



# Stakeholder Engagement Outcomes

Region of Waterloo - Children's Services

Engagement Process Outcomes - June 2024

# Table of Contents

## Stakeholder Engagement Outcomes

03	Objectives & Methodology
06	Digital Survey
17	Key Informant Interviews
22	Facilitated Focus Groups
28	Conclusions
31	Moving Forward



# Objectives & Methodology

# Objectives

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Region of Waterloo - Children's Services has been implementing initiatives to positively impact recruitment and retention of Early Years educators. This current review seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the immediate short-term impacts of its Workforce Support efforts while also considering and developing inputs to its long-term strategy. To achieve this outcome, a series of engagement opportunities were undertaken with critical stakeholders in order to accomplish these two key goals:

- (1) Clearly identify the impact of the workforce related programs, supports, and initiatives delivered by the Region of Waterloo and be well-equipped to tell a meaningful and compelling story.
- (2) Conduct a prioritization exercise and build recommendations that will support a long-term workforce recruitment and retention strategy for the Region of Waterloo.

# Methodology

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Integral to the engagement phase of this work, Ryelle Strategy Group conducted:

- Customized survey delivered to direct service staff
- 2 focus group discussions with direct service staff
- 1 focus group discussion with EYCC supervisors
- 1 focus group discussion with EYCC operators
- Key informant interviews with 7 internal and external stakeholders and partners

A detailed audit of organizational assets, projects / programs, budgets, etc. was also completed in an earlier phase of this project.

## Survey



*Excellent*



*Good*



*Average*



*Fair*



*Poor*

# Digital Survey

# Digital Survey Outcomes

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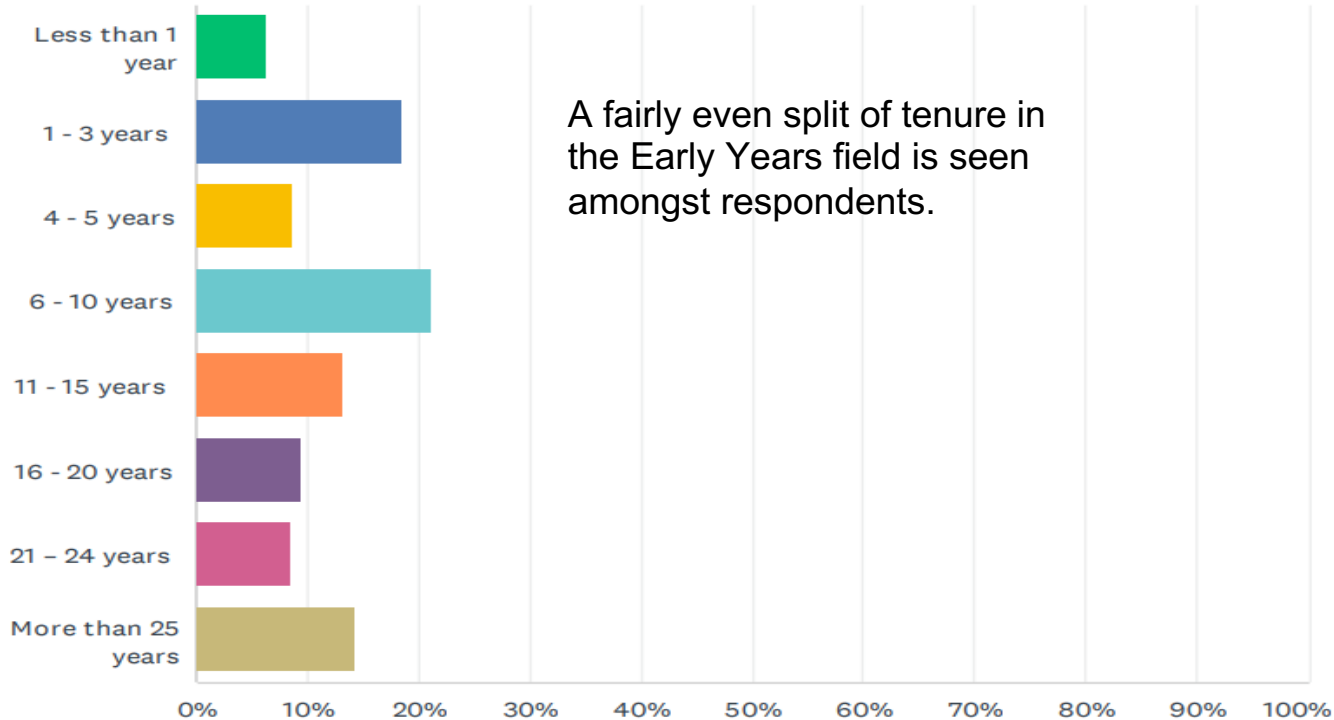
The short (9 questions) digital survey was distributed to direct service staff and had a high degree of feedback through 497 responses.

The focus of the survey was satisfaction of the respondents with the recognition they receive for their work and open-ended questions to gather suggestions for strategies to enhance that feeling of appreciation. High level data on respondents work tenure and focus was also collected.

The following pages provides an overview of the survey responses.

# Question #1:

How long have you been working in the Early Years field?



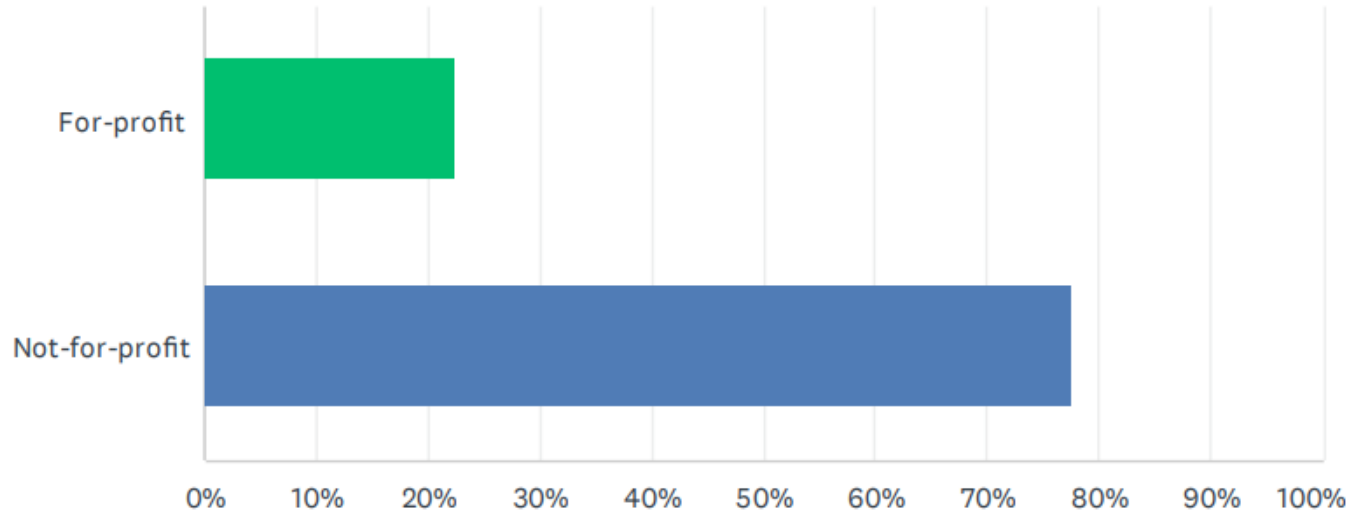
Answered: 495

Skipped: 2

# Question #2:

Do you work in for-profit or not-for-profit?

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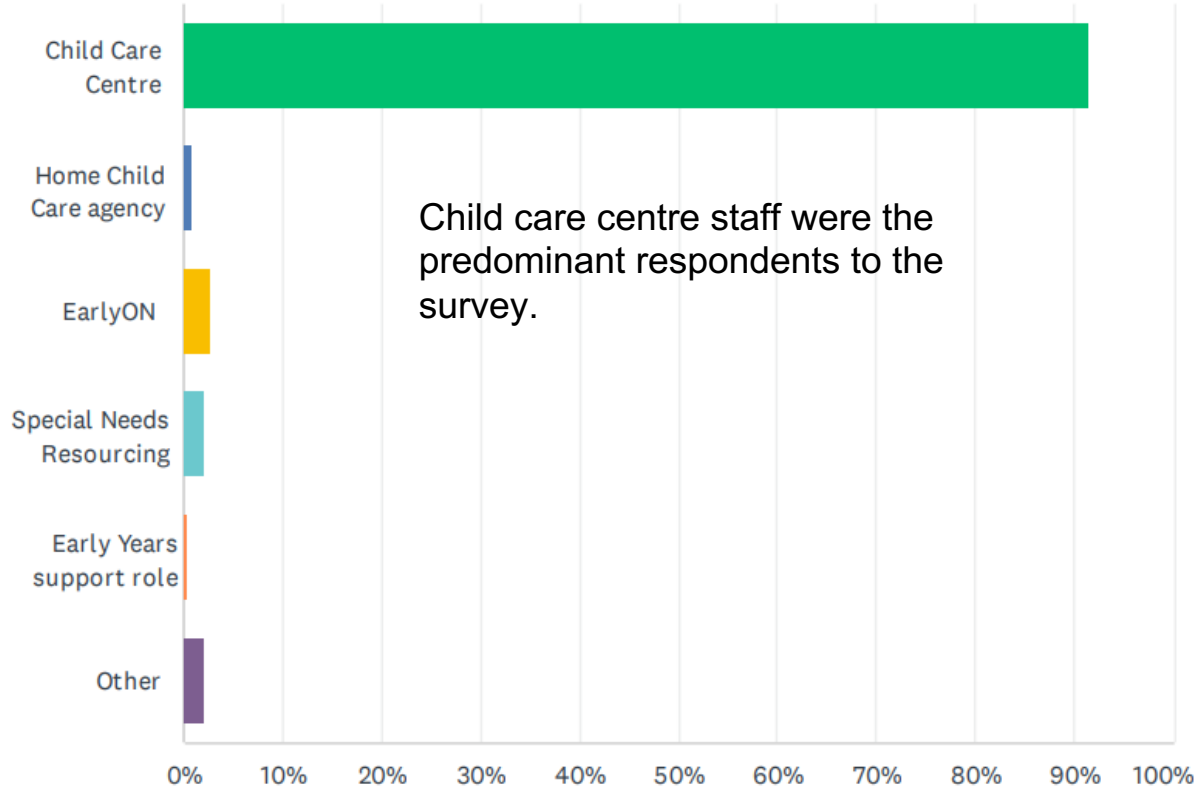


Answered: 495

Skipped: 2

# Question #3:

What part of the sector do you work in?



Answered: 496

Skipped: 1

# Question #4:

Early Years educators play an integral role in fostering and supporting healthy early child development. We know that salary and benefits are key employment issues, and that provincial investment is required to address this issue. Beyond salary and benefits, what does your employer do to recognize the importance of your work?

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Many respondents noted:

- staff appreciation events and gifts
- food/meals, professional development
- flexibility for personal needs
- and, praise for work well done.

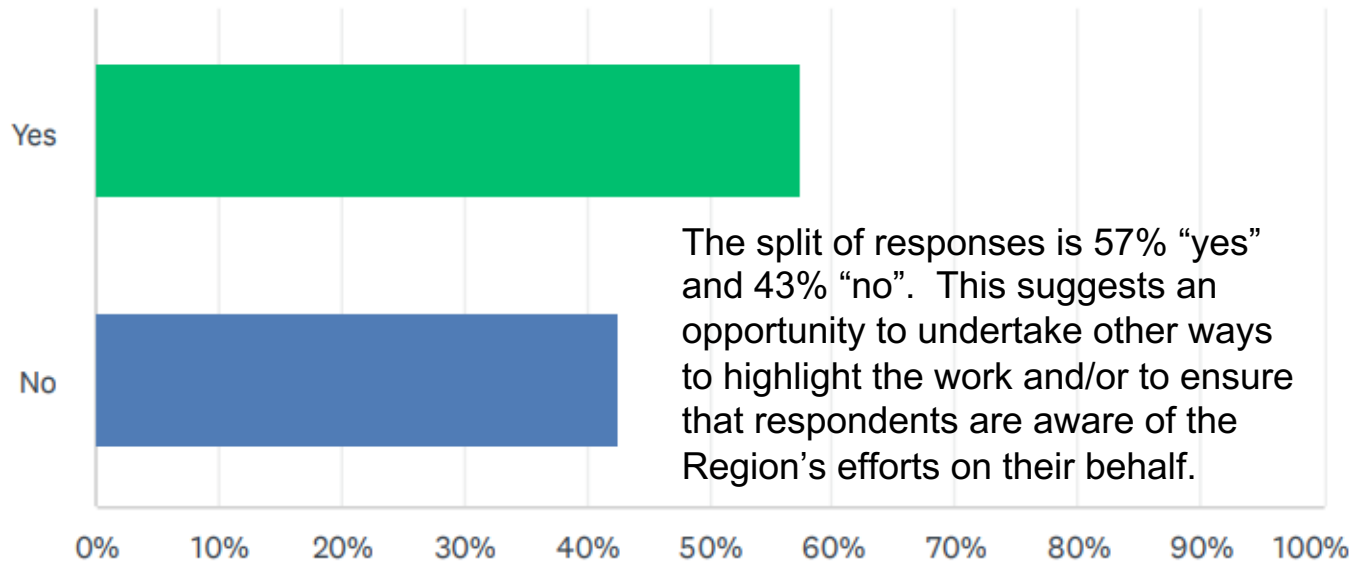
Answered: 212

Skipped: 285

# Question #5:

Is what is being done by the Region of Waterloo highlighting the importance of your work?

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Answered: 497

Skipped: 0

## Q6: If you answered yes, please comment on how the importance of your work is being highlighted.

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- Advocacy to government for increasing funding
- Region of Waterloo provides support and resources and education opportunities to centres and their staff
- Professional development days to continually build skills and knowledge
- Demonstrating the professionalism of ECEs
- Working to increase student interest in this profession
- Significant increase in public awareness, including through radio ads and bus ads

*"The Region of Waterloo has been highlighting the important role of early childhood educators like yourself. They recognize that the early years of a child's life are critical for their development and that well-trained and dedicated educators are essential for providing high-quality care and education. Additionally, the Region has implemented programs and initiatives to support early childhood educators, such as professional development opportunities, mentorship programs, and resources for parents and caregivers."*

## Q7: List some of the things that you think can be done by your employer to recognize and respect your work?

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- Advocate for increases in pay and benefits
- Seek input of staff as to what they need and action those items
- Allow planning time in the schedule
- Continue to support through appreciation events and acknowledgements
- Ongoing education to the public regarding the role as educators not babysitters
- Provide more HR/admin resources to support staff with questions (hiring, payroll, onboarding, etc.)
- Implement personal days as a means to support staff in managing their work/life balance and decrease burn out

## Q8: List what else you think can be done by the Region to recognize and respect your work?

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The majority of the comments related to advocacy for increases in funding for salaries, benefits, and resources. Many commented on their appreciation for the work done to date.

Other suggestions included:

- More opportunities to network with other ECEs
- Provide gift cards as means of recognition
- Streamline access to professional development resources at Conestoga College (challenging to access)
- Continued public awareness of role of ECEs
- Ongoing support of professional development and training

Answered:  
253

Skipped:  
244

## Q9: Is there anything else you wish to share?

### Selection of **Verbatim Responses**

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*"If something isn't done soon, there will not be qualified Educators able to work. This field will not be enticing and we will lose the amazing Educators who care and are passionate for the field. We know how important the first 5 years of a child's life are. Not having a viable wage for Educators is going to have a direct hit on the children of our community. We might not see the effects right away but in time we will see how much damage this will do to those children who do not have the access to quality programs. We need more connection, community and positive environments. We do this through accessible quality child care."*

*"It is so encouraging for me to see the advancement for recognizing the importance of ECE."*

*"I wish there was just more support from government to internationals working in field to get permanent residency."*

*"It would be really great if the Region could put the pressure on Conestoga College to graduate students who are actually prepared to start work in the field of ECE. Many of the students come to us with way too little experience, no personal tool boxes of resources and are way too much work for other front line staff to have to teach all of the things they should have learned in their ECE programs."*

*"I appreciate very much the efforts the Region has made so far. The large professional development days have been great."*

*"This is the highest number of children with exceptional needs we have ever seen, and we do not have the staffing to meet the needs of everyone. Equity needs to be the goal, rather than just equality. Equality is everyone gets the same thing, and just ended up being all children smushed together in the same room. Equity is everyone getting what they need. If a child needs one on one care, they should be given that. All children deserve to have educators present and able to engage with them and meet their needs as groups and individuals."*

# Key Informant Interviews

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# Key Informant Interviews

## Interview Approach

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One of the key engagement activities executed as part of this project were key informant interviews. These interviews focussed on understanding perspectives on what is being accomplished regarding the recruitment and retention of Early Years educators and possible next steps.

7 individuals were interviewed and the key discussion questions included:

- Please outline your role in the Early Years Sector in Waterloo Region.
- What are the sector strengths in Waterloo Region?
- What are some of the Early Years sector challenges?
- What are the Early Years sector opportunities?
- What is done well to recruit and retain Early Years staff?
- Given the financial constraints on salary and benefits, what else can be done to recruit and retain staff?
- Are there new partners that need to be involved?
- Staff surveys have indicated that respect for the profession and value for their work is very important. What can be done to enhance educators' sense of respect and value?

# Key Informant Interviews

## Key Themes

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### **Strengths:**

- Region brings partners to the table to collaborate and share and learn
- Strong partnership with Conestoga College
- Commitment to high quality programming in Region of Waterloo Children's Services Division
- Region's support of centres on a one-by-one basis rather than as a homogenous group
- Focus on continued professional education at all levels
- Focus on supporting families facing barriers to service access
- Partnership with Economic Development for planning purposes
- Attention to cultural competency

### **Challenges:**

- Recruitment and availability of suitable candidates
- Staff turnover
- Affordability of programming
- Waitlists
- Division between not for profit and for-profit centres which creates barriers in cooperation
- Complexity of current Provincial funding model and reporting requirements
- Hiring diverse staff mix to support community demographics
- Working with school boards and strict policy/procedure-based approach
- Value of professional development centre at Conestoga College in providing resources to centres
- Ability of centres to attain policy best practices

# Key Informant Interviews

## Key Themes - continued

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### **Opportunities:**

- Hiring “non-qualified” staff as permitted by Ministry
- Introduction of apprenticeship programs
- Partnerships for school age children’s programming
- Increasing training opportunities to ECEs
- Flexibility in funding at the centre level in order to address local challenges
- Increased support for needs of staff
- Comprehensive onboarding programs offered at some centres
- Increasing use of technology to improve efficiency; also for increased family engagement through virtual meetings
- Integration with EarlyON centres for collaboration, information sharing, and community awareness

### **Good practices in recruitment and retention and what else can be done:**

- Job fairs and on the spot job offers has shown some success
- Staff appreciation events
- Professional development support
- Apprenticeship program
- Supportive and flexible work environment for individual worker needs, creating loyalty and retention
- Ensure realistic understanding by students and new hires of the role of ECEs
- Organizational payment of professional membership fees
- Ongoing opportunities for staff engagement and input to organizational design and planning

# Key Informant Interviews

## Key Themes - continued

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### **New partners needed:**

- Funders and others who can bring resources to the sector
- Municipal government - for zoning approvals of new centres
- DEI focused services/assessments
- EarlyON

### **Ways to increase EY educators sense of respect and value:**

- Learning opportunities and education grants
- Health benefits like massage as alternate to salary increase; adequate sick time benefits
- Deepen personalized supports for staff
- Ensure staff are aware of local funding supports aimed at enhancing their sense of respect and value
- Engage educational institutions to partner in this endeavor
- Create public awareness of profession as educators not simply caregivers
- Demonstration of respect and value in day to day interaction with staff



# Facilitated Focus Groups

- Overview
- Outcomes

# Facilitated Focus Groups

## Overview of Sessions

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As part of the project, four facilitated focus groups were conducted. Target groups were direct service providers (2 sessions), supervisors, and operators. A structured set of questions were used with each group with the goal of gaining a deeper understanding of their thoughts and perspectives.

# Focus Group Discussion Guide

## Questions by Focus Group

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	<b>Direct Service Staff</b>	<b>Supervisors</b>	<b>EYCC Operators</b>
<b>What's being done?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Overview of activities</li><li>•What programs/initiatives/activities are in place to support you in your work...</li><li>•by your employer?</li><li>•by the Region?</li><li>•What programs/initiatives/activities are in place to recognize the importance of your work...</li><li>•by your employer?</li><li>•by the Region?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Overview of activities</li><li>•What supports are in place for you in your role in onboarding and supporting new staff?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Overview of activities</li><li>•What are you currently doing to recognize and support educators in your centre(s)?</li></ul>
<b>What is possible?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•What else do you think your employer can do to support your work and recognize your importance?</li><li>•What else do you think the Region can do to support your work and recognize your importance?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•What else would you need to on-board and support new staff?</li><li>•What supports do you have to aid you in your work as a supervisor?</li><li>•What other supports would be beneficial?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>•Is there anything else that you can do to recognize the good work of educators in your centre(s)?</li><li>•Is there anything that can be done in partnership - with other operators - with the Region - with other community partners?</li><li>•What supports would you need to put other strategies in place?</li></ul>
<b>What's next?</b>	Ideas for moving forward?		

# Focus Group Key Themes

## Direct Service Staff

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- Low wages, including relative to other professions
- Paid planning time and paid time to meet with team outside of work hours and to attend training
- Float position to cover direct service or to support documentation completion, etc.
- Staff appreciation events; years of service awards; team building activities
- Benefits - RSPs, sick days, personal days, vacation time, Y memberships, EAP, certifications, training
- Creating inclusive environments through DEI and ARAO action plans
- Advocacy for understanding of critical role of educators
- Staff engagement/satisfaction surveys
- Support for students in understanding the role before entry, tuition assistance, mentors
- Continued advocacy for importance of role of educators (not babysitters)
- Advocacy for expedited Permanent Residence application process for staff to stay in Ontario
- Resource and training around special needs and skills to support
- Facilitate opportunities for parent acknowledgement of staff contribution to child development
- Build staff / management relationship and appreciation

# Focus Group Key Themes

## Supervisors

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- Role of Supervisors in managing human resources processes has increased significantly and takes considerable time; including recruitment and onboarding
- Supervisors are increasingly needed in program areas due to staff shortage, impacting on their ability to complete other work; consider increasing admin support
- Many new staff lack basic skills and therefore need significant support upon entry
- Increase in number of children with special needs
- Increase networking for Supervisors in order to support one another
- A “float” role in the staffing mix would allow for dynamic response to program needs
- No long-term funding confirmation makes year over year planning challenging
- Professional development is seen as positive; collaborate across centres to offer more
- ARAO mandatory training was poorly executed

# Focus Group Key Themes

## EYCC Operators

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- Cater professional development to individual staff and centre needs/preferences
- Undertake intentional team building and staff engagement opportunities
- Stigma of not for profit versus profit-based work and quality of services offered
- CWELCC as intended is not feasible and not functioning properly; over time likely to see significant challenges for the sector across the board
- Funding does not support programming and quality expectations
- Challenges in budget processes and timing
- Region meetings with operators should be a shared agenda so that operators can raise issues rather than just hear information
- Staff retention is challenging given demands placed on workers
- How to pay for: benefits, pensions, education, memberships, etc. – these are important staff retention strategies that need to be preserved



# Conclusions

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# Conclusions

## Key Themes

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The following themes were seen across stakeholders and across engagement opportunities:

- Recruitment of qualified staff is challenging; differing views on strategies to broaden scope of potential hires (e.g. “non-qualified”, apprentice)
- Workload has increased and staff retention can be impacted
- Role of Region of Waterloo is acknowledged as fundamental to efforts to advocate for the sector
- Public awareness of role of ECE’s is vital and is improving in the region based on media campaigns
- Salaries need to be increased
- Other benefits are attractive for recruitment and retention (e.g. pensions, benefits, personal days, education, certification fees, etc.)
- Staff are appreciative of opportunities for input

# Positive Acknowledgements

## Key Themes

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The following positive acknowledgement themes were seen across stakeholders and across engagement opportunities:

- The regional government's proactive and supportive approach to childcare, working individually with centers to ensure their needs are met. Locally tailored support rather than one size fits all approach is appreciated.
- A cohesive community where childcare agencies collaborate effectively and share resources.
- Emphasis on ongoing professional development at all levels.
- Waterloo Region is a model for high-quality childcare and continues to be a leader in professional development.
- The region has a strong Children Services Division, which is dedicated to raising the quality of care.
- There is a strong partnership with Conestoga College's Professional Resource Center, which offers a wealth of resources and expertise to the sector.
- Fostered and enhanced more partnerships based on the work they are leading and their collaborative approach.



# Moving Forward

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# Moving Forward: Prioritization

## Areas of Focus

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Five areas are identified as priority for attention going forward:

- Recognition
- Responding to needs
- Working together
- Advocacy
- Continuous improvement

# Moving Forward: Prioritization

## Areas of Focus - Recognition

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- Recognizing the value of the Early Years and ECE's and changing current perspective
- Likening the way ECE's are perceived to the way teachers are perceived
- Focus on:
  - Parents
  - Government and policy makers
  - Community

# Moving Forward: Prioritization

## Areas of Focus - Responding to needs

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- Supports for special needs
- Flexibility in funding - so that centres can use funding in accordance to individual centre needs
- Re-visit role and responsibilities of supervisors
- Supports for changing environment for centre operators

# Moving Forward: Prioritization

## Areas of Focus - Working together

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- Focus on strong communication
- Ensure that ECE's know what is being done by Region and employers
- Develop strong and strategic communication channels
- Strong partnership with Conestoga to enhance evaluation process, skills necessary for graduates and support for international students
- Regular meetings with Operators that are operator driven and focus on relevant issues
- Support regular meetings with supervisors to build peer supports and relationships (\*\*supervisors need to have time dedicated to be able to participate\*\*)
- Look for pathways for Not for Profit and For Profit collaboration
- Work with other communities

# Moving Forward: Prioritization

## Areas of Focus - Advocacy

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- Important issues:
  - Salaries and benefits
  - International students - supports for Permanent Residency issues
  - Regarding issues related to \$10 a day and roll out
  - Funding and how funding is rolled out - CWELCC
- Need to deal with multiple stakeholders including different levels of government, Regional, partners, college etc.
- Be strategic in efforts
- Build a plan so that system is nimble and able to appropriately respond to opportunities

# Moving Forward: Prioritization

## Areas of Focus - Continuous improvement

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- Professional development is more responsive to individual and centre needs
- Can use professional development to help build team - both on individual and region-wide basis
- Support collaboration around professional development with centres
- Enhance skill building and supports for supervisors as their roles and responsibilities change