



Project Insights Report

Early Childhood Education Training Lab



PARTNERS

NouLAB



LOCATIONS

New Brunswick
Newfoundland and Labrador
Nova Scotia
Prince Edward Island



INVESTMENT

\$2,257,314



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Executive Summary

Even before the increased demand created by the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreements, a 2021 federal commitment of over \$27 billion to deliver \$10/day licensed childcare across all provinces and territories, early childhood educators were already being called to obtain higher credentials, without comparable improvements to wages, benefits, or working conditions. If those conditions don't change, there is growing concern that the sector will not have enough qualified ECEs to staff the national system the CWELCC agreements are building.

NouLAB, a social innovation lab based at the Pond-Deshpande Centre at the University of New Brunswick, used social innovation labs across two rounds to develop and test prototypes responding to two questions:

- How might we support educators in getting ECE qualifications while working to deliver quality early learning and childcare?
- How might we create the conditions for thriving work experiences for operators and educators?

Stakeholders from across Atlantic Canada co-created 8 prototypes tested across a number of childcare centres. In Round 2, stakeholders included much-needed insights from North Shore Mi'kmaq Tribal Council, who developed Indigenous-led outdoor learning approaches across nine First Nations communities in NB and PEI.

Results were promising and merit further development. The lab process strengthened cross-sector relationships and deepened shared understanding of challenges across the network. Consistent with evidence from other sectors, findings also highlight the critical role supervisors and managers play in whether workers can access professional development at all.

Building on these results, additional funding was secured to launch Driving Insights from the Early Childhood Education Lab, a dedicated knowledge mobilization phase that translated lab learnings into bilingual, accessible, and actionable resources for ECEs, employers, and policymakers across Canada, reaching over 500,000 people through targeted outreach and a national webinar.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 In Atlantic Canada, under 10,000 educators provide care and learning for more than 60,000 children.
- 2 Less than half of ECEs are satisfied with career opportunities, and 60% of ECEs work in the same position as when they started.
- 3 A social media campaign generated 500,000+ impressions, revealing strong demand for practical, peer-informed resources.

The Issue

Quality of work issues have given rise to shortages of trained early childhood educators (ECEs) across Canada. This is being felt acutely in Atlantic Canada as Pre-K programs are being expanded and legislative changes now require post-secondary credentials for educators and a greater percentage of educators per center. The demand for innovation and support for a resilient and quality ECE workforce is front and center as Canada works toward a national \$10/day childcare plan.

Over the last decade, ECE work has become more technically demanding. But wages, benefits, hiring practices, leadership, and human resource support have not kept up. Wage remedies implemented in the last few years and the ones coming with the federal bilateral agreements are important first steps in resolving this systemic dysfunction, especially as wages are the top concern among ECEs, but they are not enough on their own.

If working conditions do not change, the sector is likely to see continued educator burnout and recruitment and retention struggles, with negative implications for children and parents who rely on the ECE system. These workforce challenges are critical to resolve if the roll-out of a national childcare program is to be successful.



What We Investigated

NouLab is a social innovation lab based at the University of New Brunswick, which convenes teams of stakeholders to design solutions to various socio-economic problems, prioritizing user voice in the design of solutions that impact them. Aiming to reduce labour force disruptions in the sector, NouLab convened an ECE social innovation lab to bring together previously siloed ECE stakeholders to produce prototype solutions that are more representative of the whole ECE system. Each round of the social innovation lab included groundwork, discovery, design sprints workshops/ideation, concept & field testing, and sensemaking.

Round 1 – July 2020-Dec 2021

The first round of the social innovation lab sought to answer the question “How might we support educators in getting ECE qualifications while working to deliver quality early learning and childcare?”

The first round of the social innovation lab generated 4 prototypes that were tested at 1-2 childcare centers in Atlantic Canada:

- **New Brunswick study leave:** Covered one paid study day per week for 12 weeks for working educators enrolled in an ECE course, reducing burnout and improving academic performance.
- **New Brunswick prior learning assessment and recognition:** Created a plain-language storyboard guiding experienced educators through the certification process via prior learning recognition.

- **Prince Edward Island embedded mentorship:** Delivered a mentorship workshop, a peer nomination process to identify mentor-educators, and community of practice sessions to sustain peer learning.
- **Newfoundland & Labrador educational pathway support:** Provided administrators with a self-assessment tool, a three-part virtual workshop, and a visual map of the full certification pathway.

Round 2: April 2022-July 2023

Based on learning from round 1, the second round of the social innovation lab tried to answer “How might we create the conditions for thriving work experiences for operators and educators?”

- **New Brunswick peer-to-peer director cohort:** Brought directors together to collectively address challenges and strengthen pedagogical leadership through shared learning.
- **New Brunswick pedagogical leader placement:** Created a process to place peer-nominated pedagogical leaders in rural and urban centres across New Brunswick.
- **Prince Edward Island learning buddy:** Paired directors with a coaching partner to work through a shared leadership self-evaluation and goal-setting process.
- **Newfoundland & Labrador Close Out Day support:** Helped centres hold their first Professional Learning Close Out Day, including support to access available funding.

Driving Insights — 2025 A third phase of funding was secured to carry solutions and insights into wider practice. *Driving Insights* was a knowledge mobilization initiative designed to translate multi-year lab learning into accessible, bilingual, and actionable resources for ECEs, employers, and policymakers across Canada. Working through co-design with 15 sector partners, the phase produced Prototype Action Packs, short videos, visual tools, a blog series, and a centralized online hub, reaching over 500,000 people through targeted outreach and a national showcase webinar.

✔ What We’re Learning

Expanded networks and strengthened trust

The social innovation lab brought together government departments, colleges, and sector associations from NB, PEI, and NL through more than 50 stakeholder interviews and four provincial multistakeholder teams across two rounds. For most participants, the lab deepened existing connections rather than creating new ones, building the trust and shared language needed to move toward consensus. The impact was significant: 94% of participants reported a high-value experience, the lab received a Net Promoter Score of 64, and approximately half reported immediately applying lab approaches in their work. In the Driving Insights phase, a new partnership with the North Shore Mi’kmaq Tribal Council brought Indigenous perspectives across nine First Nations communities, producing a model for ethical collaboration with relevance well beyond the ECE sector.

No single solution: a multi-pronged strategy is needed

Across two rounds, eight prototypes were developed and tested, each reflecting meaningful regional differences in context and need. Most showed strong potential: paid study leave in NB improved educator grades and reduced burnout; embedded mentorship in PEI was unanimously valued by participants; and pathway tools in NL were immediately adopted by administrators. The diversity of approaches confirms that tackling ECE workforce challenges requires a flexible, multi-pronged strategy and not a single solution.

Innovation in an overburdened sector requires dedicated support Meaningful participation required more than an invitation. It required active scaffolding. An experienced design coach was embedded in each prototype team, and the same model was carried into Driving Insights. Structural barriers persisted throughout both phases, reinforcing a critical insight: designing equitable processes requires changing conditions, not simply offering access.

Unexpected outcomes from coming together

When a regional Francophone team came together through the lab, they identified a gap no prototype could fill: the absence of a dedicated Atlantic Francophone ECE association. With \$18,000 in prototype funding, they leveraged an additional \$80,000 from Le Réseau de Développement Économique et D'Employabilité, a 4:1 return, to hire a consultant to prototype what such an association could offer. This outcome was not planned. It emerged entirely from bringing the right people together.

From learning to action: knowledge mobilization as strategy

A co-design process engaging 15 sector partners produced Prototype Action Packs, seven bilingual videos, four blog posts, and a centralized online hub. A national webinar drew 90 participants, videos generated over 5,000 views, and a social media campaign reached over 500,000 impressions. Intentional knowledge mobilization is not a communications afterthought. It is a core part of translating evidence into real-world change.

★ **Why It Matters**

The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care system is making progress towards \$10/day childcare for parents across the country. Central to negotiations in all provinces and territories was the need for better quality of work, including higher wages and more professional development for early childhood educators, most of whom are women. This project offers lessons about how to increase skills acquisition for early childhood educators, and how to develop the capacity of directors and operators to support a culture of learning and professional development.

Beyond wages and working conditions, this project highlighted that administrative burden was a key barrier to supporting skill development in early childhood education. This echoes findings from other industries and sectors on the important role that supervisors and managers play in a worker's access to skills development opportunities, and may be a factor in other care sectors like long-term care and healthcare. Policy-makers should be looking at a whole-sector approach when determining what is necessary and required of administrators. By reducing administrative burden through a cohesive policy and regulatory environment, quality of care and productivity are more likely to improve.



State of Skills: Evaluation and Learning in the Skills and Training Ecosystem

The Future Skills Centre's approach to evaluation and learning has evolved over time, reflecting the challenges of measuring social impact. It has shifted from a focus on common outcomes to a broader approach that embraces multiple methods for understanding impacts on individuals, institutions and systems.

Further experimentation will be needed to determine both the viability of the prototype solutions and the appropriate financial structures through which to resource them. In the prototype tests, NouLAB covered all costs for centres and ECEs, and it is unlikely that centres could adopt these solutions without subsidies. A larger-scale pilot would allow policymakers to better assess the cost-benefit ratio of investments like paid study leave. The Driving Insights phase took an important step in this direction, making prototype learnings accessible to ECEs and policymakers across Canada and confirming strong sector-wide appetite for practical, ready-to-use tools.

In addition to the practical lessons, this project strengthened relationships among key actors in the early childhood education system in Atlantic Canada and, through the Driving Insights phase, extended that network nationally. These connections, and the shared understanding built through two rounds of co-design and knowledge mobilization, will support the resilience of the sector as it navigates the significant changes brought by the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care agreements.

► What's Next

Based on a prototype from round 1 of the project, Noulab was hired by the government of New Brunswick to conduct a feasibility study for a substitute database for educators.

NouLAB was also sought out by the Public Policy Forum to contribute to their childcare research, [An Investment that Works for Child Care](#), contributing provincial workforce snapshots for New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland & Labrador.

After completing the Driving Insights phase, NouLAB has secured new investment that reflects a growing organizational focus on inclusive workforce development in Atlantic Canada. Most notably, a new partnership with Dr. Lucia Tramonte at the University of New Brunswick applies the same knowledge mobilization approaches refined through the ECE work, translating complex PISA-based research on youth skills and workforce readiness into accessible formats for policymakers and educators.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact communications@fsc-ccf.ca.

How to Cite This Report

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