

Nova Scotia's plan to transform early learning and child care in the province

Nova Scotia's child care operators have received a briefing on the provincial government's proposed approach to building a publicly funded system of early learning and child care so that high quality licensed programs can, over time, be made universally accessible, available, and affordable for all who want them. What follows is a summary of the province's transformative plan's central features as set out in a Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) document distributed to providers on January 13, 2022, but not yet publicly available.

Like most jurisdictions in Canada, Nova Scotia's child care sector is made up of privately governed not-for-profit and for-profit service providers who rely on a patchwork of grants, funding agreements and parent fees. The province wants to move to a province-wide publicly managed system that will make public funding conditional on providers agreeing to implement principles of affordability, accessibility, inclusive programs and curriculum, and proper compensation of staff. The EECD document states: "while we know that moving from an individual child care centre approach to a systematic, community need approach will have its challenges, it is a journey worth taking."

Public funding and management through a new central organization

Instrumental to making the proposed sweeping changes ahead is the creation of a new central organization that the government hopes to make operational within a few months. The organization and its mandate to manage all regulated child care in Nova Scotia was an important element of the Canada-wide child care agreement between the governments of Canada and Nova Scotia, which also promised moving to an average parent fee of \$10 a day by 2026, the creation of at least 9,500 new not-for-profit child care spaces by 2026, a new early learning program for three-year olds, and better pay and benefits for ECEs following a review to be completed in 2022.

The structure of the organization, including how it will be governed and staffed, is still to be determined. The Department document says the government will maintain a strong relationship to the organization "to ensure the growth and stability of the early learning and child care sector." The document says the central organization will assume certain administrative duties now carried out by individual child care centres including the management of wait lists, fee payments, and admissions. The central organization will also take responsibility for addressing the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators. Child care centres that are part of the new system can choose to continue to carry out these functions but will not receive public funds to do so.

The Nova Scotia government is working with Nova Scotia Early Childhood Development Intervention Services to further define how the new organization will work and expects to have more information to share very soon.

New funding formula and conditions

All licensed child care centres that decide to be part of Nova Scotia's new system of early learning and child care will be funded through the central organization, and report to it. The funding provided through the organization will provide for, and be conditional on, parent fee reductions through a reduced set parent fee, and the implementation of a province-wide compensation framework for early childhood educators. The provincial government will be developing a new funding formula and model to reflect the real costs of providing high quality, inclusive and affordable programs and will introduce a higher level of financial accountability for all approved service providers. Funding will be based on utilization of spaces, not the number of licensed spaces. New funding agreements are expected to be in place for 2022-23.

What does this mean for existing centres?

The government has invited all licensed not-for-profit child care organizations to join the Nova Scotia Canada-wide early learning and child care (NSCWELCC) system. Each will have the option of keeping its own Board of Directors in place or transferring governance to the new central organization. As stated above, each can choose to retain responsibility for all administrative functions; however, the cost of doing so will not be publicly funded. Not-for-profit providers will be funded through the central organization and comply with the funding conditions that are set, as will be the case for all providers that join the new system. No new not-for-profit centre Boards of Directors will be allowed once the new central organization is in place.

The government has also invited all commercial (for-profit) child care centres to be part of the NSCWELCC system. A commercial centre can join in one of two ways:

Sign a funding and service agreement which will give the centre access to public funding under the same conditions as not-for-profit operators. These conditions include reducing parent fees in accordance with the government's fee policy, implementing the forthcoming province-wide compensation framework, applying the province's applicable Quality Matters framework, accepting and including children with special needs, and implementing other inclusion initiatives set out by the central organization.

or

Transition to become a not-for-profit child care organization, either by merging into an existing not-for-profit organization or transferring governance and/or operations to the new central organization. The commercial organization and the new central organization will work together to decide the financial terms and timelines of this second option. Those commercial centres that decide to transition to not-for-profit operations must decide which path they will take (that is who they will transfer their license/operations to) by March 31, 2023. In the interim, they can continue to operate as commercial providers through a service agreement with EECD (or with the central organization once it is set up to sign agreements). This timeline should give commercial operators sufficient time to investigate and decide the best way forward.

The Nova Scotia government is not shutting down existing commercial operators. It is requiring those that wish to continue to receive public funding to operate in a way that advances the government's

objectives of building accessible, affordable, inclusive, high-quality programs. The obligations of commercial operators that choose to receive public funding will be the same as those of publicly funded not-for-profit providers.

The Nova Scotia government has also made it clear that a commercial child care provider that chooses not to be part of the new publicly funded system can continue to operate as a licensed private facility and operate as they wish, pay educators according to whatever scale the operator decides, and set their own parent fees (subject, of course, to licensing and other laws and regulations).

Growing the system

The Nova Scotia-Government of Canada early learning and child care agreement signed in July 2021 calls for the creation of approximately 9,500 new not-for-profit child care spaces over the next five years. On Friday, January 14, 2022, Nova Scotia's Premier announced that 1,500 of these new spaces will be in place by the end of 2022 as part of the province's new system.

The Nova Scotia government intends to achieve this ambitious objective by giving responsibility for the planning and execution of the expansion to the new central organization, and for ensuring that the "mix of spaces that exist in a community are the right spaces for the community at the right time" (EECD document, January 2021). The new central organization will work with communities, families and child care operators to plan for the growth of the system and make adjustments as needed over time.

This element of the government's transformational system-building plan could serve as a model for expansion for other jurisdictions in Canada. Across Canada, there are similar barriers to increasing the availability of licensed early learning and child care so that all parents can eventually benefit from the publicly funded parent fee reductions promised by the federal government. Every Canadian jurisdiction is experiencing a critical shortage of qualified early childhood educators. All provincial and territorial governments have put the burden of creating new licensed spaces largely on child care operators without proper public financing and other supports. There has been little or no government-led central planning and coordination. As a result, expansion of services has tended to be ad hoc and uneven, resulting in many gaps in the supply of child care services.

In giving responsibility for expansion to a central organization, Nova Scotia can overcome these barriers. This is especially true because the same central organization will oversee operational and, presumably, capital funding. Importantly, the same central organization will have responsibility for recruitment and retention of educators and other workforce planning functions which will help ensure that all new programs that are put in place can be properly staffed. The Nova Scotia government is also giving the central organization authority to collect and share the data needed to properly assess community and population needs, which is crucial to ensuring responsive planning for growth.

Free early learning for 3-year-olds

Free but not compulsory early learning for 3-year-olds in schools will be another transformative additional feature of Nova Scotia's new early learning and care system. The program will be implemented gradually, starting with the creation of up to 2,000 spaces across the province by

September 2022. Priority access to these first spaces will be given to children “who live in households that experience marginalization due to economic, social, cultural factors or are racialized or underserved” (EECD document, January 2021). Other not-for-profit programs for 3-year-olds will of course stay in place given the time it will take to expand the free early learning opportunities in schools.

Before and after school care

Nova Scotia’s plan includes “wrap-around programming” on school sites for school-aged children up to age 12. Under the new system, access to before and after school care spaces will be offered first for 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, and then to older children up to age 12. Nova Scotia’s current before and after school model will be expanded by 3,500 spaces in schools by March 2023. Also, the program will be expanded to include care on PD days, vacation days and during the summer.

