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**REPORT TITLE: Early Years and Child Care Sector Workforce Strategy Update**

**FROM: Andrea Warren, Acting Commissioner of Human Services**

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## **RECOMMENDATION**

- 1. That the approach outlined in the report of the Acting Commissioner of Human Services, listed on the June 27, 2024 Regional Council agenda titled “Early Years and Child Care Sector Workforce Strategy Update”, be endorsed; and**
- 2. That the Regional Chair, on behalf of Regional Council, write a letter to the Minister of Education, outlining Peel Region’s Early Years and Child Care Workforce challenges and request that the Ministry:**
  - a. Implement a compensation framework for early years and child care staff that is comparable to Designated Early Childhood Educators (DECE) in the school board sector that acknowledges both years of service and qualifications; and**
  - b. Work with the Ministry of Citizenship and Multiculturalism to prioritize work and studies in Early Childhood Education for immigration pathways that incentivize Registered Early Childhood Educators to remain in Ontario; and**
  - c. Fund and support accelerated learning and credential pathways for individuals currently working in the sector to become Registered Early Childhood Educators; and**
  - d. Provide adequate, flexible, multi-year funding to address local recruitment challenges through the implementation of high impact initiatives to attract and retain the Early Years and Child Care Workforce; and**
- 3. That a copy of the above-mentioned letter to the Minister of Education be provided to Peel’s Members of Provincial Parliament, with a request that they support and advance these advocacy positions with the appropriate provincial ministers; and**
- 4. That these positions be incorporated into Peel Region’s ongoing advocacy efforts to the provincial government, including at the 2024 AMO Conference.**

## **REPORT HIGHLIGHTS**

- In 2022, Peel began implementing several initiatives to rebuild the early years and child care workforce to pre-pandemic levels. As a result of these actions, 2023 workforce levels reached 109 percent of what they were in 2019, pre-pandemic.**

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- With the introduction of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) plan, Peel will add 11,980 new child care spaces to the system by the end of 2026. These spaces cannot be operationalized without the addition of 1,625 child care staff to the workforce.
  - In November 2023, the Ministry of Education released a Provincial Workforce Strategy aimed at supporting the recruitment and retention of qualified professionals.
  - The Provincial Workforce Strategy has significant gaps that require further investments and policy changes to eliminate barriers specifically related to:
    - fair and competitive wages;
    - prioritization of work in Early Childhood Education for newcomers;
    - accelerated credential pathways; and
    - adequate multi-year funding.
  - Staff are requesting Council's endorsement to bring forward advocacy positions to the Minister of Education to address these gaps and support a thriving early years and child care workforce in Peel.
  - Staff are also requesting approval to engage with Peel's Members of Provincial Parliament (MPP) to support Peel's efforts in advancing these advocacy positions with the appropriate provincial ministers.
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## DISCUSSION

### 1. Background

On March 24, 2022, staff brought a report titled "Addressing the Child Care Workforce Shortage" (Resolution 2022-178) to Council regarding the impact of COVID-19 on staff levels in the Early Years and Child Care sector. Peel received \$14.4 million over 2022 and 2023 in one-time funding to support innovative initiatives to recruit and retain a high-quality early years and child care workforce.

The report informed Council of the reasons for staff shortages in the sector and the types of initiatives that would help to retain staff. Using this input, staff developed a comprehensive Early Childhood Educator (ECE) workforce strategy and committed to return to Council with an update on the outcomes of this strategy.

### 2. Peel's Workforce Strategy

Beginning in 2022, Peel implemented a number of initiatives to recruit and retain the early years and child care workforce (see Appendix I for details on these initiatives). Several positive outcomes were achieved, including:

- Enhanced working conditions for up to 4,466 child care staff by providing increased access to professional learning and planning time.
- A dedicated system-wide learning day for over 4,200 child care staff that made them feel rejuvenated, valued, and appreciated.
- Provided 75 domestic students from equity-deserving communities with financial and academic support to complete their ECE diploma within 16 months and obtain employment in a child care setting.
- In partnership with four GTA Service System Managers and 7 accredited colleges, 3,500 ECE diploma students were supported through a tuition grant program.

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- In 2022, 1,949 ECE students were supported with 23% of students being residents of Peel.
- In 2023, 1,551 ECE students were supported. Staff are currently working with the colleges to summarize enrollment data.
- Collaborated with Sheridan College on the “2023 Early Years and Child Care Workforce study of Halton and Peel Regions of Ontario” (hereinafter referred to as “the Sheridan Study”) to study workforce challenges to inform further recruitment and retention strategies. This research captured input from 476 early years and child care staff and 53 child care agencies.
- Partnered with Sheridan College to develop an ECE Leadership Micro-credential program with 19 students enrolled in the first cohort.
- Recognized over 5,000 early years and child care staff in ECE appreciation campaign.
- Facilitated connections between 144 job seekers and 13 employers through early years and child care job fairs resulting in employment opportunities.

As a result of collaborative efforts between Peel and community partners, the goal to rebuild the early years and child care workforce was achieved. Staffing levels in Peel’s early years and child care workforce increased by 109 per cent compared to 2019 pre-pandemic levels.

### 3. Current State of the Early Years and Child Care System

Peel’s early years and child care workforce now includes 5,779 dedicated staff members. Among them, 55 per cent are qualified Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs), 36 per cent are non-RECEs, and 9 per cent are supervisors providing support to children and families across the region. According to the Sheridan Study, the average age of Peel’s early years and child care workforce is 38, and includes:

- 81 per cent women,
- 53 per cent racialized individuals
- 4 per cent male,
- 4 per cent Indigenous People
- 3 per cent persons with a disability, and
- 2.1 per cent French speakers

This committed workforce ensures that children and families in Peel have access to high-quality early years and child care services, however, there are new system challenges with the implementation of the Canada Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) program which has brought Peel back into a workforce deficit, at a time where child care expansion is critical.

### 4. Peel’s Early Years and Child Care Workforce Challenges

Peel has a CWELCC expansion target of 11,980 new licensed child care spaces by the end of 2026. To operationalize these new spaces, approximately 1,625 additional early years and child care staff are required.

In November 2023, the Ministry of Education introduced the Provincial Workforce Strategy aimed at supporting the recruitment and retention of qualified professionals by increasing RECE compensation, creating access to professional learning opportunities and enhanced support for qualification upgrade grants and secondary school dual credit programs.

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While the increased investment in the workforce is welcomed, the Provincial Workforce Strategy has significant gaps that require further investments and policy changes to eliminate barriers to recruiting and retaining a strong early years and child care workforce.

### 5. Early Years and Child Care Workforce Policy Changes and Investments Required

The current workforce shortage poses the single most significant risk to the successful implementation of the CWELCC program, as a strong workforce is needed to ensure families have access to affordable child care. Peel will continue to advocate for provincial policy changes and additional funding to address the following areas:

#### a) Fair compensation including a comprehensive wage grid and benefits

The Sheridan Study showed that pay and benefits is a major factor impacting job satisfaction. Sixty-eight per cent of early years and child care staff indicated they are dissatisfied with their pay and 69 per cent indicate that benefits do not meet their personal needs.

While the increase in RECE compensation is welcomed, the province's workforce strategy does not consider the following:

- A wage differential between staff who have multiple years of experience compared with staff with no work experience. New RECE staff entering the workforce have wages that are accelerating faster than their colleagues who have similar credentials and more years of experience, creating wage costs pressures for providers and inequities amongst staff.
- Director Approved Staff – individuals who have been approved by the province to take on the role of a qualified staff person counted towards meeting adult-child ratio requirements.
- The current RECE wage floor (\$23.86 per hour in 2024) is low compared to the GTA living wage of \$25.05, and to Designated Early Childhood Educators (DECE) employed by school boards. In Peel, 48.4 per cent of RECE staff earned less than the living wage in 2023 inclusive of the current wage grants. The sector continues to lose RECE to school boards where they are compensated at a higher rate of pay and where their salary is based on a wage grid that takes into consideration years of experience.
- The Provincial Workforce Strategy also excludes support for additional benefits that would increase job satisfaction and incentivize individuals to work in the sector. The sector is made up of many small non-profit and commercial operators who want to give employees better benefits but are unable to provide them without additional funding.

To address these challenges, staff request Council's endorsement to advocate to the Ministry of Education for the implementation of a compensation framework for early years and child care staff that is comparable to DECE's in the school board sector and that acknowledges both years of service and qualifications.

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### **b) Recruitment and Retention of Newcomers in the Workforce**

Newcomers and work permit holders represent a significant portion of Peel's early years and child care workforce. The Sheridan Study found that 21 per cent of RECEs and 18 per cent of non-RECEs having been in Canada for five years or less. In addition, it is estimated that work permit holders make up over 30 per cent of early years and child care program staff.

The development of newcomer talent is essential to recruitment and retention of the workforce, however challenges in Ontario's immigration policies limit this opportunity causing newcomers with RECE qualifications to relocate to other provinces with better immigration pathways for early childhood educators. Ontario's Immigrant Nominee Program (OINP) prioritizes "scoring factors" for technical occupations in the sciences and health care services. By contrast, in Nova Scotia early childhood educators and assistants are prioritized through the "International Graduates in Demand" nomination program.

To address this issue, staff are seeking Council's endorsement to advocate that the Ministry of Education work with the Ministry of Citizenship and Multiculturalism to prioritize work and studies in Early Childhood Education for immigration pathways that incentivize Registered Early Childhood Educators to remain in Ontario.

### **c) Accelerated Education Pathways**

The Provincial Workforce Strategy lacks a focus on accelerated education pathways for individuals to become qualified. The Sheridan Study indicated that 39 per cent of non-program staff are interested in becoming RECEs. Barriers such as flexible training options, financial constraints and demanding program workloads hinder their ability to enroll in ECE diploma programs while continuing to work in the sector.

Staff request Council's endorsement to advocate to the Ministry of Education to fund and support accelerated learning and credential pathways for individuals currently working in the sector to become RECEs.

### **d) Multi-year flexible funding to address local workforce challenges**

Multi-year flexible funding is needed to ensure Peel can implement responsive and innovative initiatives aimed at growing the workforce to support child care expansion and meet community need. To date, the province has committed to "Innovation Funding" in 2024, however details regarding this funding including Peel's allocation remains unknown.

To address this challenge, staff request Council's endorsement to advocate to the Ministry of Education for adequate multi-year funding to implement high-impact initiatives that address local recruitment challenges and enhance workforce retention.

## **RISK CONSIDERATIONS**

A thriving, qualified early years and child care workforce is a key requirement to ensure that families and children in Peel have access to affordable and high quality child care.

## **Early Years and Child Care Sector Workforce Strategy Update**

Council's endorsement for staff to advocate for investments in the early years and child care workforce will support efforts to actively engage with the province, community and key partners on the challenges impacting Peel's workforce.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications related to the recommendations in this report.

### **CONCLUSION**

Peel has made great strides through local initiatives aimed at recruiting and retaining a strong and qualified early years and child care workforce. With Council's endorsement, staff will continue to work with our provincial government partners to address the challenges facing the workforce to ensure that the sector in Peel continues to thrive and deliver high quality programs to children and their families.

### **APPENDICES**

Appendix I – Workforce Strategy Initiatives

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Andrea Warren, Acting Commissioner of Human Services

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