



THE DISTRICT OF THUNDER BAY
SOCIAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION BOARD

Child Care Workforce Development

POSITION PAPER

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The District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board

Prepared for:

Hon. Jill Dunlop, Minister of Education
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Brief

The District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board (TBDSSAB) requests that the Ministry of Education creates a provincial workforce strategy that guides system service managers on planning for the long-term future of childcare in Ontario with a key focus on sustaining the recruitment, retention and professional development of Early Childhood Educators (ECEs).

Summary

Since 2022, the funding agreement between the Ontario and federal governments has resulted in significant childcare fee reductions and a corresponding increased demand for licensed childcare. However, this increase in demand has surpassed the available spaces and program staff capacity in the District of Thunder Bay, resulting in a growing childcare waitlist that cannot be served. A decreased workforce capacity significantly limits childcare spaces in the district. Therefore, the need for more qualified childcare staff is critical. Addressing this need requires a multipronged approach that would result in a long-term provincial strategic plan for the provision of highly functional and quality childcare.

Background

As of September 2024, TBDSSAB has a childcare waitlist totaling 3,910 children, with 2,570 (65.7%) of that number seeking to be placed as soon as space is available. In contrast, an average of 61 children have been placed in childcare centers from the waitlist each month from January to September 2024. At this rate it will take 42 months for all currently waitlisted children seeking immediate care to be actively placed. It is worth noting that this projection does not account for new waitlist additions. This sizeable and slow-moving waitlist is significantly impacted by the lack of qualified childcare workers required to meet the increasing demand precipitated by CWELCC fee reductions for families.

Accessible, inclusive, and high-quality childcare is essential to our provincial economy and Early Childhood Educators (ECE) are at the forefront. Without a viable workforce there is no childcare, which has a compounding effect. The current ECE workforce has seen a significant decline in Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECE), with a 20% reduction during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Unfortunately, post-pandemic, childcare programs continue to struggle with staff recruitment and retention due to a shortage of qualified childcare workers. As a result, these programs have had to operate at a reduced capacity or suspend programs entirely.

To begin addressing the staffing shortfalls, TBDSSAB worked with Confederation College and implemented a RECE Fast Track program in 2023, which relied on the one-time federal investment in the Child Care and Early Years Workforce Funding Strategy. The outcome resulted in 12 of 15 registrants completing the program requirements and becoming RECEs. While this is a testament to the success of the program, TBDSSAB is currently operating at 48% of full ECE workforce and has projected a need for 130 more RECEs to meet the current demand for more childcare spaces.

Though the outcome of TBDSSAB's approach resulted in success this year, its continuation would not be sustainable in meeting the growing need for more childcare spaces. In addition, the dearth of qualified staff and the resulting consequence on the provision of services is not limited to the childcare sector in the District of Thunder Bay.

In a recently concluded study focused on the provincial ECE workforce, the report found that childcare providers across Ontario are plagued by similar workforce issues². For example, some of the findings showed that a shortage of a qualified workforce has led to compounding effects. These include having an unutilized capacity, which limits access to childcare and a growing waitlist of parents seeking childcare. In some communities, they have turned to the use of untrained staff as a stop gap measure, which results in qualified ECE staff having to provide on-the-job training while also fulfilling their work duties. The resultant effect has been a reduction

¹ Ontario Ministry of Education. (2021). Child Care and Early Years Workforce Funding: Ministry of Education.

² Akbari, E., McCuaig, K., Schurter, M. Varmuza, P., Akbari, S., Mudie, S. (2024). Knowing Our Numbers: A Provincial Study with a Local Lens on the Early Childhood Education Workforce in Ontario. Northern Perspectives.

in the quality of care provided and staff burnout as they carry out their extended duties with little to no support.

Outside of the childcare sector, long-term care (LTC) homes recently experienced a similar workforce crisis, leading to decreased system capacity. As a response, in 2023 the Ontario government committed \$300 million over three years for the attraction, retention, and support of new PSWs. This funding offers up to \$25,400 for PSW students and new graduates, including (but not limited to):

- Up to \$5,400 stipend for students during a long-term or community care clinical placement.
- \$10,000 to support relocation costs for recent PSW graduates committed to working in a long-term or community care setting in a rural, remote, or northern area for one year.³

As with the incentivization introduced for PSWs, a provincial workforce strategy that focuses on addressing challenges faced by the childcare sector will allow for a sustainable increase in capacity of the childcare workforce, who, in turn, can accommodate the growing demand for more childcare spaces.

Therefore, TBDSSAB requests that the Ministry of Education provide Service Managers with a provincial workforce strategy that would enable DSSABs and CMSMs to strategize on the long-term future of childcare and grow the number of qualified ECEs across the province.

³ https://www.healthforceontario.ca/en/Home/All_Programs/PSW_Initiatives