



A GREAT PLACE TO GROW PUBLIC CHILD CARE

Why public early childhood education and care?

The Canadian Union of Public Employees, along with its partner advocates, has long opposed privatization in child care. CUPE believes public funding is the way to go—child care programs should not have to rely mainly on parent fees, vouchers or subsidies. As well, there's no place for profit-making in child care. For-profit child care—a growing sector—is not consistent with high quality programs, and good wages and working conditions for staff.

Now, the union is going a step further. As part of its national anti-privatization campaign, CUPE is advocating for an early childhood education and care (ECEC) system that is both publicly funded and delivered. Excellent community-based non-profit child care programs have been the backbone of providing child care services in Canada for decades. Overall, however, public delivery is most likely to benefit the most children and families.

Why public child care?

A public ECEC system delivers—in many ways.

A public system recognizes that “good care educates and good education cares.” Having separate programs for kindergarten, child care and parent support causes hardships for parents

and children. Many countries successfully blend early childhood education and child care into one publicly funded universal system. These systems are usually delivered and managed by public authorities—local education or municipal governments.

A public system takes a planned approach. It provides direct funding and integrates ongoing quality improvement into programs. Staff are employees of larger public entities such as school boards or municipalities with better wages, working conditions, support, training opportunities and representation. A public system removes the burden from parents or voluntary groups of having to create and maintain child care programs. Instead, equitable service distribution becomes more possible.

A public system supports diversity and innovative programming through local delivery, a democratic approach that includes parents, and various program options. Public systems are not about “one size fits...all.”

A public system is more likely to deliver high quality programs and meet families' needs. It does not automatically *guarantee* these two outcomes, but must set them as goals. By its very nature, a public system is more likely to lend itself to solid planning, target

setting, accountability, ongoing quality improvement and evaluation.

A public ECEC system for Canada would replace the privatized approach we have now where child care programs rely mainly on parents' ability to pay and are delivered by the private sector—unregulated private arrangements and regulated private for-profit or private non-profit programs.

Is a public ECEC system compatible with Canada's federal/provincial/territorial system? Yes! A public system would be provincially/territorially established, designed and managed, and it would have an overarching “national” ECEC program supported by federal dollars with national policy.¹

What a public ECEC system can do

This is what publicly delivered child care could do for children and families in Anywhere, Canada, 2015. This is not fantasy. It is based on existing public systems, such as those in the City of Toronto, Quebec's school-age child care program and Sweden. This represents reality for children and families who have access to a public child care system.

¹ In keeping with CUPE's policy on Québec's right to self-determination, the union supports a pan-Canadian early learning and child care system structured in a way that affirms Québec's right to continue to develop its own system of services, within its own legislative and policy framework.



Fernando and Stella's twins and Athena's son are in the three-year-old room at the Grace Hartman² Children's Centre in downtown Anywhere. The centre is part of the school board's early childhood division, which includes 150 ECEC programs for preschool-aged children across the city. The Grace Hartman Centre is for children aged one to six, but some neighbourhoods have separate infant-toddler centres operated by municipal government, and school-based programs for three- to five-year-olds. Most of the centres provide supervision and support for family child care providers as well as family resources for parents.

The children—Sophia, Letitia and Demosthenes—had been on the city-wide ECEC waiting list since birth because all newborns' names are entered on the list. Athena was given high priority for a place when Demos was a year old since she is a single parent with no relatives who can help with child care.

Parent fees are paid to the school board and locally set under province-wide policy requiring family income and the number of children to be taken into account. The centre doesn't depend on fees to make up its budget. Development and all planning—including financial—are done by the school board or province-wide. The centre's budget comes from the school board, which uses federal and provincial dollars that come through the province under the national *Early Childhood Education and Care Act* of 2012.

Early childhood educators are paid by the school board—the employer. Salaries and benefits are set system-wide through collective bargaining between the board and a province-wide union representing the educators.

Most early childhood programs in Canada are now publicly operated by local levels of government. The old system of private—often for-profit—centres was phased out over time as owners and organizations retired or turned over operations to the new public programs, in some instances staying on as centre directors. Since the new policy began, there have been no new privately-operated child care programs. However, if a community group wants to develop a non-profit program, it can be considered as an option.

Fernando, Stella and Athena have all served on the centre's parent committee, making budget and staffing decisions. For the past two years, Athena has been on the city-wide ECEC Planning and Policy Committee, helping design and implement the next five-year service plan. The province has mandated a five-year planning cycle which it supports with data and resources. The planning process must be participatory.

The parents and children feel a sense of ownership and pride in their children's centre. Parents benefit from the peace of mind that comes from knowing their children are in an excellent, nurturing and stable environment. The program is affordable and parents have a say in it. The children love being at the centre and benefit from the high quality play-based program that follows the province's much admired early childhood curriculum framework.

It's time to change Canada's privatized child care

Today, most child care in Canada is privatized, both in the way it's funded and how it's delivered.

Child care is mostly paid for with parent fees, and most of the available public funding is in privatized forms—tax breaks, parent cheques or fee subsidies based on family eligibility.

Privatization is also about who provides child care. Private delivery includes both unregulated private arrangements and regulated private for-profit or private non-profit programs. Many people don't think of non-profit community-based child care centres as "private", but they are. That's because parent or voluntary groups—not public government entities such as municipalities or school boards—bear the responsibility for creating and maintaining centres. Almost all of Canada's regulated child care provision is private, relying on private development and maintenance of for-profit and non-profit services.

A majority of centre-based spaces in Canada are operated on a non-profit basis. Publicly-operated child care plays a significant role only in Ontario (about 10% of centre spaces) and Quebec, where school authorities operate after-school programs for children aged four to 12 years. Alberta now has three publicly-operated programs while Saskatchewan has four.

The for-profit sector provides 25% of centre spaces nationally and plays a major role in more than half the provinces. This sector is growing at an alarming rate—in some provinces, almost all the new spaces in 2006-2008 were for-profit.

² Grace Hartman, labour activist and feminist, was CUPE's first female national president (1975-1983).



Public is better

It is clear from the research and experience at home and abroad that children and families in Canada would be far better served by public systems that blend early childhood education and child care—in other words, publicly funded and delivered early childhood education and care programs, managed and mostly operated by local governments or education authorities.

The evidence is overwhelming that well-designed public ECEC systems are more likely than private market approaches to deliver:

- Integrated early childhood education and kindergarten programs.
- Better access and inclusion of families—no matter where they live or their language, origins or abilities.
- More consistent quality.
- Affordable ECEC (with small or no fees) for all parents who choose it.
- Services that are planned and accountable to communities.

What we want

Our vision is a public system where every child can attend a program that blends early childhood education and care. Support public child care—it's the way to go for a great place to grow.