



THE DISTRICT OF THUNDER BAY
SOCIAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION BOARD

Increased Allocation of Additional Licensed Child Care Spaces in the District of Thunder Bay

POSITION PAPER

January 2026

Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA) Conference

Prepared by:

The District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board

Prepared for:

Hon. Paul Calandra, Minister of Education

Brief

The District of Thunder Bay Social Services Administration Board (TBDSSAB) requests that the Ministry of Education increases the allocation of child care spaces in the District of Thunder Bay to support the growing need for child care within the district.

Summary

Since the implementation of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system, there has been a significant increase in families seeking child care in the District of Thunder Bay. Supporting these families in accessing quality child care is a priority for TBDSSAB and is constrained by the allocation of new spaces from the Ministry. TBDSSAB has always met its allocated targets, and this year was able to meet the planned allocation of 86 new spaces as well as filling an additional 57 spaces provided through the recalibration enhancement. Aside from limited licensed spaces, the increased demand for care is also influenced by the limited number of Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECE) available to meet the staff to child ratios. Therefore, there is a need to increase allocation of licensed CWELCC child care spaces in the district, while also continuing to develop and support the child care workforce to maintain those spaces.

Background

As part of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) agreement, the Ontario Government committed to the addition of 86,000 new licensed child care spaces across the province by the end of 2026 and \$10 per day child care fees by March 2026. As of March 2025, there has been about 39,500 net new, affordable child care spaces in the province. As for the northwestern district, between 2024-26, TBDSSAB was approved for a total of 196 additional spaces.

Despite the growth expansion plans, the waitlist for child care in the District of Thunder Bay continues to grow as parents' fees have decreased, thereby making it a challenge to find available child care spaces. In September 2024, TBDSSAB had a waitlist of 3,910 children. As of August 2025, TBDSSAB's waitlist increased to 4,857 children, with 3,703 children (76.2%) seeking placement immediately¹.

Since January 2025, an average of 72 children have been placed monthly. At this rate, it will take 51.8 months (4 years and 3 months) for all the currently waitlisted children seeking immediate care to be placed. This projection does not account for any new additions to the waitlist. It is also worth noting that most children on the current waitlist are 'CWECC-eligible', as 83.5% of the applications are seeking care in Infant, Toddler, Preschool, and Kindergarten age groups.

Given the total population of children aged 0-4 years old in the District of Thunder Bay, only 21.2% of CWECC-aged children have access to care in the district². With access rates in the Northwest region being lower than provincial average³, there is a need to increase the percentage of children who have access to care. Provincially, the access target is 37%, placing TBDSSAB well below this target. Addressing this issue would require an increase in allocation of CWECC licensed spaces and recruitment of more Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) to meet the staff-to-child ratios.

To ensure that children have access to quality care, TBDSSAB also recognises a need for more RECEs in the field. As of August 2025, there is a total of 300 full-time equivalent program staff (RECE and Non-ECE) working in the district. RECEs make up 165 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff in the district. To meet the total licensed capacity, service providers in the district would need to employ approximately 22 additional FTE program staff⁴.

¹ Seeking placement immediately includes children who's preferred start date on their application is prior or equal to today's date, or up to 3 months into the future. For example, if today's date was September 12, 2025, and John's preferred start date is December 2025 this would be categorized as seeking placement immediately.

² As of August 2025, there were 1433 CWECC-aged children in care in the district. Based on Statistics Canada (2021) Census Profile, The District of Thunder Bay has 6765 children aged 0-4 years old. [Profile table, Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population - Thunder Bay, District \(DIS\) \[Census division\], Ontario](#).

³ As of 2023, the provincial average for access to care for CWECC spaces was 37% at which point, the District of Thunder Bay was at 21% access to care- one of the lowest rates in the province (Access Rates for CWECC Spaces by Region, 2024. Ministry of Education).

⁴ Approximation of additional staff needed is based on the minimum number of FTE program staff required as per provincial staffing ratio requirements.

Since the implementation of the RECE Fast Track program, a partnership between TBDSSAB and Confederation College, 12 of 15 registrants are completing the program requirements and are on the path to becoming RECEs⁵. While the program has been successful, the district is still in need of more RECEs to meet the increased demand for child care. The need for more RECEs is seen throughout the province. It is estimated that up to 10,000 additional RECEs could be needed in the field by December 2026 to support the growing need for care.

The benefit of increasing the RECE workforce is that child care operators would be able to place more children at a quicker rate – while meeting the staff-to-child ratio – and in turn, steadily decrease the number of children on the district's waitlist⁶.

Based on a distinct count of children with access to care in licensed child care spaces from January to August 2025, the district is using approximately 73% of its licensed child care spaces, with 67% of that proportion being CWELCC-eligible children.

Although the district has not reached the maximum average operating capacity, more licensed spaces would enable TBDSSAB to allocate them to the operators who have reached their capacity and have the resources to accept more children into care. Out of the 39 sites that were open in August 2025, 20 of them were operating at 90% or higher of their licensed capacity based on a distinct count of children in their care.

To support the growth of child care spaces in the District of Thunder Bay, TBDSSAB would like to present two requests. The first would be for the Ministry of Education to consider allocating 225 more CWELCC licensed spaces in the district that will allow TBDSSAB to work with operators to address the growing waitlist in the district.

To support the capital costs associated with increasing CWELCC licensed spaces, TBDSSAB is requesting a total of \$3,950,000 in ELCC Infrastructure Funding. Of that, \$2,850,000 would accommodate 163 more community-based spaces, including 98 spaces for Indigenous organizations. Additionally, \$1,100,000 would accommodate 62 more school-based spaces, including 26 Francophone spaces.

⁵ The 12 registrants graduated from the first cohort, the second cohort will have another 12 graduates in 2026 and by 2027, 15 more have enrolled and will graduate with a total of 39 by 2027.

⁶ This correlation is validated by the recently released Office of the Auditor General's Performance Audit report (2025).

The second request would be for the Ministry to consider providing additional funding to support the recruitment and retention of RECEs. We believe that fulfilling these intersecting requests would provide resources that enables the District of Thunder Bay to meet the provincial average access rate of 37%.

Therefore, TBDSSAB requests that the Ministry of Education provide TBDSSAB more CWELCC space allocations to increase the districts access to care to help meet the needs for child care services as seen in the districts growing waitlist. In addition, TBDSSAB requests more funding to support the development of the RECE workforce and the increase in operational costs in Northern and remote communities.