



JUNE 2023

Results Report: Engagement Strategy

**COMMITMENTS UNDER THE CANADA – NEW BRUNSWICK CANADA-WIDE
EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE AGREEMENT**

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Minister's Message

The Government of New Brunswick has engaged parents and partners in critical dialogue to strengthen collective actions on the transformation of the early learning and child care system to better meet the needs of children and their families. We want to ensure the early learning and child care programs and services we have in place are meeting the needs of New Brunswick families, and are accessible, affordable, inclusive, and high-quality.

As part of the *Canada-New Brunswick Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (2021-2026)*, last year we consulted with early childhood educators, operators, families, and other stakeholders from across the province who shared their perspectives on improvements that could be made to early learning and child care in New Brunswick. I would like to thank the more than 400 stakeholders who participated in engagement sessions and over 2,100 New Brunswickers who responded to our survey. Their feedback has been incorporated into this report.

We know there are several pressing issues that need to be addressed. Retaining and recruiting early childhood educators, along with improved training opportunities and, in particular, professional development of staff, to facilitate inclusion of all children, were common themes. Enhancing communication between educators and operators was also a priority. The feedback received was widespread and is captured in this report.

Moving forward, we will be considering this valuable input as we develop our *2023-26 Action Plan*. I look forward to continuing to hear from the public in the years ahead on how we can work together to continuously improve and ensure our early learning and child care system is not only dependable but a space where children can achieve their full potential.

Thank you,



Honourable Bill Hogan
Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development

Context

As part of the *Canada-New Brunswick Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (2021-2026)*, New Brunswick has committed to a meaningful dialogue with its partners and stakeholders on working toward a common goal of creating supportive environments for families through early learning and child care services. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) has launched an engagement strategy to help us work toward achieving that goal.

The results of the ongoing engagement will guide the transformation of the Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system in New Brunswick and will allow for a better understanding of the needs of children and their families. This will help guide the collaborative transformation through capacity building and systemic change to ensure the creation of a strong, sustainable system.

The purpose of this report is to present the engagement strategy and results of engagement which took place in April and September 2022.

Vision

“New Brunswick benefits from a high-quality early learning and child care system that families can count on, and that supports each child as they develop to their full potential.”

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

The overall objectives of the engagement strategy throughout the term of the *Canada-New Brunswick Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement (2021-2026)* are to better understand the needs of New Brunswick families and to discover innovative ideas to address these needs.

SYSTEM REFLECTIONS

In the spring of 2022, EECD initiated a collective reflection process with families, employers, and primary ELCC stakeholders.

This reflection process aimed to create a forward-thinking approach to address the obstacles identified throughout the engagement period, with a goal of establishing a transformed ELCC system, over time, that families can rely on and through which every child can develop and reach their full potential.

BUILDING ON A SOLID FOUNDATION

The implementation of the *Canada-New Brunswick Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement Action Plan 2021-2023* is complete and key initiatives are beginning to take shape. The planning for the *2023-2026 Action Plan* is underway. EECD is committed to engaging families, operators, early childhood education staff, partners, and key stakeholders on an ongoing basis to create programs and services that meet the needs of New Brunswick families.

The engagement activities undertaken to achieve these goals are based on a spirit of continuous improvement through collaboration and to allow participants to validate, consult and contribute to the realization of initiatives and projects that are integral to the *2023-2026 Action Plan*.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this engagement period was to identify the needs and issues related to accessible, affordable, inclusive, and high-quality ELCC services. Particular attention was also given to further exploring the need for equitable access across the province.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed methodology (quantitative and qualitative methods) was used to achieve the objectives. EECD engaged consulting firms to support the engagement efforts, primarily because of the expertise required to carry out this work and the tight timelines for completion of the work.

EECD chose a mixed-methodology approach to reach as many people as possible with an aim for describing and understanding issues related to ELCC for the different target groups. The wide variety of groups allowed issues to emerge and enabled EECD to identify similar and different views.

Key stakeholders were grouped into interest groups and invited to participate in engagement sessions delivered virtually or face-to-face. Forty-two (42) open forum engagement sessions and/or structured interviews were held and over 400 people participated. In addition, two (2) quantitative surveys - one aimed at the general public, and one aimed at families receiving ELCC services - were conducted. Two thousand, one hundred and twenty-eight (2,128) families responded. Furthermore, thirteen (13) briefs were received from various stakeholders.

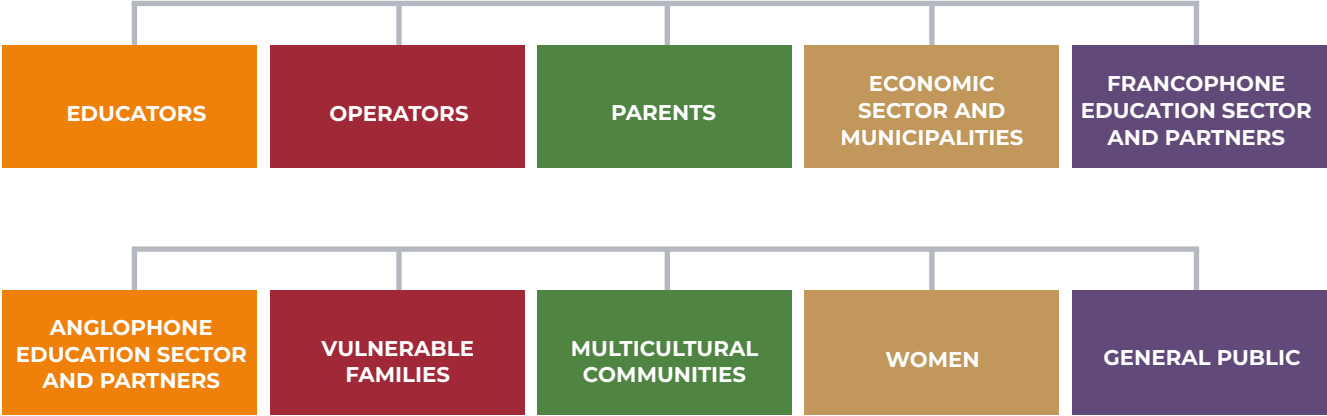
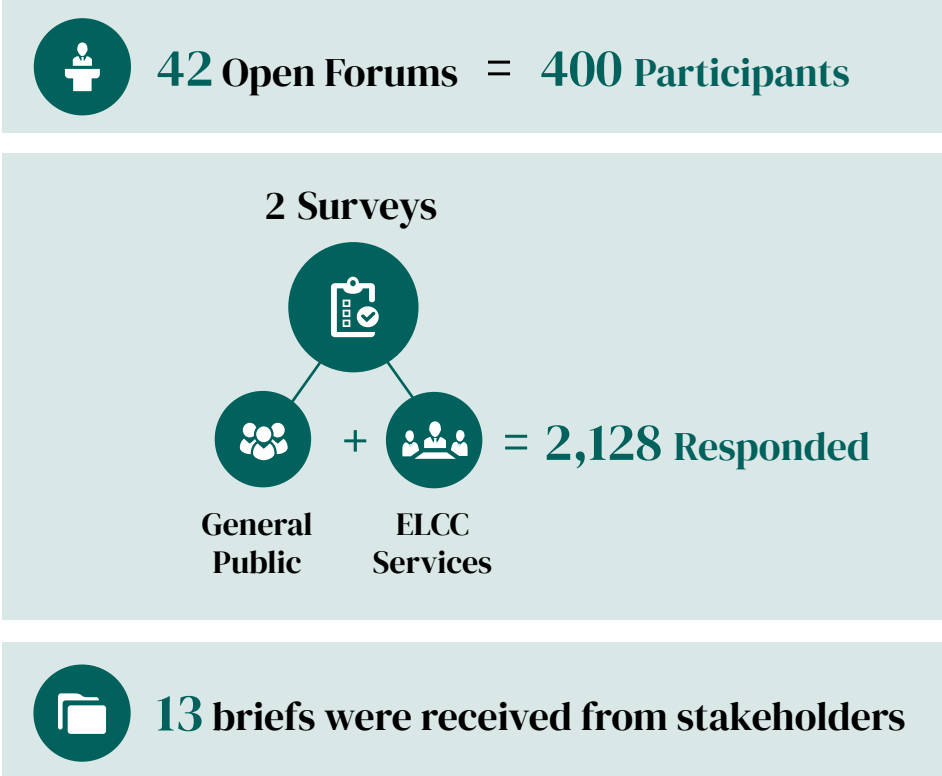


FIGURE 1: INTEREST GROUPS

The following questions were explored throughout the engagement sessions, semi-structured discussions, and individual interviews:

- What are the challenges and opportunities related to accessible, quality ELCC services?
- What do high-quality inclusive services look like? (Inclusive services: for all children and families, in their diversity)
- How can we support high-quality services where children can reach their full potential?
- What issues and opportunities do families identify in this regard?
- How can child care facilities support businesses, organizations and their families?
- What does an ELCC system that supports businesses, organizations and families look like?
- What are the challenges and opportunities for workers and employers in child care?

Note: It should be noted the questions could be modified slightly depending on the groups or individuals interviewed.

What We Heard:

RESULTS OF THE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

The engagement results are presented by reporting on the general trends that emerged from the data analysis, followed by a look at the general trends within the four pillars: accessible services, affordable services, inclusive services, and quality services.



THEMES



COMMUNICATION

During the engagement period, several priorities were identified to improve the quality of services in the ELCC system. Enhancing communication emerged as a key concern, emphasizing the need for more openness between operators and educators. The lack of training for educators to effectively handle difficult conversations with their superiors was also expressed as a concern.

Additionally, developing stronger relationships and communication with the school system was raised as another priority. This would foster better understanding of the needs of school-age children, increase recognition of the role of educators in early learning and child care facilities during the transition to the school system, and help children when they make the transition from ELCC services to the school system.

There was also a call for more direct and better-quality communication with early childhood educators concerning government policies and programs, as well as improved communication practices with inclusion support services.

Open communication with families, informing them about their rights and available options, was highlighted, as was sharing curriculum content and objectives to initiate discussions about the role of early childhood educators. The inclusion of families in discussions and intervention plans was seen as crucial for effective inclusion practices.



WORKFORCE

There were several priorities identified by different stakeholders related to overall working conditions and compensation. Some stakeholders emphasized through their feedback the need for greater recognition and improvements in their profession, including higher rates of pay, fair compensation for overtime and professional training hours, provision of benefits, and increased family engagement. Wage funding should reflect actual operating hours to avoid unpaid work. Educators also requested funding for educational materials to alleviate out-of-pocket expenses.

Working conditions and workload were identified as key concerns, with a call for specialized training, comparable conditions to educational assistants, as well as better staff retention strategies to reduce burnout. Hiring qualified and experienced staff was seen as crucial for delivering high-quality services. It was suggested educational assistants could serve as support workers or educators on a part-time basis during sick days.

Other priorities included the control of turnover among inclusion support staff and supports for children with special needs. Collaboration between families, child care facilities, and schools, as well as improved communication between educators and operators and training for children with difficult behaviours were deemed essential.

Valuing the profession was highlighted as crucial for recruiting and retaining quality staff. It was acknowledged it is challenging for one person to simultaneously serve as an educator and operator, indicating the need for clear roles and responsibilities. Positive reinforcement practices and involving educators in decision-making processes would enhance their sense of belonging and value in the profession.

Establishing a human resources data system, conducting exit interviews to understand why an employee chooses to leave the profession, gaining more knowledge about child development, aligning activities with children's interests and pace, and promoting investments in early childhood development and education were suggested for quality improvement.

Open communication with families, paid training sessions during work hours for staff, and minimum requirements for operating an ELCC facility were recommended.

Stricter criteria for early childhood education programs, sector-specific training, and retreat sessions for educators were proposed. Uniform and logical credential recognition and assessments, paying annual salaries instead of hourly wages, and visualizing child development as a continuum were mentioned.

Promoting the profession of early childhood educators, mandatory training for educators and operators, suggestion boxes for improvement ideas, and better-quality training were suggested. Hiring more educators, recognizing credentials of newcomers, and developing cultural skills workshops to support working with immigrant families and educators were proposed.



ACCESSIBLE SERVICES

There were various recommendations for improving accessibility in the ELCC sector.

Some recommended rethinking the service delivery model to consider the geographic and linguistic distribution of ELCC facilities with a view to improving access to services. Other suggestions included better representation of ELCC facilities at the national level and the development of a geographic map to easily identify their locations. Providing summer child care services for school-age children is seen as crucial for encouraging families to stay in the region and supporting local schools and the economy.

The challenges associated with creating infant spaces to meet the needs of New Brunswick families, and support workforce participation among women were emphasized. The lack of available spaces prevents some families from participating in the workforce. It was requested information be distributed on child care services from birth, creating resource lists for families, and automatically registering children for child care at birth. This could be enhanced by creating more spaces in child care facilities and offering services in schools to reduce waiting lists. There were also calls for more toddler spaces to be created.

Respondents also recommended breaking down fixed age barriers and some suggested adjusting ratios in mixed age groups to allow flexibility for older children. Additionally, respondents recommended re-defining the maximum age for infants to improve accessibility. It was proposed that making attendance at a recognized or approved ELCC facility should be mandatory. And it was recommended to reconsider subsidy awards based on child development to improve access.

To further enhance accessibility, suggestions include creating spaces for children aged 0 to 2, conducting public consultations to understand families' needs, and investing in expanding public child care services in rural and underserved communities. Prioritizing services for disadvantaged communities and single mothers was also suggested.

Establishing a framework defining parameters for non-profit organizations offering child care services can strengthen access for newcomer communities and address growing waiting lists. This could be supported by a comprehensive gender analysis to evaluate equity and engagement in all aspects of the ELCC sector.

The importance of providing suitable spaces for therapy sessions and emotional support for families of children with disabilities was also noted as important. Transportation was identified as a major concern for vulnerable groups, particularly immigrant or disadvantaged families who may lack access to transport or live far from child care facilities. Limited public transportation availability and scheduling challenges result in long travel times for families with young children, making it difficult to meet employment hours.

Some municipalities and private sector companies expressed interest in opening their own designated centres to serve their residents and employees. They asked for a simple and concrete non-profit approach and process to opening a facility.

It was recommended home-based services have access to support in transitioning to designated status. Additionally, some respondents stressed the importance of keeping the wage support program in place for home-based child care facilities and taking measures to improve their access to inclusion support programs. It was pointed out that home-based child care facilities play a critical role in the delivery of ELCC services in rural regions. It was proposed EECD should focus on reducing red tape for these facilities and establish communities of practice staffed by paid facilitators for new centres.

Offering meals that cater to diverse cultural and socioeconomic needs, making the system financially accessible to all, and providing financial aid to middle-class families were seen as priorities.

Respondents shared that implementing flexible scheduling after 5:00 p.m., and ensuring affordability for women entering the workforce should be considered.

It was also emphasized all ELCC services should be fully accessible and compliant with established standards and that it is important to avoid separating children from the same family across different facilities.

There were also numerous calls for facilities to develop outdoor educational environments.



AFFORDABLE SERVICES

Respondents provided several recommendations to improve affordability. These recommendations included reviewing the allocation funds to ensure they are being spent in the designated areas and harmonizing fees for different age groups. In addition, it was suggested that full-time educators should have access to the wage support program.

Concerns were raised about subsidy programs for families, with a need to review guidelines to prevent enrollment in unregulated private services. The issue of paying for full-time services even if a child only requires part-time care should be addressed, along with increasing subsidized spaces for after-school services.

Financial support for low-income families, including warm clothing and daily necessities, was emphasized. Charging a \$10 per day average fee for child care services was considered a significant affordability boost.

To further address affordability, it was proposed government allocate more funds, increase grants for children aged 0 to 2, establish a universal public ELCC system, and facilitate a smooth transition for for-profit models to become non-profit facilities by providing compensation and incentives.



INCLUSIVE SERVICES

Respondents provided numerous recommendations to enhance inclusion in the sector. Training on trauma was suggested, along with equivalent pay for inclusion support workers. General training on various aspects of inclusion, such as special needs, gender diversity, and supporting children with trauma or mental health issues, was emphasized. Additional resources, specialization opportunities for educators, and universal design training for more inclusive services were recommended. It was suggested these would enhance overall support for services, children, and programs.

To support inclusion, concrete actions such as developing a strategy for inclusive practices and conducting additional assessments for children with special needs were proposed. It was noted that autism agency representatives should adhere to facility-specific policies. Professional development in crisis intervention and leadership training were also recommended.

Consideration for neurodivergent children and children with special needs was highlighted, emphasizing sensitivity to different learning types, consistent support from behavioural specialists, and individualized programming based on children's interests. Collaboration between intervention services and educators, as well as uniformity in interventions, were suggested. Re-evaluating the age limit for intervention services and avoiding group separation were proposed.

Consistent quality preschool autism services should be available across regions. There were recommendations for having intervention specialists at each facility, improving access to specialists, and promptly processing referrals to enhance inclusive practices. Providing training on specialized intervention plans and effective methods for individualized support were also encouraged.

Funding for environmental design and playground structures was identified as necessary to make services more inclusive and provide equal play opportunities for all children.

Creating a strong sense of identity and security in children, welcoming the Early Years Evaluation - Direct Assessment (EYE-DA) at ELCC facilities, and reintroducing on-site meals were suggested. Sensitivity to cultural differences, promotion of different languages and clothing styles, and inclusive training on child



development and autism were mentioned. Collaboration between facilities, schools, and services, as well as with specialists, were deemed important for effective communication and joint planning.

Fair representation of minority groups in decision-making processes, involvement of education specialists, and community participation in child care activities were proposed. Supporting newcomer children and staff through quality reception, medium-term support, and collaboration with associated organizations were emphasized.

Improving understanding of power relationships and fear of repercussions, establishing an effective mechanism for inclusion promotion, and leveraging expertise from diversity and children with special needs organizations were suggested. Support for the transition from ELCC facilities to school, and recognition of the needs of newcomer families and children were also highlighted. Ensuring educators reflect values of inclusion was seen as essential.

There was also a call from respondents to ensure First Nations communities are served more effectively.

Respondents favoured embracing inclusion in its broader sense to incorporate all characteristics, including gender diversity and the on-site presence of professionals to meet the needs of children with behavioural issues and children with special needs more effectively. They also noted the importance of early referral to community organizations offering various supports and services. They discussed the major importance of awareness and understanding in relation to people with disabilities and their skills (e.g., ReThink Ability).

It was stated every child should have an opportunity to learn social skills and make connections with others through full inclusion in their group. Approaches for achieving this include Universal Design for Learning, activity planning and curriculum improvements.

Suggestions for improving access included developing strategies to promote inclusion and diversity with a focus on cultural awareness that reflects the needs of local communities (e.g., First Nations, language transmission, multicultural appreciation).

Access to child care services in the official language of choice regardless of a child's circumstances, needs or location was another priority identified. Respondents noted the importance of ensuring compliance with linguistic duality in New Brunswick in terms of both the process and service delivery. Increasing the number of spaces in rural or underserved regions is another factor supporting achievement of this objective.

Regarding linguistic characteristics, some emphasized the importance of considering French by offering francization services to both educators and families.



Respondents emphasized the importance of offering high-quality and inclusive services to newcomer families. It was suggested it is important to create a welcoming environment by providing appropriate physical reception, activities, materials, and meals. To overcome communication challenges and cultural barriers, early intervention and outreach efforts specific to their cultural realities were suggested.

It was further recommended a committee be formed to promote cultural sharing and understanding, as well as providing diverse activities. ELCC facilities should ensure staff are trained and have access to professional development to better support the needs of newcomers. Inclusive services should incorporate diversified educational materials and activities to promote cultural learning. Multicultural communities highlighted the importance of offering families more flexible schedules, creating more child care spaces and offering services in French regardless of age, location or needs by opening more facilities. Additionally, inclusion extends beyond target client groups and should be reflected in educator staffing, which also needs to be inclusive and diversified.

Lastly, Gender-based Analysis Plus should be factored into policies and programs in all areas of government.



QUALITY SERVICES

Several recommendations were shared to improve the quality of ELCC services. Respondents suggested expanding the definition of “early childhood” services to include children aged birth to 12 and emphasized the importance of on-site operators supporting and collaborating with educators.

To improve service quality, participants proposed creating a portal or app for supply staff, and shared creative spaces for family-educator interactions, and reducing the quality gap between preschool and after-school services.

To ensure quality services, suggestions included harmonizing visions across departments, school districts, ELCC facilities, and homes. Revising quality assessment checklists to eliminate discrimination, promoting uniformity in training program content and placements, and streamlining assessment requests for more effective support were proposed.

To support new owners and operators, mentorship programs and guidance on regulatory requirements were suggested. Supportive and flexible inspections, a clear understanding of quality service delivery, and analysis of incident reports for safety maintenance were recommended.

Respondents believed it was important to ensure consistent interpretation of the rules by inspectors. They indicated in this regard that it is critical to promote a respectful and supportive climate as well as open and more unifying peer-to-peer communication with the department and school districts.

Integrating technology, reviewing service formats, involving local governments and district education councils in strategic planning, and unionizing professionals for better pay and benefits were recommended.

Promoting healthy eating and local sourcing of foods for toddlers was also mentioned.

Next steps

Moving forward, EECD recognizes the importance of actively engaging with stakeholders to ensure the successful development and implementation of the *2023-2026 Action Plan*.

Recognizing that families in New Brunswick have diverse needs, EECD is committed to listening to and understanding the unique challenges and aspirations of families across the province. Through this ongoing engagement, EECD envisions a collaborative process that embraces the collective wisdom, expertise, and lived experiences of stakeholders. By incorporating their valuable input into the action plan, the department aims to ensure that the resulting initiatives and policies reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of New Brunswick families, ultimately leading to an enhanced early learning and child care system that truly meets the needs of its residents.

