



2025 Toronto Child Care and Early Years Roundtable Engagement Summary

June 2026

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Indigenous partners, City and School Board staff, organizations representing families, educators, and supervisors, unions, experts, and other community stakeholders and partners who participated in the 2025 Child Care and Early Years Roundtable.

A special thank you to Grandmother Dorothy Peters for providing an opening and closing for the Roundtable. Thank you as well to Mayor Olivia Chow for her remarks. In addition to the participants, thank you to Councillor Bravo and her staff for their support in developing and facilitating the Roundtable.

2-Spirited People of the 1 st Nations	Knowing Our Numbers
Apple Jacks	Macaulay
Association of Daycare Operators of Ontario	Malvern Family Resource Centre
Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario	Mothercraft
Building Blocks for Child Care (B2C2)	Network Child Care Services
Centennial College	Not Your Average Daycare (N.Y.A.D.)
Child Care Resource and Research Unit	Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care
Child Development Institute	Parents for Child Care
Conseil Scolaire Catholique MonAvenir	PLASP Child Care Services
Conseil Scolaire Viamonde	Red Apple Daycare
CUPE 4400	South Asian Women's and Immigrant's Services
CUPE National	Surrey Place
ENAGB	The Learning Enrichment Foundation
Heritage Child Care Services	Toronto Community for Better Child Care
Home Child Care Association of Ontario	Toronto District School Board
Humber College	Toronto Catholic District School Board

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Overview of the Child Care and Early Years Roundtable

The 2025 Toronto Child Care and Early Years Roundtable was convened on November 18, 2025, following direction from City Council to bring together experienced partners for dialogue and feedback to inform the implementation of [Toronto's Early Years and Child Care Service Plan 2025-2030](#).

The session focused on information-sharing, community perspectives, and identifying strategies to **three topic areas** outlined in the table below.

TOPIC A	Improving access for families in receipt of the Child Care Fee Subsidy
TOPIC B	Expanding supports for children in their middle years
TOPIC C	Strengthening inclusion for children with disabilities and extra support needs

Participants for the 2025 Child Care and Early Years Roundtable were selected deliberately to ensure **broad and balanced representation across the child care sector**¹. Participants included single-site and multi-site child care operators and home child care providers, representing a mix of:

- for-profit, not-for-profit, and public operators, and
- operators that both opted into and did not opt into the CWELCC program and, operators with and without a fee subsidy service agreement.

To reflect the diversity of children and families served and to support discussion of the Roundtable's priority topics, the City also invited organizations advocating for children in their middle years, children with disabilities and/or extra support needs, and families with varying levels of access to child care. Efforts were made to ensure invitees reflected Toronto's families, including Indigenous, Black, and Francophone organizations. The Roundtable also included advocacy organizations, post-secondary institutions, research organizations, unions, and key child care partners within our system, including the French and English school boards. In total, 36 attendees representing 32 organizations were in attendance.

Further details on the itinerary for the day can be found in the Appendix.

¹ In identifying participants, consideration was given to whether the organization was in attendance at the 2024 CWELCC Roundtable to promote equitable opportunities to participate in the event.

What We Heard

Topic A: Improving Access for Families in Receipt of Fee Subsidy

Current State: Key Challenges and Barriers

Structural, Policy & Administrative Barriers to Access

Access to child care fee subsidies may be limited by several barriers, including space constraints, restrictive policies, and insufficient supports to help families navigate the application and subsidy process.

Funded largely by the province and administered by the City, the Child Care Fee Subsidy offsets the cost of child care for eligible low-income families. However, families receiving or in need of fee subsidy continue to face challenges finding a child care space. Families with fee subsidy do not have access to all CWELCC-enrolled spaces as not all CWELCC-enrolled operators have a fee subsidy service agreement with the City of Toronto. Participants described a shortage of infant, toddler, and preschool spaces, especially in high-inequity neighbourhoods, and limited spaces for Francophone children. Infant spaces were noted as particularly scarce, due to the short duration of care before children age into toddler programs. Before- and after-school care as well as flexible and extended hours of care were similarly limited, often leaving families struggling to find alternative options or to choose to withdraw altogether. Participants indicated that access challenges exacerbate when children transition to school age care due to rising fees. There was consensus that without substantial expansion in the number of spaces available to families in receipt of fee subsidy, policy changes alone cannot address access inequities.

Restrictive eligibility requirements can create a dilemma for parents who need employment to qualify for fee subsidy but cannot secure employment without financial assistance and child care². Participants suggested that the current income threshold does not reflect inflation and the rising cost of living. It was further noted that parents with inconsistent activity such as those in precarious work situations and with variable incomes, are disadvantaged. Even after being approved for fee subsidy, families may not be able to readily access child care due to little to no space availability. Once a fee

² Toronto Children Services has updated Child Care Fee Subsidy eligibility policies to improve access for families with identified needs, in cases where parents and guardians are not employed or enrolled in a program.

subsidy space is secured, absent day policies put families at risk of losing their subsidy entirely as a result of illness, travel, or unstable work schedules, while operators bear financial losses when families exceed the 50-day absence limit and spaces are not reassigned.

Navigation barriers further compound access challenges. Long waitlists, complex documentation requirements, and limited navigation supports mean that many low-income, newcomer, and linguistically diverse families struggle to secure spaces even when eligible. Families may not realize that they must join individual centre waitlists while simultaneously applying for subsidy. A lack of documentation, such as Notice of Assessment, can also delay the process, in addition to inconsistent communication from fee subsidy offices and frequent caseworker turnover.

Family Challenges: Missed Opportunities, Economic Uncertainty & Reduced Wellbeing

Participants emphasized that families who experience higher financial burden often face the greatest barriers to accessing child care, losing out to those with greater economic resources and better positioned to navigate the complex fee subsidy system. Families unable to secure child care may be forced to defer employment, education, or settlement activities, contributing to prolonged economic insecurity. Children may also miss critical early learning and developmental opportunities, particularly in child care deserts within Scarborough, North York, and Etobicoke. Children with extra support needs or disabilities who also require fee subsidy face additional challenges due to a lack of Every Child Belongs funding and appropriate staffing to address complex needs.

Pressures on Operators: Administrative Barriers & Workforce Challenges

Participants reported significant administrative burden related to compliance and reporting requirements and that come with holding a fee subsidy service agreement. Some participants described the Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI) as a source of stress that diverts attention from programming and child development toward compliance responsibilities. Participants also expressed that the AQI is a key example of the administrative work involved in operating child care and may be a deterrent for providers to opt into a fee subsidy service agreement.

Workforce challenges, including low pay, burnout, and a lack of recognition constrain operators' ability to expand spaces or maintain quality. Many providers expressed concern about a component of the CWELCC funding formula that uses an assumed occupancy rate to estimate base fee revenue. Participants noted that reserving spaces for subsidy families, without clear processes or timely placements, may create vacancies and financial uncertainty for operators.

System Siloes and Lack of Coordination

Participants observed disconnects between municipal, provincial, and federal policies, and between child care operators and fee subsidy offices. Communication gaps contribute to inconsistent interpretation of policies, confusion among families, and operational inefficiencies for providers. Participants also noted the lack of shared data on waitlists and community demand or subsidy needs undermine coordinated system planning.

Possible Solutions & Opportunities

Strengthening Cross Sector Collaboration & Funding

Participants highlighted the importance of increased and coordinated funding from all orders of government. Greater collaboration across sectors and fewer operational siloes were seen as critical to aligning policies, improving system responsiveness, and strengthening service delivery. Broader system-level improvements included calls for stronger advocacy to provincial counterparts, data informed decision making, improved transparency and accountability, and enhanced communication from Toronto Children's Services. Learning from successes in other jurisdictions and strengthening system navigation supports to help families were also identified as key opportunities.

Expanding Fee Subsidy Access: Policy and Procedural Changes

Participants emphasized requiring all CWELCC-enrolled operators to hold fee subsidy service agreements with the City of Toronto.

Other recommendations included:

- targeting service agreements toward high-inequity neighbourhoods to direct more spaces to the families who rely on or have higher need for subsidy access
- increasing overall space creation across the sector, including exploring expansion through commercial operators, to promote availability, choice, and flexibility for families
- reserving specific fee subsidy spaces and prioritizing low-income families during enrollment
- incentivizing centres to prioritize vulnerable families.

Several operational and policy changes were also proposed to reduce barriers, including:

- updating absent day policies to distinguish between vacation and sick days

- exploring alternatives to the current 50-day absence limit
- increasing the income eligibility threshold to reflect inflation and rising living costs in the city
- improving support related to system navigation (e.g., interpretation services, assistance with internet access, support managing multiple waitlists, working with partners on broader poverty reduction initiatives, better supports for those who are at risk of losing subsidy)
- introducing retroactive subsidy payments once applications are approved.

Supporting Staffing and Workforce Sustainability

Workforce sustainability was widely recognized as foundational to improving access. Participants emphasized the need to strengthen recruitment and retention through:

- improved wages and non-wage benefits
- expanded training and professional development
- pathways for internationally educated professionals.

Topic B: Expanding Middle Years Supports

Current State: Key Challenges and Barriers

Affordability and Financial Barriers for Families

Participants reported that families with school aged children aged 6-12 are increasingly facing affordability challenges. Unlike child care programs included in the CWELCC system, no similar fee reduction exists for school aged children. As a result, families who have benefited from reduced early years fees under CWELCC often experience a sharp cost increase once their child turns six. This is a shift from historical trends where costs typically decreased as children aged.

Many families, such as those with multiple children or lower incomes, are responding to higher school age fees by opting out of child care programs. Participants indicated concern around a rise in unsupervised “latchkey” children who are taught to walk home alone after school or wait outside school buildings before opening hours. Recent return to office mandates have particularly reduced the flexibility of parents to supervise and escort their children to and from school. As a more affordable option to school age programming, some families in the same community share caregiving responsibilities with parents taking turns picking and dropping off their children at school. However, this

alternative is often only feasible when parents have flexible working arrangements; permanent or a more frequent return to the office will likely increase reliance on child care programs.

Fragmentation of the Middle Childhood Landscape: Child Care, School Boards and Recreational Programs

The middle childhood landscape includes a diverse complement of programs often operating under disparate regulations, hours, and funding structures:

- licensed child care programs
- extended day programs
- authorized recreation programs
- specialized support programs
- drop-in programs
- seasonal camps.

Families frequently find it difficult to understand the distinctions between program types. Participants emphasized that families need seamless care across the early years and middle years, yet the current system remains fragmented and difficult to navigate.

Many participants observed that while the early years system has undergone significant transformation through CWELCC, school age programming remains underfunded, and misaligned with contemporary family needs. This creates a two-tiered system, where 0-5 care receives significant CWELCC investment to offset parent fees and is supported by a new funding formula, while 6-12 care relies on a different set of provincial guidelines with limited new investments.

Workforce Instability and Unsustainable Staffing Models

Participants overwhelmingly noted the challenges faced by the school age workforce which is driven largely by split shifts, limited hours, low wages, and poor access to benefits. Limited professional development opportunities and a lack of professional recognition were also concerns. These persistent conditions make recruitment and retention difficult. Workforce instability and staff burnout and turnover directly affect program quality and continuity, causing some operators to close school age programs entirely and leaving families stranded without child care. Sustainability issues can reduce the types of programs or activities offered and limit capacity, leading to fewer available spaces even when demand is high.

Limitations to School Age Program & Space Expansion

Participants identified that a major barrier to expanding school age programming is challenges with access to school spaces. Having to navigate space fees, permits, and additional bureaucratic constraints increases expenses and administrative burden for operators. Some providers reported a perceived reluctance from principals to share rooms even when they appear to be suitable or underutilized. Many operators and child care providers expressed that child care is not deemed as an equal partner in the school environment, and the power imbalance affects their ability to plan, invest, and maintain stable programs.

Program Diversity, Flexibility, and Family Needs and Preferences

In addition to families needing consistent year-round care, participants reported that there is also interest in diverse programming for older children, such as camps, music programs, sports, academic skill building activities, and recreation-based options. Participants stated that while operators are interested in offering more creative or varied opportunities, they are constrained by budget, staffing capacity, and regulatory restrictions. Children may not want to remain in the same school room or program environment for 12 months of the year, suggesting a need for greater program flexibility and variety tailored to different developmental stages.

Increasing Support Needs

Participants reported increased behavioral and developmental support needs among school aged children, with insufficient resources to respond effectively. Staff often lack specialized training in middle childhood development, and some programs have experienced safety concerns for staff and children. These challenges can discourage educators from working in school age programs, further exacerbating workforce shortages.

Possible Solutions & Opportunities

Improved Collaboration, Coordination, and Sector Integration

Participants emphasized the need for stronger coordination among partners serving school aged children, including child care providers, school boards, authorized recreation, and community programs. This could be achieved through intentional collaboration, shared access to information, and integrated planning that places children and families at the centre of the system. Partnership with post-secondary institutions can also provide valuable training to students, create career pathways into the sector,

and strengthen connections to emerging research and data to inform best practices and policy decisions.

Participants shared the value of implementing a Middle Years Strategy that helps to connect the various parts of the middle childhood sector and strengthen support for programs serving school age children. A Middle Childhood Advisory Committee would be instrumental in mobilizing the development and implementation of a Strategy and offer a forum for issues awareness, organizing advocacy efforts, and establishing relationships and coordination among different stakeholders.

Improved cohesion across the middle years sector requires reduced barriers to accessing school space, such as addressing high permit fees and inconsistent cooperation in sharing classrooms. Navigation supports can be beneficial for families as children transition from early years care (ages 0-5) to middle years programming. A centralized information-sharing platform was suggested as a one potential tool to help families better understand available programs and plan for care as their children age.

Advocacy and System-Level Reform: Funding, Workforce Sustainability and Program Expansion

Participants emphasized the importance of long-term system changes supported by coordinated advocacy efforts. Many noted that without policy change and sustained investment, existing challenges will continue to deepen. Participants proposed a dedicated school age funding model for Toronto, as was advocacy directed at the federal and provincial government for increased school age investments in upcoming budget cycles.

Workforce development, including specialized middle childhood training and stable full-time positions, was described as critical to achieving program quality and continuity. For school-age programs, exploring creative staffing solutions, such as shared roles/hours across program sites, is essential to addressing current recruitment and retention issues, particularly involving split shift positions.

Topic C: Strengthening Inclusion for Children with Disabilities and Extra Support Needs

Current State: Key Challenges and Barriers

Underdiagnosis of Developmental Conditions and Complex Needs

Participants reported an increase in both diagnosed and suspected developmental conditions among children, often presenting as behavioural challenges and difficulties participating in group settings.

Despite growing prevalence, current supports do not fully meet the needs of children and families – a gap that may be even more pronounced for equity-denied groups. For example, participants indicated that a shortage of Indigenous programs and Early Childhood Educators limits the supports available to Indigenous children and families.

Increase in Safety Incidents

Educators report escalating safety incidents involving behaviours such as hitting, kicking, spitting, and other high intensity responses. Without additional supports, these behaviours create safety risks for the child, other children, and staff. Families may also experience significant stress and, due to stigma or other pressures, may be reluctant to pursue developmental assessments or specialized supports.

Operators also described difficult situations where families of injured children expect disciplinary action against the child who initiated the incident, creating challenging dynamics for program staff to manage. Parents may treat the situation as a conflict between adults, and the lack of awareness on supports for complex behavioural needs can heighten tension and create an additional challenge for operators to navigate.

Reduced Workforce Capacity: Skills Gaps, Burnout and Low Compensation

Participants reported educators lacking sufficient training, resources, and support to meet the increasingly complex needs of children. Many acknowledge that educators “love the work” but are exhausted, overwhelmed, and stretched beyond what ratios and supports currently allow. Burnout is a common reality, with more staff taking leave or relying heavily on directors for crisis management.

Possible Solutions & Opportunities

Workforce Sustainability and Development

Participants emphasized that improving workforce capacity is essential to supporting children and families with extra support needs or disabilities. Suggested approaches included flexible staffing models (e.g., needs-based staffing), integration of specialized roles, compensation, and ongoing professional learning.

Participants pointed to the importance of aligning postsecondary education with the realities of practice. This could include specialized education on disabilities and extra support needs embedded into traditional ECE curriculum, enhanced practicum experiences in high-needs settings, on-the-job training, and paid internships. While Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) is perceived as essential, it is also considered impractical. Many educators are expected to complete CPL requirements outside work hours, and the lack of paid time, incentives, or recognition further reduces participation. Educators consistently expressed that while one-off training is helpful, what they actually need are ongoing mentorship opportunities, classroom embedded coaching, and tangible support during challenging moments.

Enhancing wage parity across the child care and early years sector, including school boards, improving professional recognition, and preventing workplace burnout were identified as opportunities to reduce workforce attrition. Enhancing capacity of staff through training is insufficient if burnout, absenteeism, and low compensation and recognition are not concurrently addressed.

Improved Child Care Offerings for Children with Disabilities or Extra Support Needs

Families may choose to withdraw from traditional centre-based child care settings if their children are not receiving adequate supports, which may be a function of current staffing ratios, lack of training and capacity, or perceived and actual safety concerns. As a viable alternative, many families prefer home child care due to the benefits of smaller spaces and more personalized supports.

Participants suggested that Children's Services, in collaboration with sector and allied partners, explore how existing child care models can better support children with disabilities and extra support needs and consider new approaches that expand the range of available options. Targeted initiatives were also recommended to support Indigenous and Black children and address stigma. This could encompass culturally specific programs, recruitment and retention of diverse educators, community-led engagement, and training in anti-oppressive practices.

System-Level Improvement: Need for Better Funding and Coordination

Greater investments in Every Child Belongs programs, resourcing, and funding are integral for sector and system-level improvement. The rise in complex developmental conditions will require Children's Services and its provincial and community partners to prioritize children with extra support needs in its immediate and long-term planning, stressing the importance of advocacy efforts and cross sectoral coordination and collaboration.

Shared accountability will guide resource allocation, staffing decisions, and policy development to strengthen inclusive practices across the system. Formal partnerships across child care, educational, and health sectors are necessary to reduce fragmentation and establish unified, family-friendly navigation systems, and streamlined referral processes to improve access to developmental, behavioral, and social supports.

Moving Forward Together

The 2025 Toronto Child Care and Early Years Roundtable aimed to explore key priorities for Toronto Children's Services and the broader sector: improving access to fee subsidies, expanding supports for middle years programming, and strengthening inclusion for children with extra support needs.

While each topic area presents distinct challenges, there are common solutions that may address challenges across each area. For instance, cross-sector collaboration, expansion of services, and supporting a thriving workforce were noted as needed solutions for all three topics. Participants emphasized that progress across all three areas is essential to build a more seamless child care system, one that supports a continuum of care, promotes equitable access to services delivery, and improves outcomes for children and families.

While acknowledging that Children's Services cannot implement all solutions independently, advocating to provincial and federal partners for increased funding and exploring local short- and medium-term strategies to improve collaboration across sector partners, expanding access to relevant services, and supporting the recruitment and retention of qualified staff are important areas of action for consideration.

Progress in the areas of fee subsidy, middle childhood, and supporting extra support needs are key action areas identified in Toronto's 2025-2030 Early Years and Child Care Service Plan. Moving forward, Children's Services aims to work with the sector to identify the immediate next steps and longer-term strategies to action solutions to address the challenges in these three policy and programmatic areas. To that end,

Children's Services is looking to convene focus tables and a forum comprised of sector partners and representatives to advance solutions related to these and other Service Plan priorities. Children's Services is committed to keeping the sector engaged as partners as meaningful change for Toronto's children's and families will only be achieved together.

Appendix 1: How We Engaged and Small Group Discussion Questions

The Roundtable began with an overview of the purpose of the event, objectives, and discussion norms. This was followed by a presentation from Children's Services' senior leadership outlining the policy environment, the child care service system, and progress on the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system.

At the onset of discussion, Councillor Bravo facilitated discussion with participants to establish a set of shared principles and norms to guide dialogue, learning, and collaboration during the Roundtable. This included:

1. Value all voices equally
2. Practice attentive listening
3. Consider all options - there are no bad ideas
4. Ensure everyone has the opportunity to speak
5. Ask questions
6. Show respect for one another
7. Work Collaboratively

Participants then engaged in facilitated small group discussions, supported by family vignettes grounded in local experience. Initial discussions focused on access to child care for families in receipt of fee subsidy, followed by split group discussions on expanding middle years supports and strengthening inclusion for children with disabilities. Discussion questions for each topic are provided in the following section. Key themes and areas of alignment were identified through plenary debriefs and full group reflection. The session concluded with a facilitated conversation led by Councillor Bravo to identify shared observations, areas of agreement, and potential next steps.

Discussion Topic A: Improving Access for Families in Receipt of Fee Subsidy

1. The presentation described the challenges that families with a fee subsidy face in accessing child care. Do you see the impact of this challenge?
2. Thinking about addressing this challenge, what does an ideal future state look like?

3. One policy option that has been raised to begin to address this challenge is requiring all CWELCC operators to have a fee subsidy service agreement. What are your thoughts on this?
4. Let's discuss next steps, what are the immediate next steps?

Discussion Topic B: Expanding Middle Years Supports

1. How does the issue of fragmentation in the middle years show up in your programs?
2. In addressing this challenge, what does an ideal future state look like?
3. What can get in the way of reaching this goal?
4. Let's discuss next steps, what are the immediate next steps?

Discussion Topic C: Strengthening Inclusion for Children with Disabilities and Extra Support Needs

1. How does inclusion for children with disabilities and extra support needs show up in your programs?
2. In addressing this, what does an ideal future state look like?
3. What can get in the way of reaching this goal?
4. Let's discuss next steps, what are the immediate next steps?