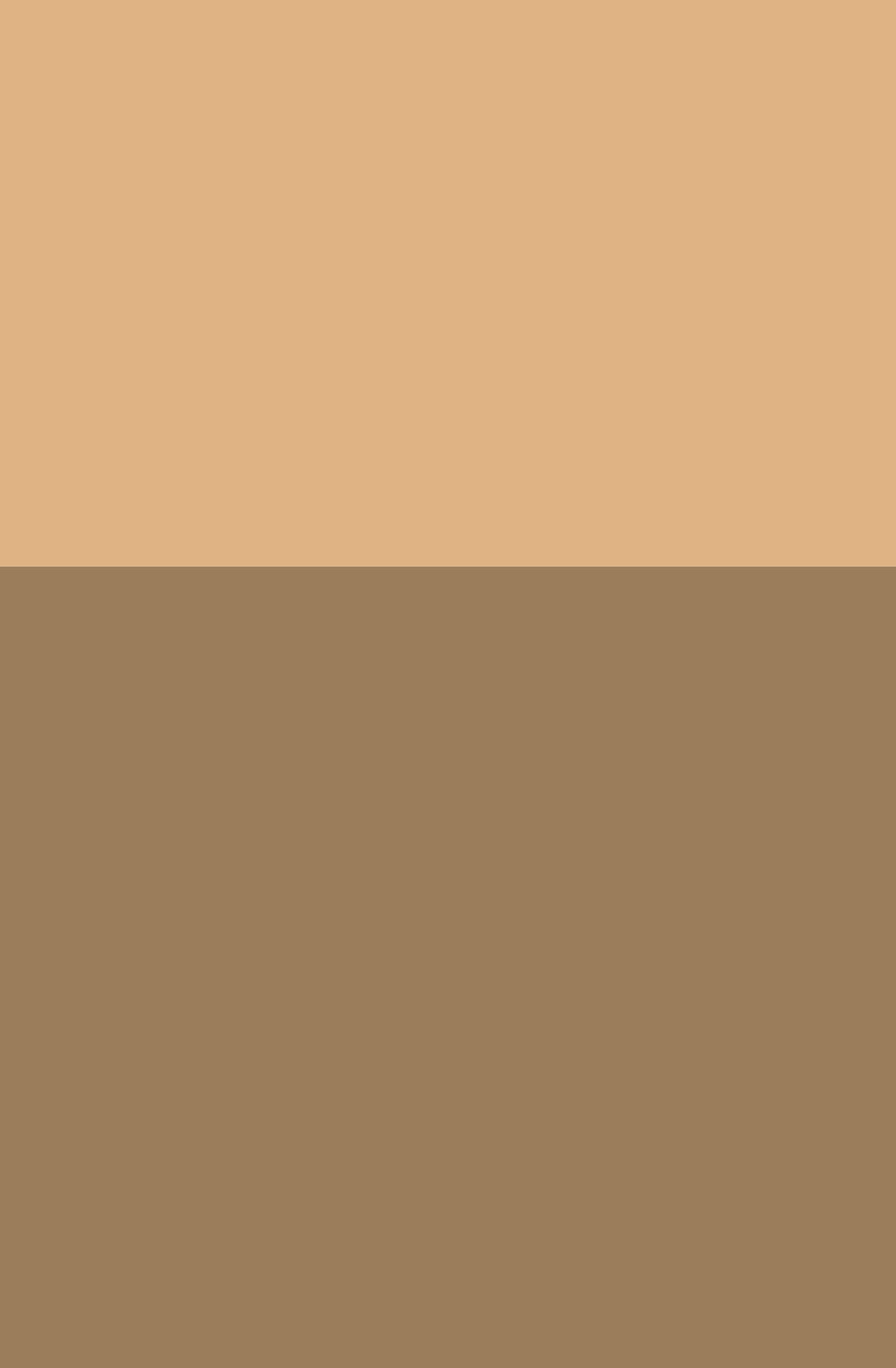




Early learning
and child care —
It's time





Early learning and child care — It's time

The Canadian Union of Public Employees believes Canada urgently needs a high-quality early learning and child care (ELCC) system. Many CUPE members are parents with young children. They need quality child care so they can work with peace of mind. More than half of CUPE members are women, and women still bear the major responsibility for child-rearing. Child care workers, many of them CUPE members, provide a valuable service to society, yet are among its lowest-paid workers.



Strong, universally-accessible social programs such as health care and education are critical to building equity and reducing income disparities. CUPE joins parents, advocates and child care workers calling on governments to build a pan-Canadian, public/non-profit early learning and child care system that meets the needs of today's families. Our children deserve it. Parents need it. And we'll all benefit from it.

Canada lags behind

Canada outside of Quebec¹ is one of only a few developed nations with no plan to provide early learning and child care services to its youngest citizens. Although Canada is near the top among wealthy nations, it's at the bottom of all developed countries when it comes to spending on early learning and child care.

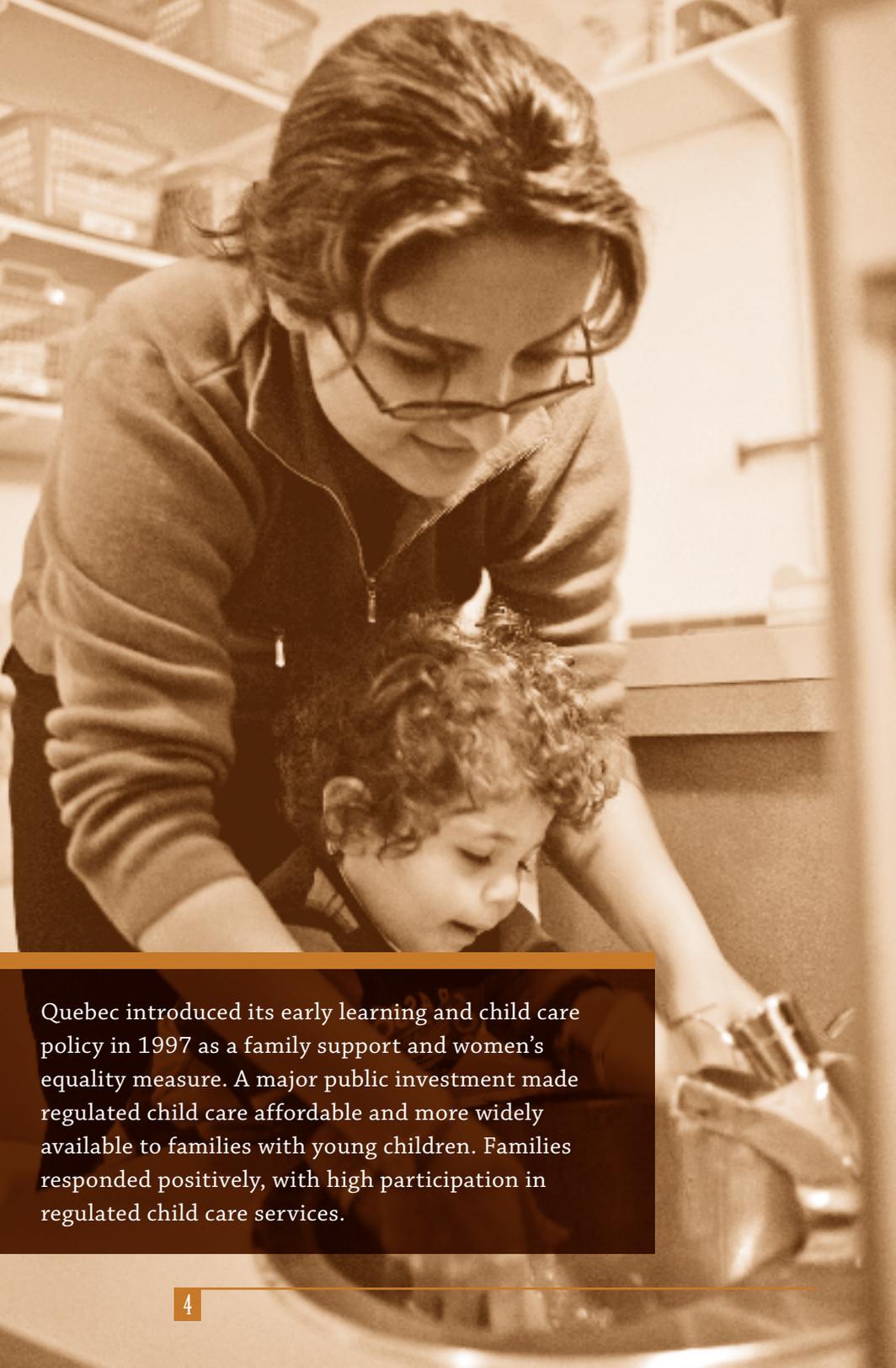
Early learning and child care in Canada is a patchwork of unplanned services that don't meet the needs of Canada's diverse population. Quality early learning and child care is in short supply and remains unaffordable. Paying for child care falls mainly on the shoulders of parents and child care workers, who subsidize the service through their low wages and benefits.

Canada's inaction flies in the face of overwhelming evidence that early learning and child care is good for children, parents and society. Polls show the public understands the importance of quality early learning and child care. Support for a system of child care services is high. When we look at the evidence, it's not hard to see why.

What is quality ELCC?

- Provides children with stimulation, enjoyment and learning.
- Encourages individual attention and co-operation through high adult-to-child ratios and small group sizes.
- Celebrates diversity and includes children with disabilities.
- Supports secure, warm relationships between children and caregivers.
- Provides good wages and working conditions to early learning and child care staff, who are skilled and trained.
- Is public/non-profit—all funds go into the program.
- Encourages parental involvement.
- Fosters supportive communication between early childhood educators and parents.
- Adheres to high standards, often going beyond regulations.

1 Quebec introduced a comprehensive early learning and child care system in 1997, involving a major public investment to expand and increase the availability of child care services. In keeping with CUPE's policy on Quebec's right to self-determination, the union supports a pan-Canadian early learning and child care system structured in a way that affirms Quebec's right to continue to develop its own system of services, within its own legislative and policy framework.



Quebec introduced its early learning and child care policy in 1997 as a family support and women's equality measure. A major public investment made regulated child care affordable and more widely available to families with young children. Families responded positively, with high participation in regulated child care services.

The case for early learning and child care

The early years last a lifetime

Study after study concludes a good start in life gives children a leg up, regardless of their family's social or economic status. Positive early experiences build children's self-esteem, ability to co-operate and socialize, cognitive skills, and physical and emotional well-being. Quality early learning and child care also lays the groundwork for lifelong learning and shapes society's future workers, parents, voters and active community members. As one key study (the *Early Years Study*) says: "The earlier in a child's life these programs begin, the better."

Support for families

Quality early learning and child care is an important part of the broad range of supports—such as improved maternity, parental and family care leaves—that help parents balance work and family. Child care helps parents work, study, care for other family members and be involved in community life. Parents who are in the workforce are better able to feed, clothe and house their children, reducing child poverty.

More than parents and young children benefit from quality early learning and child care. There's also a social and economic payback. Economists say that every dollar invested in quality early learning and child care produces a \$2 return.

Helping women

Mothers continue to bear the primary responsibility for children. Quality early learning and child care is critical for

working mothers. It's also important for mothers at home who need a break, or who want their children to be with others their age in programs where children learn through play.

More than 73 per cent of mothers with children under six are in the workforce. Yet there's only enough regulated early learning and child care for 15 per cent of children 12 and under. Most mothers who work outside the home have to cobble together unregulated child care of uneven quality. Access to quality child care lowers stress for working mothers because they know their children are well cared for in reliable child care arrangements. Quality early learning and child care helps mothers enter the labour force, and reduces unpaid workforce absences that reduce lifetime earnings and limit job advancement. It also supports mothers studying or training for jobs.

Promoting social solidarity

Social solidarity connects people in their communities. Quality early learning and child care fosters social solidarity across the boundaries of class, ethnicity, race, culture, language, sexual orientation, ability and geography.

Quality early learning and child care celebrates and reflects diversity in programming and staffing. Culturally and linguistically appropriate and anti-racist programs pass on community traditions and values, and bring families from diverse backgrounds together in activities related to their children. Inclusive programs provide equity for children with special needs. Child care is also important for cohesion in rural and remote communities because it draws young families to rural areas and is essential for economic development.

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black top and large patterned earrings, is smiling warmly. She is in a kitchen-like setting with a counter and cabinets visible. In the foreground, a young child is partially visible, looking towards the camera.

The ELCC workforce: the key to quality

Research confirms a skilled and trained workforce is the number one factor in the quality of early learning and child care programs. The people who work in early learning and child care are committed individuals. They provide environments that are healthy, safe and caring, and support child development. Child care staff support effective parenting and help parents balance work and family life. Investing in the child care workforce is an investment in our families and children, and society's future.

Despite their key role in delivering quality services, child care workers are among society's lowest-paid, earning about half the national average for all jobs. Early learning and child care staff overwhelmingly feel they aren't valued or respected.

Those who work in early learning and child care also face:

- difficult working conditions, with long hours and heavy workloads.
- high levels of job insecurity, with poorly-funded child care centres often just a step away from closing.
- limited career opportunities.
- health and safety issues from physically demanding work, stress and exposure to infections.

For all of these reasons, recruiting and retaining skilled staff has become a critical problem for the sector.

The ELCC workforce at a glance:

- Is 96 per cent women.
- Works in regulated child care centres, nursery schools/preschools, or in regulated family child care in the provider's home.
- Average annual full-time income is half the national average for all jobs.
- More highly educated than the overall working population.
- Proportion of visible minorities and immigrants reflects the general workforce.
- Is aging as the sector faces problems attracting and keeping staff.

Unionization pays off

A large number of unionized early childhood educators, cooks, cleaners and clerical staff are CUPE members. CUPE believes union representation and collective bargaining is the best route for early learning and child care staff to improve their wages, benefits and working conditions.



“Unionization is beneficial not only for the child care workforce but also for the children in unionized centres, their parents, and for the whole society.”

Unionization and Quality in Early Childhood Programs

Unionization also provides structures that increase the sector’s influence at all levels of government.

CUPE works to:

- Make workplace gains for child care workers through bargaining.
- Increase the strength of child care workers through coordinated bargaining within CUPE, and with other unions representing child care workers.
- Use the collective bargaining process and structures to support staff, employers and parents in jointly influencing funding levels and policy direction, as well as finding shared solutions to workplace issues.
- Give child care workers a strong voice in the workplace and community.
- Promote the value of early learning and child care as an occupation, and the benefits of the service to society.
- Support professionalism by negotiating conditions that help workers do their jobs well, and advocating strong regulation of the sector.

Not surprisingly, unionized centres contribute positively to the quality of early learning and child care programs. These centres have lower turnover rates, find it easier to recruit and retain good staff, support quality programs, and rate higher on program quality than non-union centres.

Union representation in early learning and child care produces results. The 2002 study *Unionization and Quality in Early Childhood Programs* found unionized staff in many centres have bargained:

- Higher wages.
- Disability insurance, extended health care and pensions. One example is a multi-sector pension plan tailored to small workplaces such as child care centres.
- Other benefits such as sick leave, vacation, employer top-up of Employment Insurance, and maternity leave, long-term service pay, and workers' compensation coverage.
- Better working conditions such as a staff room, staff replacements, paid lunch and overtime, and an eight-hour workday.
- Measures that support professionalism, education and training, such as in-service training; off-site professional development; payment of training fees; pay for meetings held after hours; and paid release and preparation time.
- Improvements such as health and safety protection that also benefit services.



Advocating for ELCC

Universal. Accessible. Affordable. Publicly funded and accountable. Inclusive. Public/non-profit programs. Quality. Supporting children's development. CUPE and its coalition partners advocate these principles as the building blocks for a pan-Canadian early learning and child care system. We also believe quality early learning and child care is a right for all children, and should be guaranteed in law.

Most developed nations see early learning and child care as a shared social responsibility, where governments must take the lead. Over the last several decades, numerous federal government committees, commissions and task forces have called for the Canadian government to act on early learning and child care, with few results. Canada must start walking the talk of the importance of the early years.

CUPE has long made advocacy a high priority. The union has active child care committees dedicated to moving early learning and child care issues forward internally among CUPE members and in the public arena.

ELCC and family supports

CUPE believes that supporting families and children is a shared responsibility involving parents, employers, unions, and - most importantly - governments. Families need a range of supports to promote healthy child development, and to help parents balance work and family. Unions have bargained provisions that include:

- financial assistance to help cover the costs of early learning and child care and help families who have children with special needs.
- workplace child care, which can be part of a quality early learning and child care system if parental and union control are assured.
- improved maternity, parental and family care leaves.
- paid union and education leave.
- good benefit plans for long-term disability, and drug and health costs.
- flexible work schedules.

However, collective bargaining is not a substitute for well-designed, properly-funded family policies. Governments must do their part to provide services and benefits such as early learning and child care, family leaves, income supports and affordable housing.



CUPE continues to be a leading partner in child care coalition campaigns at all levels. These campaigns include the ongoing effort to win a pan-Canadian early learning and child care system; provincial campaigns pressuring governments to establish and fund early learning and child care plans, increase grants and raise wages (including through a pay equity court challenge); and local campaigns working with parents and boards of directors lobbying local governments to improve child care services and wages, and reduce parent fees.

CUPE will continue to work with the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, provincial and territorial advocacy groups, the Canadian labour movement, parents, employers, and women's, disability, rural and remote, and other community groups to raise public awareness and push governments to act.



It's important to restrict ELCC growth to public/non-profit. Public/non-profit centres:

- Put all their resources into programs, unlike commercial centres, which are looking to turn a profit.
- Are accountable and responsive, involving parents, communities and governments in planning.
- Tend to follow practices that support quality, such as hiring better-trained staff and paying them more.

As well, Canada must ensure all new public funds for ELCC go to public/non-profit programs. Otherwise, we could face trade challenges that pave the way for “big box” commercial child care to move in and set up shop.

We want an early learning and child care system that:²

- Is publicly managed, planned and financed, with governments providing an adequate operating budget to programs, so that all families can afford services. There are targets and timetables to expand services, and ongoing quality improvement.
- Accommodates parents' work and provides family support. Programs are available to children with a parent at home, in the labour force, or in training or school.
- Respects cultural values and diversity, and fully includes children with disabilities.
- Ensures democratic operation, public accountability, quality and responsiveness through public/non-profit community-based programs. There is ongoing collaboration between educators, parents and the community.
- Supports qualified, well-paid and respected early learning and child care staff through ongoing opportunities for training and professional development.
- Sees early childhood as an important stage in its own right, with children as active learners.
- Provides well-designed, clean, healthy and safe facilities and environments with age-appropriate equipment and supplies.
- Gives families the choice of centre-based or well-supported family child care programs that are available full-day or part-time, including some with flexible hours.
- Includes ongoing evaluation and assessment of the system and programs, and a long-term research agenda.

² Adapted from Friendly, Martha (2004). Strengthening Canada's Social and Economic Foundations: Next Steps for Early Childhood Education and Child Care. Policy Options, Volume 25, Number 3:46-51. Institute for Research on Public Policy: Montreal, QC





CUPE's ELCC Program

Building a quality early learning and child care system is a top priority for CUPE. We are committed to removing barriers to women's participation in the workplace, community and union, and to improving wages and working conditions – the key to quality child care services.

To make this the decade when governments implement enlightened child care policies CUPE and its national child care working group will continue to:

- Promote early learning and child care issues and advocacy among CUPE members.
- Promote early learning and child care as a key component of the union's work on women's equality.
- Join child care advocates in campaigns to win policy and funding for a quality pan-Canadian early learning and child care system.
- Push for concrete measures — such as child care allowances at CUPE functions — that help women with young children be active in the union.
- Lead the campaign to organize early learning and child care staff.



- Provide strong representation in the workplace and at the bargaining table for organized child care workers, including through coordinated bargaining within CUPE and among other unions representing ELCC staff.
- Help staff, employers and parents pressure governments on funding and policy issues, and collectively resolve workplace challenges.
- Campaign to increase government early learning and child care funding to improve wages, benefits and working conditions.

CUPE is well-positioned to continue playing a strong role in the struggle for a pan-Canadian early learning and child care system. This system is long overdue for Canada's families and children. It's time.





Early learning and child care – It's time

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Ce document est également disponible en français
sous le titre

***Services éducatifs et de garde à l'enfance –
Le temps est venu***

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