

# CUPE Concerns with the Implementation of The Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-Wide Early Learning Child Care Agreement<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Across Canada, the Canadian Union of Public Employees represents about 12,000 members who work in the child care sector or work delivering ECE programs. In Saskatchewan, CUPE represents approximately 270 child care workers covered by 11 different collective agreements. Our members work in non-profit workplaces located in Regina, Saskatoon, Prince Albert, Melfort and Yorkton.

For decades, CUPE has fought for a national, non-profit, universal and affordable child care program. CUPE is strongly supportive of the policy objectives of the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-Wide Early Learning Child Care Agreement. However, the implementation of the bilateral agreement over the last year has raised several concerns and questions, not only among CUPE child care workers, but also among non-unionized child care workers, child care directors, parents and advocacy groups.

## LOW WAGES AND WAGE ENHANCEMENT GRANT CONCERNS

The two wage enhancements that together provided for a wage top-up of up to \$5.00/hour for early childhood educators (ECEs) are a welcome first step in addressing the historic low wages plaguing the child care sector. But these wages need a much greater boost to address the serious recruitment and retention issues facing this sector.

In addition, CUPE has identified the following concerns with these wage enhancements:

1. Many ECEs in our bargaining units have been ineligible for the wage top-ups or unable to receive the full amount because their hourly wage is higher than or near the threshold set by the provincial government. These top-ups place newer ECEs close to or at the same rate of pay as long-term, experienced employees.
2. In our child care bargaining units, most employers have implemented the wage top-ups in a way that doesn't increase the actual base wage rates of employees. One implication of this is that pension plans and group RRSP benefits are not improved if the contributions are paid based on their base rate of pay.
3. Lastly, the wage enhancements currently exclude all non-certified staff, including cooks, cleaners and casual and substitute child care providers. As a result, most of these workers have not received any wage increases for almost two years, a period which has seen inflation increasing to levels not seen in 40 years.

## BENEFITS AND PENSION PLANS

Most child care workers have few if any benefits. Non-salaried benefits, including group health benefits to cover prescriptions, dental and vision care, decent pension plans, paid sick leave and paid vacations beyond the minimum statutory requirement, are critical to recruiting and retaining child care staff. The Government of Saskatchewan should also provide additional funding to enhance benefits for early learning and child care workers.

One concrete step the Government of Saskatchewan could take to make early learning and child care a real career option for workers is to ensure enrolment in an existing province-wide defined benefit pension plan, like the Municipal Employees Pension Plan (MEPP).



1. This document is largely summarized from a CUPE submission provided to the Minister of Education and Minister of Labour Relations and Workplace Safety on March 1, 2023. More recent information related to the 2023-24 Provincial Budget is also included.

## REVENUE AND FUNDING CONCERNS

The grants flowing from the bilateral agreement are generally too restrictive and relatively modest. These grants are not automatically provided to child care agencies but need to be applied for by child care operators, many of whom are stretched too thin. Regulated early learning and child care centres are no longer receiving their “annual CBO funding increase” from the Ministry of Education. The last time child care centres received a provincial funding increase was in 2021 and it was only 1%.

Following the delivery of the 2023-24 Provincial Budget on March 22, 2023, a subsequent standing committee meeting revealed that only \$61.763 million or 17% of the \$359.9 million in funding for regulated child care is provincial funding. There has been a huge spike in federal government funding for early learning and child care in the last two years, but provincial funding has remained static - \$61.738 million in 2022-23 and \$61.681 million in 2021-22. The only access to additional funds for increased costs (whether it be for employee costs or other operating costs) are through raising parent fees to those parents with children 6 years of age and older (now capped at a maximum 2.5% increase between April 1, 2023 and September 30, 2024).

CUPE urges the Government of Saskatchewan to reinstate their annual CBO funding increase to regulated child care centres to provide them with more flexibility to address operating costs and the salaries of both certified and non-certified staff.



## UNIONIZED CHILD CARE CENTRES

In every CUPE child care agreement there is a “wage re-opener” provision that allows the parties the ability to negotiate wage increases and benefit improvements when there is a funding increase from the provincial government. The Wage Enhancement Grants fall outside the wage re-opener language. Without the historic provincial annual funding allotments, and caps on parent fees, there has been great difficulty.

There is also uncertainty how the forthcoming provincial wage grid for early learning and child care workers will mesh with existing, negotiated wage grids in collective agreements. All of this underscores the need for more extensive and ongoing consultation with those who work in the child care sector, including unions representing child care workers.

## RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Recruitment and retention of early learning and child care providers is an overriding challenge in developing an affordable, accessible, inclusive and high-quality early learning and child care program.

According to Statistics Canada, among all occupations, early childhood educators and assistants had the second highest increase in job vacancies (49.3%) from the third quarter of 2021 to the third quarter of 2022.

CUPE commends the provincial and federal governments for committing \$9 million to provide training for Early Childhood Educators at no charge. However, the most effective way to address the recruitment and retention challenges is to provide a living wage, good benefits and a decent pension plan to early learning and child care providers.

There is also a need to help change the narrative around the profession of Early Childhood Educators. Early learning is an integral part of the development of children and has long term positive impacts on society as a whole.

## EXPANSION OF CHILD CARE SPACES AND WORKLOAD CONCERNS

A significant expansion of child care spaces and facilities is required to meet the needs of working families. CUPE supports the objective of the bilateral agreement to create an additional 28,000 child care spaces by the end of March 2026. To date, however, the Minister of Education has indicated that only 4,696 new spaces have been created, of which 2,124 of these spaces are operational.<sup>3</sup>

Child care workers and operators are telling us that there is not enough qualified staff to work the additional spaces being promised. The growing demand for child care spaces is also putting additional stress on child care workers. Educator to children ratios are often far too high. There is little to no time for programming and planning. It's possible that a significant expansion of child care spaces could take place within our public schools – both existing and new builds.



## CONCLUSION

Section 5.1.2 of the Canada-Saskatchewan Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement commits the Government of Saskatchewan to consult with “parents, child care providers, experts, Indigenous peoples, official language minority communities and other interested parties as an important step in developing and revising its Action Plan.”

The lack of consultation with the above groups has created issues with the implementation of the bilateral agreement. A recent example is the Provincial Budget decision to fast-track the promise of \$10 per day per child parent fees, which has increased pressure on existing child care centres with long waitlists and acute recruitment and retention challenges. As the bargaining agent for hundreds of child care workers across the province, we believe CUPE should be seen as a key stakeholder. Moreover, CUPE can add an unique perspective, value and resources to contribute to the implementation of the bilateral agreement and the pending workforce strategy.

*CUPE Research*

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3.Ibid, p. 384.