

**Prince Edward Island's
PRESCHOOL EXCELLENCE INITIATIVE
First Year Implementation Report**



September 2013

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Prince Edward Island's Preschool Excellence Initiative

First Year Implementation

1. SETTING THE STAGE

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

In May 2010, the Government of Prince Edward Island launched the Preschool Excellence Initiative – a five-year plan to phase in broad and significant changes to the early childhood education and care system. The Initiative included the largest, one-time increase in funding for early childhood education and care in the history of the province.

The Preschool Excellence Initiative draws on the recommendations of the *Early Years Report - Early Learning in PEI: An Investment in the Island's Future* (Flanagan, 2010). The Report was based on extensive consultation with parents and representatives of the early childhood sector, drew on international expertise and research, and concentrated on building an early childhood system by focusing on governance, access, quality, and sustainability.

The Context

The efforts to create a high quality, sustainable early childhood system for PEI were influenced by an earlier policy decision to transfer responsibility for PEI's universally funded, community based Kindergarten system from the early childhood sector to the public school system. In the year prior to this transfer, it became clear that this would seriously de-stabilize the early childhood sector:

- Directors of early childhood centres estimated that approximately 40% of children typically enrolled in early childhood centres would now be in the full day school system.
- In smaller communities, there was concern that centres would close, due to all staff moving to the school system – and leaving families without any access to early childhood programs.
- With a younger age group in early childhood centres, fee increases for parents were predicted due to the greater number of educators required for younger age groups.
- Since current Kindergarten teachers would be given first opportunity to apply for positions in the school system, there would be a significant loss to the sector of the most highly qualified and experienced early childhood educators.

In 2010, access (in terms of availability) to a regulated early childhood program in PEI was double the national average. Many centres reported vacancies – making it clear that sustainability for the early childhood system in PEI would depend on thoughtful and systematic planning.

THE PRESCHOOL EXCELLENCE INITIATIVE

The Preschool Excellence Initiative is a comprehensive plan to build a provincial early childhood system for children from infancy to pre-kindergarten age. As recommended in the *Early Years Report - Early Learning in PEI: An Investment in the Island's Future* (Flanagan, 2010), the system's emphasis is on early learning – while at the same time structured to support parents in balancing their work and family responsibilities. The Initiative is designed to build a community based, publicly managed early childhood system for PEI.

Noting that feedback from parents, educators, and operators emphasized that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, Flanagan recommended that the new system continue to provide availability of choices and options. The report called on Prince Edward Island to create an early learning system that allows for parental choice, and is built on four core elements:

- **Good governance:** including revised legislation, regulations, program support, and the development of a data strategy, with ongoing research and evaluation
- **Access:** To increase both availability and affordability of early learning, the report recommends using public infrastructure where available, addressing before and after school care, developing a network of registered infant homes, more structured planning for new spaces, and revisions to the Child Care Subsidy Program
- **Quality:** with measures to improve access to training and certification, curriculum development, parent involvement, wages and working conditions, quality measures and research.
- **Sustainability:** with a new funding model that provides stability to the system in a predictable and accountable manner, and seeks to improve retention of qualified staff with the introduction of a provincial wage grid with incremental increases over time, and benefits for educators that more accurately reflect the education and scope of responsibilities. The report also called for collaboration in the ECEC sector regarding the establishment of a data strategy in order to inform ongoing planning, with a coordinated approach to development of new programs and spaces.



BASELINE DATA AND THE PEI EVALUATION

In order to assess the efficiency of the first year of implementation of the Preschool Excellence Initiative and to establish a baseline of data to inform subsequent evaluations of the Initiative, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) partnered with the Margaret and Wallace McCain Family Foundation (MWMFF) to fund a baseline evaluation study. A Management Team was established to include representatives of both the DEECD and the MWMFF.

Holland College and the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) collaborated in carrying out the evaluation¹. Holland College was responsible for primary and secondary data collection and analysis; UPEI was responsible for case studies on a sample of five centres.

The Approach

The baseline evaluation study used quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Information was gathered using a number of sources and approaches:

Survey² data were collected from:

- Director/Owners of Early Years Centres and Private Centres
- Educators/Program Staff in Early Years Centres and in Private Centres
- Parents of 4 year old children who would be entering kindergarten in the following school year

Considerable effort was undertaken in order to maximize response rates for the surveys of directors and staff in both early years centres and private centres, including pre-marketing, phone contact, follow up phone calls, and prize (draw) incentives. Response rates for the Director/Owner and Educator/Program Staff surveys were:

- Directors/Owners of Early Years Centres: 65%
- Directors/Owners of Private Centres: 53%
- Program Staff in Early Years Centres: 83%³
- Program Staff in Private Centres: 28%⁴

Surveys were distributed to parents as they attended a child assessment program for their children. Parents were asked about their child's experience in out of home early childhood programs, and the nature of those programs, i.e., licensed, centre based or home based, etc. Parents were also asked about the reasons for their choices.

¹ Collège Acadie was also invited to collaborate in this partnership; however, due to staffing changes underway at the College, they were unable to participate.

² See Appendix A: survey questionnaires

³ It should be noted that 83% does not represent percentage of all educators employed in Early Years Centres; rather, this number represents the proportion of Early Years Centres represented by the individuals responding to the survey

⁴ As in footnote 3, the 28% response rate cited by the researchers at Holland College does not represent 28% of all staff who work in private centres; rather, this number means that staff who responded indicated they worked in 28% of the total number of private centres

Focus groups⁵ were held in King’s, Queen’s, and Prince counties. Focus groups were held with:

- Centre Directors and Owners
- Program Staff/Special Needs Assistants
- Parents
- Post-Secondary ECE faculty
- Multi-disciplinary professionals working with children

Key informant interviews⁶ were conducted with representatives from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The teams directly responsible for working with the Early Years Centres as well as middle and senior management were included in the interview process. In all, 9 people were interviewed.

Quality Site Visits were conducted in a sample of 25 centres. Centres were selected from all licensed EYC and PECC centres, with consideration given to:

- Early Years Centre/Private Centre
- Urban/rural and geographic representation
- Profit/Non-profit
- English/French/Aboriginal
- Smart Start/Non-Smart-start

The research team selected the City of Toronto’s Operating Criteria for their measurement tool to establish baseline data for quality measures in the 25 centres.⁷ The City of Toronto Operating Criteria identifies six key determinants of quality:

- Sound management practices
- Training, experience, and stability of staff
- Group size; ratio of children to adults
- Family involvement in the program
- Health and safety standards of the physical facility
- Program content and development (City of Toronto Children’s Services Operating Criteria, 2011, p. 2).

Case Studies⁸ were conducted in five of the 25 centres involved in the Quality Site Visits. Researchers from UPEI conducted the case studies, using a participant observation approach. Attention was given to geographic, linguistic, and demographic diversity. Approximately 45 directors and staff participated in the case studies.

And finally, the research team conducted a review of **administrative data** from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD). Data reviewed included:

⁵ See Appendix D: Focus Group Interview Protocol

⁶ See Appendix E: Key Informant Interview Guide

⁷ See Appendix B: Quality Assessment Methodology

⁸ See Appendix C: Case Study Methodology and Data Analysis

- Site specific information regarding contact and operations information, capacity, license history, auspice, financial statements, contracts, quality enhancement and special needs grants, geographic location, information on physical facilities
- Licensed capacity and actual enrollment
- Names and addresses of directors and owners, service options and areas, hours of operation, Early Years Centre general contract information, Early Years staff establishments at site level including information about staff certification levels, wages and benefits.
- Year-end financial statements for Early Years sites from years ending 2008/2009/2010/2011²

2. WHAT WE LEARNED

The DEECD document *Securing the Future for Our Children – Preschool Excellence Initiative*⁹ describes the investments and policy changes to be introduced during the first year of the five-year implementation. Funding investments during the first year of implementation focused on Access (affordability and availability) and Quality, while developmental work toward the principles of Governance and Sustainability continued. Highlights of the evaluation findings, and descriptions of specific investments in the core elements of the initiative are described in each of the following sections of this report.

GOVERNANCE

Governance refers to the “allocation of responsibility for decision-making and delivery within and across administrative departments, levels of government, and public and private actors” (Neuman, 2005.p.130). Governance is a critical component of an early childhood system, because it can determine whether or not services meet quality standards, are affordable, meet local demand, promote cost effectiveness and achieve equity goals (Kagan & Cohen, 1997). As Neuman (2005, p.132) notes, governance in this sense is “the ‘glue’ that holds the pieces of the early childhood system together”.

In the first year of implementation of the Preschool Excellence Initiative:

- Funding was allocated to the Early Childhood Development Association of PEI (ECDA) to support centres in obtaining legal and financial advice concerning their options within the new governance model. During the first months of the new Preschool Excellence Initiative, the ECDA coordinated legal and financial consultation for centres as they explored their options within the governance models outlined in the new initiative.
- The DEECD supported existing centres in other ways to determine their role in the new system. A Bridging Fund was made available for those centres who wished to become an Early Years Centre but who needed time and support to make the transition. Funds were available to renovate and equip available school space to facilitate the establishment of Early Years Centres within public schools. In areas with surplus access, a license retirement fund was available to centres that wished to close.
- Officials in the DEECD held information sessions across the province in order to provide owners and operators of early childhood programs with details of the new initiative, and to answer their questions related to the application process for designation as an Early Years Centre, implications of retaining their status as a private centre, or retiring their current license. The EYC designation process continued during summer 2010.
 - Prior to the May 2010 launch of the Preschool Excellence Initiative there were 92 full day early childhood centres, 24 stand-alone kindergarten programs, and 3 half-day programs for preschool age children. As of October 2010, there were 30 Early Years

⁹ http://www.gov.pe.ca/photos/original/edu_Excellniti.pdf

Centres approved in the first phase of designations. By September 2011, there were 45 Early Years Centres and 22 privately operated full-day centres, along with 9 half-day preschool programs.

- Privately operated centres continued to receive operating grants through the same funding mechanism that existed prior to the Preschool Excellence Initiative. In addition, a temporary wage subsidy was introduced for qualified early childhood educators who were employed in privately operated centres.
- The EYC designation process was not intended to impact governance models for licensed school age programs, or licensed family child care homes.
- Work began immediately on drafting new legislation and accompanying regulations. The *Early Learning and Child Care Act* has now been passed in the PEI Legislature (Fall 2010) and work continues on drafting regulations to the new act. Public consultation on the new regulations is scheduled for later in 2012.
- A partnership was developed with the PEI Department of Industry and the Early Childhood Development Association (ECDA) of PEI to begin development of the PEI Early Learning and Child Care Registry. The Registry, launched in April 2011 and hosted on the ECDA's website, provides parents with a search engine for licensed centres and spaces across the province. The centralized nature of the registry allows the province to monitor the level of parental demand for ECEC spaces by age group and by region of the province. This allows the DEECD to have up to date and accurate information for determining need for expansion of licensed spaces, and the related need for additional numbers of qualified educators.
- An Early Years Advisory Committee was formed, to advise on a strategy for the ongoing roll-out of the Initiative. Membership on the Steering Committee included parents, representatives of community organizations (English and French), ECE experts, PEI Child and Youth Commissioner, and departmental staff.



Early Years Centres and Private Child Care Centres

The evaluation study explored any differences between EYC and private centres. In focus groups, parents and community members reported (during the first year of implementation) they did not yet see any significant differences, and in some key informant interviews, some staff said the same. Survey data and case study reports showed that directors in EYCs felt they now had more administrative work, and there was some appreciation noted that directors in the EYCs were now outside of child:staff ratios¹⁰.

Survey data, however, highlighted some significant differences between the two types of centres. These findings indicated that in the first year of the PEI implementation:

- A majority of Early Years Centres reported wage increases; some private centres also increased wages for staff
- EYCs were more likely to have staff benefits
- Pension benefits were least likely of all benefits in place, in both EYCs and private centres
- EYCs were more likely to use criminal record checks as part of the hiring process
- EYCs were more likely to have performance appraisal practices in place for staff
- EYCs were more likely to provide daily outdoor play
- EYCs had a greater frequency of field trips
- EYCs were more likely to have parent advisory committees – 85% of EYCs either had one in place or were in the process of establishing one
- Private centres reported a greater degree of difficulty in recruiting new staff
- EYCs were more likely to have more children on waiting lists
- EYC's were more likely to have children registered whose parents were supported by the Child Care Subsidy Program

ACCESS

The Early Years Report notes that access to a high quality early childhood education and care program involves consideration of:

- Availability: if there are no programs established, it doesn't matter if parents have enough money to pay for fees
- Affordability: if parents don't have money to pay for the fees, it doesn't matter how many programs are established (Flanagan, 2010)

Availability

In the first year of the Preschool Excellence Initiative:

- The DEECD conducted an analysis as to the number of Early Years Centres needed for the first round of designations, based on geographic and cultural/language balance

¹⁰ In smaller early years centres, directors spend half of their time working within the child:staff ratio, and the other half in an administrative/leadership role.

- Early Years Centres were required to provide spaces for infants (children younger than 2 years old) and children with special needs
- Owners/Operators of existing early childhood centres who did not wish to apply for designation as Early Years Centres could continue to operate as private licensed centres according to the regulations of the Child Care Facilities Act.

Based on a review of administrative data in the DEECD, the PEI evaluation study (in Figure 1 below) found that the number of children enrolled in Early Years Centres had increased between October 2010 (when 30 EYCs were first established¹¹) and May 2011:

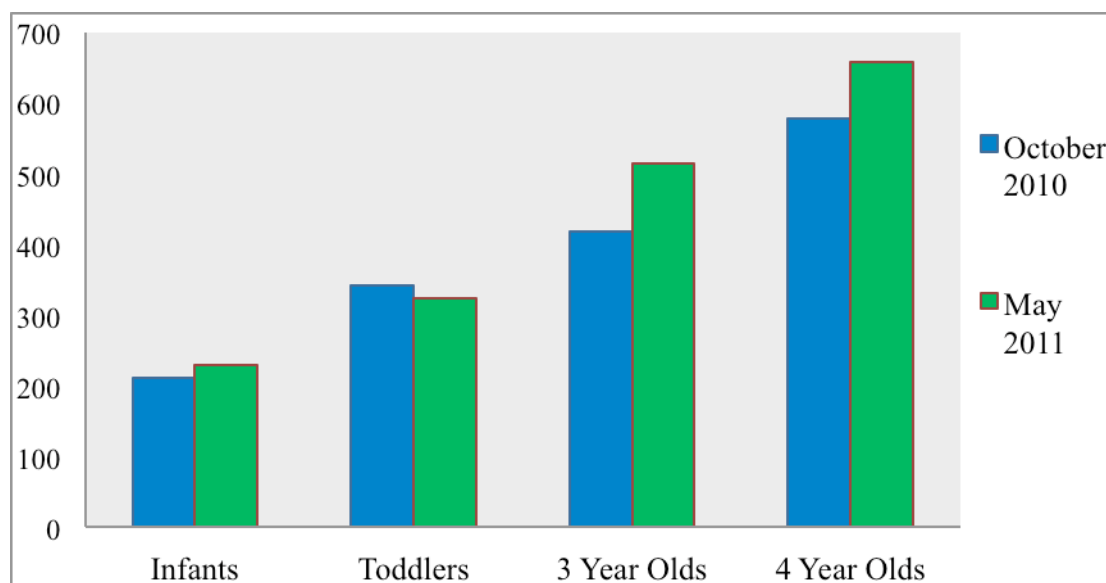


Figure 1: Number of children by age group attending Early Years Centres: October 2010 and May 2011

Source: Administrative data, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Prior to the introduction of the Preschool Excellence Initiative, administrative data were not collected regarding participation rates; therefore, data are not available to determine the level of change in utilization of spaces between May 2010 (when five year old children were in attendance) and May 2011 in order to assess any overall change in participation rates. However, as was noted in *The Early Years Report* (Flanagan, 2010), previous to the introduction of the Preschool Excellence Initiative the availability of spaces for children from birth to six years of age was double the Canadian average. PEI had the unique challenge of an oversupply of regulated spaces, with many centres reporting vacancies. PEI's challenge was to introduce a planning aspect to the introduction of new centres or spaces to address availability issues.

Some licensed programs did close by the end of June 2010:

¹¹ By Fall 2011, 45 Early Years Centres had been established

- Once the delivery of Kindergarten was moved to the public school system, a total of 23 stand alone (usually half-day) Kindergarten programs closed. This represented 14 programs in Prince County; four programs in Queen’s County; and five programs in King’s County.
- During the introductory phase of the Preschool Excellence Initiative, government offered to “retire” licenses with a small financial incentive that was based on the previous year’s operating grant. A total of 13 centres retired their licenses.

Equity of Access

Researchers involved in the baseline evaluation study examined both geographic and cultural distribution of centres across Prince Edward Island in order to assess equity of access for all Island families and children. Table 1 describes (a) distribution of centres and population by urban/rural designation, (b) the percentage of distribution of centres by region of the province according to 2006 census population data (by regional distribution), and (c) the percentage of distribution of centres by cultural focus by cultural representation in the PEI population:

Table 1: Distribution of Licensed Centres Compared to Census Data	
Centre Representativeness (2011)	Census data (2006)
57% Urban / 43% Rural	45% Urban / 56% Rural (agglomeration 55% Urban)
12% East / 56% Central / 32% West	14% East, 54% Central, 33% West
9% French	4% French
3% Aboriginal	1% Aboriginal

The baseline evaluation study researchers report that geographic and cultural distribution is consistent with large-scale census data; this suggests that equity has been attained according to these measures. They also report that the slightly higher percentages for French and Aboriginal services likely represent the dispersion of these groups across PEI. However, researchers involved with the evaluation study note that geographic equity does not necessarily translate into accessibility, especially as one moves further into the rural communities on PEI. This contention was supported by focus group data where all groups perceived that rural areas were still under-served.

Infant Spaces

The DEECD reports that in the first year of implementation of the Preschool Excellence Initiative, the number of infant spaces grew by 125%. Prior to the launch of the Initiative, there were 102 spaces for infants (children younger than 2 years old). By the end of the first year of implementation, there were a total of 230 spaces for children in this age group. Even so, survey data indicates that a majority of

both Early Years Centres and Private Early Childhood Centres maintain waitlists¹², and among those that do have a list, the demand for infant spaces was significantly higher than demand for toddler or preschool spaces. Survey data indicated that two to three times as many infants are on a wait list for EYC's compared to toddlers or preschoolers. This is supported by information from the ECDA's Provincial Registry for Early Learning and Child Care, which notes that demand for infant spaces is higher than any other age grouping. In parent focus groups, the evaluation study found that parents were appreciative of the newly established infant spaces, but noted that many more are needed.

Children with Exceptional Needs

Both Early Years Centres and Private Early Childhood Centres have continued to provide spaces for children with exceptional needs. The baseline evaluation report notes that children with a wide range of developmental challenges are participating in both types of centres. Data from the DEECD indicates that historically, approximately 200 children up to age 12 years old with special needs are funded to participate each year in licensed/regulated early childhood education and school age child care programs. Data is maintained on children funded through this program for each fiscal year. Since the first year of the Preschool Excellence Initiative's implementation spanned two different fiscal years, a detailed breakdown for the first year was not calculated. Subsequent data collection for ongoing evaluation purposes may be gathered for the second and following years of the Initiative's implementation.

The evaluation study utilized a variety of approaches to assess equity of access for children with exceptional needs. For the most part, data collected from surveys and secondary data were drawn upon to evaluate distribution of resources and to compare with data from external sources such as that available from Statistics Canada. Researchers involved with the baseline evaluation study acknowledged that such an approach is a fairly "blunt instrument", but felt that it did provide some insight into distribution and equity in relation to access for children with exceptional needs.

In general, the distribution of children with exceptional needs within each region is consistent with population estimates. Census data (2006) estimates there to be 190 children with exceptional needs on PEI in the age range of 0-4 years. Respondents to the centre survey indicated there are 80 children with exceptional needs enrolled in their centres – this represents 42% of the estimated total number of children on PEI with exceptional needs. However, it should be noted that this is possibly an underestimate as not all centres responded to the survey. Nonetheless, this is consistent with rough estimates of the percentage of children from the general population who are enrolled in centres. Considering the population of children aged 0-4 is 6,695 (2006 census data) and about 2,500 children are enrolled in licensed centres (excluding school age programs) the estimated percentage of children enrolled in these programs is 37%. On a macro level, it would appear that the resources are equitably

¹² Survey Data was collected during the same time period as the development and initial launch of the provincial child care registry. Subsequent data collection will need to determine the efficiency and effectiveness of the central registry.

distributed, given that approximately half of the children who are funded are in the 0-4 year old age grouping.

Other Issues of Access

Some focus group participants noted that regardless of geographic and/or cultural access to early childhood education programs, participation in such programs was often not feasible for children whose parents worked in seasonal jobs, or whose parents worked shift or sporadic hours. These types of access issues will need to be followed in subsequent data collection activities.

Affordability

In the first year of the Preschool Excellence Initiative parent fees in Early Years Centres were capped, based on the age of the child¹³. Focus groups conducted with parents of children in early years centres found that affordability continues to be a major concern, despite the regulation (and for the most part, reduction) of parent fees. In the survey conducted with parents of four-year-old children, many parents who selected child care arrangements outside of the licensed sector noted that the reason they did not use a regulated/licensed early childhood program for their children was related to cost.



The decision to cap parent fees in the new Early Years Centres also had an impact on the provincial Child Care Subsidy Program, managed by the Department of Community Services, Seniors and Labour. In previous years, the differential between the maximum subsidy available through the program and the actual fees charged by regulated ECEC programs had grown with the effect of limiting parents' use of the subsidy program for child care fees, due to the differential fee charged by centres. The Preschool Excellence Initiative matched the capped fees with the maximum subsidy rates, thereby eliminating the differential for parents whose children were attending Early Years Centres. Even so, some parents in focus groups noted that the income levels established as eligibility criteria for subsidy are very low, and therefore it is difficult for parents to use the Child Care Subsidy Program. Since the baseline data evaluation did not study the impact of this decision on the Child Care Subsidy Program, this should be included in subsequent evaluation studies.

QUALITY

As noted in the Early Years report, "It is widely accepted that the level of quality in early childhood

¹³ Fees in Early Years Centres were capped at \$25 per day for 3- and 4-year olds; \$26 per day for 2-year-olds; and \$32 per day for children younger than 2-years-old (infants).

education and care programs is the key variable that determines whether a child’s experience in the program will have a positive or negative influence on later development.” (Flanagan, 2010, p.46) With consideration to elements of quality, there is a consensus among researchers that the level of staff qualifications is both the most important element of quality, and the most frequently cited predictor of positive child outcomes in early childhood settings. (Barnett, 2004; Canadian Council on Learning, 2006; Doherty et al, 2005; Government of Ontario, 2007)

ECE Staff Qualifications

The Preschool Excellence Initiative focused on quality as an immediate objective, with particular attention to the qualifications of staff employed in both Early Years Centres and Private Early Childhood Centres. Given the context, i.e., that approximately 40% of all qualified and experienced Early Childhood Educators (124 educators) had moved to the public school system as kindergarten teachers, it was expected that there would be relative shortages of staff with post-secondary early childhood education credentials in both EYCs and PECCs. Survey data confirmed this expectation. Figure 2 shows that among those program staff who responded to the survey, approximately half did not have post-secondary Early Childhood Education (ECE) credentials:

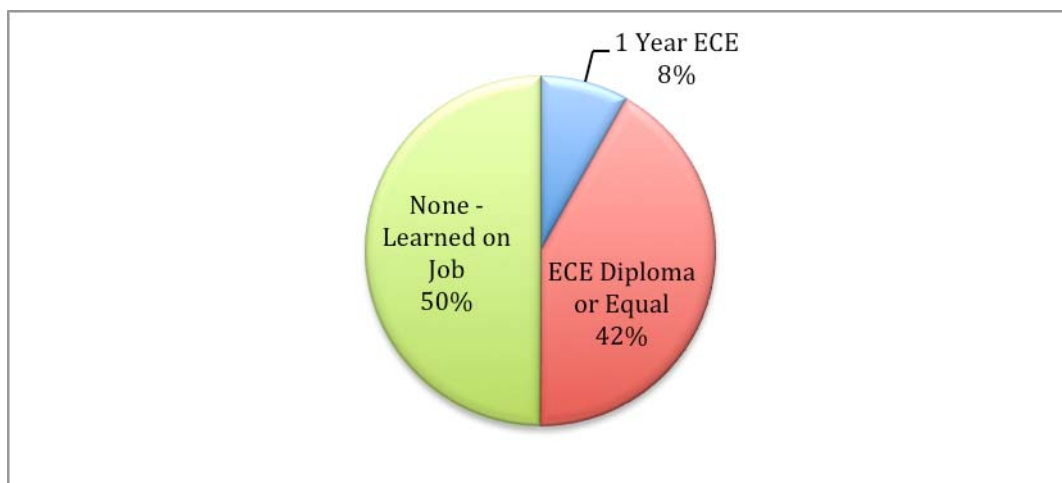


Figure 2: Qualifications (Self-Reported) of Respondents to Program Staff Survey

According to the survey data, there were 156 individuals who responded to the program staff survey. This would suggest that of that group, 78 respondents had a post-secondary ECE credential, and 78 respondents did not. Of the 156 respondents, 11% were directors. Since a majority of directors in both EYCs and in PECCs would have completed the Director/Centre Survey, this data is not a reliable analysis of qualifications of directors in either type of program.

The survey data further noted that of those respondents without an ECE credential, 40% were involved in pursuing further study, primarily through the 90-hour ECE entry-level program. The survey data does not report on whether any of the 50% of respondents without an ECE credential may have completed any other type of post-secondary education.

However, data from the DEECD files suggest that the number of people pursuing an ECE credential by starting with the 90-hour ECE entry-level program is much higher, noting that 224 spaces were funded through a partnership agreement between Skills PEI¹⁴ (a division of the Department of Innovation and Advanced Learning) and the Early Childhood Development Association of PEI. This agreement provided spaces at both Holland College and Collège Acadie for students in two cohorts (2010 and 2011). All spaces were filled in both cohorts. Follow-up data collection regarding attrition and completion rates would add to the baseline data for ongoing evaluation for the Preschool Excellence Initiative. Those who have completed the 90-hour program of study are now poised to apply their courses toward a one-year ECE certificate level program, which is tentatively expected in 2012. Long-term plans indicate that the one-year ECE certificate may then be applied toward a two-year ECE diploma.

Professional Development

Opportunities for professional development are of key interest to certified early childhood educators in PEI as completion of thirty hour of professional development in each three-year period is a condition that must be met for renewal of certification status. One of the key recommendations of the Early Years Report was that in Early Years Centres, directors and staff would work together to develop a professional development plan. This was in response to the number of educators who voiced a preference for ongoing professional development that either led to a higher credential, or that was designed in response to professional goals.

Survey data collected through the baseline evaluation study found that there was an almost even split between program staff respondents who felt that professional development opportunities had increased and those that believed they had stayed the same since the introduction of the Preschool Excellence Initiative. The survey was issued prior to the implementation of PD days that match those offered in the school system and survey results need to be viewed in that context.

Unfortunately, while survey responses measure perceptions of change, the data does not identify what the current practices *actually are* regarding opportunities for professional development. It is equally impossible to assume that for half of the respondents there had been no improvement to such opportunities as it is to assume that for those respondents, they already enjoyed appropriate access to professional development.

Similarly, almost 50% of the respondents in the program staff survey indicated that there was no change in their access to professional development opportunities that were paid for by their employer. Again, survey data does not indicate whether employers of these respondents paid for professional development prior to the introduction of the Preschool Excellence Initiative or if this benefit was not available to these program staff. Documentation and description of current types of practices (both

¹⁴ It should be noted that the Preschool Excellence Initiative is a *provincial* initiative, with investments from a number of provincial government departments.

access to professional development opportunities and the staff benefit of employers paying for such opportunities) must be collected in order to understand rates of change.

Qualifications of Special Needs Assistants

A number of key informants and participants in focus groups noted that while the introduction of a wage scale for early childhood educators was well received, there was some concern about the lack of a corresponding wage scale for those who were working in EYCs with children with special/exceptional needs. Since the wage scale for early childhood educators is based on a combination of ECE credentials and position (Director) in the EYC, there was no comparable consideration given to “special needs assistants” since current regulations did not specify qualifications for individuals in these positions.

The ambiguity regarding what is considered to be appropriate educational qualifications for special needs assistants is reflected in responses from respondents to the program staff survey regarding the level of “specific” training achieved by those who work with children with special needs. Survey data indicates that 10% of the 165 respondents to the program staff/educator survey worked as special needs assistants. When asked about their specific training to work with children with special needs, respondents reported a variety of types of training, ranging from a bachelor of arts degree (although specific area of study was not specified) to human services diploma, early childhood diploma, “other” (not specified) and no specific training. Since it is difficult to determine a provincial trend based on this response rate and lack of clarity in response categories such as “other”, this is an area that needs further study in any subsequent data collection for ongoing evaluation.

The difference in wages (lower than wages for ECEs) for special needs assistants is reflected in the responses from those who participated in the program staff/educator survey regarding intention to continue to work in the early childhood system. Among all respondents, special needs assistants were more likely to report that they intended to leave the field in less than five years.

Early Learning Curriculum Framework

One of the key features of the Preschool Excellence Initiative announcement included the intention to provide an early learning “curriculum framework to support the work of educators”. (Preschool Excellence Initiative, 2010, p.3) As soon as the Initiative was launched, the DEECD began to explore options to create an early learning curriculum framework based on current evidence about early learning and child development. The new curriculum framework was to:

- Focus on children between the ages of infancy to four years old (pre-kindergarten)
- Take a social pedagogical approach – to promote children’s overall well-being and capacity for learning rather than a focus on preparing children for school
- Represent the cultures of PEI, including English, French, Aboriginal, and newcomers from a variety of countries



- Include an approach to assessment and evaluation
- Provide a natural progression to the PEI integrated kindergarten curriculum

An advisory committee was established, a consultant was contracted, and during the first year of the Initiative's implementation (2010 / 2011) directors of EYCs met with both the consultant and members of the advisory committee on multiple occasions to explore and provide feedback on the structure and content of the new early learning curriculum framework.

Focus groups conducted during the baseline evaluation study found that educators and parents alike were looking forward to the introduction of the new early learning curriculum framework, and considered the framework to be key to quality improvement. In case study data, focus groups, and review of secondary data the topic of curriculum was considered to be a major element of the sustainability of the new early years system.

Given that the pilot phase for the new early learning framework is underway during 2011 / 2012, further documentation regarding the implementation of the framework, its relevance, and approaches to documentation and assessment will need to be part of ongoing data collection for future evaluation.

Quality Measurement

Prior to the introduction of the Preschool Excellence Initiative, program consultation and support was available to licensed early childhood programs through the DEECD's Bridges Team. Program consultants also worked with centre directors in providing quality measurement assessment using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale – (Revised version). Involvement with program consultants was optional for centre directors; even so, participation rates were very high.

One of the conditions of designation as an EYC is to work with program consultants from the Bridges Team for ongoing program support and quality assessment. In Fall 2010, staff at DEECD consulted with Dr. Michal Perlman from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto) regarding the range of quality assessment tools for early childhood settings, the uses and considerations for each tool, and options for using the data collected. A final decision as to the most appropriate tool had not been made prior to the launch of the baseline evaluation study.

For the baseline evaluation study, researchers recommended that the City of Toronto Children's Services Operating Criteria (TCSOC) be used to develop a baseline measure of quality in both EYCs and in privately operated centres. The Evaluation's Management Team supported this recommendation. The TCSOC are used in all municipally operated child care centres in Toronto. Content domains in the TCSOC include measures for the following program components:

- Structure of the day (daily schedule and program plan/activities documented)
- Activities and experience planned (offered to the children)
- Physical environment
- Play equipment, toys and materials
- Learning areas
- Physical needs (equipment needs for eating, toileting/diapering, rest and storage)
- Health and safety

- Interactions

Twenty-five centres (both EYC and private centres) were selected for quality measure site visits.

Centres were selected to achieve stratification according to:

- Urban / rural
- Profit / non-profit
- English / French / Aboriginal
- Smart Start / non Smart Start
- Regional representation: East / Central / West

Staff members of the DEECD Bridges Team were trained (2 day session) on the use of the TCSOC and achieved inter-rater reliability with the trainer. Students in the Holland College Early Childhood Care and Education program were also trained, but did not achieve inter-rater reliability. Students accompanied the Bridges Team consultants in site-visits, but their scores were not used in the final ratings.

The first six items in the TCSOC focus on structural elements of quality. These are aspects of the program that can be quantified, e.g., play equipment, toys, etc. The final measure – Interactions – focuses on process elements of quality, i.e., how program staff interact with children, how they engage children in activities, etc. The assessment results obtained through the site visits indicated that according to the measures outlined in the TCSOC there are several areas regarding structural elements of quality that need improvement. It is important to note that the Toronto Operating Criteria were not adjusted to reflect the regulatory environment in centres in PEI, since many of the items were embedded in the regulations to Ontario's Day Nurseries Act, e.g., the need to have a schedule of activities posted on the wall. Centres in PEI received their lowest scores in these types of measures (e.g., schedules, planning, and materials in learning environments). Even so, the need for greater attention to planning and scheduling for children's activities was also highlighted as a result of the five case studies conducted. Measures were somewhat stronger for structure of physical environment, meeting physical needs of children, and health and safety, but it was noted that there was still room for significant improvement.

The strongest area of quality measurement was in interactions with children. This area evaluates how the staff engage with children including supervision, supporting learning, promoting independence, self-esteem and communication skills, behavior guidance, level of responsiveness, and intervention to extend children's learning. Research indicates that these types of interactions are the most important characteristics of quality, having the strongest impact on outcomes for children. This was the area of greatest strength with a score that exceeded the benchmark. As well, this aspect of quality was observed in the case studies, and was mentioned by parents in focus groups.



SUSTAINABILITY

As a province, we can do a great deal more to prepare young Islanders for a lifetime of education. The first step in the process was the introduction of kindergarten as a full-day program in the public school system. The next logical step in the plan to improve education is a system that provides support to young Island children from birth to age four, their parents and their educators. The Preschool Excellence Initiative plan will achieve that goal by helping to build an accessible, sustainable and quality-driven system – which recognizes the need for parental choice.

Securing the Future for Our Children: Preschool Excellence Initiative, 2010, p.2

The Early Years Report notes:

Sustainability has been defined as “a means of configuring ... human activity so that society, its members and its economies are able to meet their needs and express their greatest potential in the present, while preserving, planning and acting for the ability to maintain these ideas in the very long term.”¹⁵ To that end, the recommendations in this report are intended to sustain the early childhood sector and the people who believe in and have devoted their lives to children and families, while at the same time moving the sector forward to reflect the lessons learned in the past number of years, and to translate “what we know” into “what we do”.

Flanagan, 2010, p.87

Survey data collected for the baseline evaluation study found that among respondents to the Director/Owner Surveys, those in EYCs found that the two most significant impacts of the Preschool Excellence Initiative were related to wage increases and increased morale among early childhood program staff. Case study interviews found the same enthusiastic response to the introduction of the new Initiative, along with lingering questions:

- *[The new salary level allowed me] “to start on a new level, and also to be able to feel comfortable about doing it [working as an ECE], because you could afford to do it...” (ECE)*
- *“...the medical benefits coming in bring us security... it’s not the ‘what if’ any more...you have that coverage to cover those ‘what ifs’.” (ECE)*
- *“The transition was...still is, still coming... we have a full year under our belt, so now starting September there will be things that we could anticipate. And I think that could make a big difference.” (ECE)*
- *“We are definitely not on the best page yet, but [we’re] moving forward.”(Director).*
- *“You have a lot of new staff coming in so... some of the challenges have been having not only new children, new families, new age groups, but also having people who are new to the field.”(ECE)*
- *“I was just really excited with all the change that it was coming to the sector. Financially, I was able to come back and still be able to support my family.”(Director)*

¹⁵ <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/sustainability>

STABILITY OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE

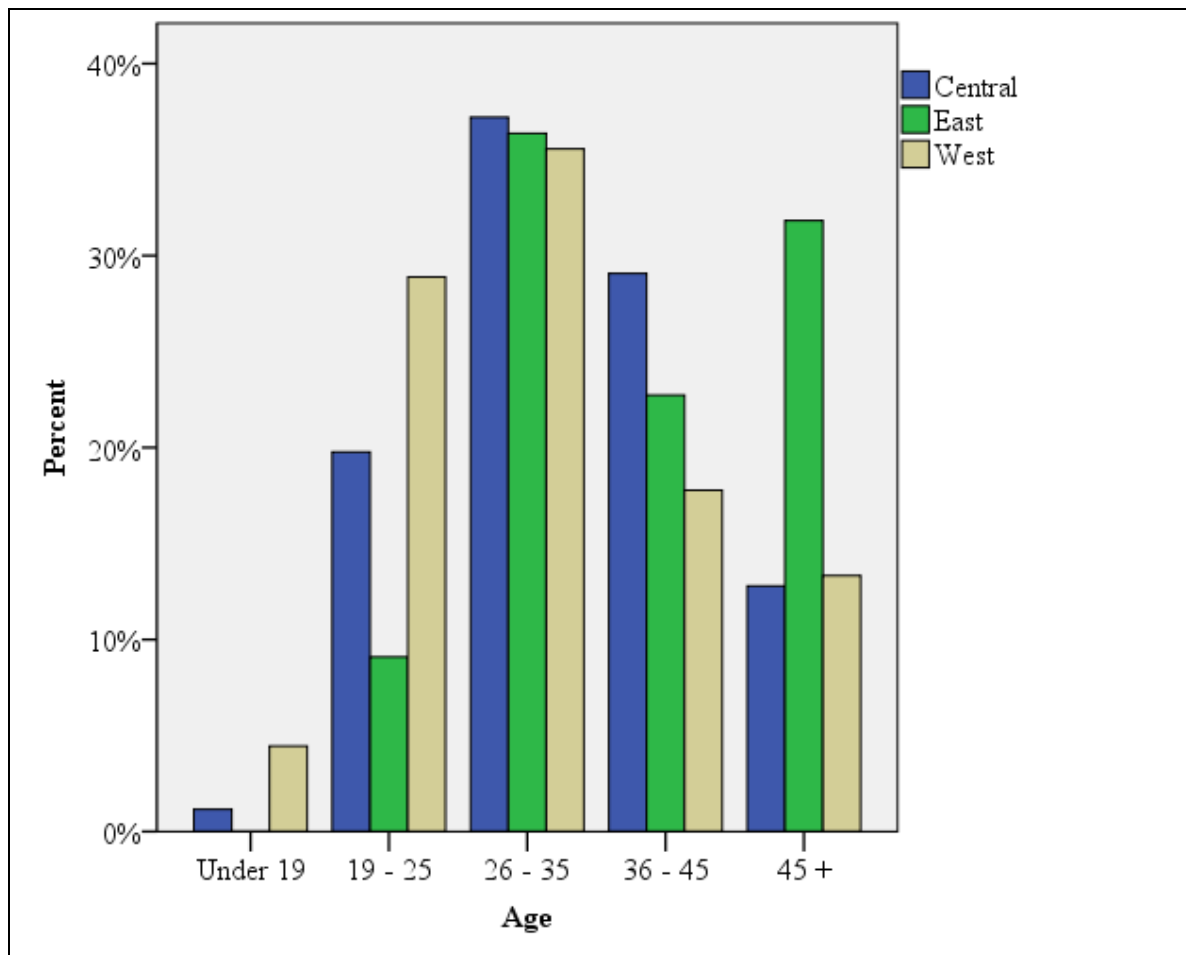
Ontario's 2007 Expert Panel on Human Resources notes "the single most critical factor affecting the quality of early learning and care programs is the knowledge, skills, and stability of the early childhood workforce." (Government of Ontario, 2007)

Potential Retirements

The baseline evaluation study examined the age range of those working as program staff in both EYCs and private centres, as well as intention to continue employment in the early childhood field. Survey data from the Educator/Program Staff survey indicate that based on responses, there is considerable stability in the early childhood workforce for at least the next 5-10 years.

Figure 3 shows that the majority of respondents to the Educator/Program Staff survey are in the 26-35 year old age range, and therefore not in the typical age group considering retirement:

Figure 3: Age distribution, by region, of respondents to Educator/Program Staff Survey:

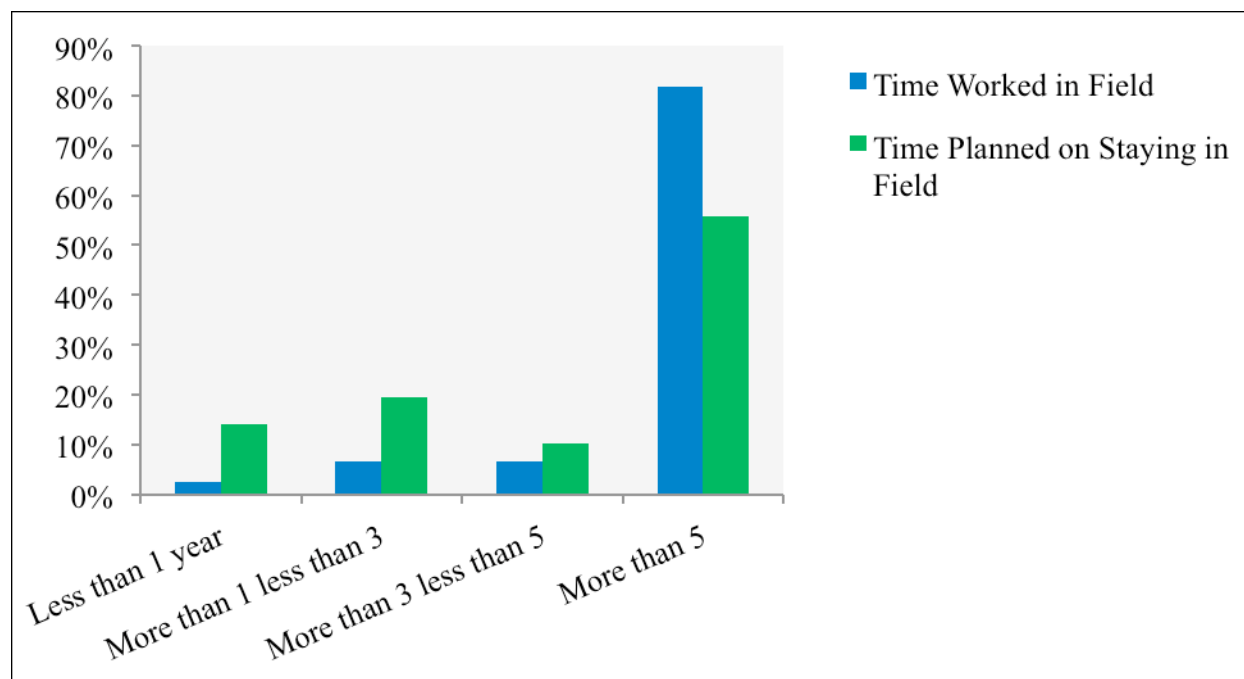


Since only a small portion of directors were among the Educator/Program Staff Survey respondents (most directors were involved in the Director/Owner Survey) it is not possible to estimate the age range and/or potential retirements among those currently working in director positions.

Future Employment Plans

Likewise, Figure 4 demonstrates that among respondents to the Educator/Program Staff Survey there is a high percentage who have more than five years of experience in the early childhood field, and who intend to stay in their current position for the next five years:

Figure 4: Time Worked in Early Childhood Field and Time Planned on Staying in Field – Respondents to Educator/Program Staff Survey



Given that the majority of directors of both EYCs and private centres responded to the Director/Owner Survey, long term (five years or more) employment plans for directors were not captured in the baseline evaluation study. This information will be important to coordinate leadership training and succession planning, as those in director positions play a key role in pedagogical leadership and administration.

As noted previously, there is consensus in the literature to support the need for specific post-secondary Early Childhood Education credentials for those working with young children. Survey data from the baseline evaluation study and administrative data from the DEECD demonstrate that a significant percentage of those working as program staff in early childhood programs in PEI have not yet earned the required credentials. Participants in focus groups agreed that the qualifications of the staff in early childhood centres were key to the delivery of quality early learning programs.

However, the baseline evaluation study has demonstrated that a large number of individuals began to work toward such credentials in Fall 2010, with another large cohort beginning their courses of study in

Fall 2011. As well, survey data gathered from respondents to the Educator/Program Staff Survey indicated that 68% of respondents had aspirations for further study in ECE certificate, diploma, and/or degree programs.

Wages and Benefits

The 2000 *You Bet I Care! Study* in Canada highlighted the importance of human resource challenges in the early childhood sector, and documented the relationship between poor wages, working conditions, and staff turnover to measures of quality in ECEC programs. (Doherty, G.;Lero, D.;Goelman, H.; LaGrange, A.; & Tougas, J., 2000)

As previously noted, data from both the Director/Owner Survey and the Educator/Program Staff Survey indicate that the introduction of a wage grid for educators working in Early Years Centres appears to have been the most significant early impact among survey respondents to the launch of the Preschool Excellence Initiative, followed by staff morale. Figures 5 and 6 illustrate survey respondents’ reports on perceptions of the most noticeable impacts of the Preschool Excellence Initiative (Directors/Owners: Figure 5; Educators/Program Staff: Figure 6).

Figure 5: Responses from Director/Owner Survey on Impact of Preschool Excellence Initiative, by type of centre

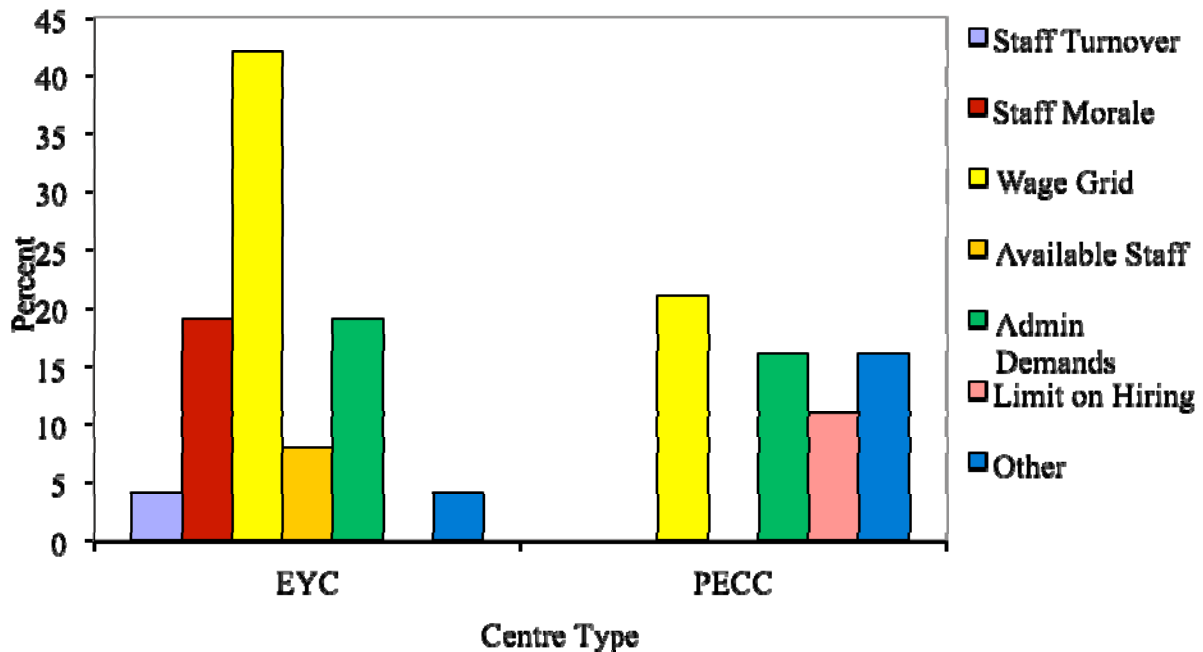


Figure 6: Combined Responses from Educators/Program Staff on Impact of Preschool Excellence Initiative

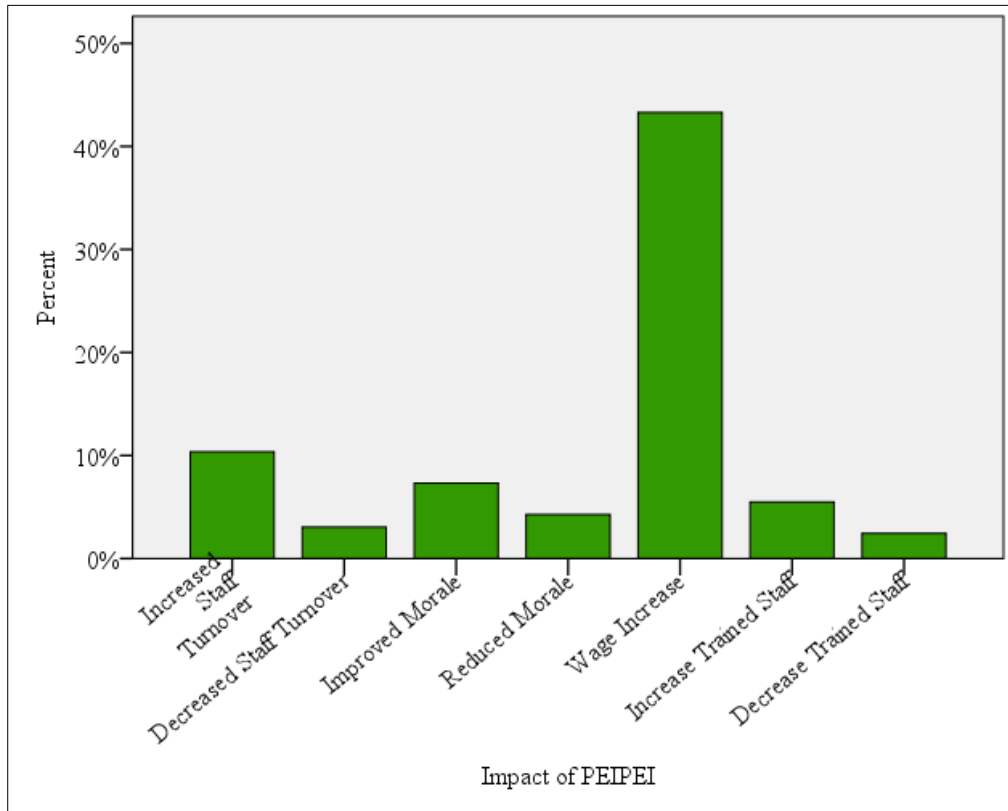
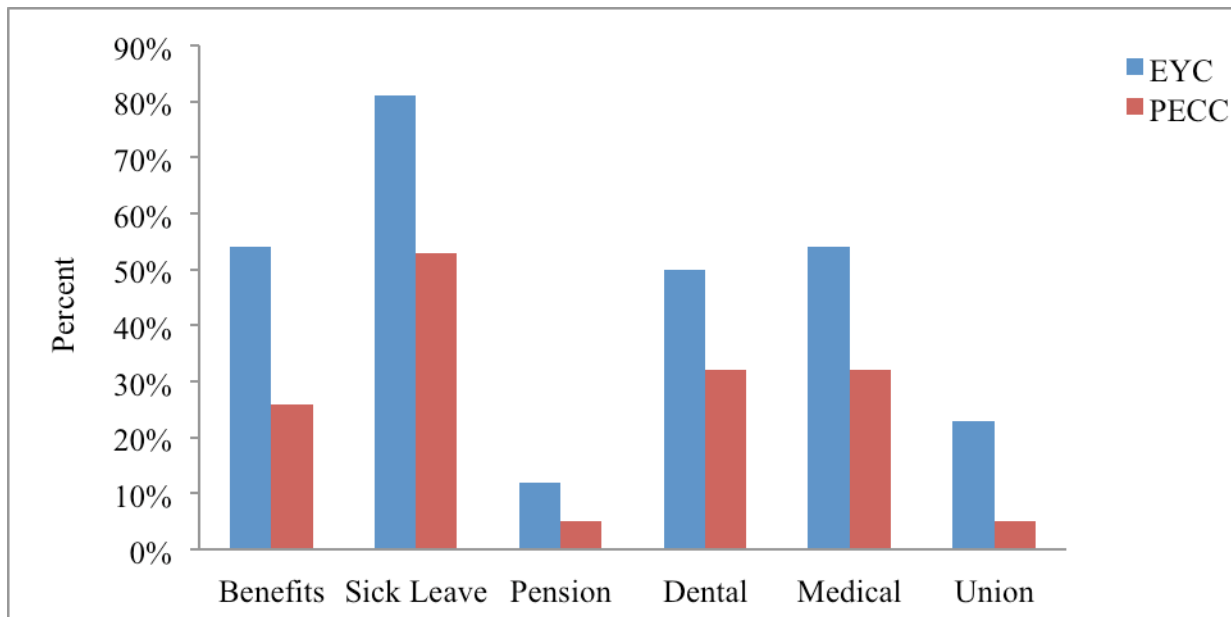


Figure 7 describes the range of benefits available in EYCs and private centres as reported by respondents to the Director/Owner Survey 2011:



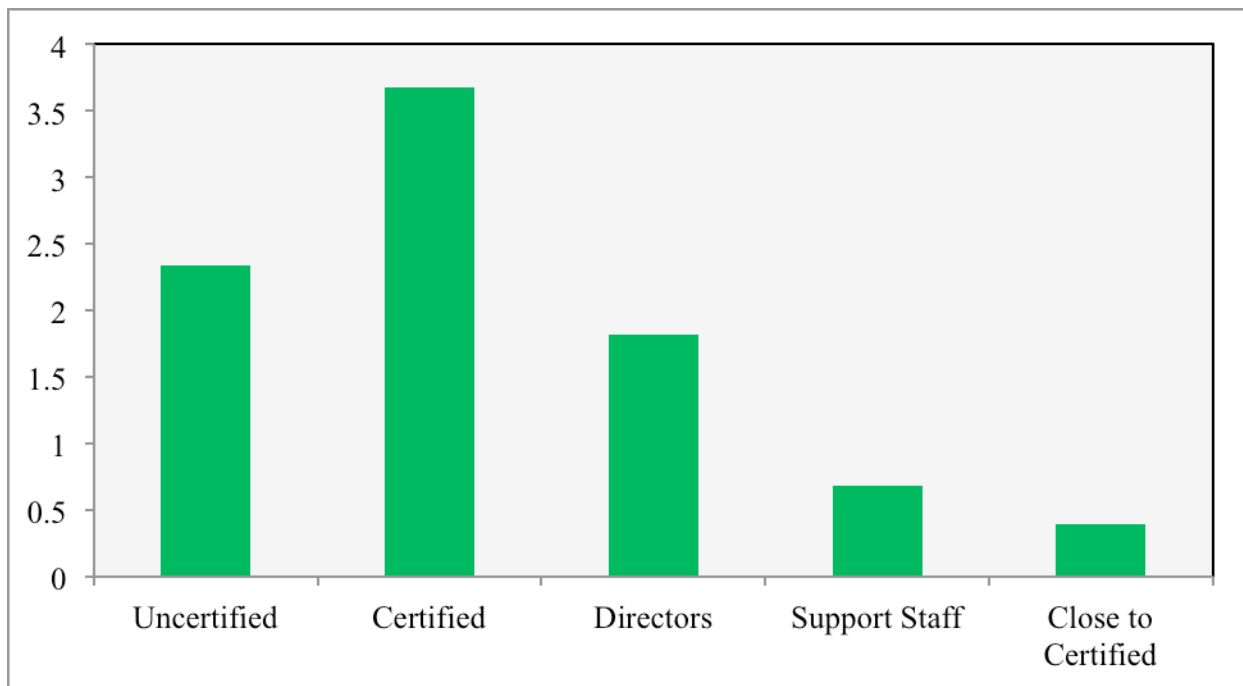
FUNDING

The Preschool Excellence Initiative provided the Island’s largest ever increase in investment in early learning for children from birth to age four. Described as a “massive step forward in the education of our children” (Securing the Future for our Children, 2010, p.2), the Initiative provided for a 63% increase in funding in just a one-year period.

The success of the Initiative is predicated on a consistent and predictable funding formula. The goals of the Initiative rely on incrementally increased funding – both to address the ongoing increased costs to operating Early Years Centres, and to factor increased wage costs into the funding formula to respond to the growing professionalism of early childhood educators.

Based on a review of administrative data, the baseline evaluation study has examined the distribution of funding toward wages and benefits, based on the current (2010/2011) level of qualifications of those working in EYCs. Figure 8 describes the proportion of current funding to each group:

Figure 8: Distribution of funds related to staff qualifications



As the Preschool Excellence Initiative achieves success in increasing the number of educators with relevant post-secondary education credentials in Early Childhood Education, the costs associated with wages and benefits will increase accordingly. It will be important for the DEECD to monitor staff qualifications and graduation rates in order to prepare accurate financial forecasts.

3. NEXT STEPS

NATIONAL RECOGNITION

In November 2011, Early Years Study 3 report recognized the important steps that the Preschool Excellence Initiative has taken with regard to the development of an early years system for Prince Edward Island. The study's authors introduced the Early Childhood Education Index 2011 with fifteen benchmarks reflecting a common set of core standards for the delivery of quality programming. (McCain, Mustard, McCuaig, 2011) The Early Years Index examines governance, funding, access, the learning environment, and accountability. According to the benchmarks established in the above five categories, Prince Edward Island ranked second in Canada – only one half point away from the first ranked jurisdiction, Quebec. Prince Edward Island was one of only three provinces (Quebec, PEI, Manitoba) considered to have a passing grade.

DATA COLLECTION

The baseline evaluation study conducted by Holland College and the University of Prince Edward Island has provided useful baseline data from which to conduct further evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of the Preschool Excellence Initiative. An examination and analysis of this data suggest further data collection priorities in order to allow for comprehensive evaluation and tracking of indicators related to the goals of the Initiative.

Suggested next steps related to data collection include:

1. Tasking the Early Years Advisory Committee with the development of a Data Strategy for the Early Years System, as recommended in the Early Years Report
2. Establishing baseline data for directors of both Early Years Centres and privately operated centres, including education, age range, and plans for retirement
3. Monitoring the impact of the introduction of the new Early Years Framework
4. Developing a three year forecasting model for wage / benefit cost implications of growth of numbers of qualified early childhood educators
5. Finalizing selection of a validated quality measurement tool in order to monitor quality improvements, and providing for adequate training and inter-rater reliability testing for those administering the assessment tool
6. Monitoring the effectiveness of newly established parent advisory committees
7. Continue to survey parents of young children to understand their awareness, preferences and practices regarding early childhood education
8. Document / describe current practices regarding professional development opportunities in order to measure indicators of change
9. Assessing the impact on the Initiative of the impact of new legislation/regulations for the early years system in PEI, including any new provisions for qualifications (and resulting wage implications) for special needs assistants
10. Planning for subsequent data collection and evaluation processes

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