



# Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement

## 2020-2021 Annual Report

Funded by the Government of  
Canada through the Early Learning  
and Child Care Agreement

**Canada** 

**Saskatchewan!** 

## Background

On June 12, 2017 Saskatchewan signed the Multilateral Federal-Provincial/Territorial Early Learning and Child Care Framework with the federal government and the other provinces and territories. The Multilateral Framework provides the overarching principles that guide federal investment into regulated early learning and child care. The three-year, plus one-year *Extension Agreement* from 2017-18 to 2020-21 provided Saskatchewan over \$56 million to support the early learning and child care sector through licensed child care space development including spaces dedicated to Francophone families, implementing programs for children with intensive needs, and supporting Early Childhood Educators and programs to enhance early learning and child care experiences for children.

Investments made through the Agreement were in addition to provincial investments and worked to build on existing strengths and priorities in Saskatchewan. *Saskatchewan's Early Years Plan 2016-2020* and the *Education Sector Strategic Plan* are both provincial plans working toward the target that 90 per cent of children exiting Kindergarten are ready for learning in the primary grades by 2020. This included initiatives that support early learning, child care, strong families, healthy children and community planning and alignment.

Saskatchewan extended the *Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* for the period of 2020-21 in order to ensure continuity of programs and services under the existing agreement while finalizing a longer term agreement with the Government of Canada. The *Extension Agreement* was a continuation of programs and services invested in under the original Agreement which includes ongoing operating funding for 1,295 new licensed child care spaces, seven new Family Resource Centres, 242 Early Learning Intensive Support spaces and initiatives to support educators in ensuring high quality programs. The *Extension Agreement* allowed for flexibility in the province's financial response to the impacts of COVID-19 on the licensed child care sector. Investments continued to be in the areas of quality, access, inclusion and minority language as per the Multilateral Agreement.

Over the course of the *three-year, plus one-year extension bi-lateral agreement*, Saskatchewan has focused on four main priorities. In 2020-21, Saskatchewan continued to invest in these priority areas ensuring a balanced approach that supports the province's strategic goals and aligns with the federal government's early learning and child care funding criteria outlined through the Agreement:

- 1. Quality** – Enhance the experience of children in licensed child care by investing in training and resources for licensed child care providers to ensure high-quality programming. A total of 173 licensed family child care home providers and assistants and 209 child care centre directors participated in training over the course of the Agreement. An additional 897 individuals from the Early Years Sector attended Aboriginal awareness workshops. Training related to non-clinical screening for children in areas such as speech, physical ability, social skills and problem-solving was also provided to 94 participants in Early Years community programs and those in licensed child care. Grants were made available to support active play and the *Play and Exploration* curriculum framework in licensed child care.
- 2. Accessibility** – Over the course of the Agreement, Saskatchewan has allocated 1,295 new child care centre spaces, exceeding the licensed centre-based target of 950 spaces and within the licensed home-based sector, 1,032 new licensed child care home spaces were opened in 110 homes. In 2020-21, Saskatchewan invested in the opening of two new Early Years Family Resource Centres in the communities of Estevan and Humboldt. These are places where all families with young children can access reliable information and support and participate in

services like parenting programs and free early learning and literacy opportunities. This brings the total number of Early Years Family Resource Centres funded under this Agreement to nine.

3. **Inclusion** – Early learning opportunities for children experiencing disability through innovative pilots continues throughout the province. The Early Learning Intensive Support pilot, the Children Communicating, Connecting and in the Community pilot, the Rural and Northern Inclusive Early Learning pilot and the Enhanced Accessibility Grant in child care continue to support children across the province.

Over the course of the three-year agreement and extension year, there have been 525 preschool-aged children, who experience disability, that have benefited from the Early Learning Intensive Support pilot. In addition, through this Agreement, there have been 377 children served with the Enhanced Accessibility Grant in child care.

4. **Minority language inclusion** – Saskatchewan continues to support the Francophone community through licensed child care spaces dedicated to Francophone families. Saskatchewan had a target of 65 spaces over the course of the Agreement and exceeded the target with a total investment of 75 spaces.

## Activities, Expenditures and Results of the Agreement

### 1. Quality

Saskatchewan continues to invest in the quality of the Early Learning and Child Care system across the province. Saskatchewan invested in a range of new initiatives for 2020-21.

#### Early Literacy Initiatives

Language and early literacy development are fundamental to a child’s present and future learning. Over the course of the three-year agreement and extension year, Saskatchewan has invested \$2.7 million in early learning and literacy initiatives for children who would not otherwise have access to these opportunities. The exposure of young children to books and reading help prepare them to succeed in their learning and development.

New child care centres and child care homes were provided with a **one-time Literacy Grant** to purchase books to support children’s early literacy development. The grant was provided to a total of 621 licensed child care facilities over the course of the Agreement. The grants were available for licensed child care centres and child care homes in the following amounts:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child Care Centres</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$800 per centre with 30 or fewer spaces</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$1,300 per centre with 31-60 spaces</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$1,700 per centre with 61-90 spaces</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family Child Care Homes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$600/home</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group Family Child Care Homes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• \$600/home</li> </ul>

KidsFirst Regional and Targeted Programs received grants to work with literacy partners in their communities to deliver Early Language and Literacy Programming to families with children under six who have limited opportunities to access high-quality early learning opportunities. The timeline of events was extended due to disruptions related to the pandemic and programming was offered from

winter 2019 to spring 2021. In-person events provided opportunities for families to experience activities they could take home to support their children's literacy. They also provided early language and literacy focused activity kits that provided information to support parent and caregiver understandings of how children develop early language and literacy skills. 421 sessions were held in 261 communities. Almost 10,000 children and caregivers participated in in-person events. Approximately 9,200 early literacy and language kits were distributed. Caregivers were asked to respond to evaluation questions about programming. They responded that programming had a positive impact on their knowledge of language and early literacy. Caregivers also reported that following programming involvement, they intended to read to their children more often, that they intended to use what they learned at home and that the information grew their skills as caregivers.

### **Training**

Funding through the *Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* was provided for training Early Childhood Educators (ECE), Licensed Family Child Care Home Providers, Child Care Centre Directors and Community-based Early Learning service providers on inclusion, leadership, child assessment, Aboriginal awareness and quality programming. This investment enhances the capacity of the early learning sector to provide quality and inclusive play-based early learning environments for children.

Over the course of the three-year *Bi-lateral Agreement and Extension*, Saskatchewan has invested \$1.41 million in training initiatives for the early learning sector.

Play and Exploration Workshops for Family Child Care Homes Providers – Young children experience learning through play and exploration in a variety of ways. Therefore, child care providers must develop and deliver programs that are safe, healthy, culturally sensitive and stimulate the abilities and interests of children in licenced child care homes. The goal of the workshops is to support family child care home providers in the creation and implementation of high-quality, age-appropriate, play-based learning experiences for young children in a variety of settings.

The one day, in-person workshops for licensed child care home providers were centered on implementation of the *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Guide* with a focus on the benefits of using Play and Exploration; practical strategies for implementing Play and Exploration in a home environment; and implementation of Play and Exploration in a multi-age setting.

Over the course of the Agreement, the target for training was 115 participants (2018-19 and 2019-20 combined). In total, 173 child care home providers and assistants, participated in training from eight Play & Exploration workshops specific to the child care home sector exceeding our target.

Aboriginal Awareness Training - In support of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*, training regarding Aboriginal awareness was offered to the Early Years Sector. Aboriginal Consulting Services delivered training for a diverse Early Years Sector audience, including child care centre directors and staff, family child care home providers, Early Childhood Intervention Program executive directors and interventionists, and KidsFirst community developers, program managers, and home visitors. In total, 897 individuals from the Early Years Sector have attended 15-in person Aboriginal awareness workshops held across the province. In addition, 100 registrations were accepted for a three-hour online Aboriginal awareness session.

Leadership Training – The management of licensed child care facilities is critical. It can impact the quality of programs, the health and well-being of staff and children, and the overall operation of facilities. The goal of the leadership training is to provide the skills child care directors need to effectively manage their staff and facilities.

A series of five in-person leadership training modules were offered to support child care centre directors to enhance their array of leadership knowledge and skills in effective employee supervision; communication; coaching; developing high performing teams and change management.

In total (2018-19 and 2019-2020 combined), 209 child care directors, over and above the target of 188, participated in training related to their leadership roles. There were 29 leadership workshops held across the province in this timeframe.

Inclusion Training – One of the critical roles child care providers play is to ensure children of all abilities have equal access to early learning and development programs. Child care programs must be inclusive and meet the needs of each child. The goal of inclusion training is to provide the skills and resources child care employees need to enhance the experience of children in licensed child care facilities. Inclusion training is focused on four key elements of high quality inclusive early learning and care programs:

- Programs are accessible to all children and their families;
- Programs are designed and carried out with consideration for the unique needs of each child;
- Programs are collaborative including family partnerships, access and collaboration with other agencies and early intervention programs; and,
- Programs monitor and effectively respond to the changing needs of children, their families and communities.

No in-person inclusion training was offered in 2020-21 due to the COVID-19 pandemic but information continued to be available online through the Early Learning Portal. Over the course of the three-year agreement and extension year, a total of 352 early childhood professionals from across the province have attended an in person, two-day forum focused on fostering inclusive practices within the Early Years. The forums had three primary goals; increase awareness and understanding of relationship-based inclusive practices across the Early Years Sector; gain insight into current challenges in regards to inclusion; and foster relationships amongst diverse sector stakeholders working to support inclusive practices across Saskatchewan.

In addition to the forums, a video series titled ***5 Key Considerations for Fostering Inclusive Practices in the Early Years*** was created to provide ECE the opportunity to explore, reflect and build understanding of some key considerations for inclusion in the Early Years Sector. The videos provide information and support child care workers need to create an environment in which each child and family, regardless of their unique strengths, needs, and challenges, feels safe, heard, valued, supported and welcomed. The videos also provide information educators need to develop and deliver programs that are inclusive, and give each child equal opportunities to learn and develop. The five key considerations for promoting inclusive practices discussed in these videos will enhance the educator-child relationship, and create an avenue for effective programming, learning and development.

## Grants

Funding was provided through the *Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* for licensed child care centres and child care homes to purchase equipment, materials and resources to enhance the experience of children in licensed child care facilities.

Play and Exploration Grant – The Play and Exploration Grant was a one-time grant for licensed child care facilities and supported facilities to implement Saskatchewan’s foundational early learning framework, *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide*. A total of 660 facilities have received the Play and Exploration grant during the three-year agreement and extension year.

The Play and Exploration Grant was available to child care centres and homes licensed and in operation at March 31, 2018. Since then, new centres and homes have also received the grant. Family child care homes could receive up to \$600, group family child care homes up to \$900 and child care centres \$2,500 for the first 30 spaces and \$75 per space for additional spaces.

Active Play Grant – The Active Play Grant was a one-time grant for child care facilities to purchase equipment and materials to encourage active play in licensed child care settings. A total of 682 facilities received the Active Play grant during the three-year agreement and extension year.

The Active Play Grant was available to child care centres and homes licensed and operational at March 31, 2018. Family child care homes could receive up to \$500, group family child care homes up to \$750 and child care centres \$1,900 for the first 30 spaces and \$60 per space for additional spaces.

Over the course of the three-year plus one-year extension *Bi-lateral Agreement*, Saskatchewan has invested \$2.899 million through these specific grants for licensed child care homes and centres.

## 2. Accessibility

Licensed Child Care Spaces - Saskatchewan exceeded its target of 950 licensed child care centre spaces by allocating 1,295 spaces since 2017-18. Within the licensed home-based sector, 1,032 new licensed child care home spaces were opened in 110 homes over the course of the agreements. Saskatchewan will continue to support the development of licensed child care in homes and centres.

In 2020-21, Saskatchewan spent \$4.6 million on a variety of both one-time as well as periodic grants that were provided to licensed child care facilities to ease the financial burden and encourage new start-ups and increase the accessibility of child care. In Saskatchewan as a part of becoming a licensed child care provider, the following grants are available to all eligible funded licensed child care facilities:

- **Start-up Grants** – to assist with the expenses incurred in opening a licensed child care centre or family child care home (e.g. equipment, furnishings, fire inspection).
- **Space Development Capital Grants** – to assist with the costs of developing, renovating or constructing new child care spaces in centres.
- **Fire, Health and Safety Grants** – to assist new family child care homes, group family child care homes and teen student support homes with the costs of meeting fire, health and safety requirements, as part of the initial licensing process.
- **Nutrition Grants** – to assist with the provision of well-balanced, nutritious meals and snacks for children in licensed child care homes. In 2017-18, as a part of the Agreement, the Nutrition grant maximum was increased from \$40 to \$60 per month per licensed child care space.

- **Equipment and Program Grants** – to assist with the expense of purchasing children’s toys, equipment, furnishings, craft supplies and children’s activities. In 2017-18, as a part of the Agreement, the Equipment and Program grant maximum was increased from \$100 to \$150 per year per licensed child care space.

Early Years Family Resource Centres – Operation of seven Early Years Family Resource Centres (FRCs) in the communities of the Battlefords, Meadow Lake, Moose Jaw, Nipawin, Prince Albert, Saskatoon and La Ronge began in 2019-20 and continued in 2020-21. In 2020-21, Saskatchewan also invested in the development of two new Early Years FRCs in the communities of Estevan and Humboldt. Early Years FRCs bring services to one location and provide no cost programming for all families with young children prenatal to age five. These resources will help families access reliable information and allow them to participate in services like early learning and literacy opportunities and parenting programs that might be hard to find in their community. During the pandemic, Early Years FRCs continued to provide service. This included offering online programs, take home learning kits, posting original videos and content that supported child development and play at home, and information about self-care and coping with stress. From April 2020 to March 2021, the nine federally funded centres distributed 8,600 learning activity kits, received 706,500 social media and web page views. They were also able to safely welcome 7,040 children and adults in-person while abiding by public health guidelines. In 2020-21, Saskatchewan invested \$2.344 million in the development and operation of these nine centres.

### **3. Inclusive**

Supporting inclusive early learning and child care opportunities for young children experiencing disability is a priority for Saskatchewan. *Saskatchewan’s Plan for Growth* lays out the goal that Saskatchewan will be the best place in Canada to live for persons with disabilities. This goal is affirmed in Saskatchewan’s *Disability Strategy* which aims to improve programs and services for people with disabilities.

In 2020-21, Saskatchewan invested \$4.47 million in inclusivity initiatives to support children who are experiencing disability through the Children Communicating, Connecting and in the Community pilot, the Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot, the Enhanced Accessibility grant and the Rural and Northern Inclusive Early Learning pilot.

Saskatchewan has invested \$15.79 million to support inclusive early learning and child care initiatives over the course of the three-year agreement and extension year.

The Children Communicating, Connecting and in the Community (4C) Pilot provides access to early educational intervention for children who are deaf and hard of hearing to reduce communication barriers when communicating with their families, other children and within their community. Children’s development is supported through inclusive environments with trained staff and appropriate technology. The pilot was launched in fall 2018 with a program in each of Regina and Saskatoon for preschool-aged children who are deaf or hard of hearing or who are connected to the deaf or hard of hearing communities. The program is based on the Ministry of Education’s Early Learning principles of children as competent learners, holistic development and learning and strong positive relationships. In 2020-21, 14 children were served through the program. Operating funding will continue for the two programs for preschool-aged Deaf, deaf and hard of hearing children in Regina and Saskatoon.

Early Learning Intensive Support Pilot (ELIS) allows additional children to attend existing school division selected Prekindergarten programs. These spaces provide children with intensive needs access to the program and additional supports are put in place to ensure the needs of all students are being met. ELIS was launched in Regina and Saskatoon at the end of the 2017-18 school year and in 2018-19, the 120 spaces became fully operational. By the end of 2018-19, the program was expanded by 46 spaces, allocated to the communities of Prince Albert, Moose Jaw, Swift Current, Yorkton and North Battleford. In early 2020, an additional expansion of 76 spaces occurred, bringing the provincial total to 242 spaces. In 2020-21 there were 228 children enrolled in ELIS. Support will continue for the ongoing operating of programs across the province for preschool-aged children with intensive needs.

Enhanced Accessibility Grant is issued to licensed facilities monthly to support the actual cost (up to \$2,000 per month) of the additional staff required to care for a child with particularly challenging needs and/or behaviours. Needs of the children vary and are confirmed through a referring professional. The grant supported 107 children in 2020-21 and 377 children over the course of the agreement.

Rural and Northern Inclusive Early Learning Pilot was implemented in select child care centres in the province in 2019-20 and supported 8 children that year. The Rural and Northern Inclusive Early Learning Pilot offers four-year old children experiencing disability who live in communities with limited group-based early learning opportunities access to part-time early learning in a licensed preschool child care space. In 2020-21, two additional children were supported as well as the children from the previous year. Over the three-year agreement and extension year, 10 children have been supported in the pilot.

#### **4. Francophone Minority Language Inclusion**

Saskatchewan had a target of 65 additional child care spaces for Francophone families over the course of the Agreement, based on consultations with the Fransaskoises parent boards and the Conseil des écoles fransaskoises, but exceeded the target with a total investment of 75 spaces.

The three-year agreement plus extension year, provided grants totalling \$1.372 million to support start-up costs for new Francophone child care centres, monthly overhead and operating costs and to assist with the costs of developing, renovating or constructing new child care spaces in a centre. Continued operating funding was provided for the licensed centre-based spaces for Francophone families in 2020-21.

In 2020-21, **translation of resources** was done to facilitate implementation of Play and Exploration in licensed child care facilities and to familiarize families with Play and Exploration to help parents support their child's learning at home.

#### **5. Other**

Differential Monitoring – Saskatchewan has invested a total of \$330,000 to help modernize its current generalized approach to licensing child care and create a more strategic approach to monitoring. This approach will allow for a greater focus on centres that struggle with compliance and in turn, enhance the quality of programs in those centres. The province has been collaborating with experts in the field of risk-based assessment so that the new system will reflect current research and best practice. Along with policy and procedures, key indicators and weighted risk factors were developed. Initial testing and training sessions also took place as well as the start of the program quality indicator portion of the project. This change in approach to licensing will provide the opportunity to develop innovation and quality measures for child care in Saskatchewan in a more systemic way. Implementation of the key indicators portion of the Differential Monitoring model began in the spring of 2021.



Public Awareness – Saskatchewan has invested \$87,000 in 2020-21 in initiatives that emphasize the importance of the early years and supports parents in navigating programs and services.

In 2020-21, a new series of videos was added to the public awareness campaign *Play. Learn. Grow. Together!* which was launched in 2019-20 as a way to reach out to parents of newborn and pre-school aged children with tips and information on how to help them learn at home. The new series called *Together We're Learning*, promoted early learning through basic everyday activities. The campaign used multiple media options, including videos, social media and experiential marketing.

Saskatchewan continues to work with the United Way to build a specific portal on the 211 site to support parents and caregivers to navigate the early learning and child care sector. This Early Years portal will serve as a one-stop location for parents, caregivers or anyone looking for information, programming or services for children zero to six in Saskatchewan.

Supplementary Grant (COVID-19 support) – In response to the widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the child care sector, starting in March 2020, supplementary grant funding was made available to 47 school-based centres providing services to essential workers associated with the response to the pandemic. Supplementary grant funding was based on actual costs less income (parent fees, ministry grants, COVID related benefits). These supports ensured these facilities were able to continue operations, mainly related to their need to continue to employ staff despite lower than usual enrolment. During 2020-21, \$2.282 million was spent on supplementary grant funding.

## Financial Expenditures

In 2020-21, Saskatchewan expended a total of \$14.224 million through the Agreement to support the early learning and child care sector in the province.

Initiative	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
<b>Quality</b>		\$2,225,557	\$2,207,124	\$88,765
Play and Exploration	\$ 1,400,700	\$153,600	\$44,725	\$26,900
Active Play	\$ 1,093,910	\$121,650	\$35,800	\$22,050
Training		\$98,483	\$1,281,120	\$30,865
Literacy Initiatives		\$1,851,825	\$845,479	\$8,950
<b>Accessible</b>		\$953,563	\$6,178,501	\$6,783,901
Early Childhood Services Operating Grant		\$303,233	\$1,592,304	\$3,140,545
Start-up	\$ 89,776	\$1,063,692	\$195,557	\$51,241
Space Development Capital	\$ 3,402,000	\$4,932,154	\$1,322,200	\$508,000
Fire, Health, Safety	\$ 37,700	\$47,899	\$40,400	-
Nutrition	\$ 583,909	\$583,321	\$726,565	\$719,290
Equipment and Program Grants - Homes	\$ 98,200	\$96,775	\$126,475	\$140,200
Family Resource Centres		\$1,505,000	\$2,175,000	\$2,224,625
Infrastructure		\$1,003,560	-	-
<b>Minority Language Inclusion</b>	\$180,000	\$578,620	\$300,897	\$312,432
<b>Inclusive</b>	\$ 2,192,236	\$4,454,420	\$4,673,682	\$4,466,289
Early Learning and Intensive Support pilots, Children Communicating, Connecting and in the Community pilots and Enhanced Accessibility grants	\$ 2,192,236	\$4,454,420	\$4,673,682	\$4,466,289
<b>Miscellaneous</b>		\$564,187	\$766,986	\$2,572,755
Differential Monitoring		\$161,254	\$163,035	-
Public Awareness Campaign		\$193,545	\$430,014	\$87,265
Administration	\$ 9,135	\$209,388	\$173,937	\$203,766
Supplementary Grant (COVID-19 support)	-	-	-	\$2,281,724
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$9,087,566</b>	<b>\$17,358,419</b>	<b>\$14,127,191</b>	<b>\$14,224,142</b>

### Results Achieved: Indicators and Targets

Over the course of the three-year agreement and extension, Saskatchewan exceeded most of the targets set as displayed in the table below.

Objectives/programs	Outputs/outcomes	Indicators	Targets by 2020	Actual Results in 2020-21
<b>High Quality</b>	Enhance the quality of child care facility programming	Licensed family child care home providers participating in training	50 per cent or 115 of child care home providers	173 child care home providers (2018-19 – 98) (2019-20 – 75) (2020-21 – n/a)
		Child care directors participating in training	60 per cent or 188 of child care centre directors	209 child care centre directors (2018-19 – 85) (2019-20 – 124) (2020-21 – n/a)
<b>Accessible and flexible</b>	Increase access to licensed child care	Licensed child care centre spaces	Increase of 950	1,295 spaces (2017-18 – 571) (2018-19 – 724) (2019-20 – 0) (2020-21 – 0)
		Licensed group or family child care home spaces	Increase of 1,500	1032 spaces (2017-18 - 317) (2018-19 - 350) (2019-20 - 365) (2020-21 – 0)
<b>Inclusive</b>	Increase access for minority groups	Preschool-aged children served who are experiencing disability	Increase of 220	387 preschool-aged spaces
		Licensed child care spaces that support French language minority communities	Increase of 65	75 spaces (2017-18 – 30) (2018-19 – 45) (2019-20 – 0) (2020-21 – 0)

## Impact on Families

Parent Central – The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education is working to enhance public awareness of the early years. An important part of this awareness is helping parents and families navigate through early learning and child care information and options. Based on sector feedback, parents may often not know where to look and what to ask when it comes to seeking early learning and child care opportunities in their community.

The Early Years Branch collaborated with 211 Saskatchewan, an initiative of the United Way. 211 Saskatchewan is a free service that connects individuals to human services in the province by telephone, text, or web chat, plus a searchable website with over 5,000 listings of social, community, non-clinical health, and government services across the province: <https://sk.211.ca/>. Over 175 languages, including 17 Indigenous languages, are available over the phone.

With a vision of being the primary provider of real time community information and referral in Saskatchewan, 211 developed a portal specific to Early Years. The site is called **Parent Central** and is intended to be a viable and sustainable solution to meet the goal of supporting parents to find and access quality early learning, programming, support and child care opportunities with the goals of:

- Making it easier for parents to find child care and other local early learning, program, resource and support options;
- Being the single repository of early learning services and resources for the province; and,
- Being the ‘front door/one-stop shop’ for parents to access consistent and up to date information and referral in areas related to early years.

Supplementary Grant (COVID-19 support) – The pandemic significantly impacted child care centres and family child care homes in Saskatchewan. Extensive cleaning protocols required additional staff and extra work and planning in these settings as all toys and equipment needed to be constantly sanitized. Some centres struggled and some homes went on hold or closed due to low enrolment. Maintaining the availability of child care for families and especially for those of essential workers was critical. Supplementary grant funding was made available through the *Canada-Saskatchewan Early Learning and Child Care Agreement* to 47 school-based centres so they could provide services to essential workers starting in March 2020. These supports ensured these facilities were able to continue operations, mainly related to their need to continue to employ staff despite lower than usual enrolment.

## Innovation

COVID-19 has changed the way we live and work – in Saskatchewan, across the country and around the world. Operations of our licensed child care facilities have also been impacted by the pandemic. Innovative solutions were needed to respond to these challenges.

The Government of Saskatchewan has responded to the challenges faced by the licensed child care sector by ensuring consistent funding was provided during the critical months following Saskatchewan’s initiation of a state of emergency. We also worked with school-based child care centres to re-purpose these facilities as child care centres for workers involved with the pandemic response. Our collective efforts supported the maintenance of child care operations, whether a facility is opened or closed, and delivery of child care services during uncertain times. Only three per cent of licensed child care centres in the province and one per cent of licenced child care homes closed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From April to July 2020, operational funding for child care centres, administered through the Early Childhood Services Grant, was provided regardless of whether or not services were suspended. Similarly, nutrition grant funding was provided to child care homes. A child care facility could suspend services for a variety of reasons, such as low-enrolment during the pandemic, or as directed by health authorities while a child was being tested for COVID-19; however, these latter suspensions were brief, and a facility would reopen once a test was reported negative.

All child care facilities remained supported by Ministry of Education Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Consultants during the course of the pandemic, although in-person visits ceased mid-March 2020 with many ministry employees working from home as part of government's effort to reduce transmission of COVID-19. ELCC Consultants communicated with child care facilities throughout the pandemic to support them in emergency preparedness, communicating with parents, understanding financial supports available and support to operate safely during the pandemic.

In late March 2020, all family resource centres moved to all on-line services such as on-line child activities, information and supports for parents, access to on-line parenting programming, and virtual centre tours.

### **Engagement Communication**

Ongoing engagement and communication with Early Years provincial organizations and stakeholders such as families and those employed in the Early Years Sector is a priority for Saskatchewan. Engagement and feedback throughout the three-year agreement and one-year extension, have been vital in helping to shape the many initiatives and programs with Parent Central being a great example of that. Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association as voice of the Early Years Sector was heard loud and clear asking for more consultation and subsequent to that, more meetings have occurred.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for engagement communication. The ministry communicated with child care facilities throughout the pandemic to support them in emergency preparedness, communicating with parents, understanding financial supports available and support to operate safely during the pandemic. Early Learning and Child Care Consultants have been available to support child care facilities including boards/operators, directors, centre staff, providers and parents.

Saskatchewan is committed to responding to local and provincial early years needs. This supports Saskatchewan's goal of helping all children to be safe, healthy and to develop to their full potential in strong families and supportive communities.