

---

# The National Child Care Advocacy Assembly 2023

---

Greg Wilcox

---

In November I had the opportunity to join early childhood educators, advocates, and allies from across the country for the National Child Care Advocacy Assembly in Ottawa. Organized by Child Care Now, delegates joined in person and online, with the purpose to work together to renew our advocacy strategy from now until 2026.

As a certified early childhood educator, student, and an employee of ECEBC, I was bringing a variety of concerns, hopes, and perspectives, all grounded in the knowledge that early learning and child care (ELCC) is complex and vital work that plays a critical role in shaping our society.

Organizations in attendance included the Canadian Child Care Federation, the Child Care Resource and Research Unit, and the Nishnawbe Aski Nation representing 49 First Nations from across Northern Ontario. BC was also strongly represented, with delegates from ECEBC, the Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC, Families in Film, and Métis Nation BC.

The first day started out with a panel discussion on the current state of ELCC in Canada with Morna Ballantyne, executive director of Child Care Now; Susan Prentice, professor of sociology at the University of Manitoba; and Martha Friendly, executive director of Child Care Resource and Research Unit.

Panelists celebrated the historic investment by the federal government in 2021 of \$27 billion over five years, as well as the widespread reduction in parent fees and the expansion of child care spaces that resulted. There was also clear acknowledgment that much work still needs to be done and a sense of urgency around making as much progress as possible before the next federal election.

Morna called recent successes “a demonstration of what can be done,” but she warned that further progress is at risk “unless we are unified.” Susan spoke to the importance of any National Child Care system being public, saying that “If we want a high quality and inclusive system, we have to get child care off the market.” Martha took aim at the workforce crisis, saying that “You can’t expand child care, or even maintain what we’ve got, unless you have a qualified workforce that wants to work in it.”

Energized and inspired by the opening panel, delegates spent the rest of the morning in small groups discussing the successes the child care movement has achieved since the 2021 federal budget, as well as the major challenges it faces between now and 2026.

Successes highlighted included the widespread reduction of parent fees, the growth in available child care spaces, an increased awareness of the importance of ELCC; and *some*



*Simal Iftikhar (Compass ELC), Greg Wilcox (ECEBC) and Kristy Hankila (Nishnawbe Aski Nation).*

improvement in the rate of pay for early childhood educators. There was also a strong sense of a child care movement building across the country and optimism that some of the recent successes may soon be embedded into legislation via Bill C-35.

Challenges included low pay, high ratios, and poor working conditions, as well as related issues around recruitment and retention. The fact that not all families have benefited from recent successes was also raised, with existing inequities continuing to undermine those with diverse needs, who live in rural and remote areas, and who are Indigenous. Additional concerns included

---

that ELCC continues to be viewed as a service rather than a public good, with very little discussion about what “quality” is or should mean.

Toward the end of the first day, we were joined by Michelle Latimore and Karen Hall, members of the Federal Secretariat on Early Learning and Child Care, who spoke about their role in helping to build a Canada-wide ELCC system. This provided a rare opportunity to hear about behind-the-scenes efforts to negotiate bilateral agreements with provinces and territories and sparked much discussion about transparency, equity, and accountability.

Day two shifted toward discussions around policy priorities and creating strategies to make them happen. Drawn from our discussions on day one, three key policy demands were identified.

1. Access to publicly funded low-fee ELCC must be expanded and made more equitable.
2. Public operation funding for providers/operators in Canada-wide ELCC must be increased and set at levels that reflect the true cost of high quality ELCC.
3. Support the distinct policy demands of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nation peoples and communities.

Discussions on strategy touched upon everything from addressing equity issues and building relationships within and outside of our sector to finding ways to better share skills, knowledge, and resources. The importance of pressuring provincial governments was also a strong theme, while many delegates spoke of the need to make gatherings such as these more accessible.

**There was a clear interest among those in attendance to continue collaborating. As delegates mingled and exchanged contacts, there was a definite buzz of excitement in the air, and while many spoke of feeling exhausted after two big days, there was also a sense of energy, hope, and optimism.**

We were next joined by the Honourable Jenna Sudds, the Federal Minister for Families, Children, and Social Development, who praised the efforts of ELCC advocates in pressuring the government to take action. Minister Sudds also congratulated those who have played an active role in helping to push through legislative changes, such as Bill C-35, via Senate Standing Committee appearances.

Minister Sudds reaffirmed her government’s commitment to ELCC, declaring that “ECEs are the cornerstone of this Canada-wide system.” However, she also reminded the audience that ELCC is a provincial jurisdiction and therefore, more pressure is required to ensure that provinces and territories are upholding their commitments.

The assembly wrapped up with discussion around next steps for the child care movement and there was a clear interest among those in attendance to continue collaborating. As delegates mingled and exchanged contacts, there was a definite buzz of excitement in the air, and while many spoke of feeling exhausted after two big days, there was also a sense of energy, hope, and optimism.

I left feeling inspired and energized, with a deeper perspective, a greater

appreciation for the work being done, and a strong desire to build on connections made.

Thank you to Child Care Now for hosting such an amazing event and thanks to ECEBC for supporting me in taking part. It was another wonderful example of the importance of standing strong together.

*Greg Wilcox is a program assistant for ECEBC and is currently completing his degree in ECCE at Capilano University.*