

Issue Update

Early Learning & Child Care

History

Federal programs for First Nations Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC)—including Aboriginal Head Start On-Reserve, Aboriginal Head Start Urban and Northern Communities, and the First Nations and Inuit Child Care Initiative—have been historically underfunded, underserved, and inadequate to meet the needs of First Nations. With outdated and stagnant funding undermining the ability of these programs to truly support First Nations children and families, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) has led calls for change in these services for decades to ensure that First Nations children are properly supported in their early years.

In 2016, the First Nations-in-Assembly mandated the National Expert Working Group (NEWG) on First Nations ELCC to lead engagements to develop the First Nations ELCC Policy Framework, which outlines the vision, principles, and goals of First Nations ELCC. The Framework envisions happy and healthy First Nations children who are grounded and connected to their identity as First Nations and supported by culture and language-based programs and services determined by First Nations. The Framework was endorsed by AFN Resolution 83/2017, *Support for the National First Nations Early Learning and Child Care Policy Framework*, supporting it as the First Nations component of the Indigenous ELCC Framework that was released in 2018, along with a \$1.02 billion investment over ten years for First Nations ELCC.

AFN's recent advocacy

Pursuant to mandates given by First Nations-in-Assembly regarding the development of a First Nations-determined funding model for ELCC, the AFN has contracted the Institute of Fiscal Studies and Democracy to lead research with First Nations to develop a funding model that reflects First Nations' needs and priorities with respect to ELCC. The NEWG oversees this work and will provide guidance and insight to the IFSD in collaboration with regional ELCC governance tables and First Nations experts. The work is anticipated to be completed by March 31, 2024.

The AFN has long advocated for increased supports for First Nations ELCC programs and services, including addressing historic funding gaps. Budget 2021 proposed investing \$30 billion over five years, beginning in 2021-22, and \$8.3 billion ongoing in ELCC across Canada; of this, \$878.53 million is dedicated to First Nations ELCC. Pursuant to AFN's advocacy, Budget 2021 also made historic investments in First Nations ELCC infrastructure, totalling more than \$250 million over three years.

Budget 2021 further proposed legislating a Canada-wide system of ELCC, which was tabled in the House of Commons in December 2022 as Bill C-35, *An Act respecting early learning and child care in Canada*. In 2022, the First Nations-in-Assembly passed AFN Resolution 08/2022, *Early Learning and Child Care Legislation*, outlining First Nations priorities for federal ELCC legislation and asserting that federal ELCC legislation must respect First Nations rights to self-determination and

jurisdiction over ELCC, calling on Canada to engage directly with rights holders. In early 2023, the AFN, with input from the NEWG, prepared a submission to the Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. The AFN's submission expressed concerns about the lack of engagement and Free, Prior and Informed Consent from First Nations in the development of Bill C-35, pointed to the need to recognize and support First Nations jurisdiction and rights, and emphasized the importance of long-term funding for First Nations ELCC.

Next Steps

The AFN continues to monitor the progress of Bill C-35 as it advances through the legislative process and will continue to advocate for First Nations rights and jurisdiction in this process. The AFN will continue to monitor the implementation of Budget 2021 investments in First Nations ELCC to ensure that First Nations children, families, and communities are supported by First Nations-determined and -delivered, high-quality, culture- and language-based ELCC. The AFN will continue to advocate for First Nations governance, self-determination, and jurisdiction over ELCC in the implementation of the First Nations and Indigenous ELCC Frameworks, and in the development of a national childcare system.