

# WHY EQUAL PAY MATTERS: INSIGHTS FROM THE 20TH ANNUAL SUMMER INSTITUTE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT



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Last week's 20th Annual Summer Institute on Early Childhood Development brought together a community of changemakers aiming to [Shape the ECE Workforce for Canada's Future](#). Researchers and practitioners from multiple disciplines addressed the working conditions of early childhood educators and explored strategies to stabilize and grow the workforce.

Olivia Chow, the Mayor of Toronto, kicked off the event by underscoring the need for "political will, good data, foundational funds, and support from the government" in effecting meaningful change. With unwavering conviction, she declared that "we need an ECE workforce strategy." As a longtime ally, her words served as a catalyst to unite attendees and ensure that early childhood educators felt seen and heard on a scale that promised real action.

The authors of the latest [2023 Early Childhood Education Report \(ECER\)](#), Dr. Emis Akbari, Dr. Shelly Mehta, and Kerry McCuaig, reviewed the status of early childhood education and care across Canada at the halfway point of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care plan (CWELCC). Since the onset of

the pandemic in 2020, the child care sector has faced unprecedented challenges, experiencing a staggering 21 per cent decline in employment compared to just 3 per cent in other industries.

This, the fifth edition of the report, showed how some jurisdictions are leveraging CWELCC funds to address staffing shortages. Notably, six jurisdictions have already implemented mandated wage grids, and another is currently in development. Four jurisdictions have also put enhanced educator wage supplements into place. Ontario's progress has improved the least since 2020, with only a 3 per cent change in wages over the last three years. Some provinces and territories are offering pensions and health plans, along with improved professional development opportunities. Addressing this disparity and raising ECE wages to meet minimum standards are crucial to break the cycle of precarious employment in the sector.

Amidst these challenges, it is important to recognize and confront the significant gender pay gap that further compounds the barriers faced by ECEs. The average woman in Ontario earns a mere \$0.87 for every dollar a man makes. Dr. Elizabeth Dhuey, Vicky Smallman, and Jan Borowy also discussed how women are disproportionately represented in the "care economy," often clustered in occupations characterized by the "5 Cs": caring, clearing, clerical, catering, and cashiering. In addition, in Ontario, women represent 96.8 per cent of the child care workforce and 31.3 per cent of racialized people.

Closing the pay gap is not only a matter of economic fairness, it is also a fundamental human rights issue. In Ontario, strides have been made through the Pay Equity Act, which mandates the use of one of three prescribed methods—job-to-job comparison, proportional value comparison, or proxy comparison—to evaluate and rectify disparities between female-dominated and male-dominated professions. However, the Act is not well enforced, particularly in non-unionized work environments. What immediate action needs to be taken to bridge this gap? Jan Borowy, with the Ontario Equal Pay Coalition, suggests raising the minimum wage to a living wage; mandating paid sick days for workers; having affordable, accessible public child care with decent wages for early childhood educators; implementing the Pay Transparency Act; and lastly, rebuilding the economy by funding public services.

Reflecting on insights gained from the Summer Institute and the findings of the ECER 2023, it becomes evident that continued research, collaboration, advocacy, and innovation are needed to advance the economic security, gender equality, organizational success, and societal well-being of ECE professionals and the children they serve.