



Parents' Views About the Accessibility of Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta

Report 3 on the *Alberta Parent Survey on Early Learning and Child Care*

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Federal and provincial governments have embarked on a major initiative to build systems of early learning and child care (ELCC) across Canada that meet high standards for quality, affordability, accessibility, inclusion, and flexibility. As part of this initiative, the Alberta government committed to creating 68,700 new ELCC spaces by 2025/2026. The success of this initiative will depend in part on the extent to which changes to ELCC align with the views and preferences of parents.

To assist in understanding parents' views and preferences, a survey was conducted with over 1400 parents in Alberta who had children younger than six years of age. Parents responded to a wide range of questions about ELCC. The present report, one in a series of reports based on the survey, is focused on accessibility. Parents in Alberta made decisions about their current child care arrangements based on accessibility-related factors, experienced a range of accessibility-related difficulties and consequences, and had concerns about the accessibility of ELCC in their communities.

We recommend that the Alberta provincial government: (1) regularly and systematically gather information to understand parents' views and preferences regarding the location of ELCC; (2) develop a sustainable process for understanding and responding to the supply and demand for ELCC spaces; and (3) create a public strategy for improving ELCC space creation and allocation.



Parents' Views About the Accessibility of Early Learning and Child Care in Alberta

In 2017, federal, provincial, and territorial ministers in Canada agreed “to work toward a shared long term vision where all children can experience the enriching environment of quality early learning and child care that supports children’s development to reach their full potential.”¹ The ministers recognized that the “development of early learning and child care systems is one of the best investments that governments can make to strengthen the social and economic fabric of our country,” as well as the importance of early learning and child care (ELCC) for supporting the development of children, families, and communities.¹ The ministers agreed on the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework for building ELCC systems across the country that are based on five principles: quality, affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, and flexibility. This framework was followed by a substantial, five-year financial commitment to this vision² and by a series of bilateral agreements between the federal government and individual provinces and territories under the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiative.³ Under the Canada-Alberta agreement⁴ and the *Alberta Cost Control and For-Profit Expansion Plan*,⁵ Alberta will work toward creating 68,700 non-profit and private, for-profit ELCC spaces in the province by 2025/2026.⁶

The present report is about one of the five principles on which the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework is built: accessibility. Specifically, this report summarizes the views and preferences of Alberta parents and guardians on the accessibility of ELCC in Alberta. There are different ways to define accessibility. Although some definitions focus on the availability and location of ELCC spaces, others suggest the definition should take affordability and inclusivity into account (e.g., whether the features of ELCC environments are conducive and welcoming to all children, such as those with disabilities or ethnic-minority backgrounds).⁷ For the present report, accessibility is defined as the availability and location of ELCC spaces. Parents’ views on affordability is the topic of a previous report,⁸ and inclusivity will be considered in a future report.

The availability and location of ELCC are two dominant topics in the research literature and in the public conversation about ELCC in Alberta and across the country. Canadian parents and guardians face difficulty in accessing ELCC spaces due to poor coverage rates and supply

¹ Government of Canada, 2017

² Government of Canada, 2021a

³ Government of Canada, 2023

⁴ Government of Canada, 2021b

⁵ Government of Alberta, 2023

⁶ Government of Alberta, 2024

⁷ Beach, 2020; Thomson et al., 2020

⁸ Bisanz et al., 2023



issues.⁹ A 2023 report indicates that approximately 18% of children not in care at the time of the survey were not using ELCC due to a shortage of places or being on a waitlist.¹⁰ Another 2023 study indicates that 61% of children in Alberta, compared to 48% of children in Canada, live in a child care desert (defined as geographic areas with at least three children not yet in kindergarten for every full-time licensed child care space).¹¹ Although the calculation of child care deserts has limitations, it provides a valuable approximation of where gaps may exist in the availability and location of ELCC spaces.¹²

The present report outlines the views and preferences of Alberta parents and guardians on the location of ELCC and the ease or difficulty with which they can find a space in ELCC. The survey results described below are intended to provide information about ELCC accessibility as the province of Alberta responds to the policy window opened by the Canada-Alberta agreement. As policymakers implement the agreement, the views and preferences of Alberta parents and guardians could inform decisions regarding critical topics, such as where and how to create new ELCC spaces in Alberta.

Method

The Alberta Parent Survey on ELCC includes data from 1479 respondents who were parents or guardians (referred to throughout as “parents”) at least 18 years of age in Alberta. The survey was commissioned by the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELC)¹³ and the Muttart Foundation,¹⁴ and developed in collaboration with the Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families at the University of Alberta.¹⁵ Advanis,¹⁶ an independent market and social research firm, recruited parents and collected data. Participants were parents of children 0 through 5 years of age who lived with them at least 50% of the time. Parents were randomly selected and invited to participate from a panel of approximately 110,000 Albertans. The panel was maintained by Advanis and consisted of randomly recruited Albertans. Data were collected from May 30 through July 11, 2022. The survey comprised a range of questions about parents’ views and preferences on ELCC. For this report, we focus on survey answers related to accessibility.

For the purposes of comparison, respondents were categorized into one of four locations: the City of Edmonton; the City of Calgary; mid-sized and metropolitan municipalities; and rural areas. Mid-sized and metropolitan municipalities include eight municipalities that are

⁹ Japel & Friendly, 2018

¹⁰ Statistics Canada, 2023

¹¹ Macdonald & Friendly, 2023

¹² Buschmann & Partridge, 2019

¹³ <https://www.ecelc.ca/>

¹⁴ <https://muttart.org/>

¹⁵ <https://www.ualberta.ca/community-university-partnership/index.html>

¹⁶ <https://advanis.net/>



defined as cities or service areas within the metropolitan regions of Edmonton and Calgary¹⁷ and five municipalities or service areas that lie outside the metropolitan regions of Edmonton or Calgary with populations greater than 60,000.¹⁸ Rural areas include all areas not in the other three categories.

Survey data were weighted to align with population proportions in the 2021 Canadian census¹⁹ based on annual household income before tax, location in Alberta, and number of parents in the family (one or two). Throughout the report, percentages are based on weighted data. In describing findings from the survey, we sought to identify response patterns related to location in Alberta, household income, number of parents in the family, and whether respondents reported receiving child care subsidies.²⁰ Nonparametric statistical tests were used to guide inferences. We omitted reference to these demographic variables when sample sizes were too small to make inferences with reasonable confidence.

Two limitations should be noted. First, the survey was cross-sectional, so changes over time could not be tracked. Second, although our data were weighted to align with population proportions in the 2021 Canadian census, weighting cannot entirely compensate for inadequate numbers in some categories. For example, a greater number of responses by parents with very low incomes would be particularly helpful for understanding the views and preferences of parents who are likely experiencing poverty. The lowest category of household income in the survey was less than \$25,000 per year. The number of parents in the survey who fell into that category aligns with what would be expected based on population data, yet the number is too small to allow for inferences, with reasonable confidence, about the views and preferences of parents who are in this income category, and especially so when income level is considered in combination with other variables. Different approaches (e.g., surveys or qualitative studies with purposive sampling targeted at specific groups) are needed to address the problem of insufficient data from parents in the lowest category of household income.

¹⁷ Airdrie, Beaumont, Chestermere, Fort Saskatchewan, Leduc, Sherwood Park and Strathcona County, Spruce Grove, and St. Albert

¹⁸ Fort McMurray and Wood Buffalo, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, and Red Deer

¹⁹ Statistics Canada, 2021

²⁰ In Alberta at the time of data collection, full subsidies (\$266/month) were available for children in licensed, full-time care for families with incomes less than \$120,000 per year. Partial subsidies, from \$106 to \$253/month, were available for children in families with incomes from \$120,000 to \$180,000 per year. Children attending licensed, part-time preschools were subsidized at a rate of \$125/month, regardless of household income.



Findings

Survey questions were designed to measure two aspects of accessibility: the availability and location of ELCC. These questions were asked in different ways. For example, when asking about parents' top three reasons for choosing their current child care arrangement, parents could select from a variety of response options, two of which ("only option available" and "limited availability") concerned space availability. As another example, when asking about parents' top three reasons for not using child care for at least one child, parents could select from a variety of response options, one of which ("shortage of places or waiting list") concerned space availability. In each section below, we include in parentheses an italicized list of response options that were used to identify accessibility-related responses.

Is accessibility important to parents in selecting child care arrangements?

Parents were asked to rank the three most important factors they would consider if they were able to access any type of child care arrangement. In the survey, *child care arrangement* referred to any type of regular care provided by someone other than the child's parent or guardian, not including occasional babysitting or time spent in school.

Accessibility-related factors (*the location of the arrangement and/or having a space available as soon as their child needed it*) were selected by most parents (56%) as being among their top three most important factors.

- More parents in higher income groups selected accessibility-related factors than those in lower income groups. Accessibility-related factors were selected by 62% of parents with annual household incomes of \$120,000 or greater; 54% of parents with annual household incomes of between \$75,000 and \$119,999; and 49% of parents with annual household incomes less than \$75,000.
- More parents in Edmonton (64%), Calgary (63%), and mid-sized and metropolitan municipalities (54%) selected accessibility-related factors than those in rural areas (41%).
- More parents with subsidies (70%) selected accessibility-related factors than those without subsidies (60%).
- Percentages did not vary based on the number of parents in the family.

Nearly half (48%) of parents identified the location of the arrangement as one of their top three most important factors.

- More parents in higher income groups selected location than those in lower income groups. Location was selected by 55% of parents with annual household incomes of \$120,000 or greater; 44% of parents with annual household incomes between \$75,000 and \$119,999; and 41% of parents with annual household incomes under \$75,000.



- More parents in Edmonton (56%) and Calgary (55%) selected location than those in mid-sized and metropolitan municipalities (43%) and rural areas (35%).
- More parents with subsidies (61%) selected location than those without subsidies (52%).
- Percentages did not vary based on the number of parents in the family.

Approximately one in seven (15%) parents indicated that having a space available as soon as their child needed it was one of their top three most important factors. Percentages did not vary based on income, location in Alberta, number of parents in the family, or subsidy status.

Did accessibility inform parental decision-making regarding their current child care arrangements?

Parents were asked to rank the top three reasons why they chose their current child care arrangement. Most parents (72%) selected an accessibility-related factor (*location, only option available, and/or limited availability due to COVID-19*) as at least one of their top three reasons for choosing their current child care arrangement.

- Percentages varied by location in Alberta: 77% of parents in Calgary selected accessibility-related factors compared to 74% in rural areas, 72% in Edmonton, and 63% in mid-sized and metropolitan municipalities.
- More parents with subsidies (78%) selected accessibility-related factors than those without subsidies (69%).
- Percentages did not vary based on household income or number of parents in the family.

Most parents (63%) identified the location of the arrangement as one of their top three reasons for choosing their current child care arrangement.

- Parents in higher income groups were more likely to select location than those in lower income groups. Location was selected by 66% of parents with annual incomes of \$120,000 or greater; 60% of parents with annual household incomes between \$75,000 and \$119,999; and 59% of parents with annual household incomes less than \$75,000.
- Percentages varied by location in Alberta: 69% of parents in Calgary selected location compared to 65% in Edmonton, 58% in rural areas, and 55% in mid-sized and metropolitan municipalities.
- Parents with subsidies (73%) were more likely to select location than those without subsidies (56%).
- Percentages did not vary based on number of parents in the family.

Approximately one in seven parents (15%) identified that one of their top three reasons for choosing their current child care arrangement was that it was the only option available.



- Percentages varied by location in Alberta: 23% of parents from rural areas selected “only option available” compared to 15% in mid-sized and metropolitan municipalities, 13% in Calgary, and 10% in Edmonton.
- Parents without subsidies (17%) were more likely to select “only option available” than those with subsidies (12%).
- Percentages did not vary based on household income or number of parents in the family.

A small group of parents (6%) identified limited availability due to the COVID-19 pandemic as one of their top three reasons for choosing their current child care arrangement.

- Parents without subsidies (7%) were more likely to select “limited availability due to COVID-19” than those with subsidies (4%).
- Percentages did not vary based on household income, location in Alberta, and number of parents in the family.

Do parents experience accessibility-related difficulties in finding child care? If so, what are the consequences?

Parents were asked whether they experienced accessibility-related difficulties in finding child care in the past three months (*no spots available, could not find child care that accommodated more than one of their children, and/or had challenges finding a spot due to COVID-19*). If parents cited at least one accessibility-related difficulty, they were asked what consequences they experienced.

Over one-quarter (26%) of all parents reported difficulty finding child care arrangements in the past three months. Of the parents who had difficulties, 28% indicated that there were no spots available, 19% indicated that they could not find child care that accommodated more than one of their children, and 17% indicated challenges finding a spot due to COVID-19. In total, 51% of the parents who had difficulties reported at least one accessibility-related difficulty.

Parents who reported an accessibility-related difficulty in finding child care experienced one or more consequences, including but not limited to:

- working fewer hours than they would have otherwise (51%),
- postponing or discontinuing work (36%),
- paying more for child care than they wanted (34%),
- using multiple or temporary child care arrangements (34%),
- giving up looking for child care (32%),
- deciding to work from home (29%), and
- deciding to split care with a spouse, relative, or partner (24%).

Parents who were not currently using a child care arrangement for at least one of their children were asked about their top three reasons for not using child care. Of these parents,



13% selected an accessibility-related difficulty as one of their top three reasons for not using child care for at least one of their children. Among these parents, percentages did not vary based on income, location in Alberta, number of parents in the family, and subsidy status.

Do Alberta parents have accessibility-related concerns in their local community, neighbourhood, or area?

Parents were asked whether they had concerns about ELCC in their community and, if so, what their concerns were. About one-third of parents (35%) indicated that they had concerns about ELCC in their community.

Just over one-fifth of parents (22%) indicated that they had an accessibility-related concern (*not enough spots available and/or location of care not convenient*).

- Percentages varied by location in Alberta: 28% of parents from rural areas had accessibility concerns compared to 24% in mid-sized and metropolitan municipalities, 21% in Calgary, and 16% in Edmonton.
- Parents without subsidies (29%) were more likely to have accessibility concerns than those with subsidies (21%).
- Parent responses did not vary based on income or number of parents in the family.

Nearly one-fifth of parents (19%) were concerned that there were not enough spaces available.

- Percentages varied by location in Alberta: 26% of parents in rural areas had space availability concerns compared to 20% in mid-sized and metropolitan municipalities, 18% in Calgary, and 11% in Edmonton.
- Parents without subsidies (25%) were more likely to have space availability concerns than those with subsidies (17%).
- Percentages did not vary based on income or number of parents in the family.

A small number of parents (5%) indicated that they had concerns about the convenience of the location of child care in their community. Percentages did not vary based on income, location in Alberta, number of parents in the family, and subsidy status.



Discussion and Recommendations

These findings regarding the views and preferences of Alberta parents on the accessibility of ELCC suggest two major implications for ELCC in the province.

First, the accessibility of ELCC, and especially location, matters to parents.

1. Most parents indicated that accessibility-related factors would be top of mind if they could select any child care arrangement. Nearly half selected location as a top-three factor if they were able to access any type of child care arrangement. Parents with higher incomes, in urban areas, and receiving subsidies were more likely to select location than parents with lower incomes, in rural areas, and without subsidies.
2. Most parents indicated that accessibility-related factors were among the top considerations when selecting their current child care arrangement. Nearly three-quarters of parents selected location as a top-three factor influencing their selection. Parents with higher incomes, in urban areas, and receiving subsidies were more likely to select location than those with lower incomes, in rural areas, and who do not receive subsidies.
3. A substantial number of parents had concerns about the accessibility of ELCC in their community, with those in rural areas and those without subsidies being more likely to report concerns. Parents, especially those in rural areas and those without subsidies, were particularly concerned about space availability in their communities. Interestingly, those with subsidies were more likely to have no concerns, which may suggest that receiving a subsidy plays a positive role in alleviating parents' concerns about ELCC accessibility.

Second, many Alberta parents reported accessibility-related difficulties and consequences. Of the parents who had difficulties finding ELCC in the past three months, most reported an accessibility-related difficulty, and a substantial number experienced consequences related to work and child care. For instance, over half of these parents worked fewer hours than they would have otherwise and approximately one-third gave up looking for child care altogether.



Recommendations

The findings outlined in the report have led the authors to consider the following recommendations for advancing the accessibility of ELCC in Alberta.

1. The provincial government should regularly and systematically gather information to understand parents' views and preferences regarding the location of ELCC.

Parents indicated that the location of ELCC matters to them. However, what makes a location convenient likely varies considerably among families. For instance, while some families might prefer that ELCC arrangements are located close to home, others might prefer that ELCC arrangements be located close to their workplace. As a result, parents should be asked about what contributes to an ideal ELCC location. For instance, parents should be asked about where they would like ELCC to be located, how far they are willing to travel to get to ELCC, and the methods of transportation they would prefer to use.

An exploration of parents' views and preferences regarding the location of ELCC and other accessibility-related topics could be supported by an ongoing process of systematically and comprehensively gathering parent perspectives using quantitative (e.g., survey) and qualitative (e.g., focus groups) methods. An example of the former is a brief survey of parents conducted in early 2024 by the Government of Alberta, which included a few questions about accessibility.²¹ Establishing an evidence-based process for regularly capturing parent views and preferences regarding the accessibility of ELCC is a critical step in reaching the objectives outlined in the Canada-Alberta agreement. A better understanding of where parents would like ELCC to be located could support planning for space creation. Additionally, improving the availability and convenience of ELCC locations may promote greater parental use of ELCC and thereby enable more parents to pursue their educational and career objectives.²²

2. The provincial government should develop a sustainable process for understanding and responding to the supply of and demand for ELCC spaces.

Although Alberta has committed to increasing the number of ELCC spaces available to families, there is no clearly articulated or transparent process for the creation and allocation of these spaces. A key consideration in the creation and allocation of new ELCC spaces is balancing supply (how many spaces are available and where) and demand (how many families want a space in ELCC). However, balancing supply and demand is not only a matter of counting licensed spaces and the number of children who need an ELCC space; Alberta has also committed to ensuring that ELCC is high quality, inclusive (e.g., responsive to various cultural needs and differing abilities), and available at an affordable cost. Moreover,

²¹ Government of Alberta, 2024

²² Choi, 2023; Government of Canada, 2021a; Morrissey, 2017



new spaces should be allocated in an equitable manner to ensure that they are available to all families who need ELCC.

Creating and allocating new ELCC spaces also requires the collection and use of a variety of sources of information for planning and decision-making. The provincial government should develop a sustainable process for understanding and responding to the many factors that contribute to supply and demand. To do so, the provincial government should regularly collect and use data from a variety of methods simultaneously, including coverage rates, waitlists, enrollments, mapping exercises, participation rates, and workforce dynamics,²³ as well as the perspectives of parents, ELCC providers, and municipalities.

3. The provincial government should create a public strategy for improving ELCC space creation and allocation.

In Alberta, the provincial government is attempting to transform the delivery of ELCC services from what is primarily a market-based and parent-funded approach to a system that is publicly funded. This task is considerable, and the design of the system is likely to evolve over several years. To facilitate the creation of an accessible ELCC system for families in Alberta, the province needs a strategy for creating and allocating ELCC spaces.

To create and allocate ELCC spaces, the province needs a plan for how spaces will meet community-identified needs and outline how these targets will be met. Plans and targets to improve accessibility could draw upon the insights and recommendations of local experts from community organizations.²⁴ Two examples of elements that could be included in a strategy are highlighted below.

- It has been recommended that the provincial government explore the creation of new ELCC spaces in schools and other publicly owned buildings already funded by the province²⁵ and Alberta municipalities. Although the idea of using schools and other public buildings is not new, there are often barriers that make using these spaces difficult or impossible to use for ELCC. As part of an ELCC strategy, the provincial government could create a “child-care-in-schools policy framework” and an “inventory of public spaces.”²⁵ To do so, the provincial government could work with municipalities, ELCC providers, school boards, government ministries (e.g., Infrastructure and Education), and other provincial bodies to document public spaces that could be used for ELCC, investigate the barriers to using public spaces for ELCC, and collaborate to eliminate those barriers.²⁵
- Local community experts have expressed the view that creating affordable, accessible, and high-quality ELCC spaces is not possible without a well-educated and well-supported workforce. For instance, it is estimated that there are not enough

²³ Buschmann, 2019; Council of the European Union, 2022

²⁴ Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care, 2021; The Muttart Foundation, 2021

²⁵ Beach, 2021



early childhood educators (ECEs) available to make use of many new spaces.²⁶ As part of an ELCC strategy, the provincial government should outline a plan for ensuring that ECE students are supported and incentivized to join the ECE workforce in sufficient numbers and then remain in the workforce.²⁷ The recommendations produced by local organizations such as the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta could be used in drafting a strategy.²⁸

Conclusion

Accessibility matters to parents in making decisions about ELCC, parents face accessibility-related difficulties and consequences, and parents have concerns about the accessibility of ELCC in their communities. The policy window opened by the CWELCC initiative and by the Canada-Alberta agreement presents the province with an important opportunity to strengthen the quality, affordability, accessibility, inclusivity, and flexibility of ELCC in Alberta. Understanding the views and preferences of Alberta parents regarding these five principles is critical for implementing changes to ELCC that can maximize the success of this initiative for Alberta's children, parents, and families.

²⁶ Child Care Now Alberta, 2023

²⁷ The Centre for Family Equity, 2023

²⁸ Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta, n.d.



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