

knowing
u
numbers

A community approach to
understanding the early childhood
education workforce

The ECE Workplace Northern Perspectives





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The regional data presented here are part of the larger provincial early childhood education workforce study **Knowing Our Numbers** (KON). Forty-three regional children's service districts participated in the study representing over 91% of all regions in Ontario. The data presented in this report are from 11 service areas that represent Northern Ontario and are members of the [Northern Ontario Service Deliverers Association \(NOSDA\)](#). NOSDA provides a political forum for reviewing and developing both policies and program delivery issues from a northern perspective. Note that Kenora District Services Board did not participate in the Knowing Our Numbers Project. Details on the project, methodology, and province-wide results can be found [here](#). In the **Executive Report**, Northern Ontario is part of the 'North' data region. Individual reports for participating regions, along with their respective census data are available on the [KON website](#).

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All communication and inquiries should be made to
Dr. Emis Akbari – emis.akbari@ece-rpa.ca
and Kerry McCuaig – kerry.mccuaig@ece-rpa.ca

BACKGROUND

Northern Ontario's small population is spread across a vast geographical area spanning two time zones. This region covers 90% of the area of Ontario but has only 5.1% of its population—about 725,000 people. Workforce challenges in the North are unique due to geographical variations, sparse and spread populations, weather conditions, workforce shortages in other sectors that impact child care operations, and seasonal and shift work that are the norm in many areas.

High costs for food, facilities, maintenance, and staff in remote areas limit the availability and quality of child care. This, in turn, contributes to the persistent disparities between remote communities and more urbanized areas. These gaps in service provision can have negative impacts on child development and family well-being.

Access to all levels of education in northern and remote communities further complicates service provision. Schools struggle with limited resources, including insufficient teaching staff, inadequate facilities, and lack of educational materials. The recruitment and retention of qualified educators are ongoing challenges, exacerbated by the isolation and harsh living

conditions. Students who leave their northern communities to study in more urbanized areas tend to remain there. As a result, educational outcomes in remote communities frequently lag behind those in more accessible areas. Online learning options, which could mitigate some of these issues, can be hampered by inadequate internet connectivity.

Transportation costs and infrastructure maintenance are additional major barriers to consistent and reliable service provision. Communities are separated by great distances with limited transportation infrastructure, making travel time-consuming, expensive, and more sensitive to extreme weather. Many remote areas are accessible only by air or seasonal ice roads, which restricts year-round access and complicates the delivery of goods and services.

Indigenous communities, which comprise a significant portion of the population, face additional challenges related to historical and ongoing systemic inequities. These communities often contend with inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded housing, and lack of access to clean water and sanitation. Cultural and linguistic barriers further impede the delivery of child care and other programs.



The percentage of the child population served by child care in Northern Ontario is notably lower than in more urbanized regions of the province. While approximately [25.5% of children aged 0–12 across Ontario](#) have access to licensed child care, this figure tends to be reduced in the North. The following table shows the number of early childhood programs by district.

Child Population and Early Years Program Types by Northern Region

Region	Child population 0–12 years (2021) ¹	Child population 0–12 years (2016) ¹	Child population 0–5 years (2021) ¹	Child population 0–5 years (2016) ¹	Publicly operated centres ²	Non-profit centres ^{2,3}	For-profit centres ²	Home child care agencies ^{2,4}	EarlyON child & family Centres ^{2,5}
Algoma District Services Administration Board	3,935	3,860	1,690	1,775		17		1	15
District of Cochrane Social Services Administration Board	11,035	11,805	4,605	5,295	4	16	7	1 (directly operated)	8
City of Greater Sudbury	21,980	21,725	9,355	9,740		74	1	2	25
City of Kenora	12,180	12,610	5,275	5,865	17	13	1		17
Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board	4,495	4,345	1,825	1,925		21		2	4
District of Nipissing Social Services Administration Board	10,470	10,625	4,420	4,715		32	6	3	16
District of Parry Sound Social Services Administration Board	4,830	4,660	2,050	2,020	3	6	1	1 (directly operated)	16
Rainy River District Social Services Administration Board	2,895	3,050	1,245	1,350	4	4			6
District of Sault Ste. Marie Social Services Administration Board	9,825	10,035	4,155	4,625	2	29	2	1 (directly operated)	10
Thunder Bay District Social Services Administration Board ⁶	18,660	18,890	8,235	8,535					
District of Timiskaming Social Services Administration Board	4,310	4,250	1,955	1,990		11		2	5

¹Statistics Canada Population Census.

²Data provided by regional children's service manager.

³Includes Indigenous-led centres.

⁴Includes public, non-profit, and for-profit home child care agencies.

⁵Does not include satellite or mobile sites.

⁶Data not available at press time.



The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement aimed to address these disparities through increased funding and reduced child care fees. Almost all child care providers in the North joined the CWELCC. However, the implementation of such programs is complicated by the region's unique challenges. Funds are available to expand child care services, but the specific impact on Northern Ontario remains limited by the aforementioned barriers.

Addressing these issues requires targeted investments, community-driven solutions, and ongoing support to ensure that all children in Northern Ontario have access to quality child care services.

Number of Respondents to Workforce Survey by CMSM/DSSAB in Northern Region

North	Number of RECE and non-RECE participants	Per cent of regional total
Algoma District Services Administration Board	33	8.3
District of Cochrane Social Services Administration Board	29	7.3
City of Greater Sudbury	41	10.4
City of Kenora ¹	4	1.0
Manitoulin-Sudbury District Services Board	38	9.6
District of Nipissing Social Services Administration Board	70	17.7
District of Parry Sound Social Services Administration Board	16	4.0
Rainy River District Social Services Administration Board	6	1.5
District of Sault Ste. Marie Social Services Administration Board	15	3.8
Thunder Bay District Social Services Administration Board	99	25.0
District of Timiskaming Social Services Administration Board	45	11.4
TOTAL	396	8.8²

¹This region was not part of the Knowing Our Numbers Project. Sample gathered through survey distribution by the College of Early Childhood Educators.

²Per cent of total provincial sample.



FOCUS GROUPS

Researchers conducted focus groups in five northern areas to better understand the conditions in these communities. In addition, the researchers wanted to make sure the voices of the people who live and work in these regions – which are often diluted or lost in quantitative survey approaches – are included. Locations were selected based on the unique features of the communities and to ensure representation of Indigenous, francophone, remote, and rural areas in the study.

In-person focus groups were conducted in May 2023 and April 2024. A total of 91 individuals across the five regions participated, including supervisors/directors, RECEs (with and without director's approval), non-RECEs, EarlyON centre employees, licensed home child care providers, and visitors. In addition, pedagogical leaders, special needs resource consultants, and RECEs working in school-based Kindergarten also participated as did quality assurance specialists. Participants were from English, French, and Indigenous-led programs across all auspice types (public, non-profit, and for-profit).

Rationale for Focus Group Site Selections

Timiskaming: This jurisdiction has a large portion of French and Indigenous-led child care. The region was selected to understand the impact of workforce challenges on the programs serving these cultural groups.

Cochrane: This jurisdiction is a mining region where shift work is common. As a result, there is a high demand for alternative child care hours. The study sought to understand the impact of the demand for alternate hours on workforce recruitment and retention.

Rainy River: Most centres in this jurisdiction are directly operated by the District Social Services Administrative Board (DSSAB). The region was selected to understand the impact of public operation on the workforce and working conditions.

Thunder Bay: This jurisdiction has specific challenges due to seasonal work. The study aimed to understand the impact of variable child care needs over the year.

Manitoulin-Sudbury: This jurisdiction had caps on parent fees prior to CWELCC. The region was selected to understand the impact of parent fees on program operations.

Individual reports for each of these regions can be found at <https://knowingournumbers.ca/en/>

Focus Groups Findings

To ensure anonymity, names, positions, program names, and locations are not used.

Staff Shortages

Staff shortages are a significant issue throughout Northern Ontario, impacting the overall functionality and quality of child care services. *“Burnout across the board”* is a prevalent concern. High turnover rates are exacerbated by the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff are grieving the loss of loved ones, coupled with personal mental health issues, which are contributing to exhaustion.

“The trauma of COVID is still in the environment.”

Staffing shortages are evident in the daily operations of the centres. Supervisors, who should be focusing on pedagogical leadership and management, are spending significant time on the floor due to staffing gaps.

“Our supervisor probably spends 20–50% of her time on the floor.”

Many times, it’s “all hands-on deck.” On a daily basis, centres have to repurpose head teachers, along with EarlyON and enhanced staff, who are there to support children with disabilities, not

to maintain legislated ratios. Sometimes even these measures are not enough and rooms need to close, disrupting the routines of children and their parents.

Centres rely heavily on ‘director approvals’— permission to hire staff without the necessary training for qualified positions. As many as 50% of positions could be filled in this manner, but not all regions collect this data and the province does not report it publicly.

The difficulty in retaining staff is compounded by low wages, with many staff working two jobs or relying on their partner’s income. During the hiring process when the discussion turns to pay, potential employees often withdraw their applications.

“I have done a handful of interviews where everybody’s there right to the bitter end, and then we discuss pay. You see the blood leave their face, and then we’re ghosted.”

Operators sometimes make it work with stop-gap measures, but building and retaining a qualified staffing complement is difficult.

“We were able to bring in four summer students but no full-time staff. We’re great for the summer, but come September, we’ll be back where we started.”



Access to Care

Access to child care is severely limited due to staff shortages, leading to long waitlists and underutilized capacity. One supervisor mentioned having a waitlist of 100 children while only half the spaces in the centre are in use. Additionally, challenges arise when children with disabilities cannot be accommodated, forcing centres to make the difficult decision to turn away children, much to the frustration of their parents.

“Parents are putting their names on the waitlist even before they’re expecting. They pretend to be French just to get into any door. They’re so desperate.”

Impact of the CWELCC

Ontario is unique within Canada in that 47 municipal **Consolidated Municipal Service Managers** (CMSMs) and **District Social Services Administration Boards** (DSSABs) are the service system managers for early years and child care. These managers play a central role in the planning, funding, administration, and operation of early years and licensed child care services. They are required to implement the CWELCC plan and transform the existing system.

The federal-provincial CWELCC agreement, with a \$13.2B federal allocation to Ontario over six years, allows for a 10% administration threshold. However, in December 2023, the province announced approximately \$85.5M in administrative cuts for 2024, leaving only 1% of the total allocation for CWELCC management and oversight. This not enough to manage the existing early childhood system and implement the federal-Ontario agreement.

The CWELCC plan has significantly increased the administrative burden for operators, with agencies hiring additional staff to keep up with new reporting requirements. Operators are concerned about future funding stability and the impact of funding reductions on the ability of children’s service managers to support child care providers—just when their support is needed the most.

“Our DSSAB has been very supportive through COVID. If we were having a difficult time, we could reach out to them. My fear is in 2024, when that funding shift happens, will they be there?”

Training

Participants discussed their perception that training quality has declined. Some new educators completed their qualifications virtually due to the pandemic, resulting in an emerging workforce that can be underprepared.

“We had somebody who completed her ECE during the pandemic, and it’s so different compared to the ones before.”

The region relies heavily on apprenticeships to upgrade workforce qualifications. Many staff are doing their apprenticeship in their own workplaces where there are not enough RECEs to support the needed mentorship. It also puts RECEs in the uncomfortable position of assessing the work of their coworkers.

“They grade them one day and work with them the next. Even if the person is doing lousy, and it has happened, they fluff the marks.”

Quality of Care

The quality of care in northern regions is affected by the instability and high turnover of staff. Frequent reassignments disrupt the continuity of care, impacting children’s experiences and leading to increased behavioural issues. ‘Otherwise approved’ staff may not have adequate knowledge of the provincial curriculum or behavioural guidance techniques, or how to adjust the learning environment to suit the needs of the children. Incidents serious enough to require police involvement have increased, reflecting the stress and burnout among the staff.

“Just reaching out to our program advisors for simple things, we’re not getting quick turnaround responses because they’re busy dealing with big scary stuff.”

Investing in Staff

Investing in staff is crucial for maintaining a high-quality child care system. This includes not only financial investments, but also fostering a supportive environment that focuses on staff well-being.

“The number one thing I’ve heard is wellness for our educators. But wellness – you can feed somebody wellness and you can tell them how to do it, but if you don’t foster it, if you don’t practise it yourself, if you don’t support and create the space for it, it doesn’t matter. You can train, train, train, but like any training, you have to live and breathe it.”

Conclusion

Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including improving wages, offering comprehensive training, and ensuring adequate funding to support both administrative functions and direct care roles. The Knowing Our Numbers study has revealed regional challenges and the need for targeted solutions. A cookie-cutter approach to policy in a province as geographically variable as Ontario will benefit some, while impeding the progress of others. By addressing the core challenges of staff shortages, the child care sector can move toward providing better support and services for children and families.

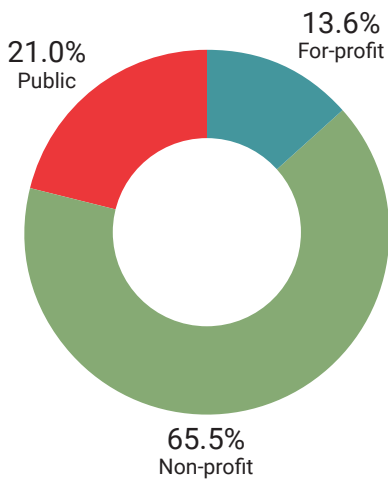


Sample Characteristics

A total of 396 individuals working in early years services in Northern Ontario responded to the survey (referred to as the 'workforce survey'). Of these, 64.9% are RECEs and 35.1% are non-RECEs (referred as the 'workforce'). The majority of respondents are from non-profit programs (65.5%). Public programs include those directly operated by regional governments and full-day Kindergarten provided by school boards. Compared to the rest of the province, the North has very few for-profit child care programs.

Additionally, 84 directors responded to the survey. As the number of respondents who are licensed home child care providers is low (n=22), data are not presented; these data are included in the [Executive Report](#).

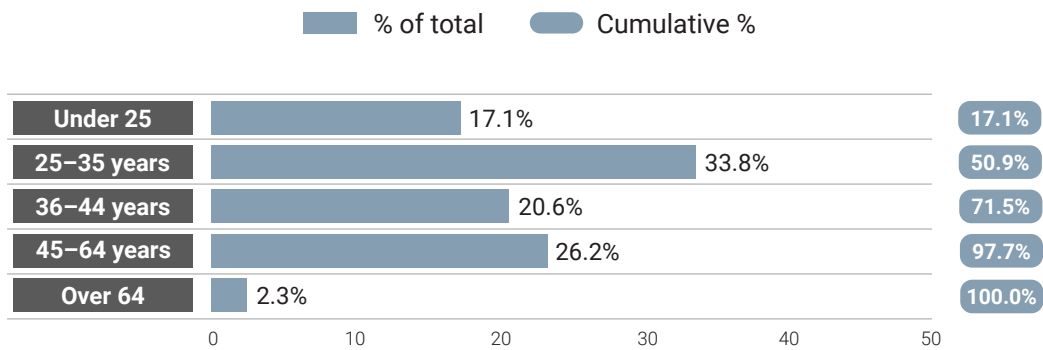
Percentage Respondents by Auspice Workforce



AGE

Almost 72% of *workforce* respondents are under the age of 45. About 45% of director/supervisor respondents in the North are younger than 45 years of age (data not shown). This is on par with the provincial average sample, where 42.7% are under the age of 45.

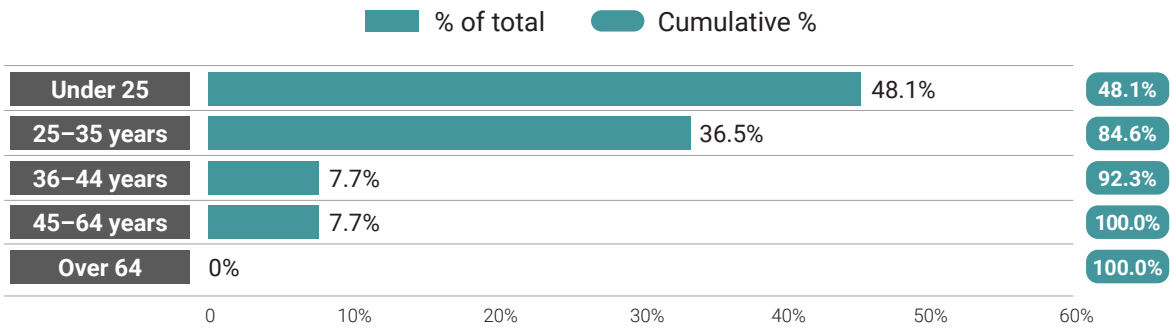
Age Distribution of Respondents *Workforce*



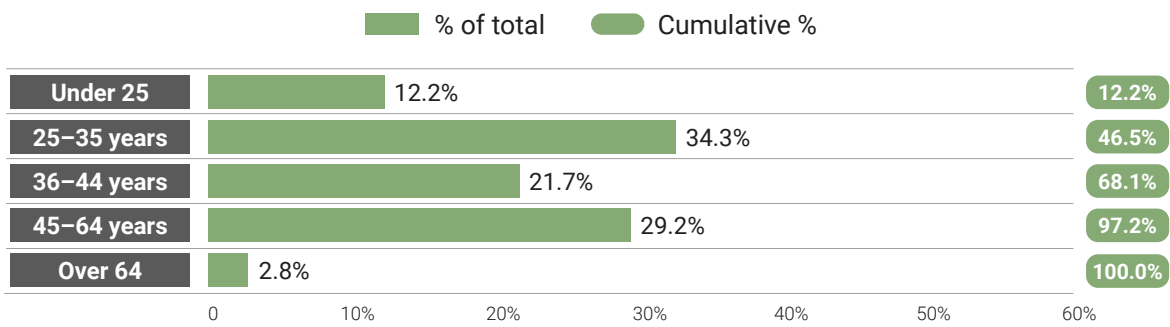
Respondents working in for-profit organizations are more likely to be younger. Approximately 92% of workforce participants from for-profit programs are under the age of 45 years. By comparison, 68.1% of staff in non-profit programs and 70.7% in public programs are under 45 years of age.

Age Distribution by Auspice Workforce

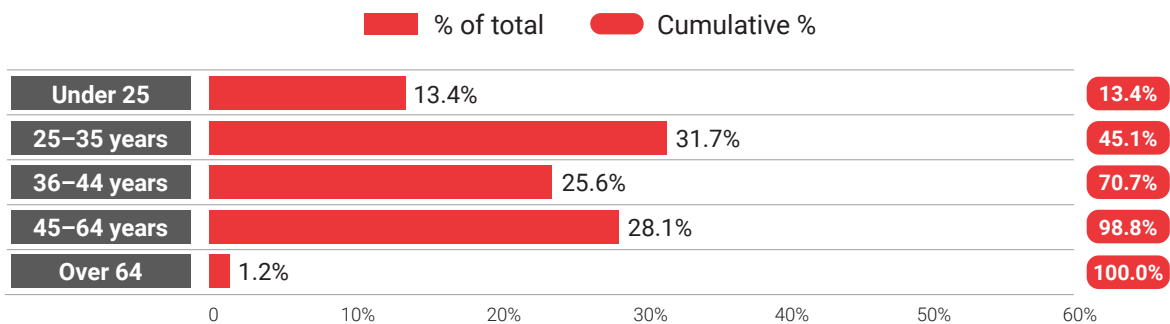
For-Profit



Non-Profit



Public



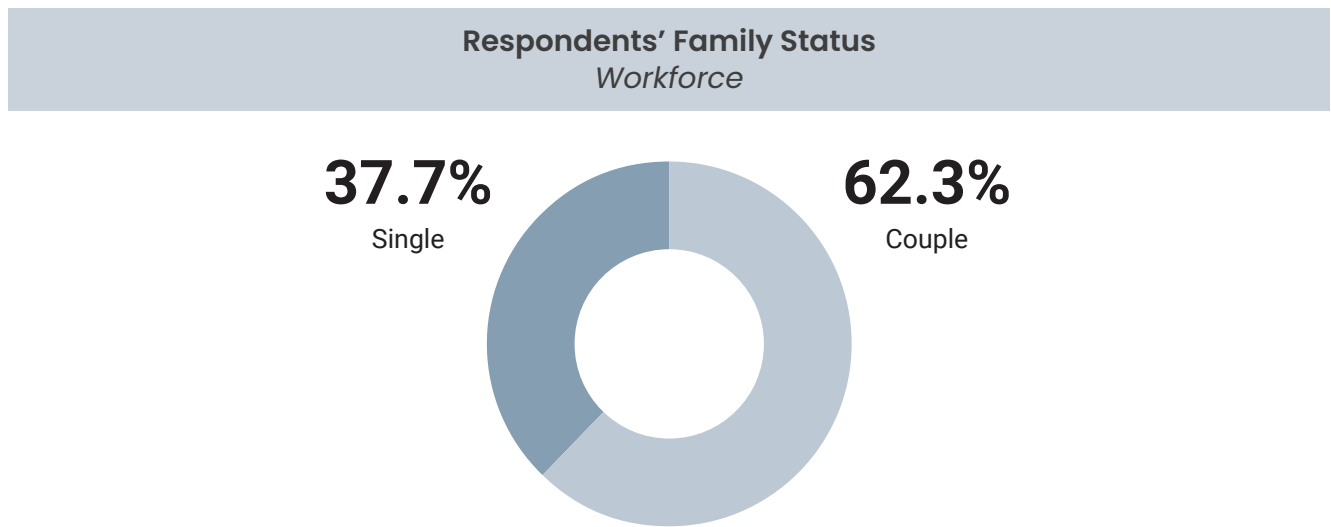
YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

Participants who work in for-profit programs have the fewest mean and median years of experience. In contrast, public and non-profit programs tend to have more experienced educators.

Years of Experience by Auspice <i>Workforce</i>						
Auspice	Mean	Minimum	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile	Maximum
For-profit	3.9	0.0	1.0	3.0	4.0	19.0
Non-profit	11.4	0.0	4.0	9.0	16.0	44.0
Public	12.0	0.0	5.0	9.5	18.0	35.0

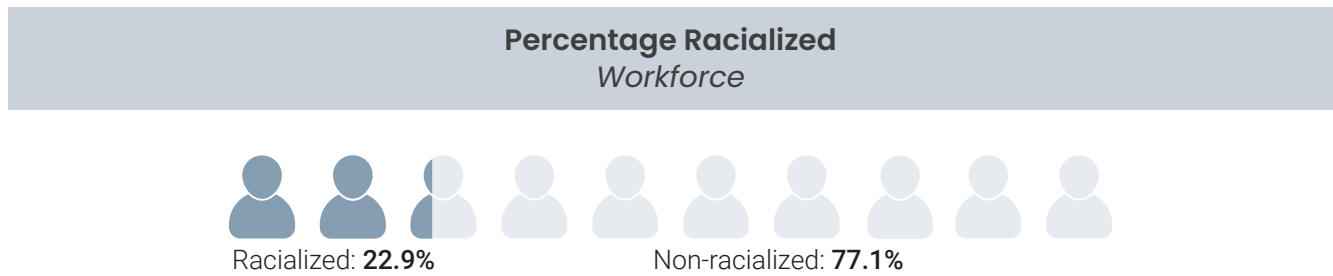
FAMILY STATUS

Approximately 38% of the *workforce* survey respondents are single.

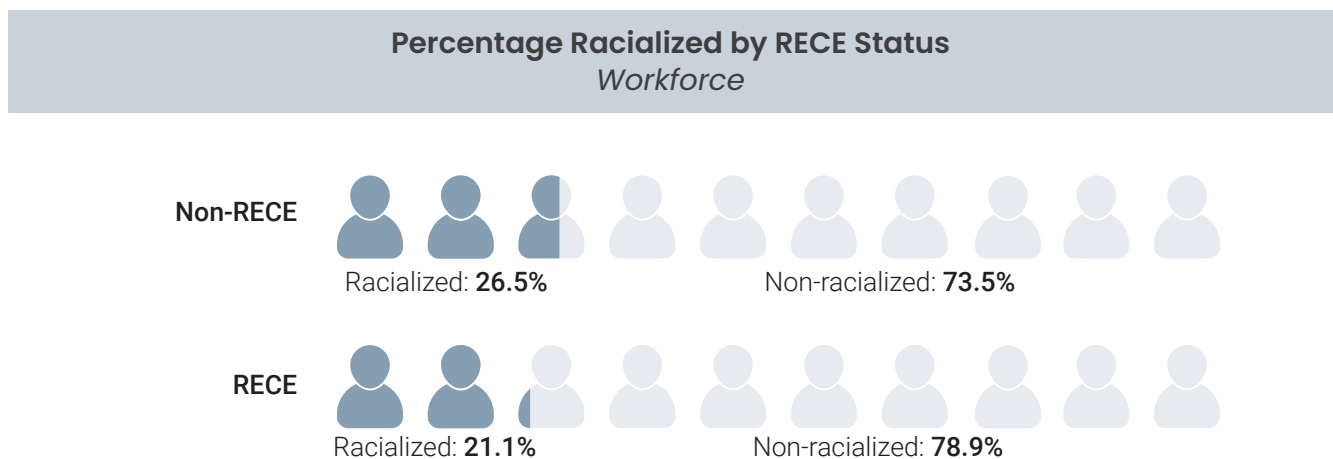


RACIALIZATION

Just under one-quarter (22.9%) of the *workforce* sample identify as racialized.



Non-RECEs are slightly more likely than RECEs to identify as racialized.



Of the 84 directors/supervisors from Northern Ontario who responded to the survey, 85.7% report they are RECEs compared to 94.7% across all 43 participating regions. Of those who are RECEs, 93.3% have been registered with the College of Early Childhood Educators for less than five years.

Compensation

WAGES

Wages of RECEs are higher than for non-RECEs. Those working in for-profit programs have the lowest hourly wages. Approximately 25% of respondents report having additional employment to supplement their primary wages.

Hourly Wages by Auspice and RECE Status Workforce

Auspice	RECE status	
	Non-RECE	RECE
For-profit	\$19.76	\$23.09
Non-profit	\$22.21	\$25.60
Public	\$22.43	\$27.10
Average across auspice	\$21.47	\$25.60

Reported director/supervisor wages in northern regions are on par with those across provincial participating regions. The median director/supervisor hourly wage in the overall provincial findings is \$30 per hour, with a minimum of \$18 per hour and a maximum of \$80 per hour.

Director/Supervisor Wage Range in Northern Regions

Position	Average	Minimum	25th percentile	Median	75th percentile	Maximum
Director	\$33.05	\$21.00	\$28.00	\$30.00	\$37.00	\$58.00

BENEFITS

Just over 84% of *workforce* respondents report having access to paid sick days. About two-thirds report having extended health benefits (65.8%). Half of the respondents report having pensions or RRSP contributions through their employer (50.8%), while almost three-quarters (73.7%) have access to paid professional learning opportunities. Pay increases for obtaining a new credential or degree in early education are not common (25%), while tuition assistance is rare (11.6%).

Percentage of Respondents with Access to Non-Mandatory Benefits *Workforce*



84.5%

Paid sick days



73.7%

Paid professional development



66.3%

Paid bereavement leave



65.8%

Extended health benefits (e.g., dental, physiotherapy, etc.)



52.4%

Paid programming time during the workday



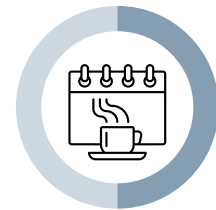
51.8%

Paid team meeting time during the workday



50.8%

Pension benefits or contributions to an RRSP



50.0%

Paid personal or mental health days



32.9%

Salary scale with regular guaranteed increases reflecting my qualifications, responsibilities, and seniority



25.0%

Pay increase for obtaining a new credential or degree in early childhood education



13.7%

Parental leave top-up



11.6%

Tuition assistance

Workforce Stability, Stress, and Job Satisfaction

DISCRIMINATION

Approximately 36% of *workforce* respondents report having experienced workplace discrimination. The types of discrimination experienced vary, with bullying (60.8%) and education/seniority (38.5%) being the most common, followed by mental health (28%) and ageism (20.3%). Note that bullying may involve, or be rooted in, other forms of discrimination (e.g., racism or ageism).

Percentage of Respondents Reporting Experiences of Workplace Discrimination *Workforce*



Types of Discrimination *Workforce*

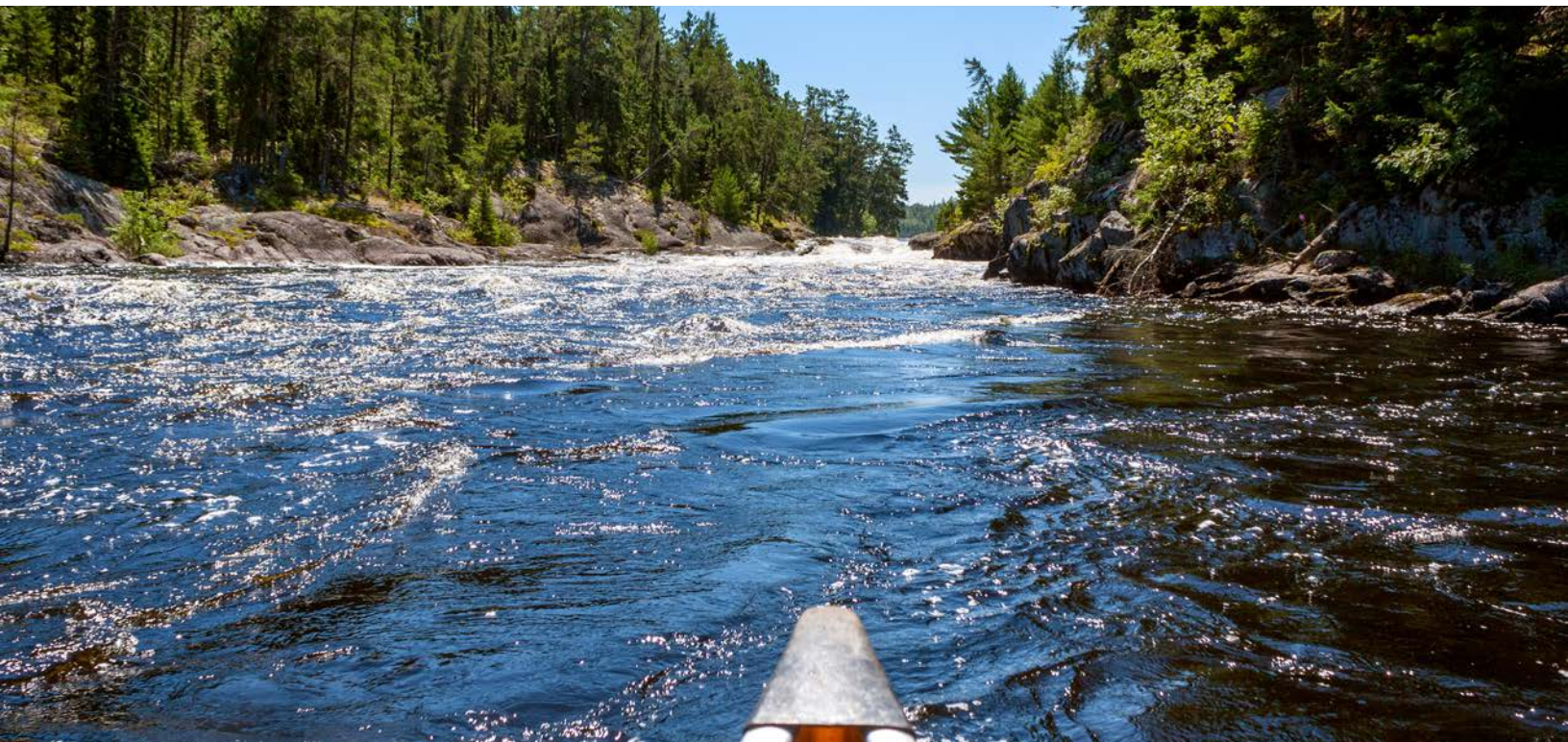
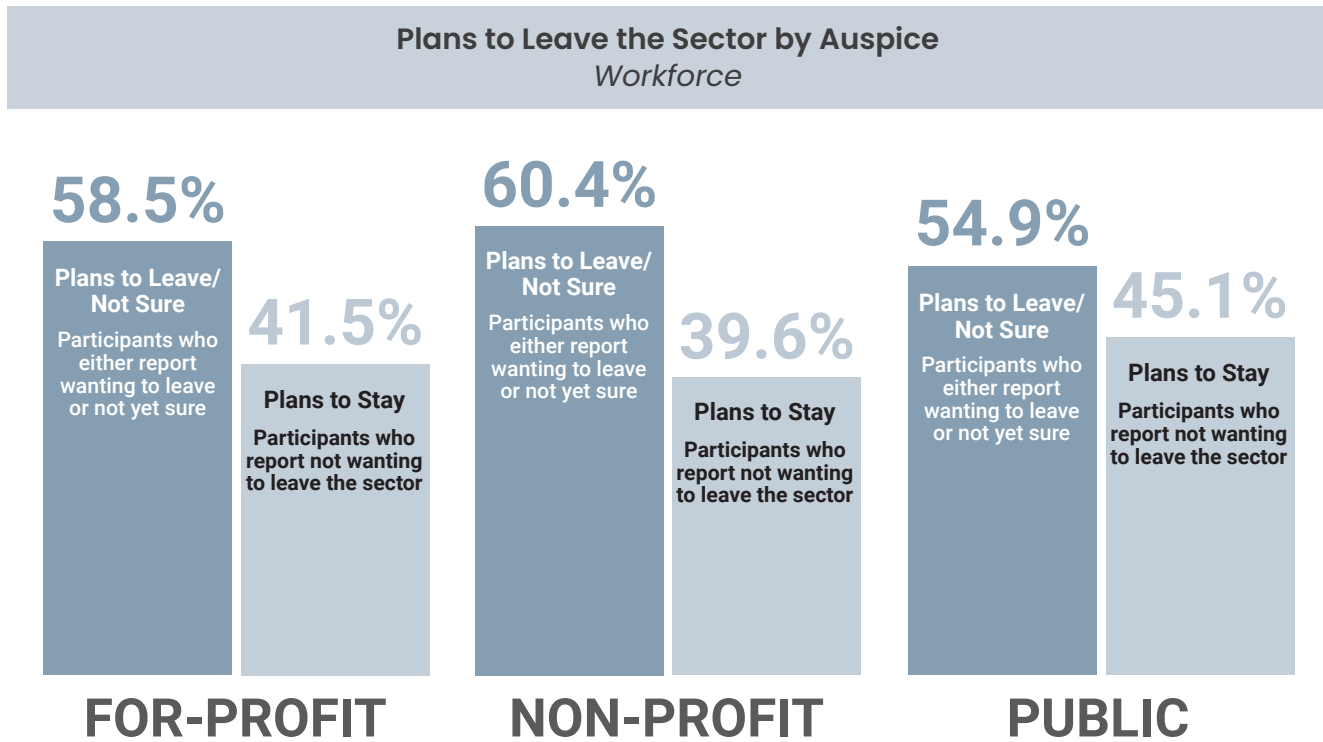
Bullying	60.8%
Education/seniority	38.5%
Mental health	28.0%
Ageism	20.3%
Body prejudice	12.0%
Other	11.9%
Sexism	8.4%
Ableism	7.7%

*Other includes racism, religious belief, homophobia, and immigration status. Combined due to low number of respondents reporting these types of discrimination.



JOB SATISFACTION

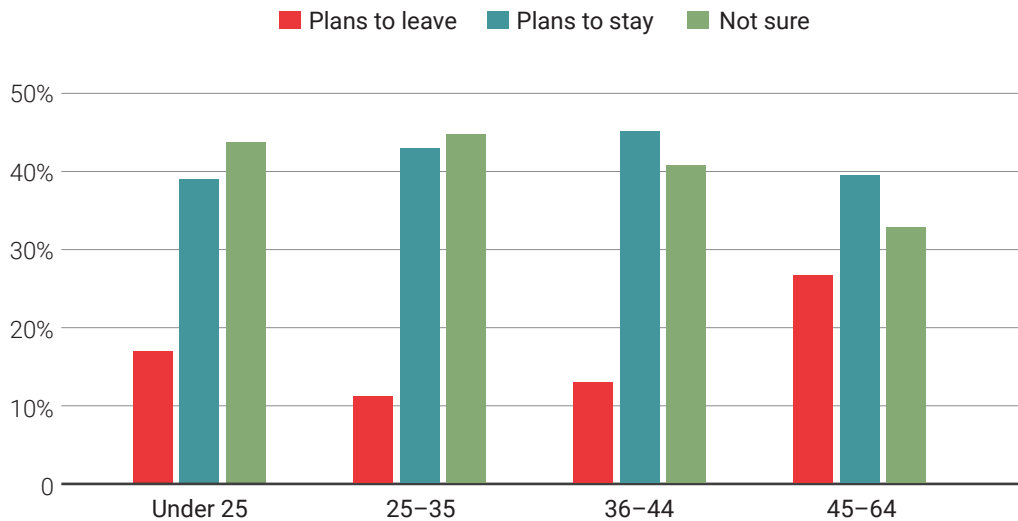
Across all auspices, 41% of respondents from Northern Ontario report plans to stay in the sector over the next five years, while 49.1% are unsure. Those who work in non-profit programs are slightly more likely to report plans to leave or say they are unsure (60.4%). Those who work in public programs are slightly more likely to report plans to stay in the sector (45.1%). These findings have important implications for retention strategies.





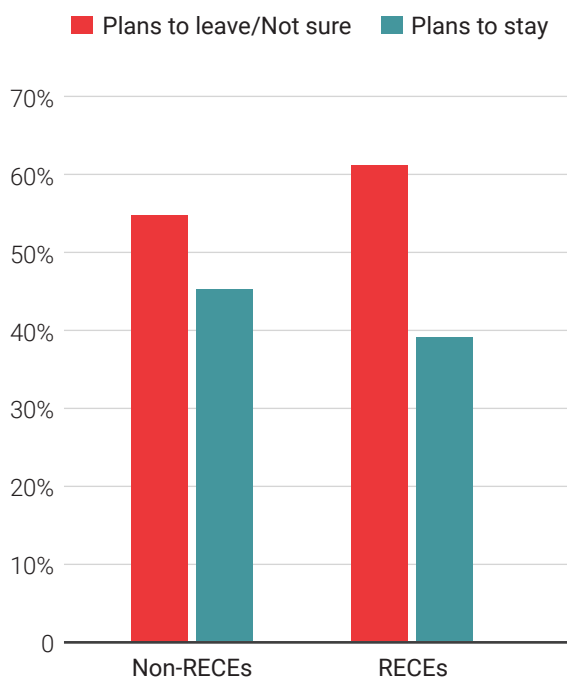
Over half of all age groups state they have plans to leave the sector or are uncertain of their plans. Note that those 65+ are not included in these findings as plans for retirement would confound results.

Plans to Leave the Sector by Age of Respondent Workforce



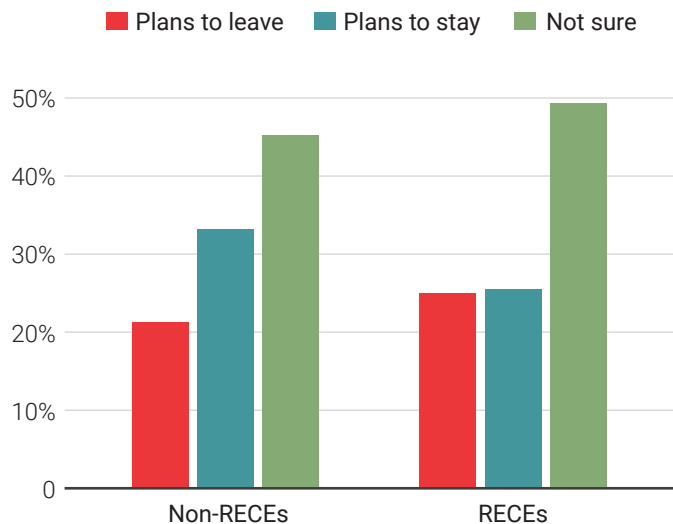
Overall, only 38.5% of RECE respondents report plans to stay in the sector, with 61.5% either planning to leave or reporting they are unsure. Non-RECE respondents are slightly more likely to report plans to stay in the sector (45.7%).

Plans to Leave the Sector by RECE Status *Workforce*



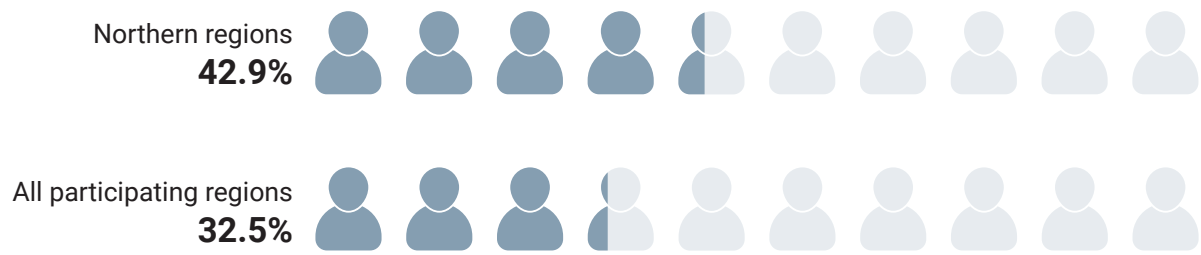
Plans to leave the sector are associated with experiences of workplace discrimination. RECEs who experience discrimination are slightly more likely to report plans to leave the sector in the next five years or uncertainty with their plans. This has implications for professional learning and human resource management. More detailed discussion can be found in the [Executive Report](#).

Plans to Leave by Those Who Experience Workplace Discrimination by RECE Status
Workforce



About 43% of director/supervisor respondents from northern regions report wanting to stay in the sector compared with 32.5% across all participating regions.

Percentage of Directors/Supervisors with Plans to Stay in the Sector
Northern Regions Versus All Participating Regions



WORKPLACE STRESS

On a scale of 1 (low stress) to 5 (high stress), RECEs report higher stress levels than non-RECEs. There are no significant differences in reported level of stress by auspice.

Average Level of Stress by Auspice Workforce

(1=low stress; 5=high stress)

Auspice	RECE status		Average across RECE status
	Non-RECE	RECE	
For-profit	3.4	3.5	3.4
Non-profit	3.0	3.4	3.2
Public	3.0	3.4	3.2
Average across auspice	3.1	3.4	3.2

Participants in the North generally report a low level of job satisfaction. On a scale of 1 (low job satisfaction) to 5 (high job satisfaction), study participants' level of satisfaction is 2.7 out of 5. Overall, job satisfaction is highest in public programs.

Average Level of Job Satisfaction by Auspice and RECE Status Workforce

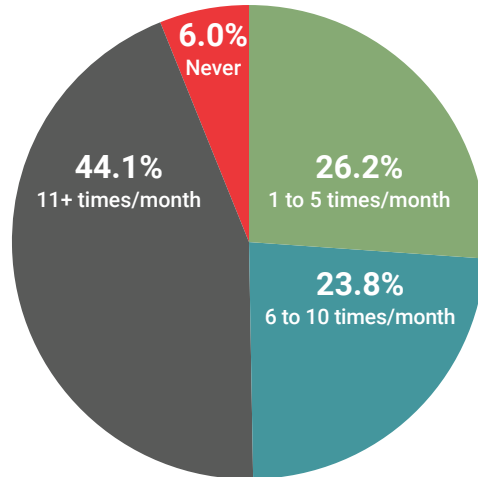
(1=low job satisfaction; 5=high job satisfaction)

Auspice	RECE status		Average across RECE status
	Non-RECE	RECE	
For-profit	2.3	2.4	2.4
Non-profit	2.7	2.7	2.7
Public	3.1	2.9	3.0
Average across auspice	2.7	2.7	2.7

WORKPLACE STABILITY

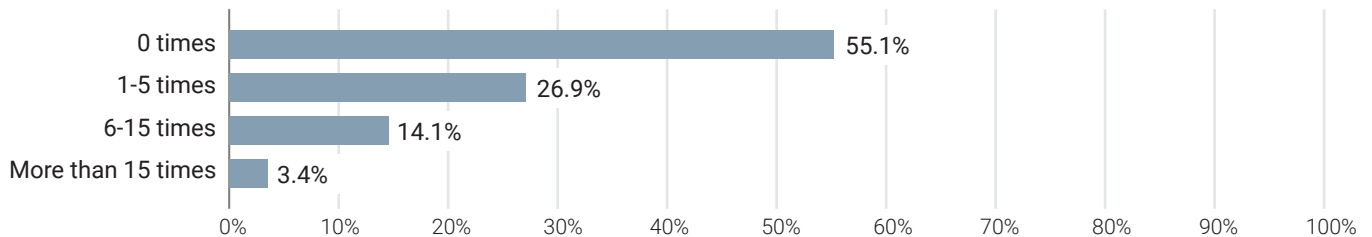
Directors often stand in for absent staff by necessity, taking them away from their leadership and administrative duties. More than two-thirds (67.9%) of management staff report having to fill in more than six times per month to maintain ratios, with just over 44% reporting this occurs more than 11 times per month. This is on par with the overall provincial findings. More than 77% report the need to hire casual staff in the previous 12 months, with 69% stating they are unable to do so (data not shown).

Number of Times per Month Directors/Supervisors Fill in Ratio



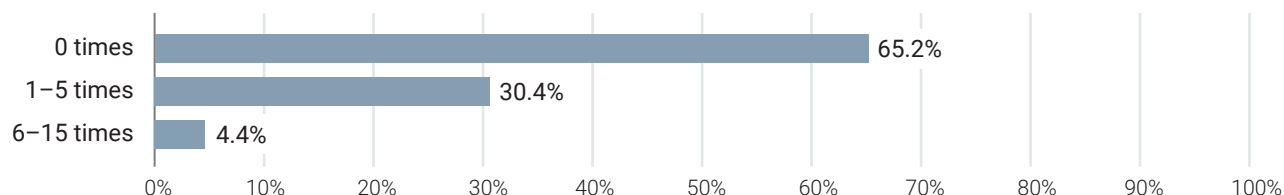
Staff shortages also have deleterious effects on the inclusion of children with disabilities or varying needs. Almost 45% of director/supervisor respondents report they have had to send a child(ren) with a disability home due to staffing shortages. This is higher than the provincial sample average of 26.6%.

Percentage Reporting Frequency of Times in the Previous 12 Months Directors/Supervisors Sent Home Children with Disabilities Due to Staffing Shortages



About 35% of director/supervisor respondents in the North report they have de-enlisted at least one child with a disability from their program in the previous 12 months due to staffing shortages. This is higher than the provincial sample average of 16.5%. Furthermore, 39.3% (compared to 27.3% in provincial findings) report they have refused admission to a child with a disability in the previous 12 months (data not shown).

Percentage Reporting Frequency of Times in the Previous 12 Months Directors/Supervisors Had to De-enlist Children with Disabilities Due to Staffing Shortages



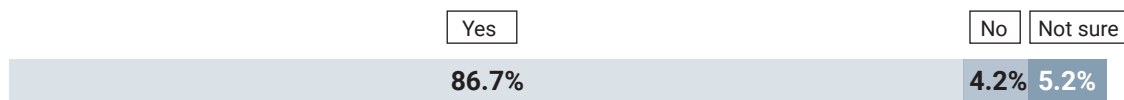
About 61% of *workforce* respondents from Northern Ontario report they would recommend a career in the early years to others who are interested.

Percentage of *Workforce* Respondents that Recommend a Career in the Early Years



About 87% of *workforce* respondents state they would recommend their program to a family member or friend looking for child care.

Percentage of *Workforce* Respondents that Recommend Their Early Years Program to a Family Member or Friend



Note: Total does not equal 100 due to missing data

Professional Development

FORMS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Respondents from Northern Ontario report that the most common form of professional learning in the previous 12 months was online delivery (78%), followed by performance reviews (58.1%) and self-study (56.1%).

Although online delivery is the most common form of professional learning received in the previous 12 months, respondents report it is the least desired format (20%). Respondents prefer ongoing communities of practice (39.1%), attending conferences (38.1%), in-person workshops (36.6%), and taking courses for their continued learning (34.3%), all of which are forms of collective learning.

Forms of Professional Learning Received by Region in the Previous 12 Months and Desired Forms of Professional Learning
Workforce



CONTENT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Overall, less than half of participants in the North report having received equity, inclusion, and diversity professional learning in the previous 12 months. Of those who received training, the most common type of training was supporting children with disabilities (42.7%). Just over one-third received training in anti-bias/anti-racism (36.6%) and cultural diversity in early years settings (35.4%). Only 12.1% received training in supporting newcomer families in the previous 12 months. Participants report the least amount of professional learning in incorporating Afrocentric ways of being (3.8%). Census data for the region help contextualize results.

The most wanted professional learning reported is centred around supporting vulnerable (58.3%) and newcomer (53.3%) families. Participants also report wanting more professional learning focused on critical trauma-informed practice (51.8%), supporting 2LSGBTQIA+ children and families (48.5%), supporting children with disabilities (48%), incorporating Afrocentric ways of being (48.2%), and incorporating land-based learning (46.5%).

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Learning of Respondents in Northern Ontario Workforce

In the previous 12 months

