



The Early Years and Child Care Service System Plan

2025-2030

January 2026

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Land Acknowledgement

Niagara Region is situated on treaty land. This land is steeped in the rich history of the First Nations such as the Hatiwendaronk, the Haudenosaunee, and the Anishinaabe, including the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. There are many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit from across Turtle Island that live and work in Niagara today. The Regional Municipality of Niagara stands with all Indigenous peoples, past and present, in promoting the wise stewardship of the lands on which we live.

The Regional Municipality of Niagara is committed to equity and respect for all by ensuring Indigenous voices are heard and included in our plans and programs. In addition, we are committed to eradicating anti-Indigenous racism and discrimination within the early years and child care sector in Niagara.

Message from the Regional Chair

On behalf of Niagara Regional Council, I am pleased to offer my support for Niagara Region's Early Years and Child Care Service System Plan, which will be instrumental in guiding Niagara's early years and child care sector for the next five years.

As the Region continues to grow, welcoming new businesses and families, and as the early years and child care sector continues to evolve with federal and provincial policies, it is imperative that we have a Service System Plan that can support our flourishing region and changing family needs.

The Service System Plan has been heavily informed by in-depth community consultations with parents and families, staff working in the sector and community partners, all of whom provided valuable input that will help us build a strong direction for the future. This Plan will help us deliver inclusive, accessible and affordable early years and child care programming leading to improved outcomes for children, families and the community.

The goals we have set for ourselves through this plan are ambitious. Achieving them will require strong collaboration and shared commitment from all parties, and I look forward to seeing what we can collectively accomplish for the good of Niagara's families and communities.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Bradley". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "J".

Jim Bradley, Chair
Niagara Region

Letter from the Director

I am pleased to introduce Niagara Region's Early Years and Child Care Service System Plan for 2025–2030 ("Service System Plan"). Under the *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014*, Service System Managers are required to develop a Service System Plan that sets a five-year strategic direction. This plan aligns with Niagara Region's current priorities, reinforcing our commitment to building a thriving community by growing better, together. It reflects our dedication to fostering a connected, inclusive, and flourishing Niagara.



The Service System Plan is a comprehensive multi-year roadmap that guides investments in high-quality early years and child care programs and services. It establishes key priorities to achieve the best possible outcomes for children and families in Niagara. It also reaffirms our commitment to strengthening a high-quality, affordable, responsive, and accessible early years and child care sector.

This plan was informed by extensive community engagement, with input from over 3,300 individuals, including parents and families, child care operators, staff from the sector, EarlyON, and Niagara Region, and, most importantly, children. Collaboration and research enabled us to create a relevant and impactful plan.

Achieving the plan's goals will require ongoing collaboration and coordination across sectors and levels of government. A shared commitment to these priorities will ensure meaningful progress for children and families in our region.

I extend my sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed their insights and feedback during the engagement process—your input has been invaluable in shaping this plan. I would also like to acknowledge the dedicated staff who diligently developed this plan based on the collected community engagement data.

As we look ahead to the next five years, I am excited to continue working together to create positive change. Growing better, together means fostering collective action to achieve our shared vision and keeping Niagara's children and families at the heart of our efforts.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S. Klair".

Satinder Klair, Director Children's Services
Niagara Region

Background

Our Role as a Service System Manager

Niagara Region is one of 47 Service System Managers mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Education to plan, oversee and manage child care and early years programming for children aged 0 to 12 years in Niagara.

As the service system manager for the early years and child care sector, Niagara Region provides oversight to the early years and child care system in Niagara, while also directly operating programs and services for families and children. Niagara Region oversees and delivers programs and services across 12 local area municipalities that make up Niagara Region: Fort Erie, Grimsby, Lincoln, Niagara Falls, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Pelham, Port Colborne, St. Catharines, Thorold, Wainfleet, Welland and West Lincoln.

Under the *Early Years and Child Care Act, 2014*, Niagara Region's Children's Services plays an integral role in planning, funding, administering, and operating early years and licensed child care services in Niagara. Under this act we are mandated to complete a Service System Plan every 5 years. This Service System Plan is a 5 year plan from 2025-2030.



As the Service System Manager, Niagara Region's responsibilities include:

Management of provincial **funding and resources** to support children and families.

Supporting **local policies** for the operation of child care and early years programming.

Monitoring quality across the early years and child care system.

Professional development and **capacity building** for staff working in the early years and child care sector.

Implementation of **Canada-wide early learning and child care** program and targeted child care expansion.

Being **accountable** to the Ministry of Education and families for the early years and child care system and funding.

Direct service delivery, including direct operation of five child care centres and one licensed home child care agency, and delivering child care fee subsidy to families.

Evidence informed **system planning** to address the needs of Niagara residents and Provincial priorities.

Early Years and Child Care Systems in Niagara Region

● Centre Based Child Care

Centre based care is provided for children aged 0-12 years by not-for-profit and for-profit operators in a variety of locations, including schools, community hubs and stand-alone buildings. As of Dec. 31, 2024, there are 193 contracted centres operating 13,750 licensed spaces in Niagara region.

● Home Based Child Care

Licensed home child care agencies contracted with independent providers to care for children aged 0-12 years in their private home. Extended days, evenings and weekend care may be available at the discretion of the provider. As of Dec. 31, 2024, there are three agencies offering 856 spaces across 141 homes.

● EarlyON Child and Family Centres

EarlyON Child and Family Centres (EarlyONs) offer free virtual and in-person programming for children aged 0-6 years and their parents or caregivers. EarlyONs are places where families engage in play-based learning, access resources and support and meet other children and families. As of Dec. 31, 2024, there are 21 physical EarlyON locations and one virtual EarlyON centre in Niagara.

● Special Needs Resourcing

Special Needs Resourcing can be accessed through licensed child care or EarlyON locations. Educators are supported by resource or behaviour consultants so children can fully participate in programming. Transition to school supports are also provided for children entering kindergarten.





Child Care Fee Subsidy

Fee subsidy provides financial assistance to help families pay for licensed child care so they can attend school or go to work. Subsidy is based on both household income and the cost of child care.

Professional Development and Learning

Niagara Region contracts with the Early Childhood Community Development Centre to deliver professional learning to Niagara Early Childhood Educators to support them in their learning and professional development.

Quality Programming in Early Years and Child Care

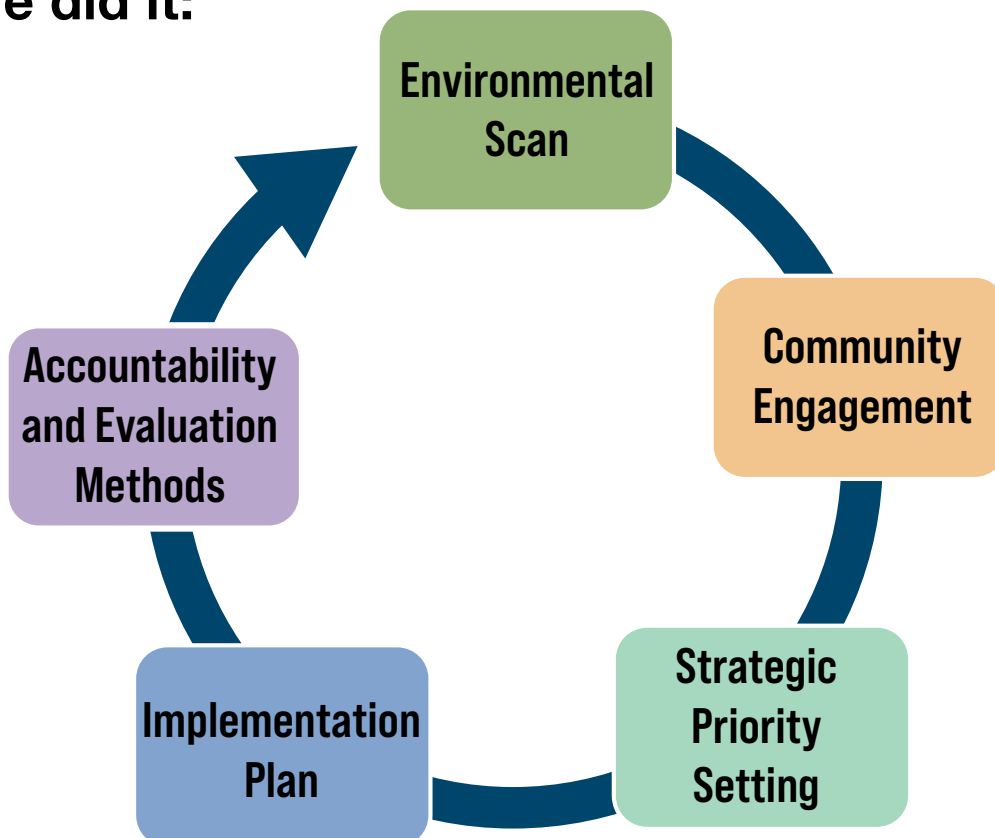
Quality is a key pillar in delivering service to families and children in Niagara. To maintain quality care all licensed child care centres and licensed home child care providers are trained in Quality Child Care Niagara.

Process Overview

Early Years and Child Care Service System Plan Process

The Early Years and Child Care Service System Plan (Service System Plan) is a mandated, comprehensive multi-year plan that will act as our road map for the next five years to guide investment in high quality early years and child care programs and services. The Service System Plan allows us to set priorities that will aim to achieve the best outcomes for Niagara children and families. Niagara Region's Children's Services has followed a comprehensive process, including an in-depth analysis of community-level demographic and service data and community engagement, to inform the development of this plan. Following the release of this report, an Implementation and Evaluation Plan will be developed.

How we did it:



1. Jurisdictional Review

- We reviewed Service System plans of seven comparators to understand their goals and objectives, as well as the structure of their plans

2. Environmental Scan

- We pulled data from multiple databases to gather the most up to date data on children's services programs
- In addition, we leveraged the 2021 Canadian census data to understand the current landscape in Niagara

3. Community Engagement

- To inform our community engagement we reviewed 15 other Consolidated Municipal Service Management Service System Plan engagement strategies
- Focus groups: conducted 12 groups with Registered Early Childhood Education and fee subsidy staff, community partners serving children and child care operators and providers
- Community engagement: administered an online survey promoted through social media, EarlyONs and child care centres and programs where we gathered 2,600 responses
- Staff Sector Survey: distributed an online survey to the sector where we gathered approximately 500 responses

Develop Broad Recommendations

- Completed a thematic analysis on data collected from the jurisdictional review, environmental scan and community engagement to identify trends and themes in line with Ministry of Education pillars
- Utilized analysis to create high-level recommendations

Data Validation With Partners

- Hosted two open house sessions after data was analyzed to ensure recommendations were aligned with other programs and services

Develop Goals, Objectives and Activities

- Following data validation with partners, goals, objectives and activities were drafted for each recommendation
- Implementation planning will build upon this framework to include indicators and metrics to allow us to track our progress



Early Years and Child Care in Canada

COVID-19

Educators and providers across Niagara worked together to ensure early learning and child care services continued to operate safely throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Niagara Region worked together with the Province of Ontario, Niagara Region Public Health and local child care providers to ensure essential workers had access to high-quality child care during province-wide school and child care closures. Our EarlyON Centres continued to provide programming for families using virtual and online modalities.

The Covid-19 pandemic strengthened child care's role as an essential service that allows parents and caregivers to work and contribute to our economy. Together, we will continue to advocate for the role that high-quality, accessible child care plays in economic growth and recovery.

As we move towards a post-pandemic early years and child care system, we continue to face impacts to workforce stability, recruitment and retention. Recovery of the early learning and child care sector is an important part of the Service System Plan.

Truth and Reconciliation

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada published its final report detailing the experiences and impacts of the residential school system in Canada, creating a historical record of its legacy and consequences. The Calls to Action are directed at individuals, organizations and all levels of government to make concrete changes in society.

In response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report and Calls to Action, Niagara Region published a series of reports to guide our work with First Nations, Metis and Inuit communities, including *Mno Bmaadziwin: Living the Good and Healthy Life and Creating our Way Forward*. An Indigenous ReconciliAction Plan is currently being developed.

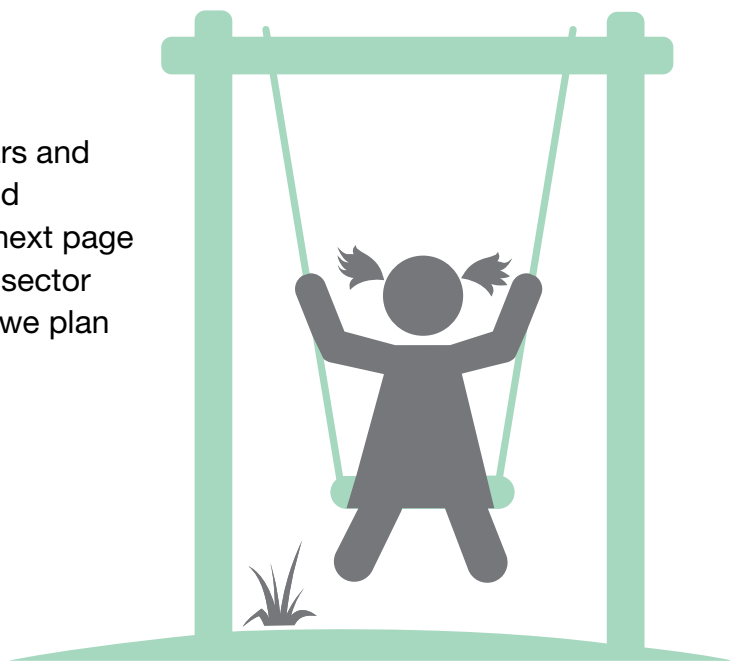
Niagara Region Children's Services has a longstanding relationship with Indigenous agencies through the delivery of services intended to support the Indigenous peoples and standing in partnership with Indigenous partners on the implementation of Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action. Niagara Region Children's Services currently supports two Indigenous led EarlyON Centres. And in partnership with Niagara College, Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre and Six Nations Polytechnic, proudly supports the Indigenous-led Registered Early Childhood Educators Program.

Niagara Region is committed to meaningful, authentic engagement with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities to ensure access to culturally safe services and programs delivered by the Region. To learn more about Niagara's Indigenous Engagement, please visit the Niagara Region [Indigenous Engagement](#) website.

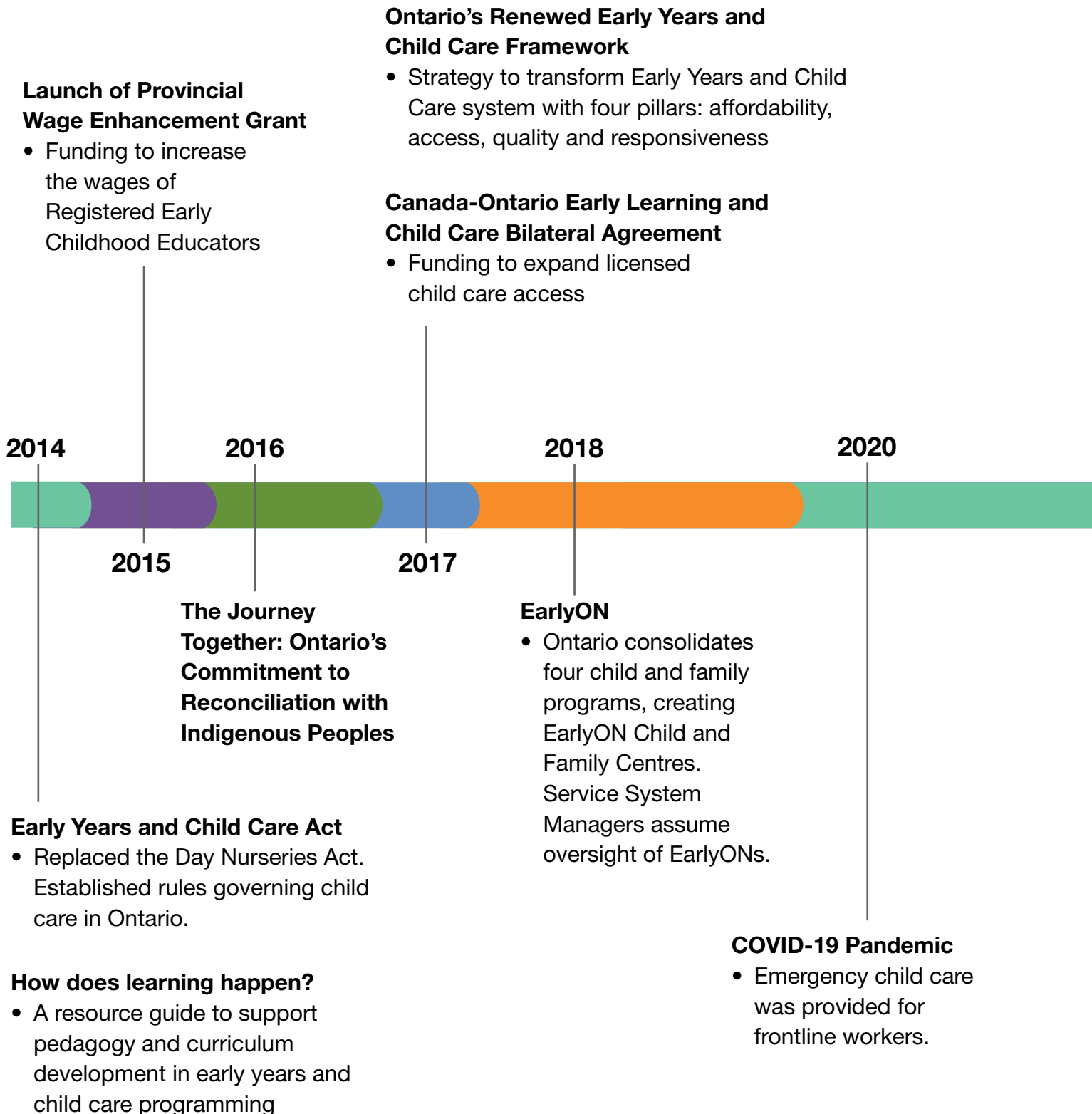
Niagara's Service System Plan will build upon this work to ensure our system meets the needs of Indigenous parents, families and children.

Provincial and Federal Context

Over the course of the last 10 years, the early years and child care system has been experiencing rapid and large-scale transformation. The road map on the next page provides an overview of the major milestones the sector has experienced that continue to impact the way we plan and execute our work.



Road Map of Last 10 Years

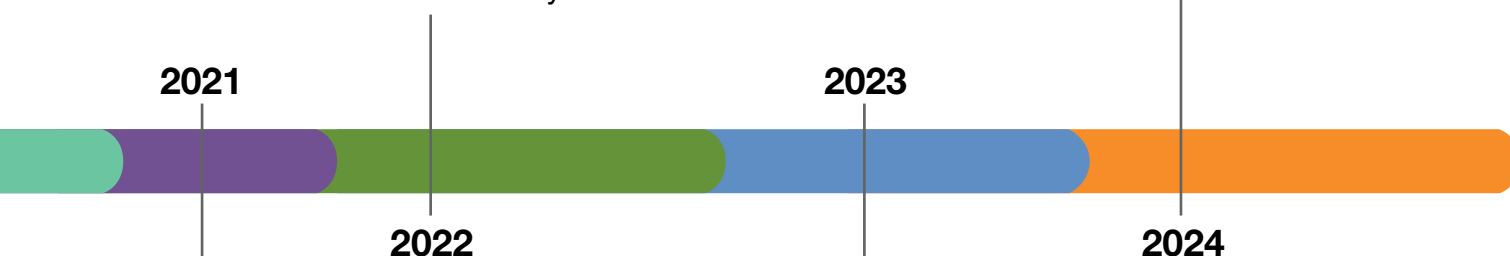


The Province of Ontario released implementation guidelines

- The Province of Ontario released the Canada-wide early learning and child care funding guidelines, referred to as the Addendum to Ontario Child Care and EarlyON Child and Family Centres Service Management and Funding Guideline (2022). Following this, the first Canada-wide early learning and child care payments were flowed to service system managers to support implementation. The Province of Ontario has committed to the creation of 86,000 new licensed child care spaces. Of those, about 53,000 spaces still need to be created by 2026.

Introduction of a Cost Based Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan Funding Formula

- The Province of Ontario introduced a cost-based funding formula for the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Program



Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Plan

- Aims to make child care more accessible, affordable and to increase the number of spaces for families. This included the reduction of parent fees to an average of 10\$ a day within the next five years.

Access and Inclusion Framework

- Designed to support system service managers with developing and implementing local service plans with increased focus on access as it relates to inclusion

Child Care Workforce Strategy

- A multi-pronged Child Care Workforce Strategy to address existing workplace shortages in the licensed child care sector and provide more affordable and accessible child care for families

Niagara-at-a-Glance

Niagara Region Current State

Niagara Region is a growing municipality, consisting of twelve local area municipalities, comprising urban and rural communities. As Niagara's population grows, the region is becoming increasingly diverse, leading to changing needs of the children and families who call Niagara home. As a Service System Manager, Niagara Region must monitor community trends and demographic changes to ensure that the programs and services delivered continue to meet the needs of the community. This section illustrates data trends in Niagara that will influence the planning and delivery of programs and services.



Population Demographics

Niagara's population continues to grow at a faster rate than the Province of Ontario and is projected to be 694,000 people living in Niagara by the year 2051. The population of Niagara Region grew by 6.7 per cent from 446,888 to 477,941 between 2016 and 2021, higher than the provincial change of 5.8 per cent.

Geography	Population 2016	Population 2021	Percentage Change
Ontario	13,448,494	14 223,942	5.8 %
Niagara Region	446,888	477,941	6.7 %

Since the last census cycle in 2021, Niagara Region's population has grown by 9.9 per cent to 525,352 in 2023.

The three municipalities with the greatest population growth between 2016 and 2021 were Niagara-on-the-Lake (9.0 per cent), Port Colborne (9.4 per cent) and Thorold (26.7 per cent).

Niagara is seeing an increase in housing starts each year, with 2,671 in 2021, 2,771 in 2022 and 2,810 in 2023. This growth in population and housing illustrates the need for agile early years and child care programs and services to continue to meet the growing needs in Niagara.

Niagara's population is slightly older than the Province of Ontario, with an average age of 44.4 years compared to 41.8 years.

The 0-9 age range makes up 9.6 per cent of Niagara's population, which is slightly lower than the province (10.2 per cent).

The data in this report is from the 2021 census which was the most up to date information available at the time of writing this report.



Diversity in Niagara

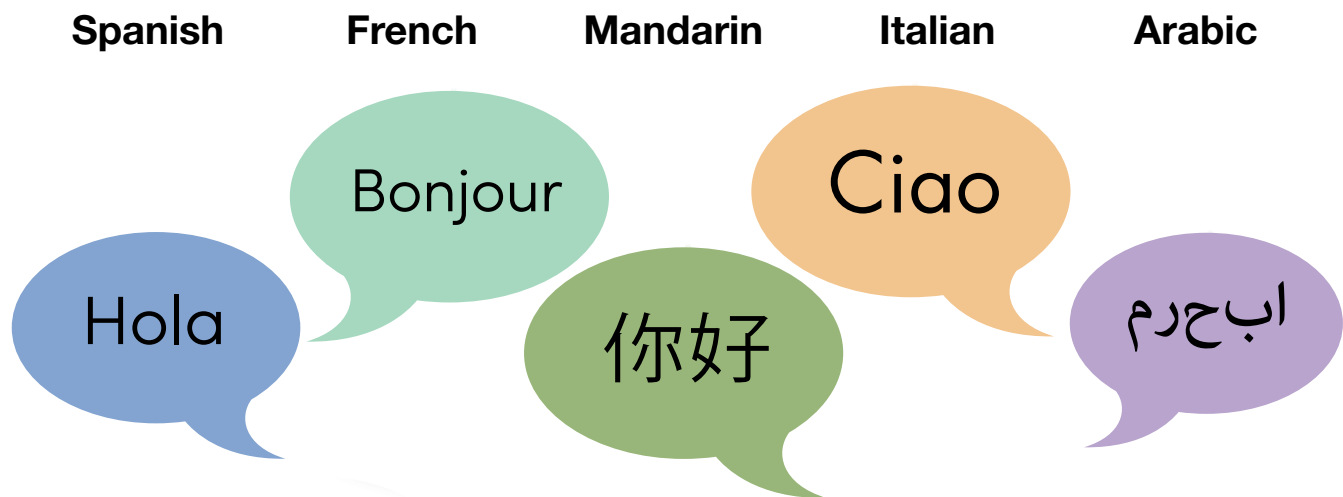
Niagara Region is becoming increasingly diverse. It is important for the early years and child care sector to adapt programs and services to meet the needs of diverse children and families.

Niagara is home to 83,005 Immigrants to Canada and 8,390 non-permanent residents, with these two groups representing 19.5 per cent of Niagara's population.

A total of 8,725 Niagara residents immigrated to Canada between 2016 and 2021.

In Niagara, 13.3 per cent of residents identify as a visible minority, compared to 8.9 per cent in 2016, which is an increase of 4.4 per cent. Niagara Falls (20.9 per cent), Thorold (18.5 per cent) and St. Catharines (16.5 per cent) have the highest proportion of residents who identify as a visible minority.

In Niagara, 6.94 per cent of residents speak a language other than English most often at home. The five most commonly spoken languages other than English are:



About 3.0 per cent of Niagara residents identify as Indigenous. Port Colborne (5.4 per cent), Fort Erie (5.0 per cent) and Welland (4.3 per cent) have the highest proportion of residents who identify as Indigenous. However, Indigenous Peoples are underrepresented in the Census due to the absence of several Indian reserves and Indian settlements in the 2021 Census of Population. Furthermore, Indigenous Peoples are less likely to participate in Census due to lack of trust of the Canadian government, migration between geographical locations and unclear definitions of different Indigenous identity groups within the Census.



Socioeconomic Status Indicators

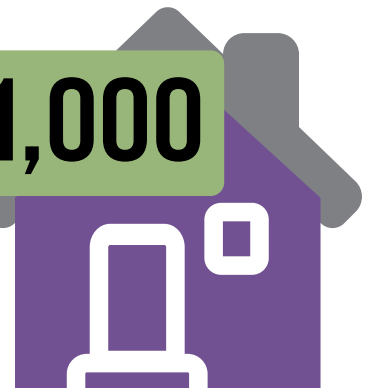
The median household income in Niagara is \$71,000, which is lower than the provincial median of \$79,500.

In Niagara, 3,653 (13.7 per cent) children under six are living in low income based on the low-income measure after tax. This proportion is highest in St. Catharines (17.2 per cent), Welland (16.5 per cent) and Thorold (15.8 per cent).

In Niagara, 17.67 per cent of families are one-parent households.

The early years and child care sector plays an important role in ensuring programs and services are accessible by all children and families regardless of income.

\$71,000



Employment and Education

Access to licensed child care is an important driver of the economy, allowing for more women to participate in the workforce.

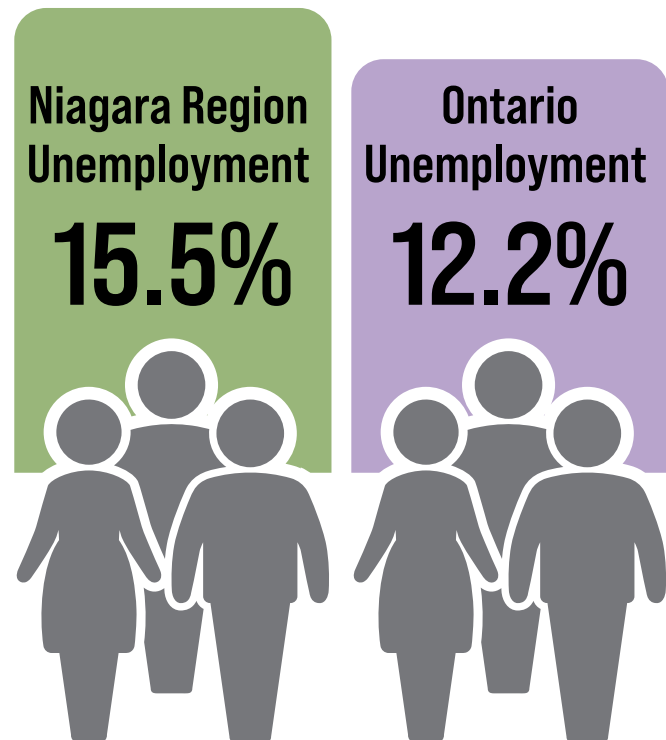
Niagara's unemployment rate (15.5 per cent) is higher than the Province (12.2 per cent), the unemployment rate for women in Niagara (16.9 per cent) is higher than the rate for men (14.2 per cent).

Niagara's participation rate (58.5 per cent) is lower than the province (62.8 per cent), the participation rate for women in Niagara (54.8 per cent) is lower than the rate for men (62.5 per cent).

In Niagara, 15.4 per cent of residents over 15 have no certificate, diploma or degree; 31.9 per cent of resident's highest level of education is a high school diploma and 52.7 per cent have completed a post-secondary diploma or degree.

At the same time, Niagara is experiencing consistent economic growth and investment with approximately 35 industrial business expansions or openings announced between 2022 and 2025. Niagara will welcome over 2,300 new job openings alone as a result of these new investments.

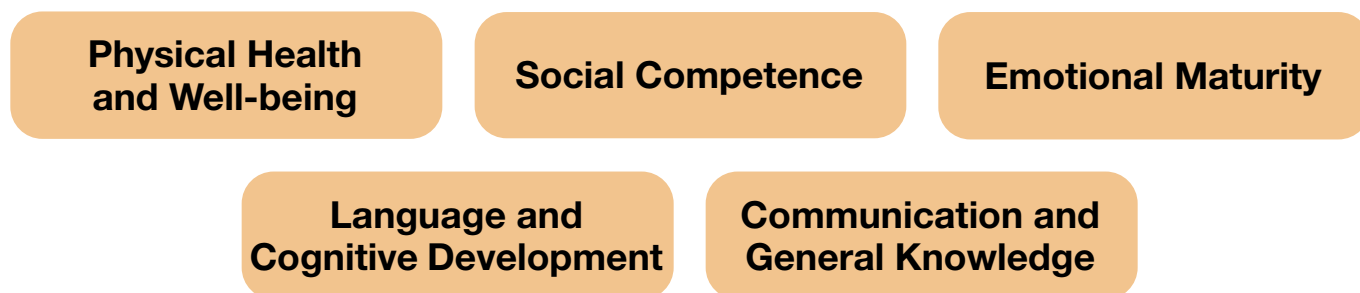
The early years and child care system is a major contributor to Niagara region's success in economic prosperity. Early years and child care programming contributes robustly to meeting workforce demands to support economic development and opportunities for local residents to gain and maintain meaningful employment. Niagara Region's 10 Year Economic Development Strategy and Niagara's Talent, Attraction and Retention Strategy, and the Service System Plan collectively will help guide the ongoing collaboration to strategically align child care and economic development initiatives.



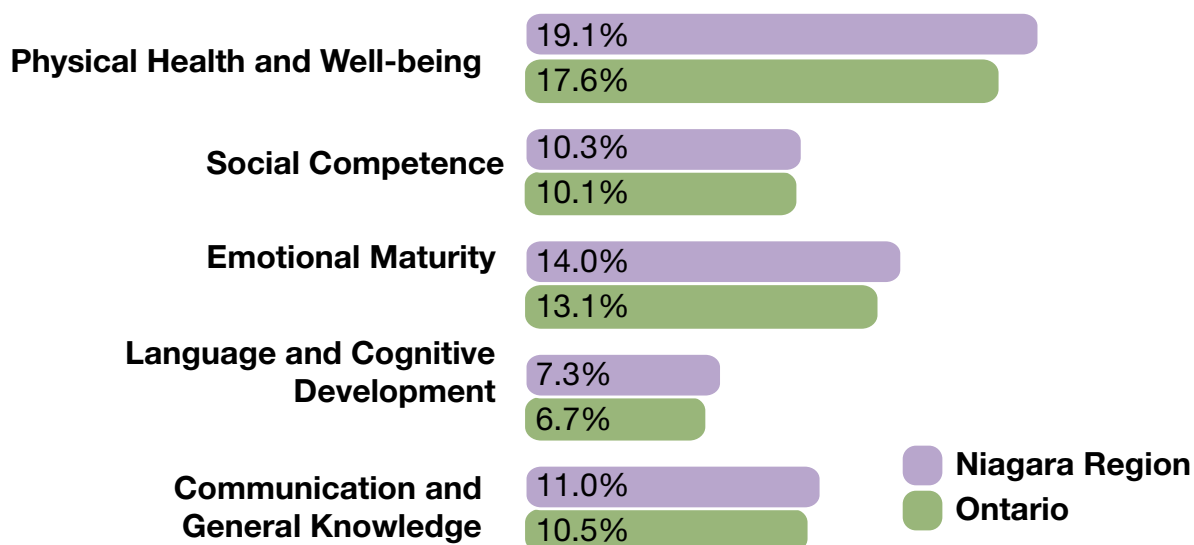
With new companies looking to call Niagara home and existing companies looking to expand, licensed child care is critical to boost labour force mobility to support economic growth in the region.

Early Development Instrument Data

The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is administered by teachers in publicly funded schools. The EDI targets senior kindergarten students and is a questionnaire of 103 questions that the teacher assesses on behalf of their students. The EDI is mandated by the Ministry of Education and is conducted every three years in schools across Niagara region and the Province of Ontario. The goal of the EDI is to get a snapshot to see how children are progressing and developing. The EDI measures vulnerability in five domains:



The following results are vulnerability rates for the latest cycle of EDI (Cycle 6, 2022 - 2023)



The latest EDI results indicate that we are aligned with the Provincial Vulnerability Rates. EDI provides us with a population level data point to see how our youngest learners in Niagara are progressing. The EDI data supports our commitment to evidence-informed decision making and allows us to strategically plan programs and services. EDI is used in collaborative work with other departments at Niagara Region like Public Health and the Niagara Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Children's Services Current State

EarlyON Centres

EarlyONs are community hubs where parents can come to play with their children and access a variety of programs for no cost. Families may come to EarlyONs for:

- Increased socialization with other children and families
- New toys, faces and environments
- Support with resources for special needs and developmental concerns or questions
- Structured programming offerings
- School readiness skills

Across Niagara, EarlyON programming is accessible in ten of our local area municipalities.

Indigenous programming is embedded through our two Indigenous EarlyON programs - Tshikeksa' EarlyON delivered by Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre and Odrohyagweh EarlyON delivered by Niagara Regional Native Centre. Our Indigenous-led EarlyON programs are focused on meeting the needs of the diverse off-reserve Indigenous population living in Niagara region by integrating Indigenous perspectives throughout the EarlyON curriculum.

While the Indigenous EarlyONs are open to all, they focus on offering Indigenous and culturally specific programming with a responsive pedagogy. Offering programming through these methods helps to bridge connections for Indigenous and non-Indigenous families to connect.

22

Total EarlyON sites

2

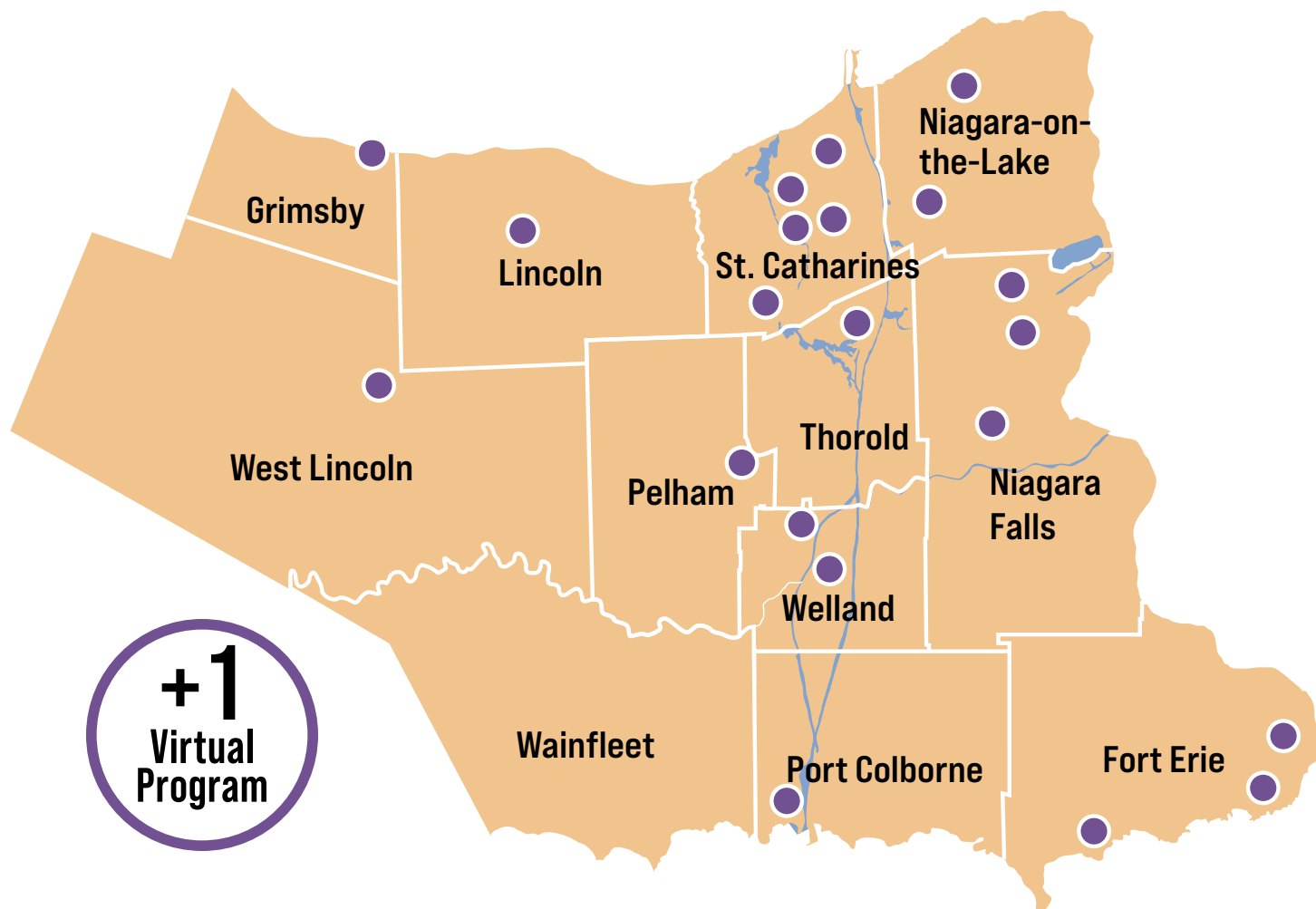
**New sites opened
in 2024**

2

Francophone sites

2

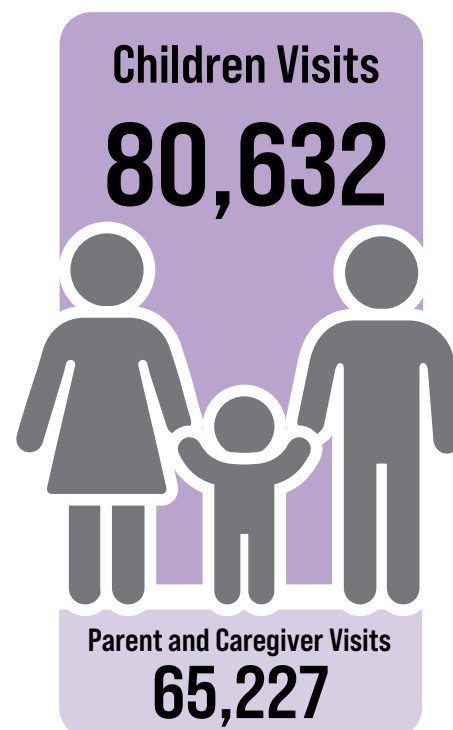
Indigenous Sites



Map of Niagara region showing the locations of the EarlyON Child and Family Centres.

EarlyON Visits in 2023:

16,841	Unique children served
80,632	Children visits
13,926	Unique parents and caregivers served
65,227	Parent and caregiver visits



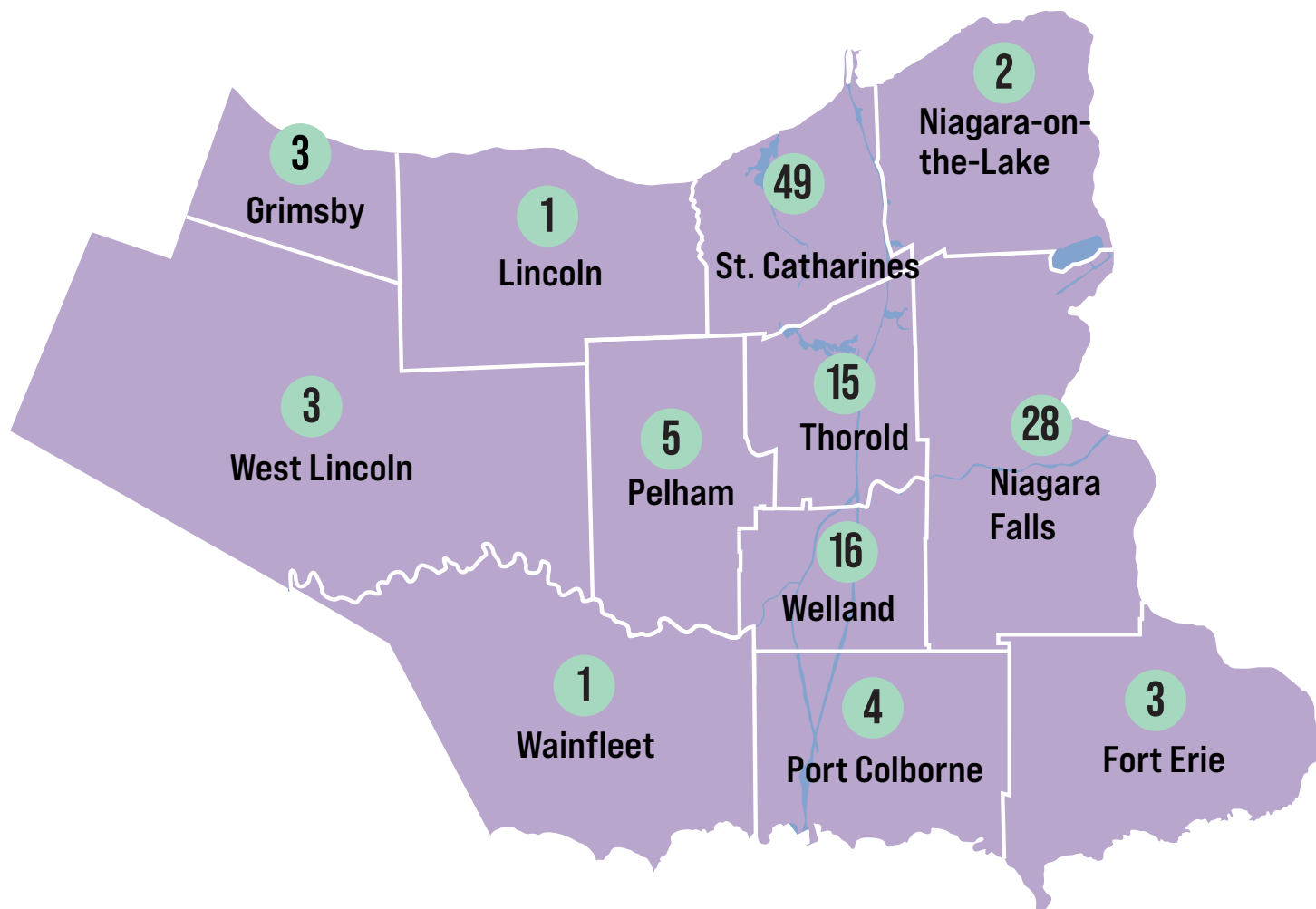
Licensed Home Child Care

Niagara Region and Wee Watch are the contracted agencies to deliver licensed home child care in Niagara. In 2024, Children’s Learning Garden signed a contract with Niagara Region to become the third licensed home child care provider and are expected to begin operation in late 2024.

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Average daily enrolment	243	269	262	247	523	519
Number of contracted homes	92	89	99	91	120	141

Licensed home child care plays a vital role in supporting families across Niagara. With the current workforce challenges in the early years and child care sector, licensed home child care providers create capacity in the sector and allow for more families to have access to child care. Licensed home child care providers are located within the neighbourhoods that families live and work, improving accessibility to care for families who do not have access to a motor vehicle.





Map of Niagara Region showing number of licensed home child care spaces.

Number of licensed home child cares in each of the local area municipalities

Fort Erie	4
Grimsby	4
Lincoln	1
Niagara Falls	29
Niagara-On-The-Lake	2
Pelham	5
Port Colborne	5
St Catharines	53
Thorold	19
Wainfleet	1
Welland	14
West Lincoln	4
TOTAL	141

Fee Subsidy

The fee subsidy program helps support eligible parents with financial assistance with child care costs. Fee subsidy is available for licensed child care centres, licensed home child care and licensed camp programs. Fee subsidy supports can range from the full to partial costs of child care being covered. The subsidy received by a family is based on their income, fees charged by providers, and thresholds established by the province.



Total number of children annually served by fee subsidy

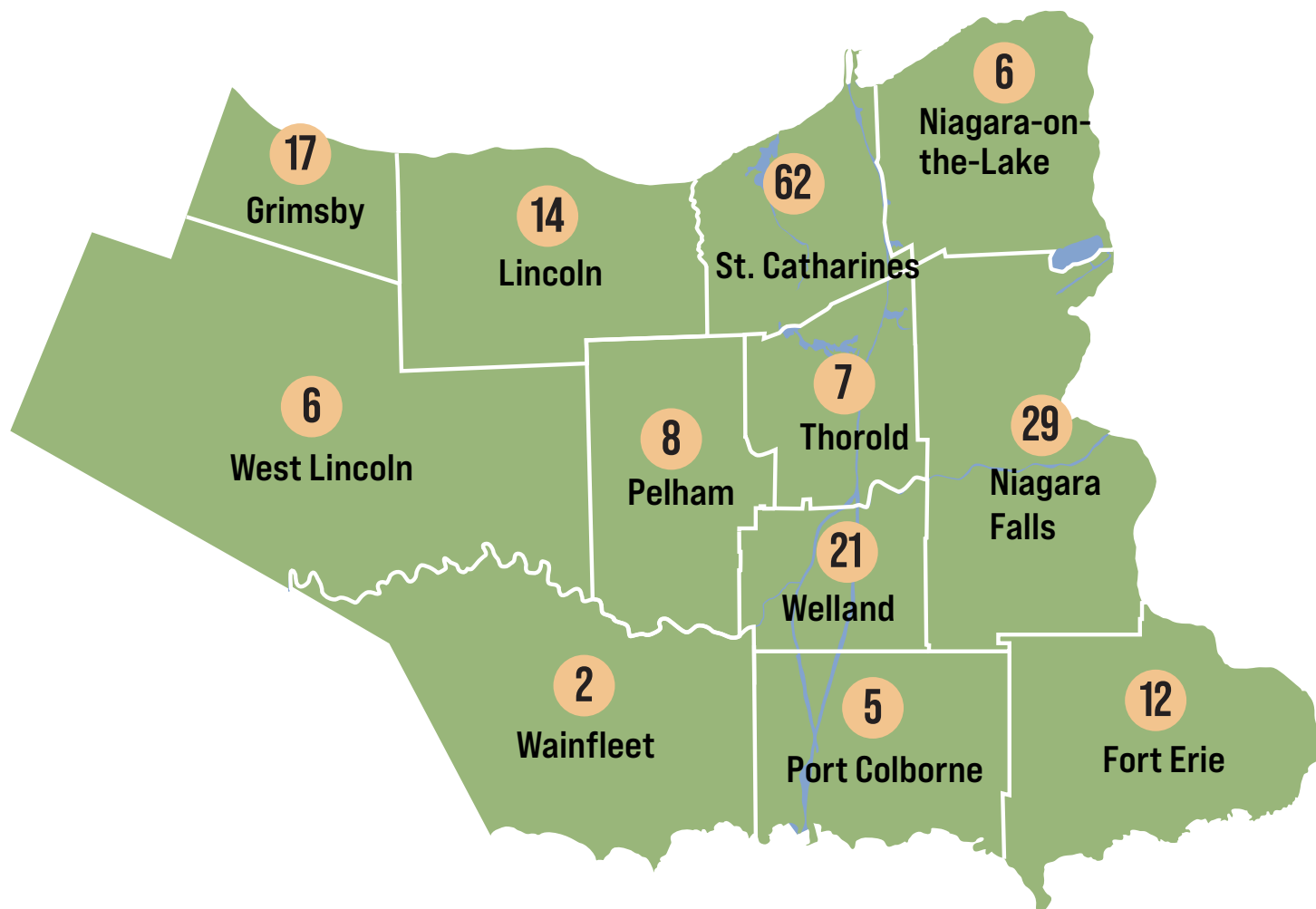
2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
4,334	3,396	2,787	2,837	2,587

Below is the number of children who have the entire cost of their care covered by fee subsidy. These are families making less than \$20,000 a year.

2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
2,013	1,431	958	824	780

The introduction of Canada-wide early learning and child care has made child care more affordable for more families, which has impacted the number of families accessing fee subsidy. Canada-wide early learning and child care has also further contributed to a higher demand for licensed child care.

As we continue to support Canada-wide early learning and child care expansion and directed growth of licensed child care spaces, we will be modernizing our fee subsidy program to keep up with the changing needs. Providing a fee subsidy program and access to licensed child care is integral to supporting the most vulnerable families in Niagara.



Map of Niagara Region showing number of licensed child care centres.

Licensed Child Care Centres

At the end of 2024, Niagara region had approximately 13,750 licenced child care centre spaces and 846 licenced home child care spaces, for a total of 14,596 spaces. Niagara has experienced tremendous growth in licensed child care spaces in the last five years, with licensed child care spaces increasing by 2,211.

Number of Canada-wide early learning and child care enrolled centres

Fort Erie	12
Grimsby	17
Lincoln	14
Niagara Falls	29
Niagara-On-The-Lake	6
Pelham	8
Port Colborne	5
St Catharines	62
Thorold	7
Wainfleet	2
Welland	21
West Lincoln	6
TOTAL	189

Number of Child Care Service Providers

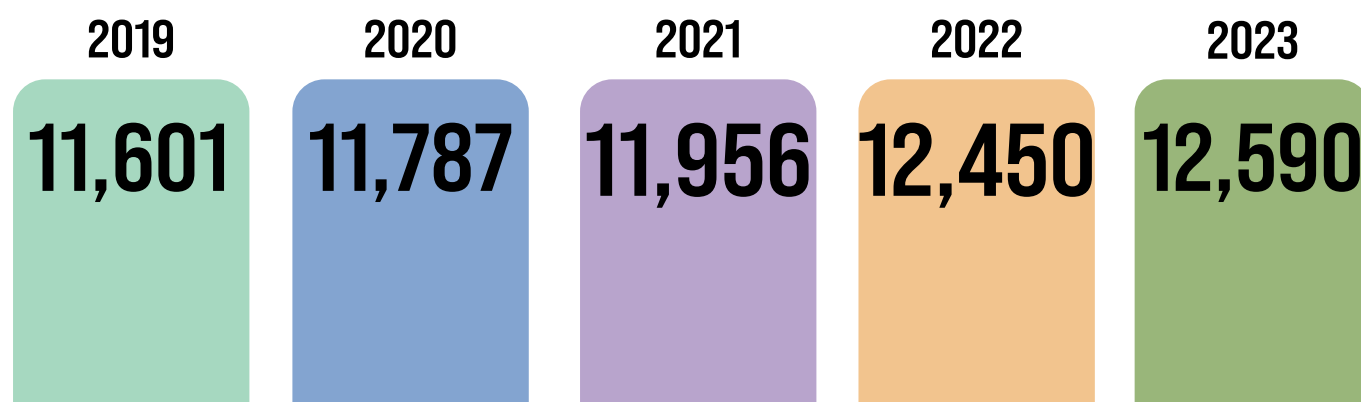
	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of service providers	58	60	62	64	61	71
Number of service providers contracted with Niagara Region	51	53	55	58	55	67
Total number of child care service providers	173	174	173	174	178	179

Number of Licensed Spaces

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of infant spaces	264	298	318	348	358
Number of toddler spaces	1,199	1,289	1,219	1,323	1,401
Number of preschool spaces	2,873	2,927	2,932	3,168	3,284
Number of Junior Kindergarten (JK)/Senior Kindergarten (SK) school aged spaces	2,923	2,942	3,007	3,026	3,021
Number of school aged spaces	4,571	4,531	4,682	4,699	4,624
Total number of licensed spaces	11,830	11,987	12,158	12,564	12,688

A very small proportion, less than one percent, of licensed spaces in Niagara do not hold a contract with Niagara Region. This means that they are government-regulated and inspected by the Ministry of Education but they are not contracted with Niagara Region to receive Ministry funding or supports. These sites do not report any data to Niagara Region, therefore there is no known information on financial viability or operating capacity. They cannot serve families with fee subsidy or receive any federal or provincial funding provided for the sector.

Licensed spaces contracted with Niagara Region



Licensed spaces not contracted with Niagara Region



Providers in Niagara region offer both French language and Indigenous child care spaces allowing families to have diverse options that meet their specific language and culture needs.

French Language Spaces

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Infant-preschool spaces in school	368	414	415	415	415
JK/SK and school aged spaces in schools	668	659	644	644	644
Total French language spaces in school	1,036	1,073	1,092	1,089	1,145
School age spaces in community space	0	0	0	30	30
Infant-preschool spaces in community	10	10	33	86	86
Total number French language spaces	2,082	2,156	2,184	2,264	2,320

Indigenous Led Spaces

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of Indigenous led infant to preschool spaces	101	157	157	157	157
Number of Indigenous led JK/SK and school aged spaces	80	67	67	67	67

Licensed child care is in high demand for families across Niagara. With the implementation of Canada-wide early learning and child care we are aiming to increase spaces and capacity to allow enrolment in child care centres to be more accessible for parents and families.

Ongoing workforce challenges continue to impact the operating capacity of the child care sector, with child care centres operating below their licensed capacity. As of September 2024, Niagara Region’s child care sector was operating at approximately 64 per cent of licensed capacity, with before and after school programs operating at approximately 49 per cent and Canada-wide early learning and child care programs operating at 71 per cent.

Niagara Region has been working with community partners to explore and implement innovative, creative local solutions, such as a supply staff registry, to support with workforce challenges. This work will continue under the guidance of this service system plan. According to the Knowing Our Numbers Report, staff wages are among the top reasons cited by staff looking to vacate the Early Years and Child Care field.

The Provincial Workforce Strategy, released in late 2023, seeks to increase the compensation of Registered Early Childhood Educators on an annual basis to a minimum of \$28 per hour by 2026.





Child Care Registration

OneHSN is the online registration system that allows parents to search and apply for all licensed child care programs for children from birth to age 12, including licensed home child care. Niagara Child Care Registry allows a parent to apply for up to 10 centres at once and prioritize up to five centres.

Number of total registration applications

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Infant	778	858	754	1,459	1,905
Toddler	629	867	932	1,897	2,682
Preschool	587	947	992	1,890	2,397
JK/SK and school aged	1,052	1,755	1,983	3,602	3,504
Total number of registration applications	3,046	4,427	4,661	8,848	10,488

Leveraging OneHSN to support the registration of families and children to enrol in child care spaces allows us to be responsive to the demand for child care while providing a seamless customer service experience for families in their registration.

Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care System

In 2023, Niagara Region was allocated 4,067 licensed child care spaces by the Province that must be created by 2026 as part of Canada-wide early learning and child care targeted growth plan.

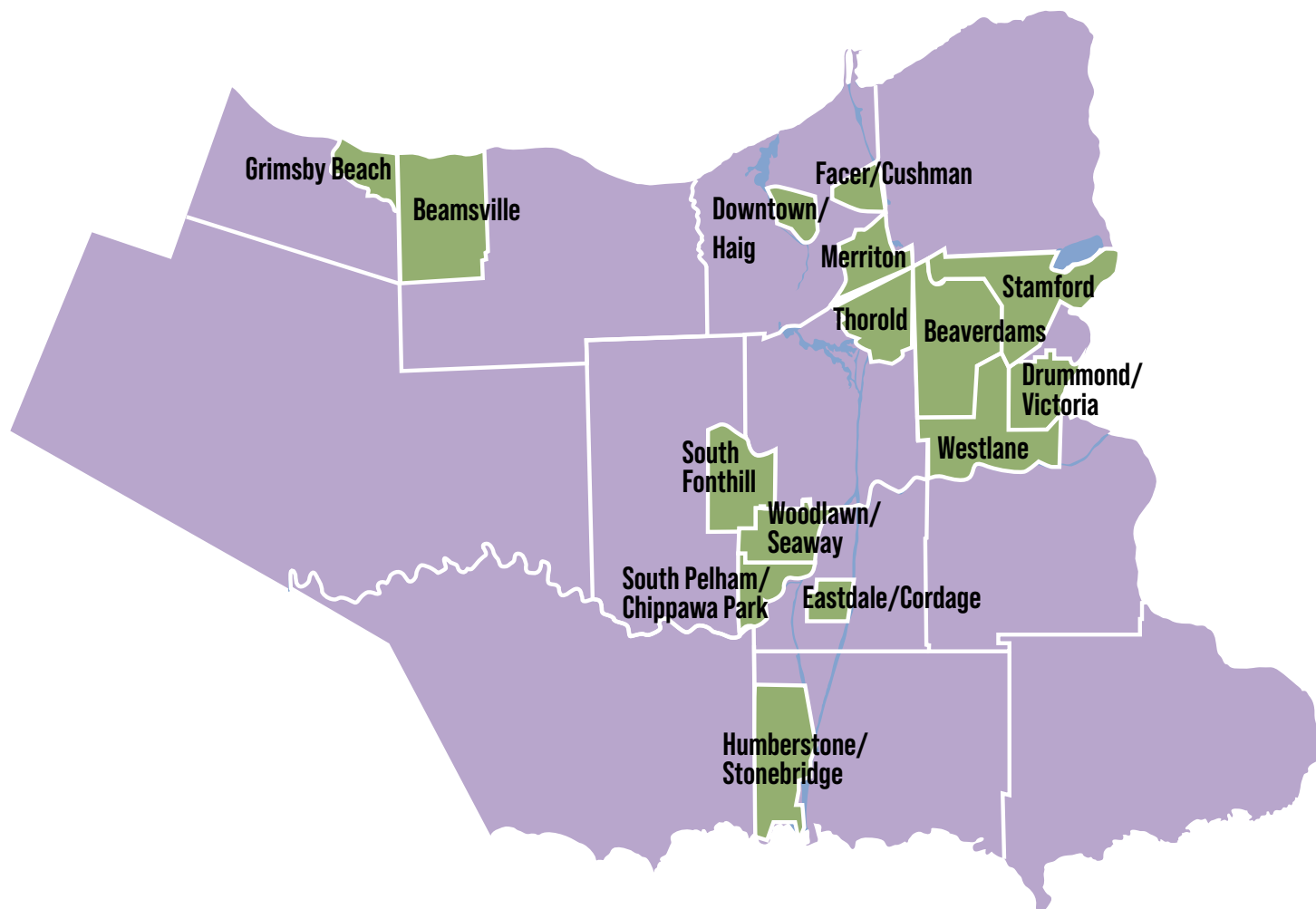
As per provincial direction, the new licensed child care expansion spaces will target specific communities to support the families who need them most.

There are 12 priority neighbourhoods for child care growth in Niagara for children five years of age and under:

Grimsby:	Grimsby Beach
Lincoln:	Beamsville
Niagara Falls:	Beaverdams, Drummond/Victoria, Stamford, Westlane
St. Catharines:	Downtown/Haig area, Facer/Cushman, Merritton
Thorold:	Thorold Proper
Pelham:	South Fonhill
Port Colborne:	Humberstone/Stonebridge
Welland:	Eastdale/Cordage, South Pelham/Chippawa Park area , Woodlawn/Seaway

Multi-year space creation targets

As we continue to expand child care spaces across Niagara region, we are employing a strategic approach to ensure we are reaching our most vulnerable populations. Prioritizing neighbourhoods using data points such as the Early Development Instrument, Low Income Measure, child care deserts and aligning with our public health priority neighbourhoods allows us to designate spaces where there is the most demand.



Map of Niagara Region showing 12 priority neighbourhoods for child care growth for children five years of age and under.

Type of child care spaces

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	Total
School-based spaces	98	0	186	49	49	382
Community-based spaces	259	591	1,267	549	1,019	3,685
Total number of child care spaces	357	591	1,453	598	1,068	4,067

Special Needs Resourcing

Niagara Region administers the Special Needs Resourcing program through our own direct operations and by contracting partner agencies to provide resource consultant and behaviour consultant support to centres in providing care to children with special or differing needs. The number of children requiring special needs resourcing supports is increasing over time in Niagara.



	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Children served in the Special Needs Resourcing program	413	346	400	691	983	1,021

With our growing population and navigating the post-pandemic landscape we have seen an increasing need for special needs supports. Providing high quality, responsive, affordable and accessible care to all children in Niagara that is inclusive of their unique needs is of top priority. The data in this report is subject to change as new centres, homes and child enrolment fluctuates. Data was collected at a point in time.



What We Heard

Community Engagement Plan

This Service System Plan has been developed based on a collaboration with community partners to ensure it serves the needs of Niagara children, families and community partners.

Some of the partners that have informed the plan include:

Sector staff - including EarlyON staff, resource consultants, licensed home child care providers, licensed child care centre staff and licensed child care operators.

Regional staff supporting the early years and child care sector and other Regional staff.

Families of children under 12 years of age in the Niagara region.

Community agencies serving children and families.

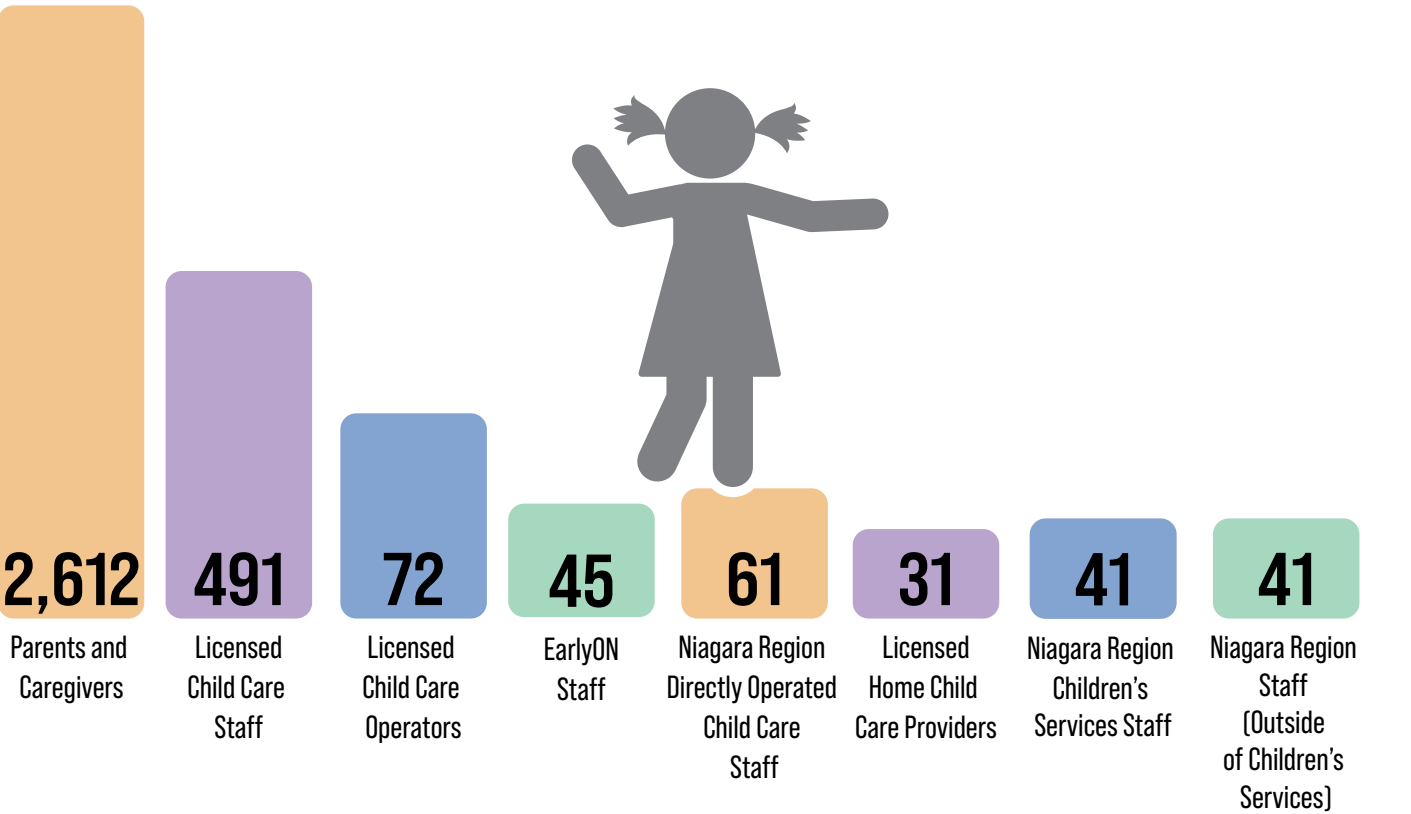
Children receiving care in Niagara region at directly operated child care centres.

Engagement Methods

A comprehensive community engagement strategy was utilized to reach the Niagara community. Community engagement for all target audiences aimed to capture and understand their experiences within the four ministry pillars: accessibility, affordability, quality and responsiveness.

Who did we hear from?

- 2,612 Parents and Caregivers
- 491 Licensed Child Care Staff
- 72 Licensed Child Care Operators
- 45 EarlyON Staff
- 61 Niagara Region Directly Operated Child Care Staff
- 31 Licensed Home Child Care Providers
- 41 Niagara Region Children’s Services Staff
- 41 Niagara Region Staff (outside of Children’s Services)



Parents, Caregivers and Families

Parents, caregivers and families were invited to complete an online survey aimed at understanding their experiences with the early years and child care sector.



Demographic Insights:

Number of children

93% of respondents were parents or guardians

60% of respondents had children aged 0-3,
42% had children 4-6,
28% had children 7-9 years old and
20% had children 10-12 years old

Languages spoken

96% of respondents listed their preferred language as English with Spanish being reported as the second preferred language

Place of birth

83% of respondents were born in Canada and
17% were not
33% arrived in the last 5 years,
23% arrived in the last 10 years and
44% arrived before 2014

Self identity

79% of respondents identified as Caucasian of those not born in Canada, and
5% identified as Latino/Latina,
4% as Black
4% of respondents identified as Indigenous and
4% identified as Francophone

Family structure

82% of families identified their family structure as a couple family and
12% as a single parent family

Family income

52% of respondents identified as working full time, with
13% on maternity leave,
12% working part time and
11% as stay at home parents

“

My provider is amazing. She teaches other cultures and different foods. My child loves to go!

”

Licensed Child Care Highlights:

- Approximately 45 per cent of survey respondents had a child enrolled in a licensed child care centre and 94 per cent of those enrolled are satisfied with their centre
- **Parents value:**
 - A clean and well-maintained facility
 - Wide variety of play-based learning activities
 - Children being happy to attend care
 - Welcoming and friendly staff
 - Outdoor programming and play
- **Parents feel licensed child care program:**
 - Hours meet their family's needs, are accessible and available in their geographic area
 - Affordable with the Canada-wide early learning and child care implementation
 - Assist access to developmental supports

“

I'm overall happy with the care both our children received from our child care centre. From the caring staff to the balanced meals to the developmental and progress updates including pictures. Financially it was a strain when both girls were there at the same time so the 50 per cent decrease to the daily cost has been a huge help because we're a two-income family and don't qualify for any subsidy. I have recommended the centre to many of our friends.

”



Licensed Home Child Care:

- 8 per cent of respondents have children in licensed home child care with 90 per cent of those enrolled satisfied with their care
- **Parents value:**
 - A clean and well-maintained home
 - Wide variety of play-based learning activities
 - Children being happy to attend care
 - Regular communication from their provider
 - Outdoor programming and play
 - Canada-wide early learning and child care plan

EarlyON:

- 37 per cent of respondents attend EarlyON programming and 92 per cent of those that attend EarlyON are satisfied with the programming
- **Parents feel our EarlyON programs:**
 - Hours meet family's needs
 - Are conveniently located and accessible
 - Make them feel welcomed and supported
 - Support developmental needs

“

I've seen a very positive change in my child's social development and skills since we've started attending EarlyON. I'm grateful there's a free program that allows my child to socialize with others which was one of my bigger concerns before we started attending.

”

Sector Staff (Children's and Other)

Licensed Home Child Care Providers:

- Have a unique set of needs because they offer care in their places of residence and do not have the same infrastructure as a centre
- **Feel supported by Niagara Region and value:**
 - Providing strong emotional supports
 - Providing safe environments for children and families
 - Being able to offer culturally competent care



Niagara Region Children's Services Staff:

- Consistently promote free EarlyON programs to their families, operators and staff
- Value quality staff and professional development
- Strive to be inclusive and equitable in providing service to families

Niagara Region Staff:

- Staff outside of Children's Services were offered the opportunity to review a draft of the Service System Plan and provide feedback about connections to their work
- Staff validated the draft goals and objectives and offered insights to facilitate connection to work done across Niagara region
- Their feedback was integrated into the final version of the Service System Plan

“Child care is necessary for access to larger labour pool talent, as seen in the economic development talent attraction and retention strategy.”

Licensed Centre-based Child Care Staff and Operators:

- Feel Canada-wide early learning and child care and fee subsidy strongly support parents and families in Niagara region
- Feel Niagara Region centres offer diverse programming to support the changing landscape of parents and families in Niagara
- Are consistently working towards professional learning goals, leveraging quality professional development options



Expand untraditional partnerships, like partnering with long-term care homes and agencies that serve seniors to connect children and seniors.



EarlyON Staff:

- Feel that because EarlyON is free it is accessible and convenient for parents and families
- Feel that there are a wide variety of locations across the Niagara region
- Feel they offer a welcoming environment for vulnerable populations
- Feel they have dedicated and knowledgeable staff who are highly engaged with families
- Feel they have a comprehensive understanding of other programs to refer families to

Staff engagement included an additional component to capture their professional development needs, including diversity, equity and inclusion supports.

Sector staff value professional learning opportunities, and identified the following as their top five learning and development needs:

Supporting children with special needs

Mental health

Utilizing a trauma informed care approach

LGTBQIA2S+

Cultural sensitivity

Voice of the Child

Children are at the heart of all we do in the early years and child care sector, and their voices are an important component of the service system planning process. Early childhood educators working in Niagara Region directly operated child care centres worked with children to allow them to express their experiences attending the child care program. Children were supported by front-line staff in a method that was best suited for their age and ability.

At St. Catharines Child Care Centre, children in the preschool program were engaged through conversation and observation.

Children were observed exploring the outdoor environment where they have learned so much from managing risks, testing limits while building relationships with peers and nature.

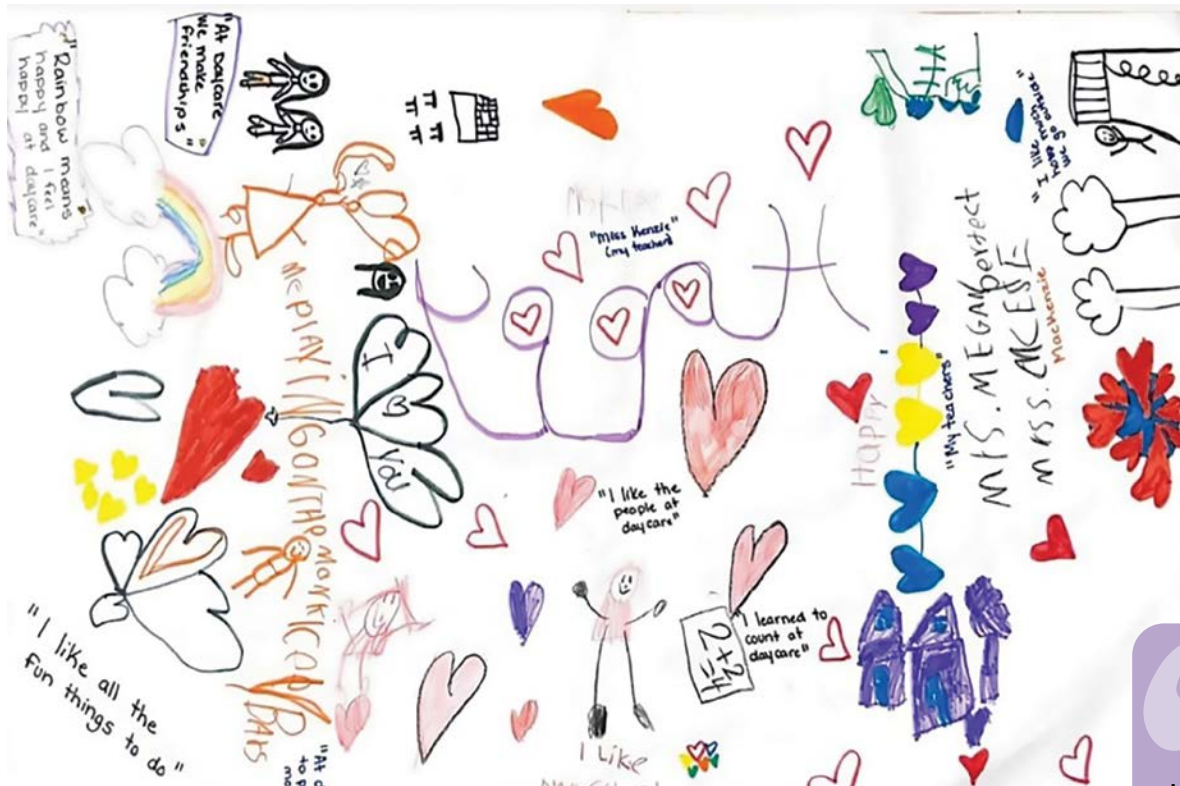


“
Rainbow
means happy
and I feel
happy at
daycare.
”



Collages created by children attending Port Colborne Child Care Centre.

“ Daycare has lots of love. ”



“ I like daycare because I can balance. ”



“ I like daycare because I can climb and jump on the tires. ”

“ I like daycare because I am taller on the tire. ”



I like how much we
learn outside.



Daycare
is like a
community.



Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Considerations

Niagara Region remains committed to ensuring diversity, equity and inclusion are considered in all that we do. Both the Niagara Region Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee and the Niagara Region Women's Advisory Committee were engaged for input. Each of these committees includes representation from Niagara Regional Council and community members. Diversity, equity and inclusion considerations are reflected throughout the goals, objectives and activities of the Service System Plan.



Strategic Pillars, Goals, Objectives and Activities

Pillars

A strong early years and child care sector is rooted in accessibility, affordability, quality and responsiveness. Based on what we learned through both research and extensive engagement, the Region is proposing five pillars to guide the work of the sector moving forward.



Customer-Centered

Goal:

Families and children in Niagara are aware of the programs and services offered.



High-Quality

Goal:

Early years and child care sector is supported in providing programs and services that are high quality, supporting healthy child development.



Accessible and Responsive

Goal:

Programs and services are responsive to the needs of families and children in Niagara and ensure all can access programming where they feel welcome, included and supported.



Affordable and Growth Focused

Goal:

The system programs are affordable for families and can meet economic growth and demand to support parents' and caregivers' workforce participation.



Community-Driven

Goal:

Niagara Region leverages our relationships with community partners to work towards integrated service delivery.

Goals, Objectives and Activities

The Service System Plan includes five pillars, each with corresponding goals, objectives and activities. This Service System Plan gives a road map to create a more balanced, inclusive and customer-driven system, leading to improved outcomes for children, families and the community.

Key performance indicators to measure each objective will be developed as part of a robust implementation plan that will include indicators and expected outcomes. Some examples of the same key performance measures are included as samples.



Customer-Centered

GOAL: Families and children in Niagara are aware of the programs and services offered.

Objective:	Families are aware of where and how to access information about the programs and services offered for children in Niagara.
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Activities:	1. Develop a comprehensive communication plan that focuses on both targeted and general multi-modal promotion of Early Years and Child Care programs and services. 2. Improve the website experience for families.
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Sample Indicators:	• Number of outreach events attended by Children’s Services • Number of informational resources distributed • Number of visits to webpage • Number of social media campaigns delivered
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Objective:	Families and children have opportunities to provide feedback to inform programs and services.
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- Activities:**
1. Implementation of a customer service strategy that meets the needs of all customers in the early years and child care sector.
 2. Prioritize regular engagement with parents and families to elicit feedback.

-
- Sample Indicators:**
- Number of families engaged with annually
 - Number of opportunities for families to provide feedback to Children's Services



High-Quality

GOAL: Early years and child care sector is supported in providing programs and services that are high quality, supporting healthy child development.

Objective: The early years and child care sector has clear expectations and a shared definition of high-quality programs and services.

- Activities:**
1. Align Niagara Region's role in quality with the provincial vision (currently under development).
 2. Niagara Region directly operated child care centres will enhance the support they provide the sector through mentorship, modelling of best practices and resource sharing.

- Sample Indicators:**
- Creation of a shared definition of quality across the system with a corresponding framework

Objective: Niagara Region is committed to supporting early years and child care service providers with timely access to the information they need to help them make informed decisions that reflect local community need

- Activities:**
1. Engage with sector to understand their information needs
 2. Tailor delivery of information to sector to meet their needs

- Sample Indicators:**
- Percentage of providers satisfied with the information available to them
 - Available dashboard for sector with relevant statistics and data

Objective:	Niagara Region supports the early years and child care sector in attracting and retaining qualified educators and child care workers.
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- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| Activities: | <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Continue to advocate for the sector workforce, including wages and benefits.2. Strengthen partnerships with local post-secondary institutions and operators to promote the Registered Early Childhood Educator program and associated pathways to prospective students.3. Align professional development offerings to meet sector feedback and needs.4. Support consistent and standardized onboarding practices across the early years and child care sector.5. Advocate for bridge program for internationally trained Registered Early Childhood Educators to practice in Canada. |
|--------------------|---|

-
- | | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Sample Indicators: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of Registered Early Childhood Educators and Assistants recruited to work in Niagara• Number of Registered Early Childhood Educators and Assistants remaining employed in Niagara after one, three and five years• Number of Niagara sector attendees at locally offered professional development sessions• Number of successful graduates from offered pathways and bridge programs |
|---------------------------|---|



Accessible and Responsive

GOAL: Programs and services are responsive to the needs of families and children in Niagara and ensure all can access programming where they feel welcome, included and supported.

Objective: Programs and services are delivered where, when and how families need them.

- Activities:**
1. Ensure offered hours of EarlyON programming meet the needs of parents and families (for example, evening and weekend hours)
 2. Centre-based and licensed home child care expansion is targeted where there is identified need, in line with our priority neighbourhoods and expansion plan
 3. Explore flexible models of licensed child care to support parents with varying shift schedules, including part-time, evening and weekend care
 4. Modernize service delivery across the sector to meet diverse family needs
 5. Advocate for increased expansion of spaces in priority age groups

- Sample Indicators:**
- Number of new licensed child care spaces in priority neighbourhoods
 - Number of EarlyON locations offering expanded programming hours
 - Number of licensed child care providers who offer part-time, evening and weekend care

Objective:	Programs and services are delivered with a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion to reflect the needs of the changing landscape in Niagara.
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- Activities:**
1. Support the implementation of Niagara's Diversity Equity and Inclusion Action Plan by working to support early years and child care programs and services to be safe spaces for all people regardless of identity and diversity.
 2. Ensure families and children with special needs have access regardless of their abilities.
-

- Sample Indicators:**
- Number of diversity, equity and inclusion considerations embedded in programs
 - Percentage of sector staff trained in diversity, equity and inclusion



Affordable and Growth Focused

GOAL: The system programs are affordable for families and can meet economic growth and demand to support parents' and caregivers' workforce participation.

Objective: Improve access to subsidized Early Years and Child Care programming.

- Activities:**
1. Increase promotion of child care fee subsidy program
 2. Increase promotion of EarlyON as a no cost program for families
 3. Advocate for increased base funding and new investments to support child care and EarlyON expansion.
 4. Ensure eligible subsidy families can continue to access spaces in the system.

- Sample Indicators:**
- Number of children supported by fee subsidy
 - Number of unique attendees at EarlyON programming
 - Percentage of fee subsidy licensed child care spaces across the sector

Objective: Facilitate the continued expansion of child care in Niagara, in line with the goals and objectives of Canada-wide early learning and child care

Activities: 1. Continue implementation of Canada-wide early learning and child care and targeted growth plan to improve access to affordable child care spaces in line with provincial direction.

Sample Indicators:

- Number of annual expansion licensed child care spaces
- Number of operators enrolled in Canada-wide early learning and child care plan
- Number of contracted licensed home child care providers

Objective: Build collaborative relationships with local area municipalities, local businesses and public sector organizations to encourage the addition of child care spaces as a driver for employee retention to support Niagara region's economic prosperity.

Activities:

1. Continue to increase net new child care spaces on an annual basis to meet the demand required to support Niagara's workforce and economy in support of Niagara's Talent, Attraction and Retention strategy.
2. Continue to support women's workforce participation by increasing access to affordable child care.

Sample Indicators:

- Number of advocacy efforts targeted at women's workforce participation and child care
- Number of new businesses/employers with child care provided on site or in proximity



Community-Driven

GOAL: Niagara Region leverages our relationships with community partners to work towards integrated service delivery.

Objective: Continue to collaborate with internal and external partners who serve children and families.

- Activities:**
1. Strengthen partnership with public health to align programming to support families' well-being.
 2. Engage with primary care physicians, obstetrician-gynecologists and midwives to explore sharing child care registration information before or at birth.
 3. Continue partnership with local school boards to promote the early years and child care sector as a profession.
 4. Continue to facilitate opportunities for on-going connection and collaboration amongst community partners.
 5. Foster relationships with community agencies who serve newcomers, marginalized populations and children and families with diverse needs to reach families.

Sample

- Indicators:**
- Number of agencies engaged with on an annual basis
 - Creation of a public health and Children's Services engagement strategy
 - Number of annual meetings with local school boards
 - Number of community partners who serve newcomers and marginalized peoples to aid in recruitment and retention

Objective: Continue to strengthen relationship with Indigenous and Francophone partners

- Activities:**
1. Support Indigenous and Francophone agencies to provide tailored programming for the communities they serve.
 2. Engage Indigenous and Francophone partners in the planning of programs and services delivered by Niagara Region

- Sample Indicators:**
- Number of Indigenous and/or Francophone initiatives delivered by Indigenous and Francophone agencies
 - Number of programs co-created by Indigenous/Francophone agencies and non-Indigenous and Francophone partners
 - Number of francophone designated centres and spaces in expansion

Annual Updates

We are committed to providing regular updates on our progress towards the goals, objectives and activities outlined within this plan. The Region will share an implementation and evaluation plan, which will be regularly monitored. A review of activities completed each year, along with progress towards key performance indicators will be shared with interested and affected parties on an annual basis.



Conclusion

Niagara region is growing, welcoming diverse families to call our twelve municipalities home. As we grow, it is important that the early years and child care sector evolves in a way that meets the changing needs of children and families. Investing in the early years is the first step towards building a brighter future in Niagara.

Access to child care helps parents participate in the workforce, strengthening and increasing equity in Niagara's economy. Access to high-quality early years programs and services is most beneficial to the children who participate, laying the foundation for cognitive, language and social skills that will carry them into adulthood.

This Service System Plan will continue to strengthen the Region's role as the Service System Manager, creating structure to manage the early years and child care sector while maintaining flexibility to adapt to change. Niagara Region is committed to continuing to deliver programs and services that are accessible, affordable, high-quality and responsive that benefit all families and children.





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