



Shine On

**Improving Supports
for Children with
Disabilities and Challenging
Behaviours in Ontario's
Licensed Child Care**

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Executive Summary

Ontario's licensed child care system is struggling to meet the inclusion needs of children and families. YMCA leaders report that in some regions as many as one in four children enrolled have special needs, with behavioral challenges rising fastest since the pandemic. Staff describe classrooms where escalating needs overwhelm capacity, forcing educators to choose between supporting one child in crisis or maintaining quality for the rest of the group.

Approximately 60–70% of Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) staff report burnout or high stress, with only 36% of RECEs planning to remain in the field for the next five years¹. This strain is leading to burnout, safety risks, and disrupted learning environments. Left unaddressed, this surge in unmet needs threatens the overall quality of programming, the safety of staff and children, and children's developmental outcomes.

This paper draws on interviews with YMCA leaders across Ontario and secondary research to highlight persistent gaps in inclusion supports within licensed child care. Key issues include inconsistent data tracking and sharing across municipalities, uneven and inadequate funding, limited specialized staffing and training, and fragmented coordination – especially during transitions to school.

The needs of children with disabilities and/or challenging behaviours vary across age groups, requiring targeted strategies for early years (0–4) and school-age children, as well as focused attention on transition periods. Effective inclusion requires adequate, stable, and flexible funding models that allow for enhanced staffing, including 1:1 supports when appropriate. It also depends on standardized, accessible training for all early childhood educators and formalized protocols between child care and school systems. While the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care program primarily covers children under age 6, this paper also addresses inclusion in licensed before- and after-school programs (ages 6–12), where needs are also increasing and supports are essential.

Drawing on promising provincial models from British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Quebec, as well as successful YMCA and municipal practices in Ontario, this paper puts forward actionable recommendations. These include the establishment of a province-wide data system, increased and predictable funding with accountability, mandated inclusion training integrated into onboarding and ongoing professional development, and formal transition frameworks involving dedicated coordinators.

In addition, the paper calls for a public accountability framework to clarify inclusion supports available to families and a provincial learning hub to share promising practices and build sector capacity.

Together, these recommendations aim to build a more inclusive, equitable licensed child care system that meets the growing and complex needs of children with disabilities and/or challenging behaviours across Ontario.

Key Recommendations – At a Glance

1. **Establish a province-wide data and accountability system** – standardize data tracking and sharing across municipalities and licensed providers.
2. **Provide stable, equitable, and full-year inclusion funding** – ensure predictable supports for both early years and school-age child care.
3. **Mandate standardized, ongoing inclusion training** – integrate province-wide training into onboarding.
4. **Implement formalized transition frameworks** – ensure coordinated protocols and dedicated transition coordinators between child care and schools.
5. **Streamline intake and individualized support plans (ISPs)** – create a digital platform to reduce duplication and delays.
6. **Establish centralized regional intake hubs** – ensure one-stop navigation for families across child care, schools, and health services.
7. **Strengthen public accountability and transparency** – create dashboards and annual reporting on inclusion supports, staffing, and funding.
8. **Create a provincial learning hub for promising practices** – share models, tools, and training resources.
9. **Establish a provincial wage grid for ECEs and support staff** – provide competitive standardized compensation tied to qualifications and experience.

Introduction & Context

In 2021, the Government of Canada launched the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) plan to improve the accessibility, affordability, and quality of child care across the country. As child care is a provincial responsibility, Ontario signed a six-year agreement valued at \$13.2 billion, with commitments to reduce fees to an average of \$10 per day by 2026, create 86,000 new licensed spaces – prioritizing not-for-profit providers – and raise wages for Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs)ⁱⁱ. Progress to date includes lowering fees from previous rates to an average of \$22 per day, the creation of 33,000 new spaces as of September 2024, and wage increases raising the minimum RECE wage to \$24.36 per hour, with further increases plannedⁱⁱⁱ.

Yet YMCA leaders consistently emphasize that the prevalence and complexity of children's needs are rising faster than supports can keep pace. At the YMCA of Owen Sound and Grey Bruce, 5% of children enrolled required enhanced support, but the majority did not receive funding, with some communities seeing much higher proportions – for example, 13% of children in a JK/K program and 12% of preschoolers required support, of whom more than half to three-quarters had no funding. At the YMCA of Simcoe-Muskoka, leaders described educators experiencing burnout and safety concerns as they manage increasingly complex behaviours amongst children. At the YMCA of Oakville, leaders noted kindergarten-aged children are entering programs with greater needs than ever before, stretching staff capacity thin.

Educators are also encountering more children with multiple or co-occurring needs, requiring behavioural strategies, speech and occupational therapy supports, and individualized planning that go well beyond typical ratios and training. Leaders described situations where one child's behavioural needs could derail an entire classroom, forcing staff to triage crises rather than provide planned programming. These pressures limit the ability to maintain consistent, high-quality experiences for all children. These challenges are not isolated; across Ontario, programs are struggling with higher caseloads, more complex interventions, and fewer supports available to meet them.

Despite certain advancements, challenges remain, particularly in supporting the inclusion of children with disabilities and/or challenging behaviours within licensed child care. About 60% of children aged 0–5 with disabilities attend non-parental child care, highlighting growing demand for inclusive programming^{iv}. Inclusion is critical to ensuring equitable access and promoting positive developmental and social outcomes for all children^v. Child care is often the first point of intervention: for many very young children, emerging needs are first noticed in licensed programs, where educators identify concerns, support parents, and help navigate referrals. Without adequate system supports, this frontline role places additional strain on staff and risks delays in accessing critical early intervention.

Ontario YMCAs, as the province's largest not-for-profit licensed child care provider with 14 regional associations, play a vital role in delivering community programming and inclusive care. However, YMCA leaders across Ontario report significant barriers to fully supporting children with disabilities, including inconsistent municipal supports, limited funding, staffing challenges, and fragmented coordination with health and education systems.

Scope note: While CWELCC applies primarily to children under 6, Ontario's licensed sector also serves school-aged children up to 12. YMCA leaders emphasized that behavioral and developmental needs are equally pressing in before- and after-school care, underscoring the need for inclusion supports across the full age range.

This paper builds on primary research from interviews with YMCA leaders and secondary research on provincial models to propose recommendations aimed at strengthening inclusion practices and systems in Ontario's licensed child care sector.

Problem Statement: Gaps in Inclusion Supports

Despite Ontario's CWELCC commitments, child care programs are overwhelmed by a surge in special needs that is both larger in scale and more complex in nature. Leaders across multiple regions reported that 20–25% of enrolled children require additional supports, yet funding and staffing have not kept pace. This imbalance threatens program quality, the safety of staff and children, and children's developmental outcomes, while leaving classrooms vulnerable to frequent disruptions that affect all children. In one YMCA program, educators reported daily incidents of aggression such as hitting, kicking, and throwing objects. Without dedicated support staff, educators were left managing safety risks while also trying to supervise the rest of the group.

Gaps in Data Collection and Sharing

Ontario lacks a consistent, province-wide system for tracking and sharing data on children with disabilities and/or challenging behaviours in licensed child care. Because early learning settings are often where needs first surface, the lack of integration means valuable early identification is frequently lost, delaying intervention and reducing developmental outcomes. This fragmentation hampers coordination of supports, forces families to disclose their child's needs repeatedly, and limits effective funding allocation and outcome measurement.

Inadequate and Uneven Funding



"We have to stretch resources and staff as far as possible, and it's really challenging when funding isn't stable."

— Cyndy Jefferson, YMCA of Owen Sound and Grey Bruce

Funding for inclusion supports is both insufficient overall and unevenly distributed across regions. Many funding streams are limited to the school year, causing instability for year-round programs and staff.

Workforce Challenges

Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) often feel underprepared to support children with complex needs due to inconsistent training and limited professional development opportunities. Low sectoral wages, burnout, and high turnover further constrain inclusion capacity. Several YMCA leaders emphasized that staff turnover is directly linked to the stress educators feel when managing the impacts of unsupported inclusion: educators leave the sector not only due to limited earning potential, but also because of the physical and mental toll of managing complex needs and repeated behavioral crises without adequate training or support.

Service Fragmentation and System Navigation

Families and providers face complex, fragmented intake processes, individualized support plans, and referral systems. This duplication wastes staff time and delays access to supports. As one YMCA leader described, parents are often forced to repeat their child's history and needs to multiple agencies, leading to frustration and delays. Families without strong advocacy skills risk falling through the cracks entirely.

Transition Disruptions

Transitions from child care to kindergarten often lack formal protocols and coordinated communication with school boards, increasing risk of service gaps. YMCA leaders noted that while some school boards collaborate effectively, in many regions there is no consistent protocol. This means children may arrive at kindergarten without the supports they relied on in child care, causing regression and renewed stress for families.



“Having a dedicated case manager means we can respond quickly to each child’s unique needs without waiting on external approvals — it’s made a huge difference in supporting continuity and stability.”

— **Sarah Crate**, YMCA Simcoe-Muskoka

Lack of Transparency and Accountability

There is limited clarity about available supports, funding decisions, and responsibilities. The absence of standardized reporting perpetuates inequities and hinders informed decision-making.

Rationale for Inclusion in Licensed Child Care



Supporting the inclusion of children with challenging behaviours in licensed child care is critical not only for the children themselves but also for families, educators, and the broader community. Inclusive early learning environments promote equity, social development, and long-term positive outcomes.

Benefits for Children with Disabilities and/or Challenging Behaviours

Children with challenging behaviours in inclusive early learning programs often show improved cognitive, social, and emotional development compared to segregated settings. Early intervention within inclusive environments enhances communication skills and fosters belonging and self-confidence^{vi}.

Benefits for Typically Developing Children

Inclusive settings promote empathy, social skills, and acceptance among typically developing children by exposing them to diverse peers, preparing them for a multicultural society. When appropriate levels of special needs supports are in place, all children benefit: the overall quality of programming improves, disruptions decrease, and educators are able to devote attention to the entire group rather than being stretched too thin.^{vii} Inclusion done poorly—without adequate supports—can have the opposite effect, with typically developing children experiencing frequent disruptions and reduced program quality.

Benefits for Families

Families benefit from increased access to quality care and more coordinated supports that ease system navigation and reduce isolation^{viii}.

Benefits for Educators and Programs

Educators in inclusive settings report greater professional growth and job satisfaction, while programs experience improved teamwork and community reputation^{ix}.

Evidence-Based Strategies for Inclusion

Key elements of effective inclusion include adequate staffing ratios, individualized support plans, professional development, and collaboration with families and specialists^x.

Promising Municipal Practices in Ontario



Across Ontario, certain municipalities and Service System Managers (SSMs) have developed innovative practices to enhance inclusion of children with disabilities in licensed child care. These practices demonstrate how coordinated funding, training, and community partnerships can support more effective inclusion.

Coordinated Funding and Staffing Models

Some regions have implemented tiered funding formulas that align resources with local demographics and specific needs rather than solely school board catchment areas. For example, Simcoe-Muskoka's partnership with CLH Developmental Support Services in Midland, through their Quality Inclusive Support Services (QISS) program, enables dedicated case managers and inclusion funding embedded directly into intake processes, fostering more streamlined and stable support.



"Families shouldn't have to navigate a patchwork system. We need consistency across Ontario so every child can expect the same supports."

— **Catherine Hamilton**, YMCA of Greater Toronto

Integrated Intake and Support Coordination

Hamilton's shared intake tool and Three Rivers' centralized referral tracking system reduce duplication and ease navigation for families and providers. These digital platforms standardize individualized support plans (ISPs) and funding applications across child care, school, and health sectors, improving efficiency and communication.



"Families often get lost between different service systems; having a centralized intake has eased their burden and helped our staff coordinate supports better."

— **Terri Kendall**, YMCA Three Rivers

Training and Professional Development

Some YMCA associations have adopted innovative approaches to build inclusion capacity. For example, in the National Capital Region, staff are participating in ongoing inclusion-focused professional development initiatives, led by experienced educators, to strengthen skills in supporting children with diverse needs. In Oakville, YMCA staff access specialized training through partnerships with local inclusion-focused organizations, providing practical strategies for supporting children with disabilities and/or challenging behaviours.

Transition Frameworks

Certain regions have begun establishing formalized transition processes between child care programs and school boards. These include shared documentation templates and designated transition coordinators to facilitate smoother handoffs for children entering kindergarten. However, this remains an area for broader provincial standardization.

Strengths and Limitations

While these municipal practices provide valuable lessons, many rely on local champions and varying funding levels, leading to uneven implementation across Ontario. There is a strong desire among YMCA leaders for a province-wide framework that sets minimum standards and provides stable, predictable funding to support consistent inclusion practices.

Comparative Models from Other Jurisdictions

Ontario can draw valuable lessons from other Canadian provinces that have made significant strides in inclusive early childhood education. British Columbia (BC), Nova Scotia, and Quebec provide notable examples of funding structures, staffing supports, and coordinated frameworks that improve inclusion outcomes.

British Columbia: Integrated Early Intervention

BC's approach emphasizes embedding early intervention directly within licensed child care settings. The province funds early intervention specialists who collaborate with educators to support children with disabilities in natural learning environments, facilitating timely intervention^{xi}. This reduces wait times and enhances developmental outcomes.

Additionally, BC employs a tiered funding model allowing child care providers to access enhanced staffing supports based on assessed need levels, including 1:1 staffing for children with significant needs^{xii}. The province has introduced a wage enhancement of up to \$6 per hour, which has raised the median Early Childhood Educator (ECE) wage to approximately \$28 per hour. This investment in wages complements BC's recruitment and retention strategy, which also includes bursaries, professional development funding, and targeted supports for rural and underserved areas. Importantly, these measures have been positioned not only as a child care policy, but also as a workforce stabilization strategy, recognizing the dual social and economic role of ECEs^{xiiiiv}.

Nova Scotia: Provincial Transition Guidelines

Nova Scotia is piloting province-wide transition guidelines to smooth the shift from child care to kindergarten. This framework includes standardized documentation, cross-sector communication protocols, and designated transition coordinators, improving continuity and collaboration between child care providers and schools^{xv}.

Nova Scotia has taken steps toward consistency by introducing a provincial wage scale for ECEs, effective April 2025, which ranges from \$24.06 to \$30.24 per hour depending on classification and years of experience^{xvi}. By setting a province-wide wage grid, Nova Scotia has aimed to reduce regional disparities, improve retention, and provide predictability for educators considering entering or remaining in the field. This move is paired with expanded training pathways, free tuition programs, and a professional recognition framework, signaling a strong link between compensation and the province's early learning quality agenda.

Quebec: Universal Access with Dedicated Inclusion Supports

Quebec offers near-universal access to subsidized child care with a strong inclusion focus. The province provides additional funding and staffing ratios for children with disabilities, supported by

clear provincial inclusion policies and mandated professional development^{xvii}. Robust provincial data systems track inclusion metrics, aiding resource allocation and planning^{xviii}.

Quebec's child care model is internationally recognized for its affordability and accessibility, but it also incorporates workforce considerations. ECEs in Quebec generally earn between \$17 and \$30 per hour, depending on regional pay scales and experience^{xix}. While wage levels vary, Quebec has invested significantly in stabilizing the ECE workforce within the CPE (Centres de la petite enfance) system, which is widely seen as a cornerstone of its successful universal child care program. This has provided not only equitable access for families but also a more sustainable professional environment for educators.

Feature	British Columbia	Nova Scotia	Quebec
Early Intervention	Embedded specialists in child care	Transition guidelines piloted	Universal inclusion supports
Funding	Tiered model; 1:1 staffing possible	Transition coordination funding	Additional funding & staffing ratios
Transition Framework	Collaborative planning	Province-wide standardized docs	Mandated inclusion policies
Data and Accountability	Provincial data tracking system	Developing cross-sector sharing	Robust inclusion metrics system
Compensation & Wages	Starting wages for ECEs ~\$23–\$27/hr; incentives for specialized training	ECE wages ~\$20–\$25/hr; regional supplements possible	ECE wages ~\$25–\$30/hr; structured pay grid based on qualifications and experience

Lessons for Ontario:

- Embedding early intervention specialists within child care reduces delays and improves support for children with complex needs.
- Province-wide transition frameworks facilitate better collaboration and minimize disruptions during key transitions.
- Clear provincial policies with dedicated funding promote equitable, consistent inclusion practices.
- Strong data and reporting systems enable measurement and responsive planning.
- Competitive, transparent wage scales for early childhood educators are critical to workforce retention and ensuring inclusion supports can be delivered consistently.

Provincial Recommendations for Inclusive Child Care



1) Establish a Province-Wide Data and Accountability System

- a. Create a standardized, privacy-compliant data collection and sharing system across all Service System Managers (SSMs) and licensed child care providers.
 - i. **Early Years (0–4):** Track developmental milestones, early intervention participation, therapeutic supports, and inclusion-focused programming to enable timely intervention.
 - ii. **School-Age (5–12):** Track behavioral interventions, individualized support plan implementation, and transition supports to ensure continuity across child care and school settings.
- b. Provide a publicly accessible dashboard for families and providers showing available supports, staffing levels, and funding allocations to promote transparency and equity.
- c. Integrate with health, school, and social service records while maintaining privacy safeguards to enable cross-sector collaboration.
- d. Include training for staff on accurate data entry and maintenance to ensure reliability and minimize administrative burden, and establish periodic evaluation to ensure the system informs policy and funding decisions effectively.

2) Provide Stable, Equitable, and Full-Year Inclusion Funding

- a. Fund licensed child care programs to support inclusion year-round, removing gaps caused by school-year-only funding streams.
 - i. **Early Years (0–4):** Support embedded specialists (speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists), enhanced staffing ratios, and early intervention programs.
 - ii. **School-Age (5–12):** Ensure continuity of individualized support plans, behavioral interventions, and transition supports in before and after school licensed child care programs.
- b. Include enhanced staffing provisions such as 1:1 support for children with significant needs, with thresholds determined by standardized assessments.
- c. Ensure funding formulas are transparent, responsive to local demographics and complexity of needs, and monitored regularly for equity across regions and age groups.
- d. Introduce accountability mechanisms linking funding to measurable outcomes for children and programs, including reporting on utilization and impact.

3) Mandate Standardized, Ongoing Inclusion Training and Professional Development

- a. Require all licensed child care staff to complete province-wide, standardized inclusion training.
 - i. **Early Years (0–4):** Cover foundational inclusion strategies, early identification of developmental delays, social-emotional development, and therapeutic supports in daily routines.
 - ii. **School-Age (5–12):** Cover behavioral strategies, collaborative transition planning, program adaptations, and supporting individualized needs.
- b. Implement half-day onboarding modules and rolling professional development sessions to avoid program closures while ensuring staff receive training.
 - i. Promising YMCA models:

1. YMCA National Capital Region (NCR): Rolling professional development where senior educators mentor peers in inclusion practices; minimizes program disruption while building internal expertise; could serve as a template for province-wide implementation.
2. YMCA Hamilton/Burlington/Brantford: Centralized intake and referral tracking system standardizing individualized support plans and funding applications; reduces administrative burden, strengthens collaboration among educators and program teams, and integrates professional development with operational systems.
- c. Provide dedicated funding to cover backfilling or substitute staff, ensuring continuity of care and participation in PD.
- d. Require ongoing evaluation and refresher modules to keep training current, aligned with best practices, and informed by emerging evidence in inclusive pedagogy.

4) Implement Formalized Transition Frameworks

- a. Establish province-wide protocols to ensure smooth transitions between child care programs and school boards.
 - i. **Early Years (0–4):** Include developmental assessments, individualized planning, and preparation for structured learning environments.
 - ii. **School-Age (5–12):** Ensure continuity of individualized support plans, behavioral interventions, and coordinated planning with school teams.
- b. Assign dedicated transition coordinators to oversee documentation, communication with families, and follow-up.
- c. Develop standardized templates for documenting transitions, integrated into the province-wide digital data system to reduce duplication and ensure consistency across providers.
- d. Ensure protocols are supported by professional development and training to equip staff and school teams with the skills needed for effective collaboration.

5) Streamline Intake and Individualized Support Plans (ISPs)

- a. Develop a province-wide digital platform to standardize intake, ISP documentation, and funding applications.
- b. Enable reporting and analytics to inform resource allocation, monitor service delivery, and identify regional gaps.
- c. Ensure the platform is user-friendly for families, staff, and third-party agencies, reducing duplication, delays, and administrative burden.
- d. Integrate training and support for staff to maintain accurate documentation and ensure the platform drives meaningful decision-making.

6) Establish Centralized Regional Intake Hubs

- a. Fund and require regional hubs to coordinate service navigation across child care, schools, and health services.
- b. Hubs should streamline access to developmental and therapeutic supports, coordinate behavioral interventions, transition planning, and individualized supports.

- c. Improve efficiency for families and providers, reduce staff workload, and enable better alignment of services across sectors.
- d. Build on successful local models such as the Three Rivers hub and ensure consistent standards and reporting across regions.

7) Strengthen Public Accountability and Transparency

- a. Require all SSMS and licensed child care providers to participate in a public accountability framework.
- b. Annual reporting should include staffing levels, inclusion funding allocations, program capacity, and outcomes associated with ISPs.
- c. Provide dashboards accessible to families showing available supports, eligibility criteria, and expected service levels.
- d. Tie reporting to measurable inclusion quality indicators and integrate staff training on data entry and interpretation to ensure accurate, actionable information.

8) Create a Provincial Learning Hub for Promising Practices

- a. Establish a centralized learning hub to document, evaluate, and share promising inclusion practices.
 - i. **Early Years (0–4):** Highlight effective early intervention strategies, professional development approaches, and embedded specialist models.
 - ii. **School-Age (5–12):** Share best practices for transition planning, behavioral interventions, and collaboration with school teams.
- b. Develop the hub in partnership with YMCA Ontario and other sector leaders to ensure practical, scalable, and regionally relevant resources.
- c. Include tools, case studies, and training modules to support continuous professional development, consistent implementation, and knowledge-sharing across the sector.
- d. Ensure mechanisms for feedback and evaluation so the hub continuously improves and disseminates the most effective practices.

9) Establish a Provincial Wage Grid for Early Childhood Educators and Enhanced Support Staff

- a. Implement a standardized, province-wide wage grid for Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) and enhanced support staff, tied to qualifications, experience, and specialized training.
 - i. **Early Years (0–4):** Ensure wages reflect the additional responsibilities of supporting children with complex developmental needs, including individualized interventions and therapeutic supports.
 - ii. **School-Age (5–12):** Ensure compensation recognizes the increased complexity of behavioral support, transition planning, and collaboration with school teams.
- b. Provide dedicated funding to enable all licensed child care operators to implement the wage grid without compromising program quality or accessibility.
- c. Regularly review and adjust wage levels based on inflation, cost of living, and regional workforce trends to maintain competitiveness with other sectors and reduce turnover.

Implementation Considerations and Next Steps



Implementing these recommendations will require a coordinated, multi-level approach involving the Ministry of Education, Service System Managers (SSMs), licensed child care providers, and sector partners such as YMCA Ontario. Successful operationalization will depend on clear timelines, dedicated funding, defined responsibilities, and robust monitoring mechanisms.

1) Phased Rollout and Prioritization

- a. Prioritize the establishment of the province-wide data and accountability system and digital intake platform, as these provide the foundation for all subsequent initiatives.
- b. Roll out standardized inclusion training and professional development in phases, beginning with pilot sites to refine content and delivery methods before scaling province-wide.
- c. Implement transition frameworks and centralized regional hubs in stages, targeting high-need regions first while ensuring all municipalities eventually adopt standardized protocols.

2) Dedicated Funding and Resource Allocation

- a. Establish multi-year funding envelopes to support stable, full-year inclusion programs, staffing enhancements, and training initiatives.
- b. Allocate dedicated funding for backfilling staff during professional development, supporting 1:1 staffing where needed, and enabling operational costs for centralized hubs and transition coordinators.
- c. Ensure transparency in funding distribution through public dashboards and standardized reporting to reduce inequities across regions and age groups.

3) Clear Roles and Responsibilities

- a. The Ministry of Education should provide overarching leadership, set minimum inclusion standards, and ensure accountability through reporting and evaluation frameworks.
- b. SSMs should oversee regional implementation, manage intake hubs, coordinate funding, and provide localized support, drawing on their experience with the subsidy system and knowledge of child placements.
- c. Licensed child care providers must integrate standardized practices, maintain accurate records, participate in training, and collaborate with families, schools, and allied health professionals.
- d. Sector partners, including YMCA Ontario, should support professional development, knowledge-sharing, and ongoing evaluation of promising practices.

4) Monitoring, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement

- a. Develop province-wide indicators for inclusion quality, child outcomes, and program effectiveness, linked to the data and accountability system.
- b. Conduct annual evaluations of training programs, transition frameworks, intake hubs, and the learning hub to identify gaps, share lessons learned, and update protocols.
- c. Incorporate feedback loops from families, educators, and SSMs to ensure the system evolves with emerging needs and maintains equitable access.
- d. Use evaluation results to inform adjustments to funding formulas, training requirements, and

operational practices, ensuring sustainable, evidence-based improvements.

5) Equity, Accessibility, and Family-Centered Focus

- a. Ensure all implementation strategies consider the diversity of children's needs, regional service variations, and systemic barriers that families may face.
- b. Incorporate family perspectives into planning and evaluation to promote transparency, responsiveness, and meaningful participation.
- c. Maintain flexibility in program design to accommodate children with complex or emerging needs, while standardizing minimum supports across all regions.

By applying these implementation considerations, Ontario can ensure that the recommendations are not only actionable but also sustainable, scalable, and effective in improving inclusion outcomes for children across all age groups.

Ontario's licensed child care system has advanced under CWELCC through improved affordability, expanded spaces, and enhanced workforce compensation. But the surge in special needs, particularly behavioral complexity, now threatens to undermine those gains. Without immediate action, Ontario risks building an affordable system that still fails to equitably serve thousands of children and families. The inclusion of children with disabilities and/or challenging behaviours remains inconsistent and under-resourced, limiting equitable access to quality early learning and development.

This paper presents eight evidence-based recommendations to address these gaps, including province-wide data systems, stable funding, standardized professional development, formalized transition frameworks, streamlined intake, centralized regional hubs, public accountability measures, and a provincial learning hub. These strategies draw on YMCA insights, municipal best practices, and comparative provincial models.

Implementation will require coordinated action, phased rollouts, dedicated funding, clear roles, and continuous evaluation to ensure supports are effective, equitable, and sustainable. By adopting these measures, Ontario can strengthen inclusion, support families and educators, and ensure that all children have the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential.

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