



INCLUSION & ACCESS PATHWAY FOR EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE (ELCC)

PREPARED FOR THE CITY OF BRANTFORD

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

In response to Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework 2023, this report presents the outcomes of a comprehensive environmental scan conducted for the City of Brantford Children's Services and Early Years, as the service system manager for child care and early learning for the City of Brantford and County of Brant. The objective was to assess and enhance inclusion and access in Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) settings, focusing on equity-deserving communities, including Black, Francophone, Indigenous, other racialized and newcomer groups, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, low-income families and children with special needs.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Changing Demographics and Evolving Needs:** The demographic shifts in the City of Brantford and County of Brant and the surrounding areas have led to evolving needs in ELCC, particularly for diverse and underserved populations. In the aftermath of the pandemic, families are experiencing unique economic pressures and educators report that children have enhanced learning needs.
- **Staffing Challenges:** Sector-wide staffing pressures continue to impact the local ELCC landscape. Opportunities exist in fostering recruitment and retention of new grads, but there are administrative barriers for international students and newcomer educators related to permanent residency in Ontario.
- **Workplace Culture:** Workplace culture, professional development and cultural competence vary widely across sites. When ELCC programming is attached to larger organizations, operators and staff have enhanced institutional and policy support, as well as comprehensive professional development focused on advancing inclusion and access.
- **Inconsistencies in Service Delivery:** While there are pockets of service excellence at specific sites, service access and inclusion for equity-deserving families varies across sites. The centralized waitlist remains a challenge to new arrivals to the City of Brantford and County of Brant area, many of whom are new immigrants and refugees.
- **Successes and Strengths:** Notable strengths include existing partnerships and resource networks. Examples of excellence in advancing inclusion in ELCC locally include: an award-winning collaboration between St. Gabriel's EarlyON and the Brantford Immigration Partnership as well as a Six Nations-led child care site at Clarence Street, and ongoing support from Resource Consultants at Lansdowne Children's Centre who enhance classroom accessibility across ELCC providers. There is an opportunity to further leverage these partnerships and resource networks across the municipality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following key recommendations are proposed:

1. **Comprehensive Equity and Inclusion Strategies:** Implement actionable equity, diversity, and inclusion strategies integrated into the strategic plans and policies of ELCC providers, with implementation support.
2. **Standardize Child Care Access through OneList:** Ensure consistent and equitable access policies for licensed child care, aligning with Ministry standards and the CWELCC agreement.
3. **Strengthen Community Engagement and Partnerships:** Foster partnerships with local organizations representing equity-deserving groups to enhance collaborative programming and community involvement in ELCC services.
4. **Expand Workforce Planning Efforts:** Advance strategies to attract and retain diverse ELCC educators, emphasizing competitive compensation, supportive environments, and workforce diversity reflective of community languages and cultures
5. **Enhance Language Support and Multilingualism:** Promote multilingual environments in ELCC settings, with bilingual staff and resources, to cater to families' diverse linguistic needs.
6. **Support Special Needs and Mental Health Services:** Strengthen collaborations with specialized providers to integrate accessible special needs and mental health services within ELCC settings.
7. **Expand Professional Learning Opportunities:** Invest in comprehensive professional development focusing on cultural competence and inclusive practices, tailored to support equity-deserving groups.
8. **Engage in Continuous Improvement and Evaluation:** Establish a continuous improvement culture in ELCC services, using self-assessment tools and data-driven methods to regularly evaluate and enhance inclusivity and accessibility.

CONCLUSION

This report highlights the current efforts towards inclusion and access in ELCC City of Brantford and County of Brant. Implementing these recommendations will require deliberate, sustained efforts and a collaborative approach, involving various stakeholders, to ensure that all children and families have equal opportunities to benefit from early learning and child care services in the region.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE FOR THE PATHWAY

In June 2023, the Province of Ontario released a new policy framework, "Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework 2023," under the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiative. This framework underscores a commitment to enhancing Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) across the province, with a strong focus on accessibility, participation, belonging, and equity.

As the Consolidated Municipal Services Manager (CMSM) for both the City of Brantford and County of Brant, the City holds the responsibility for ensuring accountability for the CWELCC program. This role is crucial to aligning with the mandates set forth in the service agreement with the Province of Ontario. The framework presents a unique opportunity to develop initiatives that effectively meet the needs of diverse and underserved populations, including low-income families, Francophone, Indigenous, Black and racialized, and newcomer communities, as well as vulnerable children and those with special needs.

This work is particularly important in the current climate with a changing demographic in the region and evolving needs of families and children in the aftermath of the pandemic.

2.2 PROJECT OVERVIEW AND PURPOSE

This report summarizes the findings of a comprehensive environmental scan undertaken by external consultants. The purpose of this exercise was to critically assess the current landscape of inclusion and accessibility within licensed childcare and early years programs in the City of Brantford and County of Brant. Our objectives were to:

- Understand the Present State: The scan was intended to highlight existing inclusion and accessibility efforts and strategies in current licensed child care and early learning programs. This involved reviewing programming practices and existing equity plans, as well as understanding the experiences of current operators, educators and families.
- Identify Gaps and Opportunities: The scan sought to uncover systemic barriers to access and to pinpoint areas where enhancements are necessary. The focus of the scan was to understand the specific needs and challenges of diverse groups.
- Develop Actionable Strategies: This Pathway outlines specific strategies and recommendations to foster a more inclusive and accessible environment for diverse children, families and staff. It considers the diverse needs of the populations served and aims to bridge the gaps identified in the current system.
- Create an Assessment Tool: Alongside the Pathway, a self-assessment tool was designed to measure progress and ensure the continual progression towards inclusion and access in local childcare and early learning services

This report details the findings of our environmental scan and presents the Pathway, along with the evaluation tool, to guide the City of Brantford and County of Brant towards a future where every child and family experiences a welcoming, inclusive, and accessible early learning environment.

2.3 KEY DEFINITIONS

To support a shared understanding of the report contents, here are definitions of key terms used in this document.

Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC)

ELCC refers to programs and services designed to support the development of children from infancy through the early school years. It encompasses a range of services including childcare, pre-kindergarten programs, and early learning initiatives (EarlyON), all aimed at fostering the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of young children.

Accessibility

Accessibility in ELCC means creating environments where all children can learn and play, by removing physical and systemic barriers such as transportation, space limitations, and language obstacles. It emphasizes readiness to support all children from the start through diverse, inclusive teaching methods.

Participation and Belonging

This principle focuses on enabling children to actively participate in all activities, fostering a sense of belonging and connection. It involves inclusive policies and practices that make every child and family feel valued, heard, and fully integrated into the community.

Equity

Equity ensures that all children receive what they need to succeed, particularly by removing barriers that might disadvantage some groups. It entails tailoring programs to the diverse backgrounds of children and their families and providing varying levels of support based on individual needs.

Equity-Deserving Communities

Equity-deserving communities refer to groups who face significant barriers to full and fair access to resources, opportunities, and participation due to systemic inequities. In the context of ELCC, this includes, but is not limited to, Black, Francophone, Indigenous, other racialized and newcomer communities, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, as well as vulnerable children and those with special needs. These are also referred to as 'equity priority groups' in this report.



3. METHODOLOGY

OVERVIEW

This report is based on a comprehensive environmental scan conducted to assess the state of inclusion and accessibility in Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) within the City of Brantford and County of Brant. The methodology was designed to gather insights from a wide range of sources, ensuring a thorough understanding of the current landscape and the experiences of various stakeholders in ELCC.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data was collected throughout November 2023 using:

- **Literature Review and Document Analysis:** Reviewed existing literature, local inclusion plans, and previous studies related to ELCC, with a focus on equity, inclusion and access.
- **Interviews:** Conducted structured interviews with ELCC operators, community partners, and key stakeholders. These interviews provided in-depth insights into the experiences, challenges, and perspectives of those directly involved in ELCC.
- **Site Visits:** Visited several ELCC centers to observe the physical environments, play materials, and the overall inclusivity of the spaces.
- **Surveys, Focus Group and On-Site Engagement:** Surveys (families and staff), a focus group (for staff) and on-site engagement with a broader range of stakeholders, including families utilizing ELCC services, operators, educators and ECE students. Together these methods gathered quantitative and qualitative data on the effectiveness of current practices and the perceived barriers to inclusion and accessibility.

TOTAL ENGAGEMENT BY THE NUMBERS

Engagement Tool	Engagement Numbers
Staff Survey	39 respondents
Interviews with Operators and Community Partners	6 participants
Staff Focus Groups	5 participants
Families Survey	92 respondents
Informal Conversations with Families	12
Site Visits	8 (including full day child care, before/after care, and EarlyON)

4. CURRENT STATE OF INCLUSION AND ACCESS

4.1 OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS FROM ENGAGEMENT

The overall findings from the engagement efforts in the City of Brantford and County of Brant's ELCC settings underscore the profound commitment to and importance of equity, inclusion and access efforts. Stakeholders, including child care operators and community partners, emphasize that "all children have a right to education" and stress the need to support their early learning inclusively. This sentiment is particularly poignant in light of the changing demographics and the aftermath of the pandemic, which created a "a whole new world" in terms of service needs. There is a growing awareness of educational and health disparities rooted in systemic barriers and colonial structures. This recognition is driving efforts to enhance understanding of systemic oppression, injustice and access issues, and how these influence child care and early learning.

A strong connection is made to pedagogical approaches like family-centered, culturally-specific, and strength-based models, aligning well with the principles of inclusion and access. These approaches foster environments where curiosity leads learning and where every child's needs are met. There is an emerging consensus on the importance of addressing biases from an early age, highlighting the critical role of educators in modeling positive behaviors and values. The field of early childhood education is experiencing a positive shift, gaining more recognition and undergoing systemic changes that reflect a deeper understanding of the significance of equity and inclusion. As one staff member noted in the survey, "We are on a learning journey," indicating a collective movement towards a more inclusive, child-centered, and interest-driven approach in early learning and child care. While many expressed a strong commitment to equity efforts in ELCC, there are opportunities to enhance consistency in service delivery in align with best practices in inclusion and access.

Highlights of Survey Findings: Families

Family Survey Participation

Respondents came from 22 different sites across the City of Brantford and County of Brant. Participants indicated the utilizing the following ELCC services:



ELCC Service	# of Respondents	Most Represented Sites
Full Day Child Care	44	Wee Watch, Banbury
Before/After Care	29	Boys and Girls Club, Holy Family, Banbury, Sacred Heart, YMCA
EarlyON	40	Bell Lane, Family Resource Centre, St. Gabriel's, Mount Pleasant, Madonna Della Libera

Where Respondents Access Services

Location of Services	# of Respondents
City of Brantford	77
County of Brant	21

Participation of Equity Priority Groups

When asked if the caregiver or child identified with any of the equity-deserving priority groups defined for this project (check all that apply), the responses were as follows:

Equity Priority Group	# of Survey Respondents
Black	5
Person of Colour	5
Indigenous	4
Newcomer	3
Person with Disabilities/Special Needs	7
LGBTQ2S+	1
Francophone	0
None of the Above	76
Prefer Not to Say	5

Note that families from equity priority groups were underrepresented in this survey. It is therefore recommended that more targeted outreach is conducted to ensure that the perspectives and needs of these families and children are understood and responded to.

Highlights of Survey Responses

Prompt	Agree/Strongly Agree
Our site <i>serves</i> a variety of children from diverse families.	66%
Educators at our site adapt services to ensure the full participation of diverse children and families.	76%
The educators at our site reflect the diversity of the families at the site.	78%
Our site is easily accessible for our family.	83%
The site offers programs, materials, and activities that my child understands and can take part in.	88%
Our site recognizes holidays and celebrations that are important to my family.	86%
My child has the opportunity to participate fully in all activities at our site.	91%
I have opportunities to give feedback about programming at the site.	68%

Overall, respondents were more likely to agree that their site is accessible to their families and meeting the participation needs of their children. They were likely to agree that their sites served a diversity of families or that they had an opportunity to give feedback about programming. Once again, due to the underrepresentation of families from equity priority groups, it is not known if these findings are generalizable.

Highlights of Survey Findings: Staff

Staff Roles Represented

Role	# of Survey Respondents
Educator	25
Manager/Supervisor	4
Director	3
Home Visitor	2
Resource Consultant	2
Assistant	1
Receptionist	1
Coordinator	1

ELCC Service Area

ELCC Service	# of Survey Respondents
Before/After Care	11
Full Day	20
EarlyON	12
Licensed Home Child Care	2

Location of Staff

Location	# of Survey Respondents
City of Brantford	24
County of Brant	17

Participation of Equity Priority Groups

When asked if staff participants identified with any of the equity-deserving priority groups defined for this project, the responses were as follows:

Equity Priority Group	# of Survey Respondents
Black	3
Person of Colour	4
Indigenous	5
Newcomer	3
Person with Disabilities/Special Needs	3
LGBTQ2S+	0
Francophone	3
None of the Above	26
Prefer Not to Say	4

Note that staff from equity priority groups were underrepresented in this survey. It is therefore recommended that targeted more outreach is necessary to ensure that the perspectives of equity deserving staff and educators are more fully captured and understood.

Workplace Culture

The following prompts were adapted from the Garner Inclusion Index (Romansky et al., 2021) as a means to capture indicators of workplace inclusion. Overall respondents endorsed a high level of trust and communication within their organizations, but were less likely to agree that their leaders were as diverse as the broader workforce compared to other prompts. One again, since there were low numbers of equity priority staff who completed the survey, further engagement would be necessary to better understand the specific needs.

Prompt	Agree/Strongly Agree
Fair treatment: Employees at our site are rewarded and recognized fairly for their contributions.	79%
Integrating differences: Employees at our site respect and value each other's opinions.	79%
Decision-making: Leadership and staff fairly consider ideas and suggestions offered by employees at all levels.	82%
Psychological safety: I feel welcome to express my true self/feelings at work.	77%
Trust: Communication we receive from leadership is honest and open.	95%
Belonging: People at our site care about me.	92%
Diversity: Our site hires and supports diverse staff.	82%
Representation: Leaders at our site are as diverse as the broader workforce.	56%

Service Delivery

Prompt	Agree/Strongly Agree
Our site serves a variety of children from diverse families.	85%
Our site adapts services to ensure the full participation of diverse children and families.	90%
Our educators are provided sufficient professional development to respond to the needs of diverse children and families.	62%
Our site excels in serving children with special needs.	69%
Our site excels in serving LGBTQ2S+ families.	67%
Our site excels in serving newcomer children and families.	77%
Our site excels in serving Francophone children and families.	38%
Our site excels in serving Indigenous children and families.	79%
Our site excels in serving Black children and families.	87%
Our site excels in serving vulnerable children.	87%
On our site, we have sufficient materials and books that meet the needs and reflect the experiences of diverse children and families.	64%
We are able to meet the language needs of all the families we serve.	33%
The food in our sites meets the needs of diverse children and families.	56%
Our site consistently acknowledges celebrations and holidays observed by diverse children and families.	59%

Overall, staff respondents strongly endorsed the statements about their sites serving and adapting to the needs of a wide range of families. When prompted about specific priority groups, respondents were on average less likely to say that their sites excelled in serving Francophone, LGBTQ2S+ and children with special needs, compared to other groups. The responses indicate that some sites may require additional support with consistency with respect to food, holiday celebrations, and meeting language needs. Elsewhere in the survey, respondents indicated specific requests for professional learning related to cultural celebrations, meeting language and communication needs, equity and anti-racism, nonviolent crisis intervention, and training on culturally appropriate child development milestones.

4.2 CHANGING NEEDS AND DEMOGRAPHICS IN THE CITY OF BRANTFORD AND COUNTY OF BRANT

The demographic landscape of City of Brantford and County of Brant has undergone significant changes, impacting Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) needs and services. In 2021, the city's population reached 104,688, marking a growth rate of 6.21% since 2016, which surpasses both provincial and national averages (City of Brantford and Economic Development, n.d.). This trend has continued post-census, with community partners and ELCC operators noting increasingly diverse children and families accessing services. The Brantford Immigration Partnership (BIP) attributes much of this growth to secondary migration of newcomers initially settling in the Greater Toronto Area. According to BIP, recent requests for translation services indicate a rise in languages such as Punjabi, Arabic, Aramaic, Urdu, Spanish, French, Ukrainian, and Russian. Additionally, there's been a notable increase in Tamil, Punjabi, Nigerian, Jamaican, Latin American, and French-speaking newcomers from Senegal and Congo. These demographic shifts require an evolution for ELCC services, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive care, multilingual program offerings, and targeted community engagement strategies to ensure inclusive and equitable access for all families in the region.

The engagement efforts in the City of Brantford and County of Brant's ELCC settings reveal a critical observation: the existing system is struggling to keep pace with the rapidly evolving needs of families, particularly those new to the area from larger cities. As the demographics shift, with an influx of newcomers and families from urban centers, there is a growing mismatch between the expectations of these families and the available services, both in terms of service availability as well as quality and responsiveness of services to diverse families. This situation underscores the urgent need for a responsive and flexible approach in ELCC to effectively meet the diverse needs of a changing population.

4.3 STAFFING AND WORKFORCE CONTEXT

One of the biggest gifts and strengths of the childcare system are the human resources, the educators.
– Child Care Operator, Focus Group

The staffing experiences within the City of Brantford and County of Brant's Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) sector mirror a province-wide challenge marked by inadequate staffing and high turnover rates. The pandemic exacerbated these issues, with staff facing increased stress due to intensified public health demands, coupled with a lack of connection to peers and recognition for their emergency response efforts. Notably, a local professional development day last year revealed a concerning trend: half of the 400 educators in attendance

had only been in the field for 0-5 years, indicative of the rapid turnover and a workforce largely trained during pandemic restrictions which limited learning opportunities.

Key factors contributing to this staffing crisis include low wages and a general undervaluing of the profession both socially and internally. The sector struggles to hire and retain a diverse workforce, with international students and new graduates often migrating to other cities or provinces for better opportunities or expedited permanent residency status. At some sites, there may be a cultural divide between long-time City of Brantford and County of Brant educators and newer educators who are frequently international students and newer graduates. Additionally, educators with substantial experience but without Registered Early Childhood Educator (RECE) certification find themselves earning less than their newly graduated counterparts. The high turnover and constant need to address basic ECE requirements have led to a challenging environment for both staff and supervisors, who are also grappling with the extra layer of advancing equity and inclusion initiatives. As one child care operator poignantly reflected during a focus group, "Educators are rising to the occasion, but at what cost?" This sentiment underscores the need for systemic change to support and sustain the workforce effectively.

4.4 SUPPORTING DIVERSE EDUCATORS

Supporting diverse educators in Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) is not just a matter of fairness or equity; it's a strategic imperative. The recruitment and retention of a diverse workforce present a viable solution to the staffing crisis that has become a province-wide challenge in the ELCC sector, particularly in the post-pandemic landscape. In the City of Brantford and County of Brant, there is a clear recognition among operators, educators, and community partners of the need to attract and retain educators from various backgrounds, including international students and recent graduates. This approach not only addresses the immediate staffing shortage but also enriches the learning environment with diverse perspectives and experiences.

However, challenges persist. A significant concern among staff and educators is the representation at some sites. Namely, educators sometimes do not reflect the diversity of the families they serve. While some sites report more than 50% of educators from newcomer backgrounds, other sites report that all educators are white. Educators from diverse backgrounds are highly valued by families and seen as bringing essential perspectives and skills to their roles. This discrepancy underscores the importance of diverse representation among staff to better serve a varied community.

*As much as I don't want to say it,
racism still exists in our community.*

– Community partner, Interview

We need to have a diverse workforce, but we also need to support diverse educators in our workplaces to not be subject to microaggressions and overt racism from their coworkers.

– EarlyON supervisor, Focus Group

Instances of discrimination have been reported against racialized educators, both in workplaces and in home care settings where parents play an active role selecting care providers. This issue underscores the need for ongoing efforts to foster a more supportive environment for all educators and tackle racism in the broader community, which is crucial for the overall health of the ELCC sector in the City of Brantford and County of Brant. This work requires a deep, systemic approach that actively combats discrimination and promotes equity at every level.

4.5 SERVICE DELIVERY AND ACCESS

In the City of Brantford and County of Brant's ELCC settings, service delivery and access present a complex picture marked by both excellence and inconsistency. While there are pockets of excellence in certain service areas, a lack of uniformity is observed across various sites, especially concerning equity and inclusion strategy and policy, staff cultural competence, diverse representation in educators and leadership. ELCC centers attached to larger institutions, such as school boards or other large organizations, often benefit from more robust support systems, enabling them to be more strategic in implementing inclusive practices and policies. In contrast, providers not affiliated with larger organizations, particularly privately owned child care centers, frequently lack access to the same resources, knowledge, and networks crucial for fostering an equity-focused environment. This gap highlights a need for more uniform standards and training across all sites, regardless of their organizational affiliations.

We work to create very open and welcoming spaces for staff and visitors. Representation in documentation, art, books, for people of colour, sexual orientations, gender, etc. Opportunities for learning and growth are constantly shared and encouraged.

– Educator, EarlyON, Survey

*As a small nonprofit,
we don't have resources like a school board... so we are behind.*

– Child Care Operator, Focus Group

*I worry because, at the end of the day,
we are all serving the same families.*
– EarlyON supervisor, Interview

Access to services is another critical area of concern. The City's centralized child care registry, One List, is crucial to consistently tracking families' service needs locally. However, the long waitlists and lack of awareness about the One List in some communities resulted in inequitable access, with new Canadians frequently placed at the bottom due to their recent arrival in the City of Brantford and County of Brant area. This situation is exacerbated by the rapidly changing local demographics and the lack of clear, equitable prioritization standards. While some sites offer priority seats, such as Clarence Street's focus on urban Indigenous and Six Nations participants, this practice is not uniformly applied across all centers or for other equity-deserving priority groups. The application and follow-up process for families is often burdensome and would benefit from enhanced standardization while balancing equity needs.

5. SPECIFIC COMMUNITY NEEDS AND RESPONSES

5.1 SERVICE DELIVERY FOR DIVERSE POPULATIONS

This section delves into the diverse needs and tailored responses for various equity-deserving populations within ELCC services. It encompasses a range of groups, including newcomer, Black and racialized, Indigenous, Francophone, LGBTQ2S+, families with special needs, as well as vulnerable and low-income families. Each subsection will provide a brief overview of the unique needs and best practices known for these populations within ELCC, as well as local efforts to enhance inclusive, supportive, and equitable service delivery for these distinct communities.

5.2 NEWCOMER COMMUNITIES

Newcomer families, those who have arrived in Canada within the last five years, face unique challenges in navigating the ELCC landscape. These challenges stem from a range of sources, such as barriers to service access, socioeconomic and language challenges, as well as cultural differences in child development expectations. ELCC providers are often a first point of contact with formal institutions in Canada - this can be important, however, providers do not always recognize their unique social and cultural capital (Massing et al., 2020). A recent study reveals that families with precarious immigration status face significant barriers to child care (Bernhard et al., 2023). Other research emphasizes a need for enhanced trauma-informed practices in ELCC settings serving newcomers (Fakhari et al., 2023), as well as attention to access and inclusion needs including translation services, fostering multilingualism in classrooms, employing diverse educators, and incorporating culturally reflective materials, celebrations, and food, as guided by the “Mirrors and Windows” framework (Bishop, 1990).

*The educator accepts us with no questions,
offers the same (to) the rest of families.*
– Newcomer caregiver, Survey

*Some sites are better than others
at being aware of diverse families and making them feel welcome.*
– 2SLGBTQ+ Caregiver, Survey

The City has seen a significant increase in newcomer families, often arriving through secondary migration from the GTA. ELCC providers in the City of Brantford and County of Brant express varying degrees of confidence in meeting the specific needs of these families. While some have adapted practices effectively, others face challenges, particularly in supporting multilingual communication and classroom materials due to limited resources. Newcomer families often express appreciation for educators who reflect their children's identities and

languages and value the shared experiences with other caregivers on site. EarlyON sites, such as 30 Bell Lane, are recognized for their diversity and high attendance by newcomers, largely attributed to word-of-mouth recommendations. This site and many others have benefited from the community engagement efforts of the City of Brantford, County of Brant and Brantford Immigration Partnership (BIP).

Other ELCC centers are exploring various interventions, such as translation apps, to enhance cross-language communication. There is also a call for more structured support around diverse holiday celebrations, including the provision of calendars and resources, and the need for more funding for culturally inclusive materials and activities. Website enhancements and continued social media outreach are suggested to improve communication with newcomer families. Additionally, there's an emphasis on the need for policy flexibility, particularly in allowing absences for cultural celebrations without penalization, especially for subsidized clients. Lastly, child care waitlists pose a systemic barrier to newcomer families, who frequently appear "at the bottom of the list" due to their recent arrival in the City of Brantford and County of Brant. There is a need for structured outreach and engagement strategies to better serve newcomer populations across all sites.

5.3 BLACK AND RACIALIZED COMMUNITIES

Black and racialized children and families often face unique challenges within ELCC settings, influenced by broader societal issues of systemic racism and discrimination. These challenges can manifest as barriers to equitable access to quality care, representation within educational materials, and culturally responsive practices. Additionally, there is often a lack of awareness among some ELCC providers about the specific cultural, social, and emotional needs of these groups. A recent study on Black families in Canadian ELCC settings found that children as young as 18 months can experience othering and racial violence (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). The need for anti-racist education and practices within ELCC settings is crucial to address biases and create an inclusive environment where all children feel valued (Kissi & Ewan, 2023). There have been calls for required preservice training for ELCC professionals to ensure an anti-racist approach, particularly with regard to anti-Black racism. (Anti-Racism ECE Ontario, n.d.)

In addition, the collection of race-based demographic data within educational settings such as school boards is seen as crucial to understanding and addressing race-based disparities (Government of Ontario, 2018). This practice is growing provincially in some educational settings, but is lagging in others. In addition, the recruitment and retention of Black and racialized educators is important to reflect equitable hiring practices, but also as an intervention to enhance educational outcomes for Black and racialized students (James & Turner, 2017). This includes representation of Black and racialized individuals in leadership positions. The College of ECEs is conducting the groundwork to implement race-based data collection of its members (College of ECE, 2023).

In the City of Brantford and County of Brant, providers have recognized the need to better serve Black and racialized communities, yet there are gaps in effectively meeting their diverse needs. While some efforts have been made towards inclusion and representation, such as integrating diverse books and cultural materials into the curriculum, more comprehensive approaches are needed. Some providers attached to larger organizations have institutional support to expose anti-racism training, strategies and policy work, which is often lacking among smaller providers.

Racialized families in the City of Brantford and County of Brant have expressed a desire for more educators who reflect their own backgrounds, emphasizing the importance of children seeing themselves represented in their caregivers and learning environments. However, there is a noted discrepancy in the level of cultural competency and anti-racist practices across different ELCC sites. Some educators and providers have demonstrated a commitment to understanding and celebrating diverse cultures, but consistent application of these practices is lacking. In addition, at least one Black caregiver noted:

I notice some other children treat [my children] differently.

– Black Caregiver, Survey

The need for professional development in anti-racist education and inclusive practices has been highlighted by local ELCC staff. There is also a call for more community engagement and partnerships to better understand and address the unique needs of Black and racialized families.

5.4 INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Indigenous children and families have distinct needs and rights concerning education, particularly in ELCC settings. Educational leaders should strive to be highly attuned to the needs of Indigenous families and communities, especially given the history of residential schools and the resulting harm inflicted upon Indigenous communities by educational institutions. These needs are underscored by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action (2015), which emphasize the importance of culturally responsive education particularly in early childhood. The TRC report notes that the lack of access and funding for early childhood and other programming contributes to gaps in lifelong income and education gaps in Indigenous communities. Emerging practices in ELCC settings include: supporting Indigenous-led education, fostering language revitalization and bolstering Indigenous staffing and leadership, as well as equipping non-Indigenous organizations and educators to work towards reconciliation, decolonization and full integration of Indigenous knowledge and practices (Preston, 2014). Access to traditional food in ELCC programs is also an emerging area, given that traditional foods have nutritional, cultural and spiritual value to Indigenous children and families,

and can enrich the learning environment (Mundel et al., 2016). There are also calls for centering Indigenous knowledge in preservice ECE training (Kinzel, 2020).

City of Brantford and County of Brant's proximity to Six Nations represents a significant asset, fostering connections with on-reserve and urban Indigenous providers, organizations, and partnerships. Highlights in the local ELCC landscape currently include: a Six Nations-led licensed child care centre (Clarence Street) and Six Nations-led EarlyON Family Gatherings or Gahwajiya:de' Detenatgwa'ta', regular Indigenous-led programming at Harmony Square, Wayne Gretzky Sports Centre, TF Warren Cainsville Community Centre and TB Costain Community Centre as well as other child cares and EarlyONs upon request. Other assets in the ELCC landscape include the expertise of an Indigenous cultural lead from Six Nations, who visits ELCC sites to share traditional teachings and complementary services such as Niwasa, who host the Community Action Program for Children (CAPC). However, there is a varied level of engagement and commitment to serving Indigenous children and families across different sites.

While some centers display land acknowledgments or Indigenous cultural items, the challenge lies in effectively equipping educators with the knowledge to understand and convey their significance beyond mere display. Community partners acknowledge that the municipality and community members need to develop a deeper understanding of Indigenous perspectives.

We have not done a good job as a [community] of understanding Indigenous perspectives, despite the proximity to Six Nations and despite 10-12% of our population being urban Indigenous.

– Community Partner, Interview

This lack of understanding is sometimes evident in the varying degrees of training and exposure among non-Indigenous operators and educators, with smaller providers often lacking the structure or confidence to impart Indigenous teachings without direct Indigenous-led support.

Regrettably, instances of anti-Indigenous narratives and a lack of awareness about the presence of Indigenous people within ELCC centers have been noted. This highlights the need for continuous education and awareness-raising among all ELCC stakeholders. Local resources such as Six Nations, Woodland Cultural Centre, and local Indigenous educators and leaders can support the ELCC community in fostering a deeper, respectful understanding of Indigenous histories, knowledge and present-day realities.

The goal for the City of Brantford and County of Brant should be not only to integrate Indigenous content into ELCC programs but also to ensure that such integration is meaningful and led by Indigenous voices. Continued and enhanced support for the Six Nations Cultural

Facilitator as well as for Indigenous-led ELCC providers locally can have a significant immediate and long-term impact in supporting Indigenous children and families, as well as recognizing Indigenous sovereignty and educational rights.

5.5 FRANCOPHONE COMMUNITIES

Francophone families in minority language settings in Ontario have unique needs and are entitled to special rights regarding access to education, as outlined in Section 23 of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Ducharme, 1996). Early childhood in particular is seen as a crucial time to ensure French language exposure with respect to supporting language development and cultural vitality in Francophone communities (Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 2016). In southern Ontario, the availability of French language services, including childcare and early learning, is often limited. It is an area that requires attention given the growing immigration from French-speaking African countries observed outside of Quebec, with aims of increasing (Government of Canada, 2023; Office of the French Language Services Commissioner, 2017). However, province-wide data suggests a concerning trend: Francophone ELCC providers may be more likely to leave the field compared to their Anglophone counterparts, highlighting the vital need for retention strategies to support Francophone educators and services (Akbari et al, 2023).

Historically, the City of Brantford and County of Brant has had one of the smaller proportions of francophone residents among Ontario cities (Government of Ontario, 2022). Recently, however, the Brantford Immigration Partnership (BIP) notes an increase in the French-speaking population, particularly due to immigration from French-speaking African countries like Senegal and Congo. This demographic shift underscores the necessity for enhanced French-language services in the region. Currently, Le Ballon Rouge is the sole fully French language childcare provider, offering 87 licensed spaces serving francophone as well as non-French-speaking children. Additional spaces expected in early 2024 will support the increasing service needs for francophone families. In the recent survey as part of this project, ELCC operators in the City of Brantford and County of Brant were less likely to report that their center excels in serving Francophone families compared to other equity-deserving groups, potentially indicating a need for training or resources needed to support this population system-wide.

Addressing the needs of Francophone families can include similar strategies to those used for serving newcomers with additional language needs – such as translation services, multilingual communication resources and materials to support multilingualism in classrooms. However, the unique status of French and the specific rights of Francophone families must be considered. Ensuring adequate access to French-language ELCC services is not only a matter of cultural responsiveness to francophone communities locally but also anticipates the needs of growing French-speaking immigrant communities.

5.6 2SLGBTQ+ COMMUNITIES

Families from the Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (2SLGBTQ+) community encounter unique challenges within educational and service settings. These families have rights protected under the Ontario Human Rights Code, ensuring access to services without discrimination based on gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Nevertheless, common barriers in education for 2SLGBTQ+ families include entrenched norms and assumptions, a lack of representation in educational materials, and, in some cases, overt discrimination from educators or other families (Butac, 2016). For 2SLGBTQ+ staff in educational settings, creating a supportive and inclusive environment is essential, and there are effective strategies that facilitate this inclusivity such as mentorship and comprehensive staff training (Best Start Resource Centre, 2012).

In the City of Brantford and County of Brant, ELCC providers are progressing in their journey to enhance inclusion and representation of 2SLGBTQ+ families, though this demographic is less frequently mentioned compared to newcomer communities or children with special needs. A study found that 2SLGBTQ+ communities in the City of Brantford and County of Brant area experienced less visibility and representation compared to larger urban centers like Hamilton and Toronto, highlighting a need for local growth in this area (Wildman, 2017). Efforts at some sites are evident, with books and resources visibly reflecting 2SLGBTQ+ communities. However, there were occasional instances of pushback from other families, underscoring the need to equip educators with skills for challenging conversations and knowledge sharing.

Some centers are adapting their language to be more inclusive, using terms like “caregivers” instead of “moms and dads,” which also recognizes diverse family structures. Despite these efforts, consistency in practice across all centers is needed. The influx of families from the GTA, where there is an expectation of visible 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity, further emphasizes the need for ELCC services locally to reflect and accommodate the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ families adequately. Collaborations with local 2SLGBTQ+ service providers like the Bridge, highlight potential system-wide learning opportunities. The monthly 2SLGBTQ+ parents group, Rainbow Roots, who meet at a local EarlyON, is also a positive step and is well-received by attendees. The varying degrees of comfort among ELCC operators and providers in discussing 2SLGBTQ+ topics suggest a need for more comprehensive training and exposure.

5.7 CHILDREN AND FAMILIES SPECIAL NEEDS

In Ontario, children with special needs and exceptionalities have recognized rights to education, including access to appropriate supports in Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) settings. Despite these rights, families frequently encounter barriers to accessing necessary services. Challenges include limited availability of specialized supports and widespread staffing shortages in the ELCC sector. This situation is exacerbated by the growing demand for enhanced services for children with accessibility and learning needs, impacting the ability of the sector to provide adequate care and support for these children. Significant effort is required achieve full

access and participation in ELCC settings, as well as attention to design, implementation and evaluation (Underwood, 2013). Furthermore, stakeholders such as the College of ECEs argue that educators require advanced training as well as critical analysis of moving from a medical model towards a social model of disability, emphasizing the systemic barriers and societal changes rather than on individual limitations or deficits (College of ECEs, 2019).

In the City of Brantford and County of Brant, ELCC providers have observed an increased need for special needs support and mental health/behavioral services, particularly following the pandemic. This includes addressing language, learning, and social delays at an early stage. While resources like Lansdowne Children's Centre Resource Consultants are invaluable and widely appreciated, there are often long waitlists for more specialized services like mental health support, behavioral therapy, and speech-language pathology.

Access challenges are significant, with issues related to waitlists and staff-to-child ratios. Some parents hesitate to disclose their children's needs on applications due to fears of service denial, as providers sometimes lack the capacity to meet the complex needs of additional children with exceptionalities. This leads to a precarious situation where essential care might be delayed until providers can ensure adequate support. Positions for specialized care often remain unfilled due to a lack of qualified Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) who can provide necessary support. This shortage puts parents in challenging positions, as availability of care hinges on the ELCC provider's capacity to address their child's needs adequately.

My children who are autistic are not allowed to attend unless outside support is present. It makes it stressful waiting to hear prior to school start or summer camp if they are able to attend until they hear from an outside source. My children are also not able to attend during PA days etc. as there is no support.
– Caregiver, Before/After Care, Survey

Physical infrastructure such as accessible play areas, parking and facility access are crucial for children and caregivers with physical needs. The need for adequate accessible parking, reasonable proximity of parking to the facility, and accessible drop-off areas are priorities for families.

5.8 LOW INCOME FAMILIES AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Low-income and vulnerable families face distinct challenges in ELCC settings. These challenges revolve around accessibility, affordability, and the availability of supportive services tailored to their unique needs (Building Blocks for Child Care, 2022). Access to childcare is known to have a significant impact on labour market participation among low-income families, and is an important protective factor that foster resilience in the family system, especially for vulnerable children (Aery, 2017; Lefebvre et al., 2009; Benzies & Mychasiuk, 2009).

Financial constraints can limit access to quality childcare, which is essential for the developmental needs of children. Additionally, these families may encounter systemic barriers, including complex application processes for subsidies or support programs. The lack of flexible care options to accommodate varied work schedules and the limited availability of specialized services for children with unique needs further exacerbate these challenges. Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of the socioeconomic factors impacting these families and a concerted effort to ensure that ELCC services are equitable and accessible to all, regardless of income level. While the CWELCC agreement is a step towards more accessible licensed childcare to low-income families, the waitlists and existing fees remain a barrier to many families.

In the City of Brantford and County of Brant, the experiences of low-income and vulnerable families in accessing ELCC services reflect these broader challenges. Despite efforts to provide support, there are gaps in meeting the diverse needs of these populations. For many families, long waitlists for childcare spaces and lack of knowledge about the One List pose significant hurdles. Moreover, the city's ELCC providers may require additional resources and training to offer the specialized care that some vulnerable children may require, such as those in the foster care system or those with developmental delays or complex medical needs.

Reports from local providers suggest a need for more targeted support and resources to effectively serve low-income and vulnerable families. This includes not only financial assistance but also more inclusive and flexible care options that recognize the varied and complex realities of these families. Community partners noticed a local service gap - a “missing” population - of single parent families accessing services. It is unclear if this demographic is unaware of the childcare services or the OneList, or if they are removing themselves from the labour market in order to provide their own childcare. Targeted outreach and collaborations between ELCC centers, social service agencies, and community organizations could play a crucial role in bridging these gaps.

5.9 PARTNERSHIPS AND PROGRAM EXCELLENCE (CASE STUDIES)

In this section, we present three distinct case studies from City of Brantford and County of Brant's Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) landscape, each exemplifying excellence in access and inclusion. These case studies – Clarence Street's Indigenous-led child care, an innovative pilot program at St. Gabriel's EarlyON, and Child and Family Services of Grand Erie's commitment to professional learning – showcase innovative approaches and best practices in creating inclusive, supportive, and culturally responsive ELCC environments.

Indigenous-Led Child Care and Language Revitalization: Clarence Street (Six Nations of the Grand River)

Clarence Street Child Care, run by Six Nations of the Grand River, is an exemplary model of Indigenous-led child care. The program is open to all children, with priority access granted to urban Indigenous and on-reserve families. The center is unique in its commitment to language



revitalization, immersing children in the Cayuga (Gayogoḥó:nqʷ) language through interactive activities and materials that teach colors, shapes, commands, and common expressions. The site also accommodates the needs of Mohawk first language children, highlighting its inclusive approach to distinct Indigenous communities locally. This approach not only fosters language preservation but also deepens the children's connection to their cultural heritage.

At Clarence Street Child Care, each classroom is enriched with the presence of an Indigenous educator or cultural guide. Clarence Street Child Care hopes to integrate traditional Indigenous cuisine into their site, aimed at enhancing cultural teachings, enriching the learning environment and being a part of local efforts to enhance access healthy and culturally appropriate food. Clarence Street childcare is located on-site at Conestoga College City of Brantford and County of Brant Campus. ECE students have opportunities to conduct on-site observations and benefit from learning about Indigenous practices in early learning. Clarence Street's holistic approach extends to community and staff wellness, with the lobby filled with local resources for families and the staff room displaying resources on self-regulation and wellness techniques. Clarence Street works in collaboration with other Six Nations programming such as Family Gatherings or Gahwajiya:de' Detenatgwa'ta' at Harmony Square, who recently hosted a professional learning workshop series open to the whole ELCC community.

Clarence Street exemplifies how Indigenous-led initiatives, coupled with a strong focus on cultural education and community wellness, can create a nurturing and empowering environment for children, families and educators.

Community Engagement: St. Gabriel's EarlyON and the Brantford Immigrant Partnership

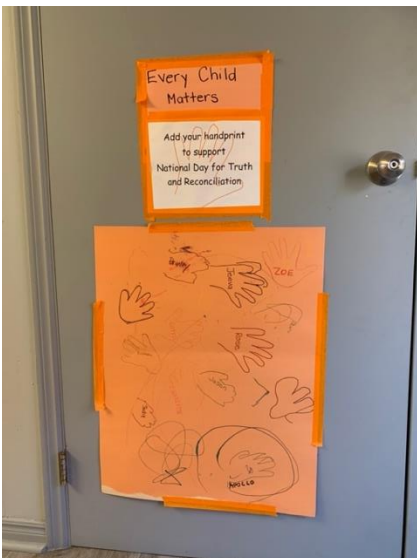


The EarlyON at St. Gabriel Catholic Elementary School was the pilot site of a large initiative called *Build Belonging*, a partnership between the Brantford Immigration Partnership, Community Living Brant, Child and Family Services of Grand Erie, YMCA Immigrant Services, the Brant Haldimand Norfolk Catholic District School Board, and the City of Brantford. The goal of the initiative was to increase EarlyON attendance among newcomer families, by offering culturally-informed programming, art, books, and toys, and seeking guidance from local subject matter experts.

Through comprehensive outreach efforts, including a survey translated into 7 languages facilitated by the Brantford Immigrant Partnership, the project elicited needs and priorities of newcomer families related to early learning. The project also included the recruitment of community champions, a holiday celebrations calendar, as well as the enhancement of culturally diverse cooks, dolls, toys and display. Over a six month period, the initiative resulted in a 10% attendance increase as well as an innovative series of Diwali activities led by parent champions at St. Gabriel's, which was well-received by families and community members. There are plans to offer a monthly cultural series featuring distinct cultural celebrations and knowledge sharing led by community champions. The learnings from this pilot will be shared with other EarlyONs and child care centres locally.

The City of Brantford was recently recognized as a local municipal champion for this initiative with an award from the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association (OMSSA). These interventions demonstrate the power of deep collaboration and community engagement in efforts to enhance access and inclusion in ELCC.

Professional Learning and Partnerships: Child and Family Services of Grand Erie



Child and Family Services of Grand Erie (CFSGE) offers EarlyON programming across 15 sites, including three sites located in affordable housing areas. The organization models a commitment to inclusion and access in ELCC, including an equity, diversity, and inclusion statement woven into their strategic plan. This plan, developed through comprehensive stakeholder engagement, notably includes insights from Indigenous staff and community partners. Their approach to diversity and inclusion is further bolstered by long-standing partnerships, such as the decades-long collaboration with Six Nations, and newer alliances with the local mosque and The Bridge, which serves the LGBTQ2S+ community. These partnerships reflect a deep commitment to understanding and serving the diverse needs within their community.

CFSGE places a strong emphasis on professional development, requiring all staff to undergo extensive training in key areas such as anti-Black racism, equity in child welfare, LGBTQ2S+ inclusion, and understanding the implications of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. These required trainings extend across all roles, highlighting the organization's dedication to fostering learning and unlearning. The commitment to professional learning stems in part from a desire to reconcile the complex history of child welfare and social services in causing harm to equity-deserving groups including Indigenous communities. Recently, the organization has ramped up its efforts towards anti-oppression and decolonization in structured team learning for ELCC staff, utilizing resources such as the book "White Fragility," a video series on race, and podcasts on generational trauma and residential school experiences. These resources are pivotal in facilitating challenging yet crucial conversations, equipping educators to engage with families on sensitive topics effectively. By fostering an environment of continuous learning and open dialogue, CFSGE sets a high standard for inclusivity in ELCC, demonstrating how intentional training and partnerships can create nurturing spaces for all families.

6. PATHWAY TO ENHANCED INCLUSION AND ACCESS

6.1 VISION FOR INCLUSION AND ACCESS

Objectives and Structure of the Pathway

The pathway for enhancing inclusion and accessibility in Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) in the City of Brantford and County of Brant is designed with a clear objective: to create an ELCC environment where every child has equitable access to high quality learning and care. This vision is structured around key pillars: accessibility, participation and belonging, and equity. The Pathway is centered around 10 organizational categories, and outlines specific, actionable strategies to enhance inclusion and access in ELCC settings locally. The focus is on creating ELCC programming that is responsive to the needs of the community, particularly focusing on equity-deserving groups such as Black, Francophone, Indigenous, other racialized and newcomer communities, 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, and children with special needs.

Desired State of ELCC

In line with Ontario's Access and Inclusion Framework, the desired state for ELCC in the City of Brantford and County of Brant is an inclusive, equitable, and accessible system. This system will be characterized by:

- **Universal Accessibility:** ELCC services that are physically and systemically barrier-free, where every child, regardless of ability or socio-economic status, can access a full range of learning, play, and developmental opportunities. This includes addressing transportation, space, language, and cultural barriers.
- **Full Participation and Sense of Belonging:** An environment where children actively participate in all aspects of ELCC and feel a strong sense of belonging. This environment will foster relationships, value each child's contributions, and respect diverse family structures and cultural backgrounds.
- **Equitable Opportunities for All:** Ensuring that every child has the resources and support they need to reach their full potential. ELCC programs will be tailored to account for the unique backgrounds and intersecting identities of children and families, with a focus on unbiased assessment tools and varied levels of support based on individual needs.

In achieving this vision, ELCC in the City of Brantford and County of Brant will not only support the developmental and educational needs of children but also play a crucial role in building a more inclusive and diverse community. It will be a system where differences are celebrated, and every child and family feels welcomed, respected, and fully included.

6.2 KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

This section outlines the 10 categories or elements of success highlighted in the Inclusion and Access Pathway. Each category is defined here in terms of its relevance to ELCC settings in the City of Brantford and County of Brant, followed by the Pathway and the Assessment Tool.

1. **Physical Environment:** In early learning and childcare settings, an accessible and culturally rich physical environment is crucial to supporting the full participation of all children. It should cater to various mobility and sensory needs, incorporating universal design principles and reflect the cultural diversity of the community. Doing so can not only enhance physical accessibility but also support the cognitive, social and emotional inclusion of all children (College of ECEs, 2019). Regular accessibility audits, community feedback, and adjustments based on evolving needs are crucial for an inclusive learning space. Locally, providers and families called attention to the need for consistency across sites related to physical accessibility. Physical barriers, related to parking and washroom access, prevent or deter families from accessing early learning services, and can limit their choice of EarlyON programs.
2. **Play-Based Materials:** Diverse and inclusive play-based materials are essential for creating environments that foster deep play, exploration and exposure to diverse experiences. The concept of “mirrors and windows” came up regularly in conversations with ELCC providers, who understand the importance of both reflecting the diversity within their classrooms and creating a window into other ways of being (Bishop, 1990). Toys, books, and activities should represent various cultures, religions, abilities, and family structures, challenging stereotypes and promoting diverse perspectives. Regularly updating these materials and involving caregivers in the selection process ensures relevance and inclusivity. Inclusion play-based materials need to be supplemented by comprehensive equity policies in order to create lasting change in early childhood environments (MacNevin & Berman, 2020).
3. **Celebrations:** Celebrating a wide range of cultural, religious, and community-specific events is vital for fostering belonging and developing cultural literacy in ELCC settings (Myers & Myers, 2001). However, challenges can emerge when educators lack structure and resources to acknowledge important holidays of families, or when celebrations are acknowledged in a surface or tokenistic manner (Bisson, 2016). Inclusive celebrations should involve community participation, reflecting a holistic view of traditions, and actively engage children and families in planning and execution. Providers locally desire structure and resources to enhance their ability to recognize cultural traditions on a consistent basis. The creation of a standardized calendar, such as the one provided by the Brantford Immigration Partnership, could support awareness and consistency in this category.
4. **Food:** Food choices in ELCC settings play a significant role in cultural representation and education. Menus should accommodate diverse dietary needs and preferences, with an educational aspect that highlights the cultural significance of various cuisines (Ontario Dietitians in Public Health, 2017; Government of Canada, 2020). This relates to

medical restrictions like allergies and sensitivities, as well as religious requirements and cultural preferences. Access to traditional Indigenous foods has significant nutritional and cultural value, as well as enriching the learning environment (Mundel et al., 2016). Food choices were mentioned frequently by families accessing childcare services, where full day programs provide meals and ideally accommodate diverse dietary needs, preferences and restrictions. Providers report that some sites are more equipped than others to cater to dietary needs and cultural food options. It is recommended that sites anticipate and prepare to accommodate diverse food needs proactively to avoid delays in meeting families' food needs.

5. **Staffing and Board Composition:** Reflecting the community's diversity through staffing and board composition enhances perspectives, representation and accountability (Sandstrom & Schilder, 2021). Having diverse staff who reflect children's identities can help to enhance engagement and reduce educational disparities long-term (James & Turner, 2017). The attraction and retention of international student and newcomer staff are important in terms of equitable access to the profession, but also as a potential solution to the ongoing staffing shortage. It is important to have strategies and policies that support diversity in recruitment, and to ensure that staff from equity-deserving groups are represented, especially in leadership roles. Boards of directors in education and the nonprofit sector struggle to reflect the experiences of the broader communities they serve, despite evidence that diverse boards make better decisions (Cardozo & Fullbrook, 2021). In terms of board composition locally, smaller organizations could use support in ensuring diversity on the board, especially if members are largely parents and long-time City of Brantford and County of Brant residents.
6. **Community Engagement:** Active community engagement ensures ELCC services are responsive and supportive. Building strong networks with local cultural organizations and involving diverse families in decision-making processes enriches the learning environment for all (Early Childhood National Centres, 2022). Cultivating authentic relationships also aligns with the strength-based approach to family engagement outlined in the How Does Learning Happen Framework (Government of Ontario, 2021). The College of ECEs' Practice Guideline on Communication and Collaboration highlights the need to engage respectfully with community partners and professionals, as well as the priority to consider the unique rights of First Nations, Métis and Inuit children by engaging with Indigenous community organizations, elders and knowledge keepers (College of ECEs, 2019). Locally, the recent pilot project at St. Gabriel's EarlyON, partnered with BIP, demonstrates the value of community engagement and valuing families as champions and partners in learning.

7. **Language:** Linguistic inclusivity is fundamental for effective communication with families and engagement in the City of Brantford and County of Brant's multicultural context. Encouraging families' multilingualism is considered highly beneficial from a child development perspective, impacting future school performance (Best Start Resource Centre, 2010). Research shows that educators can play a profound role in language development and identity by modeling multilingualism, sparking curiosity about languages, and actively encouraging multilingualism with caregivers (Wagner, 2021). Providing comprehensive language support, encouraging multilingualism among staff, and ensuring clear communication with families from various linguistic backgrounds are known to enhance services for children and families who speak additional languages. Locally, providers across sites have different strategies and tools to support the needs of multilingual families and staff.
8. **Workplace Culture:** A respectful, inclusive, and open workplace culture is essential for fostering a supportive environment in ELCC settings. This involves encouraging open communication, ensuring respect and collaboration between staff, and promoting discussions about equity and diversity. Valuing staff contributions and promoting a culture of mutual respect and professional growth are some ways to enhance workplace culture and strengthen retention (Caven et al., 2021). Retention, in turn, strengthens outcomes for children (Klein et al., 2016). With the active staffing shortage weighing on providers locally, workplace culture and morale can be a challenge to foster but are crucial to enhancing retention at each site and within the field as a whole.
9. **Professional Learning:** Comprehensive, inclusive, continuous training programs are crucial for equipping ELCC staff with the skills and knowledge to support equity-deserving groups. A commitment to professional learning also strengthens commitment to the profession and can positively influence workplace culture (Halfon & Dixon, 2015). Training should address different learning styles and accessibility preferences, and include real-world examples linked to daily practice (Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario, n.d.; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2011). Continuous learning opportunities should be provided to enhance the ability to serve equity deserving communities. Facilitators with lived experience and professional expertise should be prioritized. Locally, providers expressed a desire to learn more about supporting Indigenous communities, newcomers, LGBTQ2S+ communities, as well as topics such as trauma-informed practice and non-violent crisis intervention.
10. **Policy and Infrastructure:** Embedding equity and inclusion principles into all policies and infrastructure is pivotal to enhancing outcomes for equity deserving children and families. ELCC providers need to dedicate time and resources to create a clear inclusion

plan, anti-discrimination policies, and active equity interventions such as equity committees or dedicated roles. It is important to ensure regular policy reviews with an equity lens and ensuring resources are aligned with best practices and current legislation. For example, while anti-racism policies have grown in educational settings in recent years, there are still gaps and barriers in their implementation (People for Education, 2023). Locally, ELCC providers attached to larger organizations tend to have more institutional infrastructure to support equity and inclusion efforts, including robust policies, strategies, and interventions. With coordinated efforts, these providers can serve as resources for smaller organizations in order to strengthen the ELCC landscape as a whole.

6.3 INCLUSION & ACCESS PATHWAY

Pathway

Based on the categories and key elements of success defined above, the Inclusion & Access Pathway outlines a phased plan:

Elements of Success	Phase 1: PREPARE	Phase 2: ADAPT	Phase 3: SUSTAIN
<i>Physical Environment</i>	Conduct accessibility audits, gather community feedback on physical space needs, and initiate changes based on universal design principles.	Implement changes in the physical environment based on audit findings and feedback, ensuring accessibility and cultural representation.	Regularly update and maintain an inclusive and accessible physical environment, responding to ongoing feedback.
<i>Play-Based Materials</i>	Assess current materials for diversity and inclusivity, plan for acquiring new, culturally diverse materials.	Introduce new inclusive and diverse materials, ensuring they are reflective of various cultures and abilities.	Continuously evaluate and update materials to ensure they remain inclusive and representative.
<i>Celebrations</i>	Create a diverse celebration calendar, understand cultural significance, and plan for inclusive participation.	Incorporate diverse celebrations into the calendar. Actively involve families and community members in planning and activities. Develop an accommodation policy for staff and learners who will be absent for religious or cultural celebrations.	Sustain the diverse celebration calendar, making it a regular and integral part of the program, with ongoing feedback from families. Sustain holiday accommodation plan.
<i>Food</i>	Survey families for dietary preferences, initiate staff training on diverse dietary needs, and plan for menu diversification.	Implement a culturally diverse and sensitive menu, incorporating educational aspects about the foods served.	Maintain a diverse menu that caters to various dietary restrictions, religious needs and cultural preferences, regularly updating it based on family feedback.

Elements of Success	Phase 1: PREPARE	Phase 2: ADAPT	Phase 3: SUSTAIN
Staffing and Board Composition	Evaluate current diversity in staffing and board, develop a recruitment strategy focusing on diversity.	Actively recruit for diversity in staff and board members, focusing on inclusion in leadership roles.	Develop practices and policies to enhance diversity in staffing and board composition, ensuring ongoing professional development focusing on equity.
Community Engagement	Identify potential community partners, assess current engagement strategies, and plan for more representative activities and connecting with local assets like the Indigenous Cultural Facilitator	Strengthen partnerships with cultural organizations, start inclusive family engagement activities.	Maintain and grow community partnerships, regularly evaluate engagement activities for engagement and equity practices.
Language	Assess current language support needs, plan for bilingual or multilingual staff hiring or training.	Implement multilingual communication strategies, incorporate bilingual staff and encourage multilingualism among families.	Sustain and enhance multilingual communication efforts, continuously assessing linguistic needs.
Workplace Culture	Evaluate current workplace culture, identify areas for improvement in diversity and inclusion.	Implement strategies to enhance workplace culture, focusing on diversity, inclusion, and open communication. Strategies should be proactive and responsive to ongoing feedback.	Regularly assess and invest in workplace culture to ensure it remains inclusive, respectful, and supportive.
Professional Learning	Assess current training programs, identify needs for trainings related to serving equity priority groups.	Engage in new training programs focusing on enhancing support of equity priority groups including LGBTQ2S+, newcomers, Black and Indigenous families, children with special needs.	Sustain and embed ongoing professional development, ensuring it evolves with best practices and community needs.

Elements of Success	Phase 1: PREPARE	Phase 2: ADAPT	Phase 3: SUSTAIN
<i>Policy and Infrastructure</i>	Review existing policies with an equity lens, identify gaps, and plan for the development of an inclusion plan and anti-discrimination policies.	Implement new policies and strategies, establish equity committees and engage in communities of practice.	Regularly review policies and infrastructure for equity and access, ensuring continuous improvement and alignment with legislation.

Self-Assessment Tool

Based on the key elements of success defined above, a self-assessment tool has been created to allow ELCC providers to evaluate their current practices in alignment with the Inclusion and Access Pathway. This tool is designed to facilitate a reflective and continuous improvement process, helping providers identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth in creating more inclusive and accessible environments. The tool can be found in the Appendix along with instructions for use.

Strategic Recommendations

Building on the Pathway and Assessment Tool, this section presents strategic recommendations designed to guide Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) in the City of Brantford and County of Brant towards a more inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive future, drawing on insights from our comprehensive community engagement and analysis.

- 1. Develop and Implement Comprehensive Equity and Reconciliation Strategies:** Establish clear and actionable equity strategies that are embedded into the strategic plans, policies, and everyday practices of ELCC settings. This includes creating anti-discrimination policies and forming equity committees or communities of practice. Strategies and plans should have accountability mechanisms and commit to a clear timeline of short, medium and long-term goals. Providers will require technical support to ensure implementation and consistency across sites, particularly for smaller providers. There is a need for a distinct but parallel process to ensure that Indigenous perspectives and priorities are captured in relevant ELCC strategies, which can include connecting with existing Truth & Reconciliation efforts among local agencies.
- 2. Standardize Child Care Access through the OneList:** Implement policies to ensure consistent and equitable access to licensed child care via OneList. Explore policies that align with Ministry standards and the CWELCC agreement that can be consistently applied by all providers in the City of Brantford and County of Brant ELCC community.
- 3. Strengthen Community Engagement and Partnerships:** Build robust partnerships with local community organizations, especially those representing equity-deserving groups. These partnerships should focus on collaborative programming, resource sharing, and facilitating community involvement in ELCC services, particularly targeting equity-deserving communities locally. Robust and continuous community engagement is necessary to better understand the specific needs of equity-deserving families and staff.
- 4. Expand Workforce Planning Efforts:** Develop further strategies to attract and retain ELCC educators amidst staffing shortages, focusing on competitive compensation and supportive work environments. Prioritize diversifying the workforce to reflect the

linguistic and cultural diversity of the families served, including targeted support and mentorship for international students from Conestoga College. Continue and strengthen the Retention and Recruitment committee to ensure a sustained and responsive approach to workforce challenges. Efforts to enhance retention can also include coordinated workforce efforts towards a sector-wide wage increase and enhanced working conditions.

5. **Enhance Language Support and Multilingualism:** Promote a multilingual environment within ELCC settings, offering language support for families with diverse linguistic needs. This could include enhanced classroom resources and books, hiring multilingual staff, enhancing technological resources for translation, providing language training for current staff, and ensuring that communication materials are available in multiple languages.
6. **Support Special Needs and Mental Health Services:** Address the growing need for special needs support and mental health/behavioral services, especially in the post-pandemic context. This includes enhancing collaborations with specialized service providers and ensuring that these supports are accessible within ELCC settings, including culturally responsive care for Indigenous families. Attention to special need support is also needed in before/after and PA day care to ensure full participation in programs.
7. **Expand Professional Learning Opportunities:** Invest in ongoing professional development for all staff, focusing on anti-racism and equity training, and specific training related to supporting equity-deserving groups like Indigenous, Francophone, LGBTQ2S+, and newcomer communities, as well as children with medical and behavioural needs.
8. **Engage in Continuous Improvement and Evaluation:** Establish a culture of ongoing assessment and improvement, utilizing tools like the self-assessment framework to regularly evaluate progress in inclusivity and accessibility. Encourage open feedback mechanisms such as regular surveys with families and staff and use data-driven approaches to guide enhancements in ELCC services, such as the ongoing analysis of enrolment and participation trends.

7. CONCLUSION

This report is part of the City of Brantford ongoing work towards enhancing equity and inclusion within the Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) sector locally. The environmental scan and stakeholder engagement process have surfaced diverse perspectives and highlighted needs, challenges, and opportunities within our ELCC landscape. The resulting Inclusion & Access Pathway, alongside strategic recommendations and a detailed self-assessment tool, outlines a clear, actionable route for ELCC providers to create more inclusive, accessible, and high-quality care and learning environments.

The findings emphasize the need for holistic approaches that address various aspects of ELCC service, from workforce retention and professional learning to policy and infrastructure enhancement. The pathway underscores the importance of continuous community engagement, especially with equity-deserving groups, ensuring that ELCC services evolve in line with the community's changing demographics and needs. It also highlights the importance of language support and the incorporation of diverse cultural perspectives to create truly inclusive environments.

In moving forward, the focus must be on the practical implementation of these recommendations. Success will be measured not just by policy changes or the introduction of new programs but by the lived experiences of children and families who access ELCC services in the City of Brantford and County of Brant. The journey towards a more inclusive and equitable ELCC system is continuous and requires the collective effort and commitment of all stakeholders. Through sustained engagement, evaluation, and adaptation, we can ensure that our ELCC services not only meet the diverse needs of our community but also serve as a model of inclusivity and accessibility.



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9. APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:

Instructions: Inclusion & Access Pathway - Self-Assessment Tool for ELCC

Purpose of the Tool

This self-assessment tool is designed for early learning and childcare (ELCC) providers to evaluate their current practices in alignment with the Inclusion & Access Pathway document. The Pathway document is based on an environmental scan and needs assessment conducted in November 2023, focusing on enhancing equity and inclusion within Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) settings.

This tool aims to provide a structured framework for organizations to reflect on their strengths, identify areas for improvement, and guide strategic planning for fostering a more inclusive environment. This tool serves as a reflective instrument, not a reporting mechanism. Its primary purpose is to assist providers in identifying strengths in their current practices and pinpointing areas that require further development or improvement. The goal is to foster a self-guided journey towards a more inclusive and accessible ELCC environment, with consistency across sites in terms of best practices.

This tool is not meant to be a judgmental exercise but rather a collaborative process. The ultimate goal is to foster a culture of continuous improvement in equity, diversity, and inclusion practices within your organization. Regularly revisit the assessment to track progress, celebrate achievements, and identify new areas for growth.

Guiding Principles of the Assessment Tool

Strengths-Based Approach: Embrace a strengths-based model throughout the assessment. Acknowledge and celebrate the positive aspects of your organization's commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Safe and Non-Judgmental Environment: Create a safe and non-judgmental space for the assessment process. Encourage open and honest reflection without fear of criticism, fostering an environment conducive to meaningful self-assessment.

Inclusive Participation: Ensure the meaningful involvement of different staff members. Diversity in perspectives enriches the assessment process and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding.

Capacity Building: Use the assessment results to enhance and build organizational capacity, using the accompanying pathway tool. Identify areas where improvements can be made and develop strategies for implementing positive change.

How to Use the Tool

The self-assessment tool is structured to be user-friendly and accessible, allowing providers and staff to review various aspects of their service delivery and organizational practices. Each section of the tool corresponds to key areas identified in the Inclusion & Access Pathway, such as Physical Environment, Play-Based Materials, Community Engagement, and Professional Learning.

Rating Columns:

1. Beginner: Use this rating for areas that are yet to be addressed adequately or where significant improvement is required.
2. Making Progress: This rating is for practices that have been initiated or are in development but have not yet reached full implementation or consistency.
3. Leveling Up: This rating indicates that the practice or area is fully implemented and consistently maintained with high standards.

Completing the Assessment:

For each category, read the description and reflect on your current practices. To provide a fulsome reflection, the perspectives of leadership, staff and families should be included.

Rate your performance honestly from 1-3 in each area based on the descriptions provided.

Use the comments section to note specific actions, successes, challenges, or plans related to each area. Consider having multiple staff from your site complete the assessment and compare responses to gain further insights on growth opportunities.

APPENDIX B: SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

The next section of the document contains the Inclusion Pathway-Self Assessment Tool.

INCLUSION & ACCESS PATHWAY - SELF ASSESSMENT TOOL

1. PHYSICAL SPACE & ENVIRONMENT

Ideal State:

- Fully accessible for people with various mobility needs and assistive devices, reflecting principles of universal design.
- Entrances, washrooms, parking, indoor and outdoor play areas are barrier-free.
- Have received and incorporated input from families and staff with physically accessibility needs.
- Have participated in an accessibility audit to ensure compliance with AODA.
- Spaces are designed with considerations for mobility, sensory needs, and other accessibility requirements.
- Artwork, displays, and overall aesthetics reflect the cultural diversity of the community.
- Various areas within the space cater to different comfort preferences, promoting a sense of belonging for everyone.
- Spaces actively promote cultural safety, ensuring individuals feel respected and comfortable expressing their cultural identities.

Self-Assessment

Elements of Success	Beginner (1)	Making Progress (2)	Leveling up (3)
Physical Accessibility 1: Limited accessibility for individuals with mobility challenges. 2: Adequate accessibility, but with room for improvement. 3: Fully accessible for people with various mobility needs and assistive devices, reflecting principles of universal design.			
Representation in Decor 1: Limited representation of diverse cultures and backgrounds. 2: Some representation, but opportunities for improvement. 3: Inclusive representation reflecting various cultures and backgrounds.			
AODA Compliance 1: Not compliant with AODA. 2: Limited compliance with AODA. 3: Fully compliant with AODA and plans for continuous updates.			
Flexibility of Space 1: Limited flexibility to accommodate diverse activities. 2: Moderately flexible, but improvements could enhance inclusivity. 3: Highly adaptable, promoting diverse activities and inclusive practices.			

Building Blocks to Success:

- Elicit input from families, staff and visitors about the physical environment.
- Conduct an accessibility audit to identify and address physical barriers for individuals with different abilities.
- Implement a plan to enhance the aesthetics and cultural representation in the physical environment.
- Consider incorporating elements of universal design, ensuring spaces are culturally sensitive, and creating areas that celebrate the cultural backgrounds of children.
- Establish a feedback mechanism to involve families and staff in decisions about the physical space.
- Continue to implement barrier free physical environment, keeping updated with requirements of community and regulations.
- Share tips and/or resources with other ELCC providers.

Next Steps:

1-3 months:

4-12 months:

1-3 years:

Additional Notes:

2. PLAY-BASED MATERIALS & SUPPLIES

Ideal State:

- Cultural Representation: Toys, books, and activities represent a broad spectrum of cultures, ethnicities, abilities, identities, family structures and interests.
- Anti-Bias Materials: Materials challenge stereotypes and foster an understanding of diversity and inclusion.
- Books and materials feature works from a range of authors and creators, promoting diverse perspectives.
- Play-based materials encourage hands-on exploration, allowing children to engage with concepts in different ways.
- Imagery on materials reflects diversity in family structures, abilities, and cultural contexts.

Self-Assessment

Elements of Success	Beginner (1)	Making Progress (2)	Leveling up (3)
Diversity in Toys and Books 1: Limited diversity, with few inclusive materials. 2: Some diversity but room for expanding inclusive choices. 3: Diverse and inclusive range of toys and books, with characters and stories that reflect varied backgrounds, abilities, family dynamics, etc.			
Anticipation of Diverse Needs 1: Insufficient consideration of diverse needs. 2: Some consideration, but improvements possible. 3: Proactive anticipation of diverse needs.			
Diversity of Activities 1. Lacking variety and representation in activities offered. 2. Activities reflect the needs/ backgrounds and learning styles of current participants. 3. Activities are diverse and effective for a variety of backgrounds, abilities, and needs, whether they are present in participants or not.			

Building Blocks to Success:

- Diversify the collection of books, toys, and activities to represent a variety of cultures, abilities, and family structures.
- Regularly update materials to ensure they are reflective of current cultural norms and inclusivity.
- Engage caregivers as partners in learning and identify family champions who wish to support with cultural knowledge sharing and activities.
- Incorporate materials that challenge stereotypes and offer a range of perspectives.
- Provide training for staff on the importance of inclusive play and how to select appropriate materials.
- Regularly assess and update materials to ensure relevance and representation.
- As part of policy reviews, review activities and materials annually.

Next Steps:

1-3 months:

4-12 months:

1-3 years:

Additional Notes:

3. CELEBRATIONS

Ideal State:

- Cultural Calendar: The celebration calendar includes a variety of cultural, religious, and community-specific events.
- Community Involvement: Celebrations involve active participation from families and community members as inclusion champions.
- Clear policy for staff and families is have adequate accommodation for all cultural celebrations.
- Celebrations involve interactive elements, encouraging participation rather than passive observation.
- Families and community members actively contribute to the planning and execution of celebrations.
- Celebrations represent a holistic view of traditions, including historical, religious, and secular aspects.

Self-Assessment

Elements of Success	Beginner (1)	Making Progress (2)	Leveling up (3)
Acknowledgment of Diverse Celebrations 1: Limited recognition beyond traditional holidays. 2: Some acknowledgment but misses certain celebrations. 3: Comprehensive acknowledgment of diverse celebrations with advanced planning and full participation of community/family champions to guide activities.			
Accommodations for Staff and Students 1: Minimal accommodations provided. 2: Some accommodations but not fully inclusive. 3: Comprehensive accommodations for all staff and students.			
Advanced Planning for Celebrations 1: Celebrations lack advanced planning. 2: Some advanced planning evident. 3: Well-planned celebrations considering diverse needs.			

Building Blocks to Success:

- Develop a calendar that includes a diverse range of celebrations and events.
- Engage local partners in bolstering resources for celebrations and learning activities, including local libraries and cultural organizations.
- Ensure that celebrations are not limited to mainstream holidays and involve the active participation of the community.
- Provide guidance and structure for staff to plan ahead for celebrations, ensuring that diverse cultural and religious holidays are acknowledged.
- Create a committee responsible for coordinating and planning inclusive celebrations.

Next Steps:

1-3 months:

4-12 months:

1-3 years:

Additional Notes:

4. FOOD

Ideal State:

- Menus include diverse and culturally representative food items, accommodating various dietary needs (cultural, religious or medical).
- Resources are available to educate children and families about the cultural significance of different foods.
- Families and/or culturally appropriate sources are engaged to better understand food needs and offerings.
- Educational programs include cooking workshops where families can learn about and prepare diverse cuisines.
- Regular experiences expose children to culturally diverse foods, expanding their palate and understanding.
- Food programs include nutritional education with a cultural sensitivity lens.

Self-Assessment

Elements of Success	Beginner (1)	Making Progress (2)	Leveling up (3)
Adaptability 1. Food choices do not adapt to meet diverse food needs. 2. Food choices can adapt to some requests. 3. Food choices adapt and anticipate the diverse food needs of families, including cultural, religious and medical needs.			
Nutritional Awareness 1: Limited nutritional awareness in food choices. 2: Some awareness but room for improvement. 3: Comprehensive nutritional awareness for diverse dietary needs.			
Communication about Food Choices 1: Limited communication about food choices. 2: Some communication but not fully inclusive. 3: Clear and inclusive communication about food choices.			

Building Blocks to Success:

- Survey families to understand dietary needs and preferences and adjust food offerings accordingly.
- Explore the cultural significance of food in the classroom to enrich the learning environment.
- Provide education to staff on accommodating different dietary requirements.
- Explore partnerships with local businesses or schools/colleges that specialize in diverse and inclusive food options.

Next Steps:

1-3 months:

4-12 months:

1-3 years:

Additional Notes:

5. STAFFING, VOLUNTEERS & BOARD COMPOSITION

Ideal State:

- Staff, volunteers, and board members represent diverse cultures, ethnicities, identities, and abilities.
- Policies actively encourage and support diversity in recruitment and representation.
- Able to recruit and retain staff from equity priority groups.
- Diverse staff are present in leadership positions.
- A diverse range of skills and experiences among staff enriches the learning environment and workplace culture.

Self-Assessment

Elements of Success	Beginner (1)	Making Progress (2)	Leveling up (3)
Diversity in Staff and Volunteers 1: Limited diversity among staff and volunteers. 2: Some diversity but room for improvement. 3: Diverse representation among staff and volunteers, as well as in leadership roles.			
Diversity in Leadership 1. Leadership does not reflect the diversity of the broader community. 2. Leadership somewhat reflects the diversity of the broader community. 3. Leadership fully reflects the diversity of the broader community.			
Inclusive Board Composition 1: Limited diversity in board composition. 2: Some diversity but not fully inclusive. 3: Inclusive representation on the board.			

Building Blocks to Success:

- Gather feedback from existing staff about the current workplace culture and needs related to retention.
- Implement strategies to actively recruit and retain a diverse staff and volunteer base.
- Conduct training sessions for board members on the importance of equity and inclusion.
- Regularly assess and adjust board recruitment strategies to ensure inclusivity.
- Regularly review and assess recruitment practices.
- Provide training on cultural competence and inclusion for all staff and volunteers.
- Annual reviews of HR, recruitment, and retention policies.

Next Steps:

1-3 months:

4-12 months:

1-3 years:

Additional Notes:

6. COMMUNITY CONNECTION & ENGAGEMENT

Ideal State:

- Diverse families actively participate in decision-making processes with robust feedback mechanisms and engagement strategies.
- Activities foster a sense of cultural pride and appreciation among participants.
- Robust partnerships and collaborative programs with other centers that foster cultural exchange, providing exposure to different practices.
- Activities encourage creative expressions of cultural identity, such as art, music, and storytelling.
- Collaboration with community organizations and resource consultants ensures a broad range of support services.
- Support resources are culturally tailored, considering the specific needs and preferences of the community.

Self-Assessment

Elements of Success	Beginner (1)	Making Progress (2)	Leveling up (3)
Active Participation 1. Families are not active participants in decision-making and engagement. Limited opportunities for feedback. 2. Families sometimes participate in decision-making. Feedback opportunities are not robust. 3. Diverse families actively participate in decision-making and engagement strategies. Robust mechanisms for feedback.			
Cultural Activities 1: Few cultural activities provided. 2: Some cultural activities but not fully diverse. 3: Diverse and inclusive cultural activities that reflect the experiences of all equity priority groups.			
Engagement with Cultural Communities 1: Limited engagement with cultural communities. 2: Some engagement but opportunities for improvement. 3: Active engagement with various cultural communities, organizations and partners.			

Building Blocks to Success:

- Create a cultural activities calendar with input from families and staff.
- Foster partnerships with local cultural organizations for joint activities and events.
- Establish mechanisms for ongoing feedback and collaboration.
- Ensure cultural activities are participatory rather than tokenistic.
- Establish a system to measure engagement with different cultural communities.
- Seek partnerships with organizations that specialize in providing resources for diverse needs.
- Establish various channels for families to express their needs (i.e. surveys, feedback forms, focus groups, through an app, etc.).
- Engage diverse caregivers as partners in classroom learning, leveraging their expertise to share cultural teachings and practices.
- Robust partnerships with local community organizations who serve equity priority groups.
- Cultural activities are not limited to celebrations / events, but embedded in regular programming including dramatic play, music, songs, and stories.

Next Steps:

1-3 months:

4-12 months:

1-3 years:

Additional Notes:

7. LANGUAGE

Ideal State:

- Comprehensive language support is available for families with varying language needs.
- Bilingualism and multilingualism are encouraged and facilitated among staff, enhancing communication.
- Staff includes multilingual individuals, facilitating clear communication with families from various language backgrounds.
- An array of language resources, including books, signage, educational materials and technological resources.

Self-Assessment

Elements of Success	Beginner (1)	Making Progress (2)	Leveling up (3)
Availability of Information and Support 1: Limited availability of information and support in languages other than English. Parents may face challenges accessing essential information. 2: Adequate availability of information and support in some languages. Efforts are made to assist parents in accessing necessary resources. 3: Comprehensive availability of information and support in multiple languages through human and technological resources. Parents from diverse linguistic backgrounds can access resources easily.			
Communication in Diverse Languages 1: Limited ability of staff or participants to communicate effectively in diverse languages. Communication barriers may exist. 2: Adequate ability of staff or participants to communicate in some diverse languages. Communication barriers are addressed, but improvements can be made. 3: Highly effective communication in a variety of languages. Staff and participants demonstrate proficiency in multiple languages, promoting inclusive communication.			

Elements of Success	Beginner (1)	Making Progress (2)	Leveling up (3)
Encouraging Multilingualism in the Classroom 1. Limited ability to support first language development or multilingualism. Additional languages are seen as a barrier. 2. Some ability to support multilingualism, but lacking resources. 3. Active efforts and ample resources to support multilingualism in the classroom through books, activities, and materials as well as efforts from staff. Additional languages are celebrated, and educators can communicate the benefits of multilingualism to families and caregivers.			
Bilingualism (French and English) 1: Limited support for bilingualism, with minimal resources or initiatives to promote French-English language proficiency. 2: Some support for bilingualism, with efforts to encourage French-English language skills among staff and participants. 3: Strong support for bilingualism. Staff and participants are encouraged and supported in developing proficiency in both French and English.			

Building Blocks to Success:

- Develop a multilingual communication plan, including translated materials and multilingual staff.
- Encourage families to share key phrases in their home languages for use in daily interactions.
- Invest in language resources, translation services, and language training for staff.
- Provide language courses for staff to enhance communication with families.
- Promote a culture that celebrates linguistic diversity and inclusion.
- Share key phrases with all participants' families to encourage children to learn them both at home and at child care and use communication apps with parents to share what they are learning or talking about.

Next Steps:

1-3 months:

4-12 months:

1-3 years:

Additional Notes:

8. WORKPLACE CULTURE

Ideal State:

- Staff feel valued, heard, and respected. In such a setting, open communication is encouraged, and all staff members, regardless of their tenure, feel comfortable sharing their experiences and opinions.
- The environment actively supports discussions about the needs of equity priority groups and swiftly addresses any instances of discrimination.
- Respect and collaboration between seasoned and newer staff are evident, promoting a cohesive and inclusive workplace.
- Staff from equity-deserving communities feel valued, supported, and safe in the workplace.
- Ample opportunities for team building and group bonding to enhance staff morale as well as strength teamwork in the classroom.
- Staff are consistently recognized for their contributions and have clear opportunities for advancement.

Self-Assessment

Elements of Success	Beginner (1)	Making Progress (2)	Leveling up (3)
Staff Feedback 1: Limited opportunities for staff feedback and expression of personal experiences. 2: Some channels for staff feedback exist, but they may not be fully effective or widely utilized. 3: Ample and effective opportunities for staff to provide feedback and share experiences, in various formats.			
Peer Relationships 1: Noticeable tension or lack of respect between different staff groups. 2: Efforts to bridge gaps between seasoned and newer staff, or between staff from diverse cultural backgrounds, though some challenges remain. 3: Strong respect and cohesion between staff members of different tenures, promoting a supportive and collaborative environment.			
Culture of Accountability 1. Discomfort or avoidance in discussing equity-related topics or acknowledging discrimination. 2. Growing awareness of equity issues, with occasional discussions facilitated. 3. A culture that openly embraces discussions about equity and actively addresses discrimination.			

Elements of Success	Beginner (1)	Making Progress (2)	Leveling up (3)
Culture of Recognition 1. Minimal or no formal recognition practices for staff contributions. 2. Some recognition practices exist, but they may be inconsistent or limited in scope. 3. Robust and consistent practices for recognizing staff contributions and achievements.			

Building Blocks to Success:

- Provide robust, consistent, and various opportunities for staff to give feedback about their experiences in the workplace, including anonymous feedback.
- Actively seek the input of staff from equity deserving communities and ensure equitable opportunities for recognition and advancement.
- Clear pathways for recognition and advancement within the organization are known to all staff.
- Incorporate regular team building activities to strengthen peer relationships and enhance classroom teamwork.
- Facilitate regular conversations and learning activities related to equity and inclusion to enhance comfort discussing these topics.
- Establish clear mechanisms for reporting and responding to discrimination or harassment, as well as accountability mechanisms.
- Utilize staff expertise (such as language, culture and lived experience) in policy and programming, and recognize staff contributions.

Next Steps:

1-3 months:

4-12 months:

1-3 years:

Additional Notes:

9. PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Ideal State:

- Training programs are comprehensive and inclusive, addressing different learning styles and cultural competence.
- Materials are well-documented, accessible, and available in various formats.
- Educators and providers have robust resources and professional learning to support the needs of equity priority groups including training such as AODA, anti-racism, equity, diversity and inclusion, LGBTQ2S+ inclusion/safer spaces, mental health, and supporting children with special needs.
- Training sessions feature facilitators with a high degree of professional expertise as well as lived experience.
- Training materials include real-world examples of successful implementations that consider cultural nuances.
- Staff members have access to ongoing learning opportunities, encouraging continuous growth in cultural competence.

Self-Assessment

Elements of Success	Beginner (1)	Making Progress (2)	Leveling up (3)
Training on Inclusive Practices for Staff and Leadership 1: Limited training on inclusive practices. 2: Some training but opportunities for improvement. 3: Comprehensive and continuous training on inclusive practices available to all staff and board members.			
Quality of Professional Learning 1: Trainings are not accessible or engaging to participants. 2: Some trainings are engaging and well-received but lack consistency in quality. 3: High quality training with strong outcomes, on in-demand topics, led by facilitators with lived experience and professional expertise.			

Building Blocks to Success:

- Offer regular training sessions on best practices in serving equity priority groups for all staff members.
- Provide accessible resources that cater to diverse learning styles.
- Create a resource library with materials that support implementation of inclusive practices.
- Establish mentorship programs where experienced staff can guide others in incorporating inclusive strategies.
- Participate in Communities of Practice to share and learn best practices with other ELCC providers.
- Regularly update training programs to align with evolving best practices.

Next Steps:

1-3 months:

4-12 months:

1-3 years:

Additional Notes:

10. POLICY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Ideal State:

- Equity and inclusion principles are deeply embedded in all policies and infrastructures.
- There is a well-articulated inclusion plan, proactive equity and reconciliation strategies, and robust anti-discrimination policies.
- There are accountability mechanisms in place such as active equity committees, communities of practice, or staff who have equity and inclusion within their portfolios.
- The organization's strategic plan, mission, vision, and values explicitly reflect a commitment to equity and inclusion, guiding all operational and strategic decisions.

Self-Assessment

Elements of Success	Beginner (1)	Making Progress (2)	Leveling up (3)
Strategies and Plans 1: No strategies or plans related to equity or reconciliation efforts. 2: Basic equity and inclusion statement, but opportunities for improvement. 3: Comprehensive and effective equity and reconciliation strategies that are well-integrated into the organization, actionable and tracked.			
Interventions and Infrastructure 1: No current interventions to ensure consistency and accountability of equity efforts. 2: Some interventions related to equity, but lacking consistency or accountability. 3: Robust interventions and infrastructure including equity committees or communities of practice to enhance accountability, consistency and evaluation of equity and inclusion efforts.			
Policy Review 1: Policies are dated and in need of review. 2: Some policies have been reviewed recently, but not systematically. 3: All policies have been recently reviewed with an equity and inclusion lens and updated to align with evolving best practices and current legislation.			

Building Blocks to Success:

- Conduct regular policy, plan and strategy review and/or seek guidance from those with expertise.
- Create a resource library with materials that support implementation of inclusive practices.
- Establish mentorship programs where experienced staff can guide others in incorporating inclusive strategies.
- Participate in Communities of Practice to share and learn best practices with other ELCC providers.
- Implement a system for ongoing evaluation and updating of available resources.
- Keep up with evolving best practices and legislation related to equitable policies.

Next Steps:

1-3 months:

4-12 months:

1-3 years:

Additional Notes: