# Beyond the Promise:

## Equity, Policy, and the Marketization of Child Care

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# THE PROMISES OF CWELCC

The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) Agreement was built on a bold promise:

**AFFORDABLE.**
**INCLUSIVE.**
**HIGH QUALITY.**
**FOR EVERY CHILD.**
**EVERY FAMILY.**
**EVERY COMMUNITY.**

**CWELCC was never just about lower fees.**
It was about building a more just, inclusive, and caring Canada where every child can thrive and every family belongs.

## CWELCC PROMISED TO:

### 1. UNIVERSAL ACCESS
Every family who wants child care can find a space when they need one.

### 2. AFFORDABILITY
$10

Fees would be reduced to an average of $10 a day for regulated child care.

### 3. EQUITY
Public funding would advance equity and support families facing barriers.

### 4. INCLUSION
Children of all abilities, backgrounds, and identities would be welcomed and supported.

### 5. EXPANSION
New high-quality spaces would be created to meet growing demand.

### 6. PUBLIC SYSTEM BUILDING
A strong, primarily public and non-profit system would be built.

### 7. WORKFORCE SUSTAINABILITY
Early childhood educators would be valued, well-paid, and supported.

### 8. QUALITY
All children would have access to high-quality early learning and care.

### 9. PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY
Public dollars would be used transparently and accountable to families and communities.

### 10. CHILD CARE AS A PUBLIC GOOD
Child care would be recognized as an essential public service—not a private commodity.

These are the promises. | The work ahead is to ensure they are fully realized. | Because every child. Every family. Everywhere.

# POLICY vs. REALITY

| Policy says... | Reality often looks like... |
|---|---|
| Inclusive | **Families struggle to find placements** |
| Accessible | **Wait lists of several years** |
| Affordable | **Hidden costs remain** (fees, supplies, meals, transportation, lost wages) |
| High quality | **Workforce shortages** high turnover, burnout, challenging working conditions |
| Universal | **Unequal provincial implementation** huge differences in access, funding, quality—and priorities |
| ***Canada's plan prioritizes public & non-profit child care*** Child care as a public good | **For-profit child care continues to expand** Public dollars flowing to private operators, profit over quality in some cases |

# Early Learning and Child Care Language in Canada: Then and Now

**Policy to reality. Our language shapes our thinking. Our thinking shapes our practices. Our practices shape experiences.**

## THEN: ABOUT 20 YEARS AGO

- special needs
- integration
- readiness
- deficits
- accommodation
- normal development
- vulnerable children

The focus was often on what children **could not do** and how they could fit into existing systems.

## NOW: TODAY

- belonging
- participation
- strengths
- inclusion
- accessibility
- diversity
- equity
- rights
- capability
- Indigenous knowledges, decolonization
- Anti-racism
- Bias

The focus is on what **every child brings, their rights**, and how we create inclusive, equitable environments where all can **thrive**.

Move beyond the fluff. **Interrogate** the agenda. **Resist** the silencing.

When policy language becomes **lived practice**, rights move from words on paper to **realities** in children's lives.

### QUESTION ASSUMPTIONS

Whose needs have been centered? Whose voices have been missing?

### EXAMINE POWER

Who benefits from the current system and language?

### AMPLIFY VOICES

Whose voices are missing or ignored? How do we listen and respond?

### CHALLENGE BARRIERS

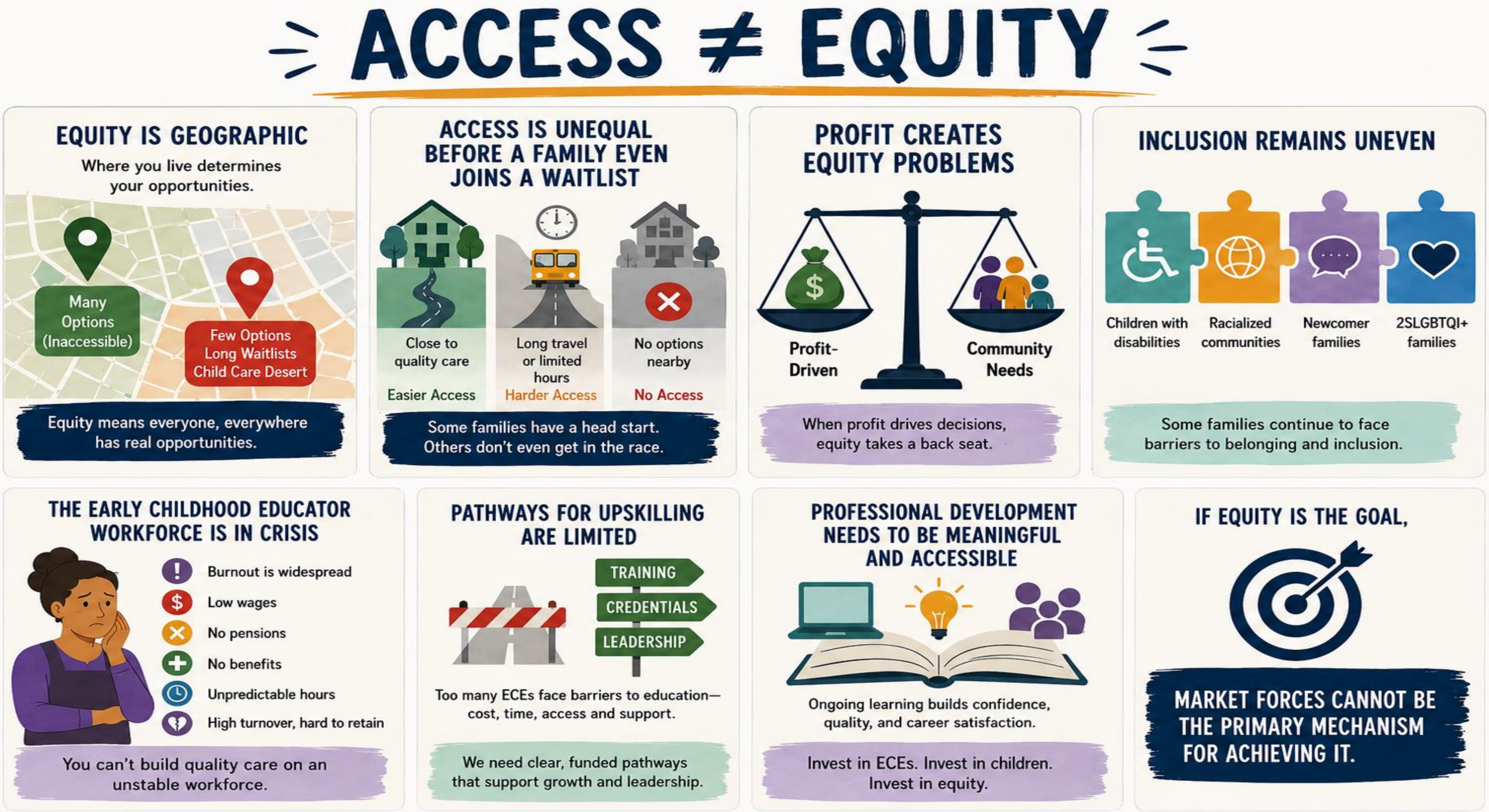
What systems, structures and biases are we upholding? What needs to change?

### CREATE CHANGE

What actions will lead to belonging, equity and justice for all?

**Language can open doors. Practice keeps them open. Rights sustain them.**

When our language aligns with our values and our actions, every child can belong, participate, and reach their full potential.



ACCESS ≠ EQUITY
EQUITY IS GEOGRAPHIC
Where you live determines your opportunities.
Many Options (Inaccessible)
Few Options
Long Waitlists
Child Care Desert
Equity means everyone, everywhere has real opportunities.
ACCESS IS UNEQUAL BEFORE A FAMILY EVEN JOINS A WAITLIST
Close to quality care
Easier Access
Long travel or limited hours
Harder Access
No options nearby
No Access
Some families have a head start. Others don't even get in the race.
PROFIT CREATES EQUITY PROBLEMS
Profit-Driven
Community Needs
When profit drives decisions, equity takes a back seat.
INCLUSION REMAINS UNEVEN
Children with disabilities
Racialized communities
Newcomer families
2SLGBTQI+ families
Some families continue to face barriers to belonging and inclusion.
THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR WORKFORCE IS IN CRISIS
Burnout is widespread
Low wages
No pensions
No benefits
Unpredictable hours
High turnover, hard to retain
You can't build quality care on an unstable workforce.
PATHWAYS FOR UPSKILLING ARE LIMITED
TRAINING
CREDENTIALS
LEADERSHIP
Too many ECEs face barriers to education— cost, time, access and support.
We need clear, funded pathways that support growth and leadership.
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS TO BE MEANINGFUL AND ACCESSIBLE
Ongoing learning builds confidence, quality, and career satisfaction.
Invest in ECEs. Invest in children. Invest in equity.
IF EQUITY IS THE GOAL,
MARKET FORCES CANNOT BE THE PRIMARY MECHANISM FOR ACHIEVING IT.

# Access is not a destination.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Access** | Opportunities are available. Doors are open. |
| ↓ | |
| **Attendance** | Children show up. They are present. |
| ↓ | |
| **Participation** | Children take part. They are included in activities and interactions. |
| ↓ | |
| **Engagement** | Children are invested. They are curious, interested, and connected. |
| ↓ | |
| **Belonging** | Children feel they are valued. They feel safe, connected, and that they truly belong. |

**The real question is:**
*Does every child feel that this place was designed with them in mind?*

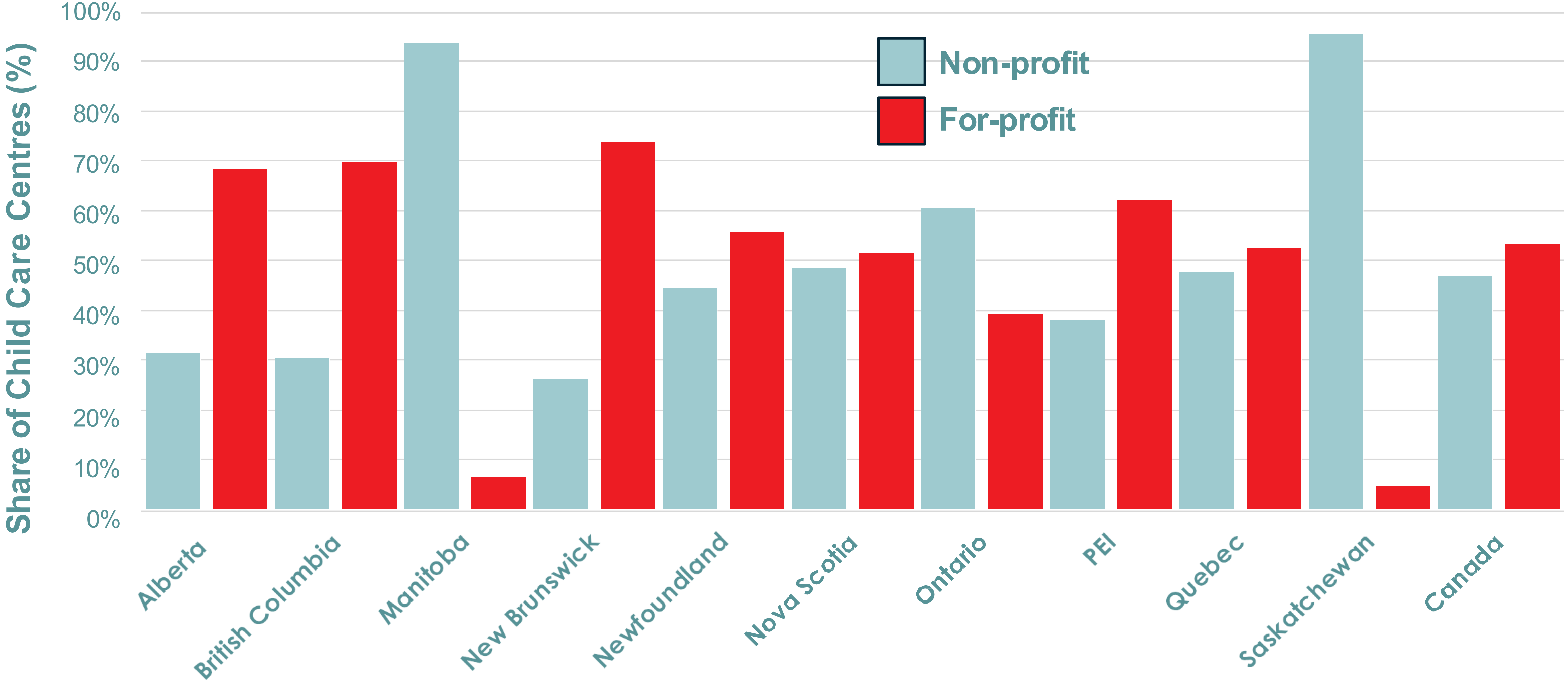
# Bridging Policy and Practice

**Our policies say…**

**What would someone walking into our centre actually see if this policy were fully alive?**

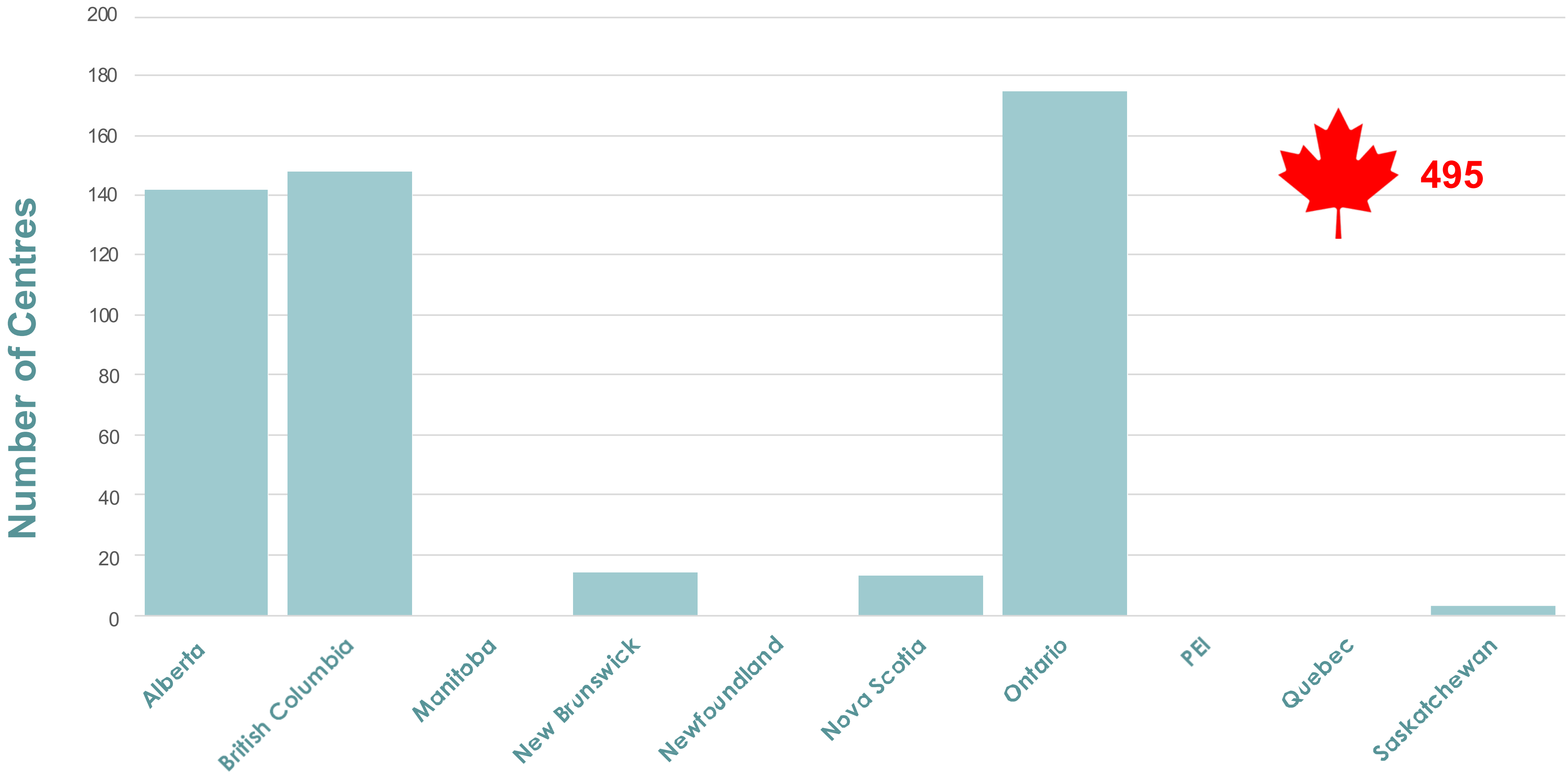
# Preliminary Analyses of the For-Profit Landscape in Canada using Childcare Licensing and Accessibility by Region (CLAR) database

# Share of Child Care Centres for 0–5-Year-Olds by Province and Auspice (Q3, 2025)




**Note:** All licensed child care spaces in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut are non-profit. Data for Yukon were not available. Source: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives - Childcare Licensing and Accessibility by Region (CLAR) database.

# Number of Centres Operated by Large Chains, by Province (Q3, 2025)




**Note:** Data for Yukon were not available. Large chains include SBGC, BrightPath, CEFA, Fueling Brains Academy, Kids & Company, Preschool Canada Academy, Tiny Hoppers, Willowbrae, Lullaboo Limited Inc. Source: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives - Childcare Licensing and Accessibility by Region (CLAR) database.

# The Marketization of Child Care

## *When Profit Leads, Equity Falls Behind*

**Child care is a public good. When market forces drive decisions, access, quality and equity are compromised.**

### Why the for-profit sector continues to expand

- Strong profits and investor interest
- Public funding still flows to for-profit operators
- Faster and cheaper to expand

### When market forces determine where spaces are created

- Spaces grow in high socioeconomic status urban areas
- Child care deserts persist in rural, northern and low-income communities

### Does profitability influence who is served?

- Children with higher needs face more barriers or extra fees
- Programs may be less inclusive when profit is the priority
- Racialized communities often face longer wait lists and fewer options

### Can markets produce equitable systems?

- Markets respond to demand—not to rights, inclusion or community well-being.

## The Reality Across Canada

- Uneven expansion across provinces
- Urban vs. rural gaps
- Private equity and corporate chains are growing
- Workforce shortages drive privatization
- Racialized and low-income families are disproportionately impacted

## Child care is not just another market.

It is the foundation for opportunity, well-being and a more just and equitable Canada.

# Beyond the Promise...

**Equity** must be measured by **who benefits**—not simply how many spaces are created.

Child care policy should move from affordability to **justice.**

The success of Canada's child care system will be determined not by lower fees alone, but by whether **every child and family** can access high-quality, inclusive, culturally responsive, and publicly accountable early learning and care.

**If equity is the goal, market forces cannot be the primary mechanism for achieving it.**

# Questions?

# Thank You

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