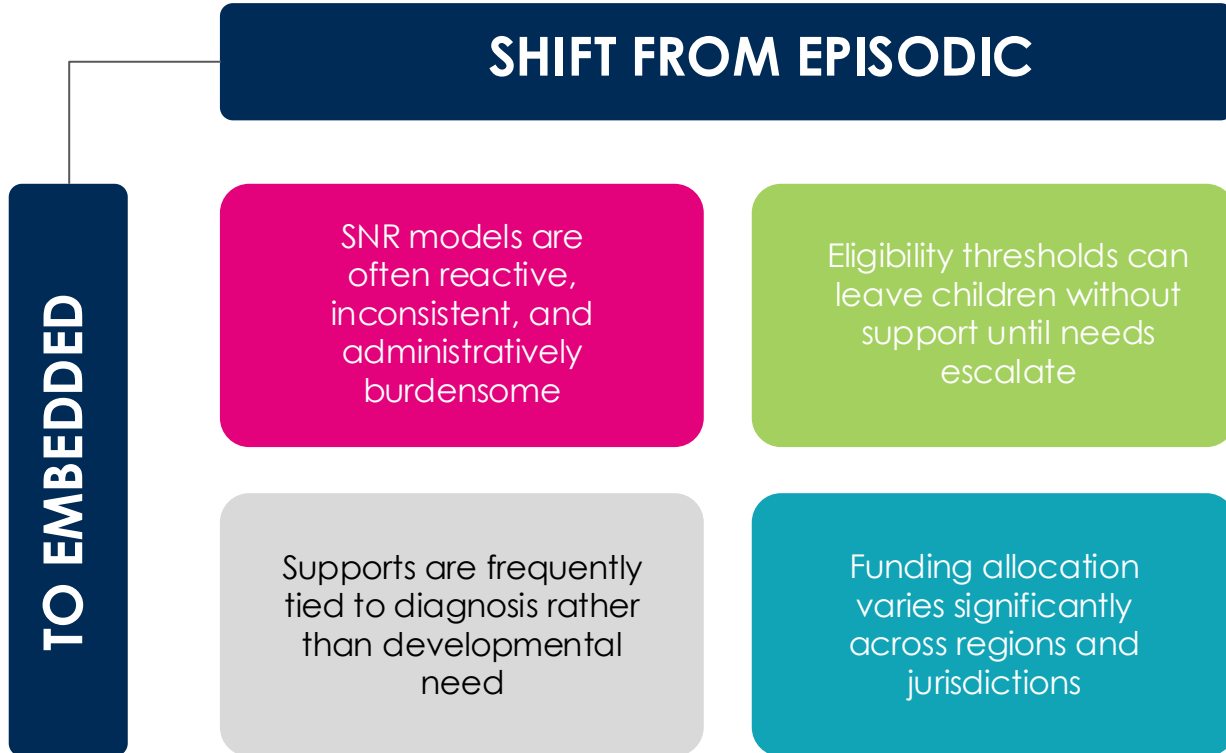


What happens to inclusion efforts when turnover and burnout become normalized within the sector?

“Workforce is not a side issue in inclusion — it is the mechanism through which inclusion succeeds or fails.”



Special Needs Resourcing (SNR) Models and Limitations



Special Needs Resource (SNR) Models

DIRECTLY OPERATED

SNR is directly operated by the government (e.g. municipal)

3rd PARTY AGENCY

SNR is operated by a third-party agency (e.g. non-profit organization)

MULTIPLE AGENCIES

SNR is operated by multiple third-party agencies – each may have their own model/system



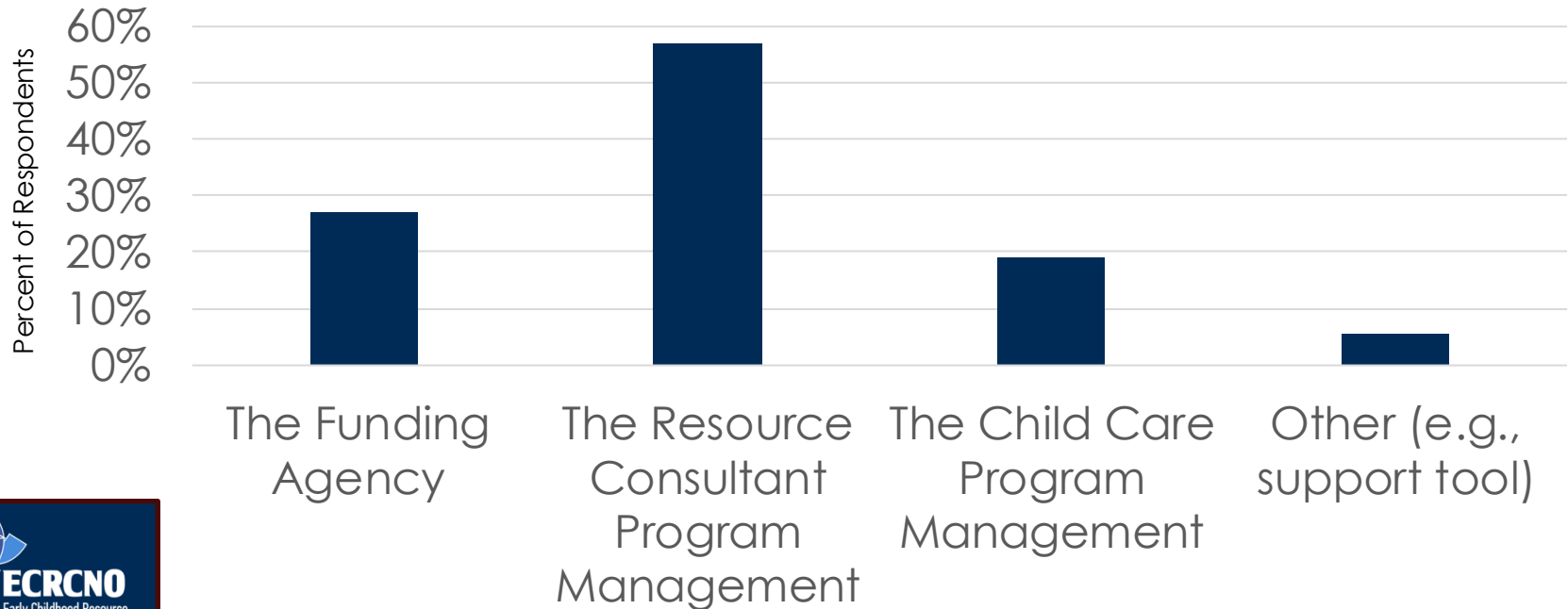
CHILD CASELOAD

Case load for each consultant may be on a child basis

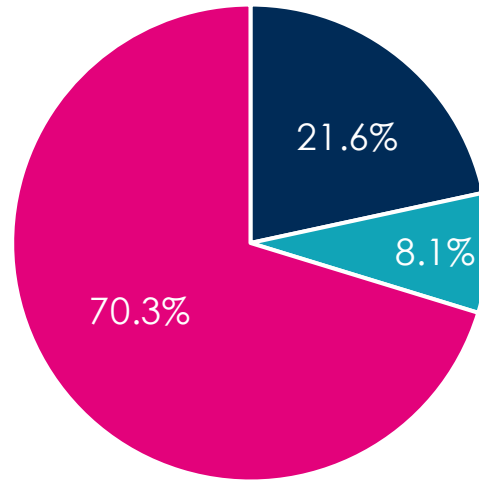
CENTRE CASELOAD

Case load for each consultant may be on a program/centre basis

Who determines approval, level of support and length of support that will be provided?

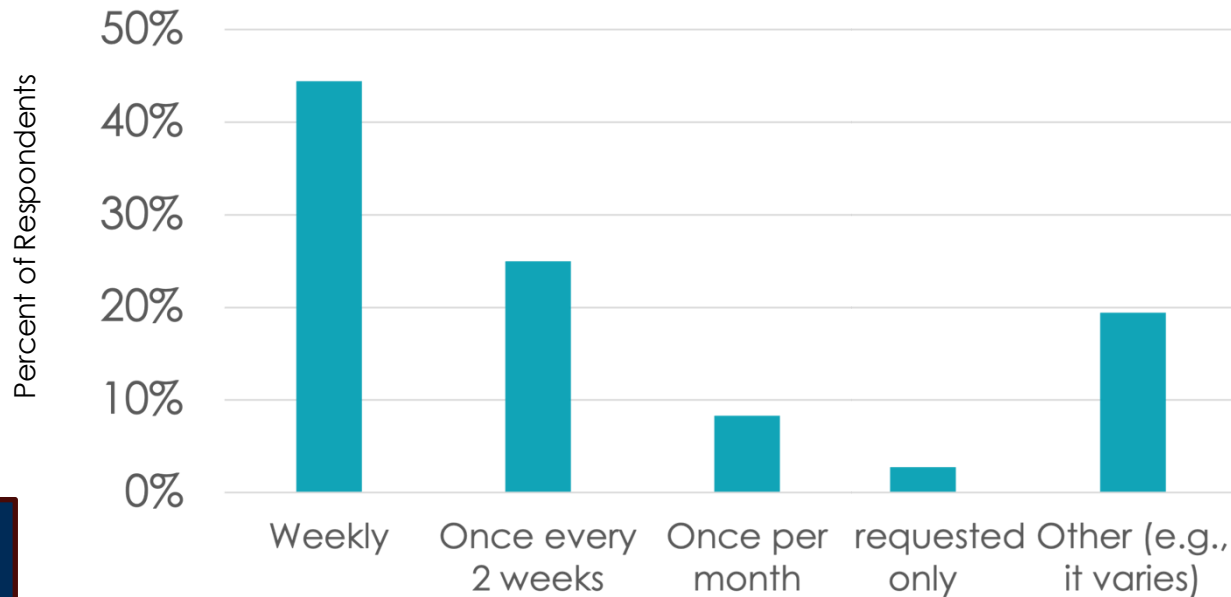


Do Resource Consultants Carry a "Centre" or "Child" Caseloads?



- Caseloads are for Centres/Programs Only
- Caseloads are Individual Children Only
- Caseloads are a Combination of Centres and Children

On average, how often will a consultant make a regular visit to a centre/child on their caseload?



When Inclusion Supports Become Ratio Coverage

Inclusion Disappears

PULLED INTO RATIO. CHILD SENT HOME.

When specialized support is used to maintain ratios, inclusion disappears.

1

INTENDED INCLUSION

Specialized support in place to enable inclusion.



Child receives the support they need to learn, participate and belong.

2

WORKFORCE SHORTAGE / RATIO CRISIS



Staff shortage. Need to maintain legislated ratios.



SNRC is pulled from the child to maintain the required ratio.

3

SYSTEM FAILURE



Support removed. Child sent home.



Inclusion cannot succeed when specialized supports are redirected to stabilize basic staffing.



Loss of individualized support



Disrupted inclusion and learning

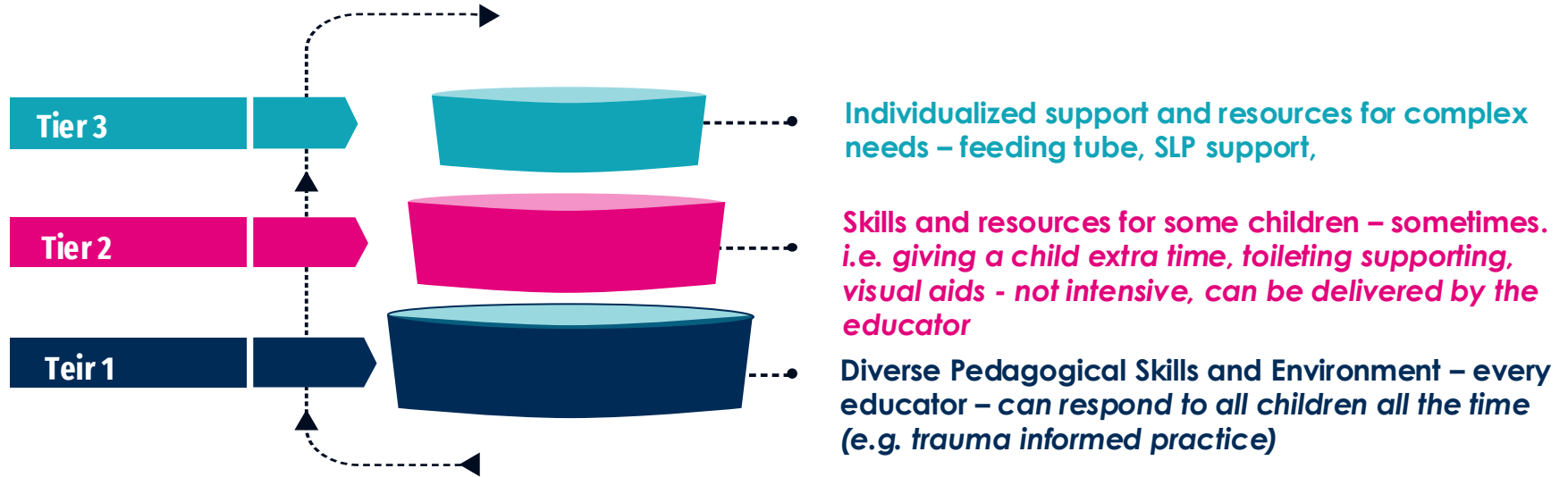


Increased stress for educators

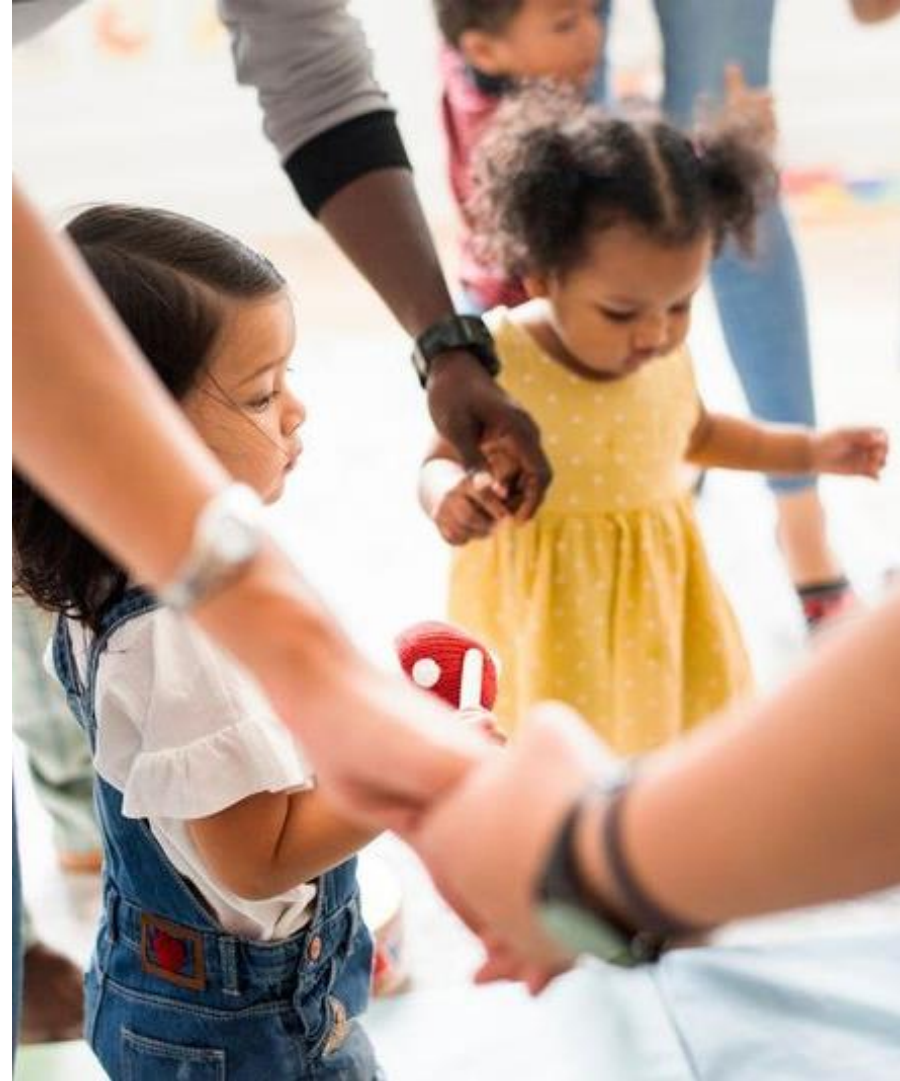


Children excluded. Families burdened.

Multi-Tiered System Support (MTSS)



- **Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) matter because they move inclusion from reactive intervention toward proactive, layered support for all children.**
- **MTSS allows programs to provide universal supports early, while increasing intensity and specialization only when needed, helping prevent children from falling through gaps in the system.**
- **By embedding support across tiers rather than relying solely on crisis-based or diagnosis-driven responses, MTSS creates more equitable, coordinated, and sustainable inclusion practices.**





**What would a truly
preventative and embedded
model of support look like in
your jurisdiction?**



EQUITY BEYOND ACCESS

Access to child care
isn't just
counting spaces.



SOME CHILDREN AND FAMILIES REMAIN UNDERSERVED

Despite expansion efforts.




CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES OR COMPLEX NEEDS MAY EXPERIENCE EXCLUSION OR "SOFT EXPULSION"

Barriers in policies, practices and environments persist.



AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESS ALONE DO NOT GUARANTEE EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION

Access is necessary, but not sufficient.



GEOGRAPHIC INEQUITIES PERSIST IN CHILD CARE DESERTS AND UNDERSERVED REGIONS

Location continues to shape access and quality.



RACIALIZED, NEWCOMER, INDIGENOUS, RURAL, REMOTE, AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES MAY FACE ADDITIONAL BARRIERS

Systemic inequities limit opportunities and outcomes.



INCLUSION MUST ACCOUNT FOR CULTURAL, LINGUISTIC, DISABILITY, AND GEOGRAPHIC REALITIES

One-size-fits-all approaches leave families behind.



Equitable child care systems must go beyond counting spaces to ensure every child and family **belongs**, **participates**, and thrives.



Professional development received in the last 12 months	For profit	Non-profit	CMSM / DSSAB	FDK	All
Supporting vulnerable families	20.4%	27.2%	36.4%	30.0%	26.7%
Cultural diversity in Early Years settings	35.4%	43.0%	51.5%	43.0%	42.2%
Anti-bias/anti-racism/anti-oppression education	34.9%	46.4%	55.7%	60.5%	45.7%
Supporting newcomer families	14.8%	17.8%	19.0%	19.4%	17.4%
Critical trauma-informed practice	18.5%	26.7%	37.4%	32.3%	26.2%
Incorporating land-based learning	15.0%	19.5%	24.9%	22.1%	19.2%
Making workplaces more accessible	22.5%	25.7%	34.1%	22.4%	25.5%
Supporting 2SLGBTQIA+ children and families	19.3%	27.1%	32.5%	29.3%	26.2%
Indigenous ways of knowing and being and decolonization	21.4%	29.0%	44.6%	40.3%	29.3%
Incorporating Afrocentric ways of being	10.3%	9.7%	12.1%	14.8%	10.3%
Supporting children with disabilities	38.1%	46.2%	53.8%	41.8%	45.0%

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