



Organizations and unions: Supporting the child care workforce

For the child care workforce, gaining more respect and improving wages are two critical related factors: recognition helps mobilize support for the funding needed to get higher wages, and higher wages increase recognition. What can the workforce do to achieve these two important goals? A look at other well respected and better paid care and education professions shows three important strategies that have produced results: professionalization, unionization and advocacy.

The majority of child care staff and family child care providers do not belong to organizations or unions. Yet affiliation does matter. Professional organizations promote the occupation, participate in policy dialogue and support the quality of services provided by their members. Unions provide members of the workforce with an organization that can negotiate for better wages, benefits and working conditions, and seek other improvements to the sector. Advocacy organizations develop broad public support and understanding of child care issues.

Child care organizations

Professionalization

Child care organizations that support professionalization provide access to collegial networking, topical and timely sector information and professional development opportunities. They produce print- and web-based resources to support best practice and are often involved in research projects around resource and program development that support quality child care services. They promote respect and recognition of the workforce and undertake activities that contribute to professionalization, such as developing occupational standards, providing leadership training, promoting accreditation of services and certifying practitioners.

The Canadian Child Care Federation (www.cccf-fcsge.ca) is the pan-Canadian child care organization supporting professionalization of the field. It has 21 provincial/territorial organizations as affiliate organization members. Its mission is to achieve excellence in early learning and child care through best and promising practice; capacity building; and networks, collaborations and partnerships.

Advocacy

The advocacy efforts of child care organizations have helped to raise the public profile and broaden the circle of support for early childhood education and care in Canada, especially during the recent period of heightened government commitment to the issue. The main message of advocates is that children and families should have access to high quality child care programs and that the workforce should be recognized as a critical component of these programs. Advocacy organizations monitor child care policy and legislation, develop policy alternatives for governments, and conduct public campaigns on policy and funding issues. The Child Care Advocacy Association is the pan-Canadian organization that focuses on advocacy issues (www.childcareadvocacy.ca). Its mission is to promote comprehensive, inclusive, affordable, high quality and non-profit child care accessible to all. The organization brings together the diverse voices of parents, caregivers, researchers and students; and women's, anti-poverty, labour, social justice, disability and rural organizations.

Affiliation

About 15,000 individuals who work in child care are affiliated with a child care organization. Membership in these organizations is typically voluntary. Most organizations rely on project funding, the efforts of volunteers and



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membership fees. Fees vary according to the size and scope of the organization. Even when minimal, fees can be unaffordable for low paid child care workers. The lack of funding limits the ability of these organizations to maintain an organizational infrastructure and carry out their work. Nonetheless, the reach of these organizations far exceeds their membership since they often make information and resources available to both members and non-members.

Unions

Unionization¹ has played a critical role in improving the economic situation, training opportunities and working environment of the child care workforce. The labour movement also has a 30-year history of campaigns and political action to promote high quality, universal, inclusive and accessible child care, linking it to good wages, benefits and working conditions and non-profit delivery.

Where there is a high union density in the child care workforce, the gains for staff have been greatest and even non-union staff have benefited. In Quebec, for example, a relatively high percentage of the child care workforce is unionized (30%) and wages have increased for all of the sector's workers, whether or not they belong to unions. The province now has a working committee comprised of government, unions and the employer organization to address pay equity, wages and benefits.

Organizing

About 35,500 members of the regulated child care workforce belong to unions. Interest in unionization in the sector is growing, although organizing child care workers is a challenge. Child care centres tend to have few employees, and a community can have numerous centres. Organizing centre-by-centre requires more of a

union's resources and time. Some child care staff believe unionization would change the close relationship they have with their managers. As well, managers may pressure staff to resist joining a union. Unions also know it's difficult to make economic gains in a sector where wages depend on parents' ability to pay. In spite of these challenges, there have been recent organizing successes in the sector in some provinces. The major unions representing child care workers in Canada are the Canadian Union of Public Employees (www.cupe.ca), the National Union of Public and General Employees (www.nupge.ca) and the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (www.csn.qc.ca).

The way forward

Professional organizations, unions and advocacy groups are increasingly joining together in their efforts to improve the working environment for the workforce and increase their membership and reach. By linking professionalization, unionization and advocacy strategies they are helping to address wages and working conditions, skills development and recognition challenges in the child care sector more effectively.

Working for Change

The information in this backgrounder comes from the 2004 labour market update study, *Working for Change: Canada's Child Care Workforce*. The study provides a profile of those who work in regulated child care and points the way to solutions for addressing critical labour shortages. The study was commissioned by the Child Care Human Resources Sector Council (CCHRSC).

¹ Almost all unionized child care staff in Canada are centre-based. Family child care providers in only one agency in Ontario are members of a union.