

Child Care Consultation Report



Ministry of Children's Services

OCTOBER 2020

Alberta

A Message from Minister Rebecca Schulz

The year 2020 has presented challenges that at one time would have been unimaginable in Alberta. A global health crisis causing a global recession and the price of oil dropping more than \$100/barrel, to name a few. Alberta's government is fully committed to finding new solutions to new problems, which includes ensuring working parents can get back to work as soon as they're ready. We know that child care is a vital part of helping Alberta's workers and families—especially during a challenging time in Alberta's economy. Alberta's families need child care options that are accessible, affordable, and high-quality, so that parents can train for and work in well-paying jobs. Ultimately, choice of child care program enrolment resides with parents, and it is the role of Alberta's government to support environments that foster safety and well-being for children so that they are able to thrive and grow. With streamlined legislation and regulations that clarify accountability for all child care programs and make sure parents have the necessary information to make informed choices, Alberta's government ensures centres and parents are well-equipped to make safe, informed decisions for children.

The Child Care Licensing Regulation was set to expire on January 31st, 2021. As the *Child Care Licensing Act* and Regulation have not been reviewed since 2008, we wanted to take the opportunity to conduct a full legislative review and broad consultation with Albertans. For the first time in more than a decade, all Albertans with an interest in child care were invited to submit their feedback through a written survey. The consultation process also consisted of virtual engagement sessions with small groups of child care operators, stakeholder groups, and industry associations led by my colleague, the Honourable Tracy Allard, MLA for Grande Prairie, prior to her recent appointment as Minister of Municipal Affairs. We also recognized that any legislation would need to be interpreted and acted on every day by licensing officers, so, again for the first time, Children's Services staff were included in the conversation.

Over the course of one month (June 15 to July 15, 2020), the Ministry of Children's Services received 9,729 survey responses and 47 email submissions; additionally, hundreds of centre operators participated virtual engagement sessions. I am very grateful to each person who took the time to provide feedback—especially while the child care sector was adapting to ever-changing complications from the COVID-19 pandemic. I'd also like to thank my colleague, Minister Tracy Allard for leading this outreach, and the staff in Children's Services who have energetically taken on this important work. This feedback—your feedback—will be setting the direction for the updated legislation this fall.

A message from Minister Tracy Allard

I was pleased to be invited to lead the engagement on the *Child Care Licensing Act* and Regulation review by my colleague, Honourable Rebecca Schulz. It was an honour to be tasked with the responsibility of ensuring the voices of Albertans were heard and incorporated into the updated legislation.

As a working mother of three (now grown) children, and a small business owner for over 25 years, I know firsthand the importance of quality child care. I also understand the difficulties that parents encounter when faced with the decision of returning to work or staying home to care for their children, and I know exactly how important it is to have quality child care options available to choose from. As an elected official, I understand that well-informed, common sense standards help to create the quality environment that children need to thrive.

During the consultation I heard repeatedly that Alberta's child care legislation needs to be flexible and adaptive to meet the challenges of our current time. The circumstances of each family and facility are different, and we need child care options that are versatile enough to meet a diverse need among Albertans, while maintaining standards of quality for our children in all child care models.

Among many recommendations, the engagement revealed to me countless opportunities to streamline and reduce red tape, highlighted the need to add additional mechanisms to support the safety of children and youth, and identified an opportunity to enshrine quality in legislation, ensuring the well-being, safety and development of children is paramount for all child care programs in Alberta.

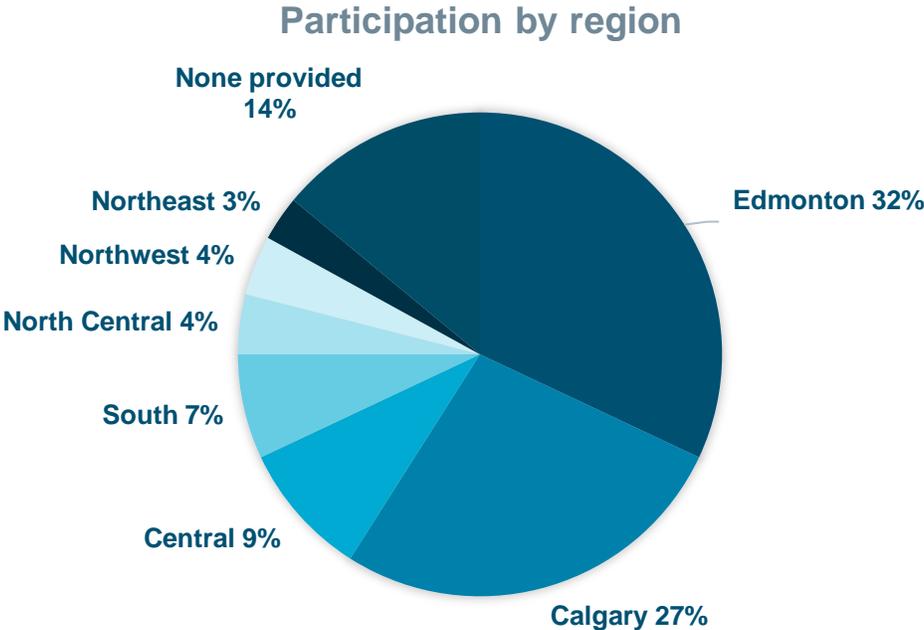
I would like to thank each and every participant for their time and consideration throughout the consultation, and for their flexibility and understanding as we navigated the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. I look forward to sharing the findings of this engagement with you in this report, and I am excited for the updated legislation to follow this fall.

Introduction

This is a summary of the child care consultation. This document includes a summary of the themes that arose through virtual engagement sessions and online surveys, and provides a summary of what was heard. Four audience categories were included in this consultation:

1. **Parents and caregivers:** Those with children age 12 and under who may use a formal or informal child care arrangement. This category also includes those who may use the child care system in the future. In total, 7,406 surveys were received from parents and caregivers from across Alberta.
2. **Child care educators:** Those who interact with children age 12 and under including early childhood educators. In total, 1,657 surveys were received from educators across Alberta.
3. **Operators and stakeholder organizations:** Those who have an interest and influence with policy and will assist with implementation; i.e., child care stakeholder organizations. In total, 605 surveys were received from operators and provincial child care associations and organizations across Alberta.
4. **Licensing staff:** Those who work for the Ministry of Children’s Services and will assist with implementation. In total, 61 surveys were completed by staff in the child care licensing area.

Anyone with an interest in child care was invited to participate in an online survey to provide feedback: the Ministry of Children’s Services received 9,776 written submissions and survey responses between June 15 and July 15, 2020. A breakdown of the responses by region can be found below.

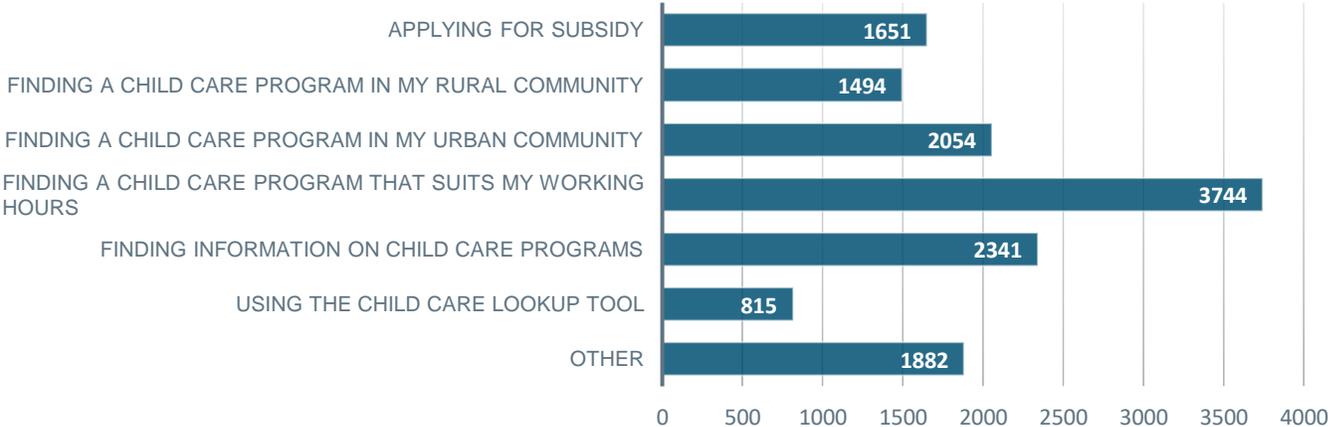


285 child care operators registered to participate in a virtual engagement session. Sessions consisted of 1.25 hour discussions with MLA Allard, using videoconferencing software and telephone when necessary. Information collected from these various sources was examined and summarized by the Policy, Innovation and Community Connections Division with assistance from Family and Community Resiliency Division. French versions of the surveys were created in collaboration with the French Secretariat at Culture, Multiculturalism, and Status of Women.

This consultation took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many participants voiced their opinions and concerns regarding the pandemic during the sessions and throughout the surveys. While some of this information is presented throughout this summary, this report focuses on comments made about the child care system and most COVID-19 related commentary was considered out-of-scope.

Wide-ranging engagement on child care legislation revealed opportunities to streamline and reduce red tape, allowing child care operators more opportunity to adapt to meet their unique circumstances and local needs, as well as spend less time on paperwork and more time with kids and families. When asked questions about red tape reduction and streamlining processes, respondents were asked to select all that apply.

Difficulties experienced when accessing child care

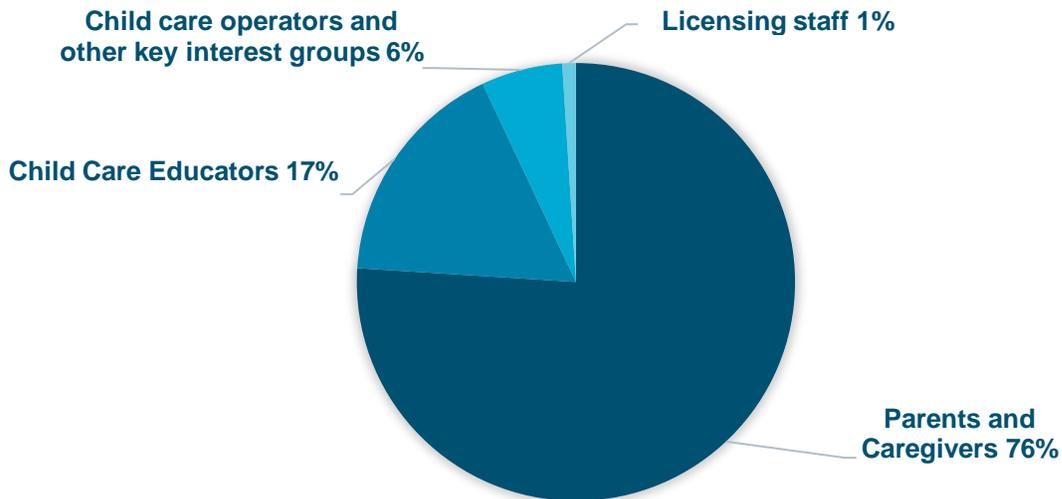


While many parents and caregivers had no issues and encountered no red tape when accessing child care, many other families shared specific challenges they faced. Issues around access to regulated child care spaces seem to be the most prevalent for respondents. The majority of responses that cited access as an issue stated that there are not enough child care spaces available for those who want them and that waitlists are very long. Some respondents shared that they waited years to be able to access their first choice of program. Given pre-COVID enrolment was at 78%, this reinforces the need to focus on accessibility and space creation in areas of need and reduce red tape so new centres can open.

Themes and common responses during the consultation

The following is a summary of the themes and common responses heard from participants during the consultation period organized into feedback by participant type.

Survey submissions by participant



Operators

- Operators are looking for flexibility in the legislation and regulations that give program directors authorization to make decisions that support their particular operations.
- Regulations should support providing high-quality care and early learning experiences to children. This includes support to include the previous accreditation standards into legislation, as long as it does not include the same level of documentation or red tape.
- Operators noted that the current licensing process is complex, costly, and time consuming for those wanting to open a child care program and would like to see this process streamlined.
- Current inflexibility around staff ratios, age categories, and space requirements are at times limiting to the ability to manage operations in a cost-effective and logical manner.
- Providing care for children with special needs currently poses a significant challenge, and operators do not have qualified staff, funding or support to provide these services.
- For the most part, operators are accepting of the square footage requirements for indoor and outdoor spaces; however, they noted that lowering square footage requirements might decrease quality and safety in their programs and would require clear language if any changes were made.

Child care educators

- Educators supported having flexibility in regards to mixing age groups as it would increase the ability to care for children with similar emotional and cognitive developmental levels.
- Many educators shared that minimum quality standards should be included as an expectation for all child care programs; however, like operators, they shared that the documentation from the previous process was a drawback and added red tape.
- Educators agreed that a skilled and educated workforce is required to deliver quality care, and many educators felt that requirements for a Child Development Assistant level were too low. Educators also noted that those with years of related experience or an early learning or child development background could be granted equivalencies.
- Educators recommended adding a curriculum framework to regulations for increased quality.
- Educators noted that increased flexibility is required for outdoor activities and allowing a long-term parental permission for “off-site” activities (i.e. walks, trips to nearby outdoor spaces) would benefit children.

Licensing staff

- Licensing staff noted that the current regulations contain unclear or vague language and definitions; they support flexibility in the legislation and regulations, and areas of increased clarity to guide their work with child care programs.
- Licensing staff also stated that having the ability to interact with prospective license holders before they begin building centres and obtaining loans would reduce unnecessary financial burdens on operators, and streamline the approval process.
- Licensing staff noted that non-compliance orders were not an effective method of getting programs to improve and require additional methods to enforce compliance of programs. They also noted that parents should be informed of what is happening in programs when it comes to non-compliance and investigations.
- Licensing staff supported overnight care or extended hours, but noted it would need to be accompanied by specific provisions and advocated for more flexibility in rural communities to increase accessibility.

Parents and caregivers

- Participants identified the issue of affordability – they thought child care costs in Alberta are too high and requested increased subsidies and support to increase affordability. A select few parents discussed the continuation and broadening of the \$25/day care pilot. This feedback is outside of scope of the regulatory and legislative amendments but was incorporated in a new subsidy model.
- Parents and caregivers identified a need to improve accessibility through more conveniently located spaces, flexible hours (to accommodate non-standard hours of employment) and reduced waitlists.
- The health and safety of children was a continuous theme; caregivers expressed a clear desire for strong regulations, accountability, and standards that will keep children safe.

Pillars of Child Care: Affordability; Quality; Accessibility and Accountability

The Alberta government's strategy for child care in Alberta focuses on four pillars of child care: **affordability, quality, accessibility and accountability**. Feedback informed by the child care consultation in relation to each child care pillar is highlighted below.

Accessibility

- Ultimately, families across the province would benefit from access to a streamlined, flexible child care system that is agile, accessible and able to meet the unique needs of Alberta communities.
- Alberta's government should support the opening and operating of child care spaces by minimizing barriers and red tape. Some participants referenced lack of access or long wait lists yet prior to the pandemic, 20% of available spaces were vacant. This points to geographic pressures that should be addressed.

Accountability

- Increased ability to work collaboratively with programs to enhance safety through a variety of accountability measures.
- Reviewing the *Child Care Licensing Act* and Regulations provides opportunities to increase accountability and safety of programs. A key theme raised throughout the engagement process, is that parents want to make sure that any red tape reduction reviews do not compromise the safety, health, and security of child care program and ultimately keep the interests of the child at the core of the delivery of child care.

Affordability

- Results from the engagement highlighted that operators, educators, and licensing staff saw opportunities to streamline regulation to make operations and licensing processes more efficient and effective, without losing a focus on providing high-quality child care in Alberta.
- Decreasing unnecessary regulations and rules that pull staff resources away from a focus on child care allows programs the ability to lower their operating costs.

Quality

- The overarching goal of Alberta child care is to provide quality options for children and families and the importance of child care should be emphasized as it affects the development of young children in Alberta.
- Quality can be emphasized by embedding principles in legislation.

Next Steps

Increased access to child care

Parents and caregivers identified accessibility and inclusivity of children with disabilities, as well as accessibility and availability of child care as two of the biggest issues in child care and areas that are integral to their ability to remain in the workplace.

Recognizing these issues, the Alberta government restructured the bilateral funding agreement with the federal government to focus 2020-21 federal investments on the following:

- 1. The Child Care Subsidy model:** Amend the current Child Care Subsidy model to be more transparent and provide increased subsidies to low-income families; a simplified formula and renewed investment in child care subsidy will result in 16,000 lower-income families paying as low as \$13 per day for child care compared with about 7,500 families of all incomes paying \$25 per day in the former pilot project.
- 2. Accessibility grant initiatives:** Provide accessibility grants for licensed and approved programs and create up to 385 spaces this year in communities with high need and working with operators, communities, and parents on innovative solutions for parents who work outside 9-5 business hours.
- 3. Curriculum availability:** Alberta's Flight curriculum, a framework that helps guide early learning and child care educators for young children, will be made available with training and implementation supports for interested licensed and approved programs to increase access to quality child care.
- 4. Inclusive child care:** The new Inclusive Child Care Program (ICC) will provide licensed child care programs with access to provincially-aligned training, resources and supports that enable the inclusion of children with extra support needs. The changes in the child care system as outlined above increase the accessibility of child care programs, make child care programs more equitable and target supports to vulnerable families.

Evaluation and measurement

The Ministry of Children's Services will be monitoring the impact of the changes to the child care system to ensure they are having the expected impacts for quality, affordability and accessibility for children, families and educators. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data will be used to assess changes in the number of families accessing subsidy, the number of child care spaces created, and improved quality and inclusiveness in child care programs.