



## The union advantage in child care: How unionization can help recruitment and retention

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Is unionization a useful strategy for dealing with the problems of recruitment and retention in child care? There is compelling evidence to say that it is. Overall, unionized child care centres have higher quality programs and attract more experienced and better educated early childhood educators (ECEs). Unions support an inclusive, democratic and collective professionalism model. They support affordable education. They are longstanding advocates for women's equality, and a publicly funded child care system. All of these issues speak to some of the broader, interrelated challenges that have affected the sector's ability to attract and keep qualified early childhood educators.

### Workforce and quality issues

A recent study, *Unionization and Quality in Early Childhood Settings*<sup>i</sup>, shows unionized centres pay higher wages than non-unionized ones (8.3% higher for child care teachers). They tend to provide better working conditions, such as paid preparation time and pay for meetings held after hours; and important benefits such as disability insurance, employee top-up of Employment Insurance maternity leave benefits and pensions. Retirement income becomes more important to child care workers as they age, and unions have made some significant recent inroads in this area. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), for example, is developing a multi-sector pension plan for negotiation by small workplaces such as child care centres. Most important, Quebec unions representing child care workers recently negotiated a pension plan for all centre-based employees.<sup>ii</sup>

It's not surprising, then, that the *Unionization and Quality* study also found that:

- ◆ There are lower ECE turnover rates in unionized centres, and more unionized providers expect to be working in child care in three years.
- ◆ Centre directors have an easier time recruiting and retaining staff.
- ◆ Unionized centres act in ways and have characteristics that support high quality programs, and have higher ratings on program quality than non-union centres.

Moreover, the study shows that workplace relationships and staff commitment don't suffer in unionized centres, as some in the sector claim. The study notes there is little difference between directors in unionized and non-unionized centres about their feelings that they and their staff work well together as a team. As well, while a greater proportion of unionized centres have paid preparation time, unionized teaching staff still donate about half a day per week of work (unpaid overtime).

### A way to gain power

Unionization gives child care workers the ability to negotiate improved working conditions (such as manageable workloads and better health and safety protection) that are also directly related to better service provision. It gives providers the right to demand to be heard and recognized both in the workplace and in the union, which is accountable to its members and obligated to represent their interests. This sense of empowerment is important for bargaining in individual centres. But it's also critical to carrying out strategies to improve the economic status and recognition of child care workers. It's especially helpful in a female-dominated sector, where the work is also not highly valued.

### Professionalism, education and training

Unions support a non-elitist and democratic model of professionalism in child care. They have bargained concrete measures that support professionalism, recognition and training. For example, unionized providers are more likely than their non-union counterparts to have contract provisions for

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in-service training and off-site professional development; for payment of registration fees, paid release time and replacements while on professional development; and for paid breaks, paid preparation time, paid overtime and a staff room.

Unionized child care centres tend to demand and attract better trained (two years or more of ECCE) and more experienced workers. Unions also have a strong record of championing affordable, high quality post-secondary training and education<sup>iii</sup>, critical to recruiting more people to ECCE programs.

### **Advocating for better child care**

Unions have a long record of involvement in child care advocacy activities, locally, regionally and nationally.<sup>iv</sup> Many unions have progressive policies on child care, and several have child care committees. Labour also has representatives on the Council of Child Care Advocates of the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada and on the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council.<sup>v</sup> In addition, union members' support for publicly funded, high quality services is strong, thanks to labour's internal initiatives around child care issues.

Labour is keenly aware that core public funding is required to ensure high quality services, and adequate wages and benefits for child care providers. Relying heavily on parent fees to fund the system pits the need for fair compensation against parents' ability to afford or access services. For these reasons, unions have also embarked upon joint campaigns with parents to lobby governments for budget increases and wage grants that address the need for increased wages and benefits while protecting parent fees.

### **Union challenges**

Unions are a good fit for child care, but still have a number of challenges to take up in order to fulfill their potential for making meaningful inroads for workers in the sector:

- ♦ Developing better and more concerted organizing strategies to bring more child care workers into unions, including family child care providers.<sup>vi</sup>
- ♦ Finding better ways to bargain, such as employer councils or coordinated groupings of child care employers. This would make the process more workable than bargaining in individual, small centres, and breakthroughs more attainable.
- ♦ Advocating for increased recognition by becoming more involved in education and training requirements, and professionalism.

### **In this together**

Unionization may not be the only strategy for solving the problems of attracting and keeping good staff in child care. But it certainly has proven to be a very effective way to get measurable results. Unions in child care are here to stay. It would be a shame if the sector viewed this as a negative development instead of working with labour to move forward on the critical issues in child care, especially recruitment and retention.

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This backgrounder is a synthesis of a longer paper with the same title by Jamie Kass; Canadian Labour Congress Representative on the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council and Bozica Costigliola, a labour and child care communications consultant. The paper is one of a series produced by Child Care Connection Nova Scotia as part of their *Attracting and Keeping Qualified Staff in Child Care* project. (2003)

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<sup>i</sup> Doherty, G. (2002). *Unionization and Quality in Early Childhood Programs*. Ottawa: Canadian Union of Public Employees and Visions (Social Development Partnerships Division of Human Resources Development Canada). Until recently, there was little information about the impact of unionization on the sector. This study used raw data collected from two of the three *You Bet I Care! (YBIC!)* studies to do a statistical comparison between unionized and non-unionized child care centres. Much of the information used in this paper draws on the findings of this study, whose principal researcher was Dr. Gillian Doherty, one of the authors of the *YBIC!* series.

<sup>ii</sup> The Confédération des syndicats nationaux, the major union representing child care workers in Québec, and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec negotiated the provincewide pension plan for all centre-based employees with the provincial government and employer groups. This affects more than 20,000 child care workers in the province and will undoubtedly lead to increased rates of retention of qualified staff.

<sup>iii</sup> Many community college instructors, including most ECCE instructors, are unionized.

<sup>iv</sup> Provincial campaigns have run the gamut from active opposition to child care cuts in Ontario and British Columbia, to pushing for operating grants in Manitoba and \$5-a-day child care in Québec.

<sup>v</sup> This is the new name for the Child Care Human Resources Round Table, which will become a Sector Council in the fall of 2003.

<sup>vi</sup> Family child care providers are generally excluded from labour laws because they are considered independent contractors who work for parents. These providers desperately need better compensation and benefits, as well as ongoing support and training to develop their skills and lessen their isolation. In Québec, a landmark Labour Tribunal decision has given family child care providers the legal right to organize and bargain collectively.