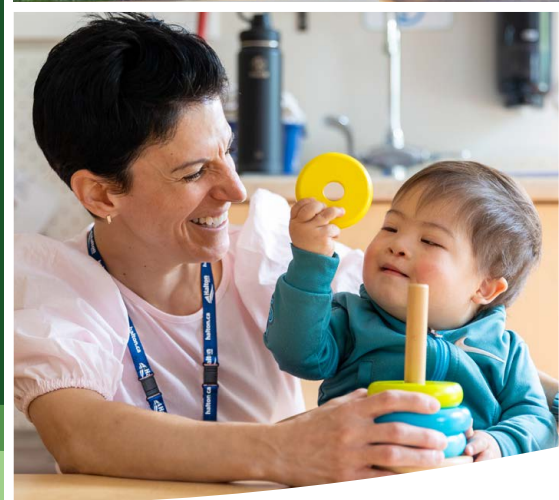


HALTON REGION'S

Early Learning and Child Care Plan

2026-2030



MESSAGE FROM HALTON REGIONAL CHAIR GARY CARR



On behalf of Halton Regional Council, I am pleased to present Halton's 2026–2030 Early Learning and Child Care Plan.

This Plan reflects a shared commitment to giving every child the strongest possible start. It sets a clear path for how Halton Region will plan, grow and strengthen the early learning and child care system over the next five years. The Plan focuses on increasing access and affordability, enhancing quality, supporting the workforce, promoting inclusion, and staying responsive to community needs.

More than 1,100 voices—parents, caregivers, educators, operators, community partners, and sector leaders—helped shape this Plan. Their insights ensured its direction truly reflects the needs and aspirations of families across Halton.

Since the launch of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system in 2022, investments in affordable child care have increased, and the Region's role in oversight, funding, and system planning has grown. These changes create new opportunities to improve outcomes for children and families.

The 2026-2030 Plan is focused on the following priorities:

- Advocate for a strengthened early learning and child care system in Halton.
- Increase access and affordability for families.
- Support workforce and quality through leadership development and improving workforce conditions.
- Enhance inclusive services that reflect families' diverse needs.
- Respond to Halton's evolving community and sector.
- Strengthen system sustainability.

Thank you to our incredible partners across the early learning and child care sector for helping to shape this Plan and dedication to making our system stronger every day. Together, you help create a seamless network of support that gives children and their families the best possible start and future.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gary Carr". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gary Carr
Regional Chair

Halton's Land Acknowledgement

Boozhoo, She:kon, Tanshi, Greetings!

Halton Region acknowledges the Treaty Lands of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation as well as the Traditional Territory of the Haudenosaunee, Wendat and Anishinabek on which we gather.

In stewardship with Mother Earth and the enduring Indigenous presence connected to these lands we acknowledge the Indigenous Nations of the past, present and future.

In the spirit of ally-ship and mutual respect, we will take the path of Truth and Reconciliation to create change, awareness, and equity as we strive to elevate the collective consciousness of society.

Miigwetch, Nia:wen, Marsi, Thank you

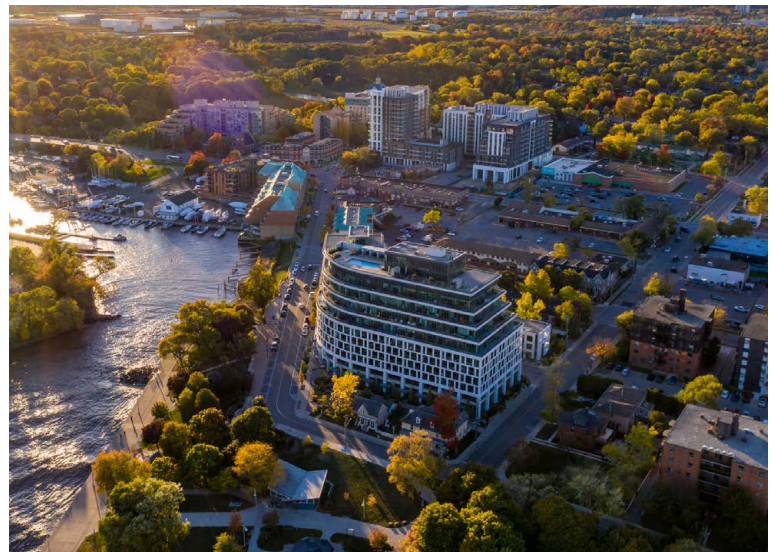


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Community Engagement

Grounded in Community Voice

Development of this Early Learning and Child Care Plan was informed by broad community engagement conducted between October 2025 and January 2026. More than 1,100 individuals contributed through surveys, interviews, focus groups, facilitated discussions, and sector events. Participants included Halton families, early childhood educators and staff, child care operators, EarlyON staff, Local Municipalities in Halton, local school boards, post-secondary institutions, health and social service partners, Indigenous community members, and Halton Region staff.

Engagement was intentionally designed to reflect the diversity of Halton's early years community. Surveys were offered in English and French, and discussions were held with sector networks, planning tables, and advisory groups representing experts in child development, workforce development, and policy design. Council members of Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and Urban Indigenous community members were engaged through dedicated dialogue.

Community insights were complemented by local data, workforce information, and service utilization patterns. Together, lived experience and system information formed the foundation of this Plan, shaping the strategic priorities, commitments, and actions that follow.



955 people responded to online surveys for parents/caregivers and educators/staff to provide input.



Over 220 people participated in focus groups and interviews to gather direct feedback and lived experiences from participants.

Focus Groups and Interviews:

- CWELCC Licensed Child Care Operators (English and Francophone)
- EarlyON Child and Family Centre service providers
- Halton District School Board
- Halton Catholic District School Board
- Conseil scolaire Viamonde
- Conseil scolaire catholique MonAvenir
- Our Kids Network (OKN) Early Years Resiliency Action Table
- Niagara College
- Sheridan College
- Halton Multicultural Council (HMC) Connections
- The Halton Resource Connection (THRC)
- Community Safety and Well Being System Leadership Group (CSWB)
- Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN)
- Urban Indigenous community members
- Halton Region Public Health
- Halton Region Small Business Centre
- Management and staff from Halton Region Children's Services

Community Engagement

Strategic Advisory Group

A Strategic Advisory Group was formed of leading researchers and experts in early childhood education, child development, mental health, and early childhood workforce, as well as leaders from regulatory bodies, policy organizations, and workforce advocacy groups to help inform the Plan.

They shaped the development of Halton's Early Learning and Child Care Plan by grounding it in empirical evidence, sector expertise, and diverse perspectives across the early years system.

This Advisory Group included:

- Dr. Emis Akbari
- Kerry McCuaig
- Beth Deazeley
- Dr. Chaya Kulkarni
- Katharine Brown
- Dr. Michal Perlman
- Dr. Samantha Burns
- Dr. Magdalena Janus
- Shailja Jain
- Wendy Miller
- Dr. Jean Clinton



Community Engagement

Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation

The Region is committed to a respectful and collaborative relationship with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN) in the planning of early learning and child care. This includes ongoing dialogue to align service planning, advance Indigenous-led early years initiatives, and support access to culturally grounded, high-quality early learning opportunities for Indigenous children and families.

On June 15, 2022, through [CA-04-22](#) "Relationship Agreement with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation", Halton Regional Council approved the signing of a Relationship Agreement with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN), the treaty holders of the land on which Halton Region exists today.

Through this agreement the Region committed to furthering its relationship with MCFN by creating formal processes for consultation on subject matters of interest. Meaningful engagement was conducted directly with members of MCFN for this Early Learning and Child Care Plan. Through continued partnership with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the Region seeks to:

- Strengthen coordination between services;
- Improve access and inclusion for Indigenous children and families; and
- Advance truth and reconciliation through sustained action in service planning and delivery.

This partnership reflects a shared commitment to advancing early learning services that are responsive to Indigenous children, families, and community priorities.



Introduction and Context

Early Learning and Child Care in a Growing Halton

Halton Region is one of the fastest-growing municipalities in Canada. As our community grows, so does the need for an early learning and child care system that is **high-quality, accessible, affordable, responsive, and inclusive**. Early learning and child care is more than a service. It is an essential part of our community. It supports children's development, helps families participate in the workforce, and is essential to a vibrant and competitive economy.

Halton Region promotes an early learning and child care system that increases access and affordability, elevates quality, strengthens workforce capacity, promotes inclusion, and remains responsive to evolving community needs.

This Plan strives to meet the needs of Halton residents not just today, but over the longer-term. It outlines how Halton Region will plan, grow, and strengthen the early learning and child care system from 2026-2030.



High-Quality



Accessible



Affordable



Responsive



Inclusive



Introduction and Context

Halton Community and Demographic Profile

8%

Halton's 0-4 population is expected to grow by **8%** by 2030.

35%

of Halton Region's population is composed of immigrants.

4th

Halton Region ranks as the **4th** most densely populated Census Division in Ontario.

89%

of Halton Region's labour force is employed.



1 in 5 of Halton Region's commuters commute outside of the region for work.

1 in 10

of Halton Region's families are lone-parent families.

Nearly half of Halton households have children

39%



Couples with Children

9%



Lone-Parent Families

Young Children Are Not Evenly Distributed Across Halton

9.9%



Milton

6.8%



Burlington

6.8%



Halton Hills

6.6%



Oakville

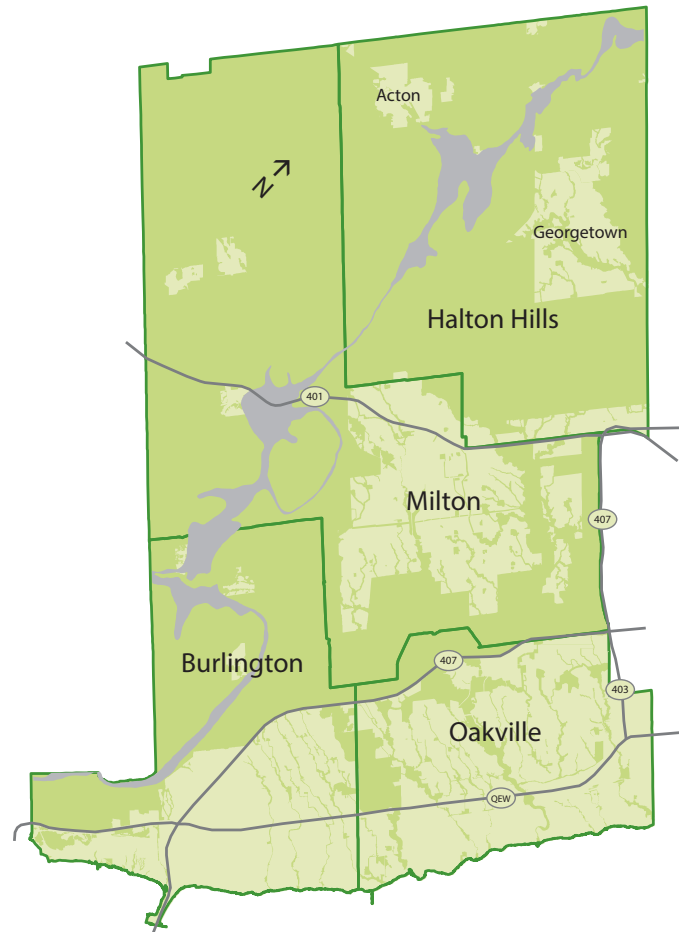
Introduction and Context

Halton Region's Role as Service System Manager

Halton Region plays a key role in Ontario's early learning and child care system. As one of the province's 47 designated Service System Managers under the *Child Care and Early Years Act (2014)*, the Region plays a central role in the planning, funding and administration of early learning and child care services for children ages 0 to 12 across Halton. The *Child Care and Early Years Act (2014)* outlines the Region's responsibilities as Service System Manager.

Key service system manager responsibilities:

- Manage and provide oversight of Provincial and Regional investments in early learning and child care;
- Develop local policies aligned with broad provincial direction;
- Lead workforce strategy development and oversees professional learning for the early learning and child care sector;
- Provide child care fee subsidies to lower the cost of child care for eligible Halton families;
- Support and monitor quality across the early learning and child care system;
- Plan and implement targeted supports for children with special needs; and
- Develop an Early Learning and Child Care Plan at least every five years to guide early learning and child care systems planning and address community need and Provincial priorities.



Introduction and Context

Federal and Provincial Role

On March 28, 2022, the Federal and Provincial Governments signed the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) Agreement – known in some circles as \$10 a day universal child care. This agreement committed to increase quality, accessibility, affordability and inclusivity in early learning and child care environments province-wide. The Government of Canada provides funding for licensed child care and works with provinces, including the Ontario Government, to monitor CWELCC space creation and financial stewardship.

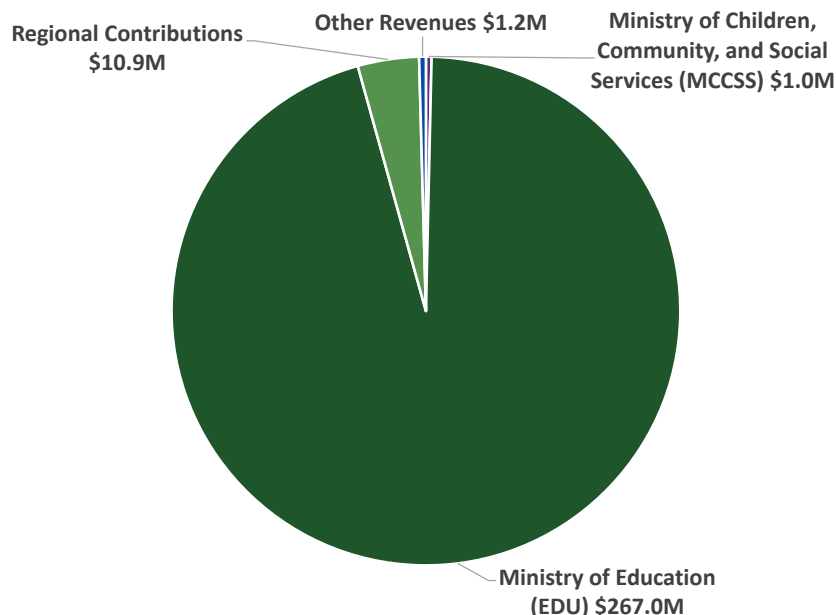
The Government of Ontario is responsible for implementation of CWELCC. The Federal-Provincial Agreement includes space creation targets and expectations that must be met over the life of the agreement. The Ministry of Education sets overall policy, legislation, and regulation for all early learning and child care programs in Ontario. It provides provincial funding to Service System Managers, including Halton Region, to support the delivery of programs and services across the system.

The Province of Ontario has identified five priorities for early learning and child care in Ontario that are reflected in this Plan:

- Lowering fees;
- Increasing access to affordable child care;
- Enhancing high-quality child care;
- Supporting inclusion; and
- Enhancing data and reporting.

Halton’s Plan aligns with these provincial priorities while meeting Halton’s needs. As Figure 1 shows, Halton Region has a number of different funding sources for early learning and child care, including a regional contribution.

Figure 1: 2026 Halton Region Early Learning and Child Care Funding Sources (\$ million)



Introduction and Context

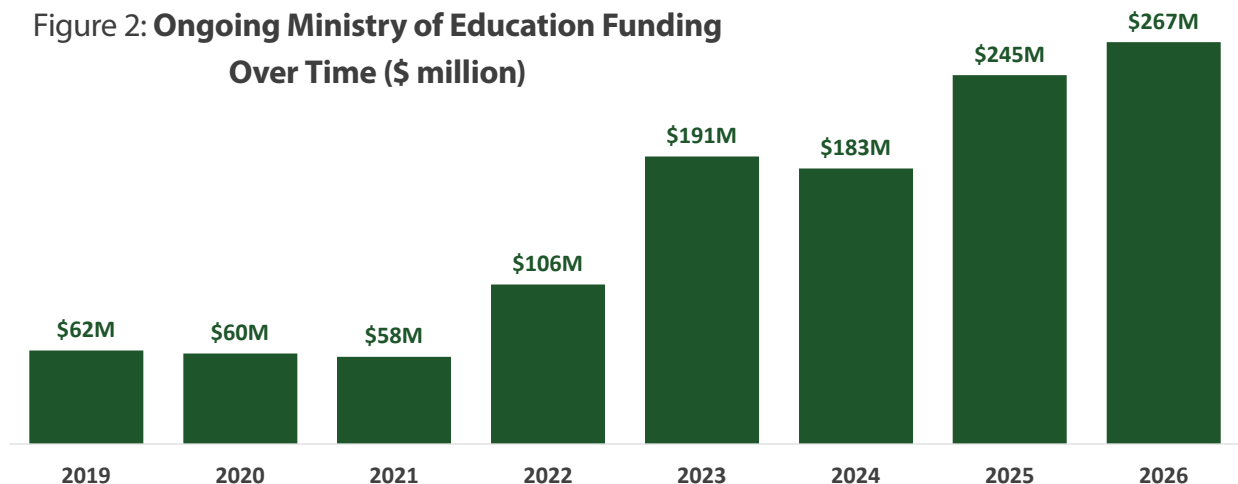
Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC)

The CWELCC system marks a significant transformation for the early learning and child care sector. It represents a significant investment to make child care affordable for families. It has transformed how programs are funded and how families access child care. It has expanded the Region's role in system oversight, funding administration, and strategic planning to support a responsive system that reflects the needs of families and our community.

CWELCC has also brought significant change to Halton's early learning and child care system, prompting new approaches to support workforce stability, inclusive child care environments that support children with diverse developmental needs, cultures, languages and backgrounds, and system planning. This investment has elevated the visibility and value of early learning and child care, positioning the sector as essential to children's development, family well-being, and broader economic competitiveness.

Since the introduction of the CWELCC program in 2022, investment from the Ministry of Education in early learning and child care has grown significantly. Annual funding included in the Region's operating budget has grown incrementally from approximately \$62 million in 2019, to over \$267 million in 2026, as shown in Figure 2*.

Figure 2: **Ongoing Ministry of Education Funding Over Time (\$ million)**



While CWELCC is positioned by the Federal and Provincial Governments as a universal program, the experience in our community is more nuanced. In Halton, current CWELCC funding and space allocation from the Provincial Government does not fully meet the demand of Halton families. Most child care operators in Halton Region have chosen to participate in the CWELCC system. However, there are others that continue to operate outside of it. Many would like to join the CWELCC system.

Halton's early learning and child care landscape includes operators both within and outside the CWELCC system. The Region recognizes the vital role that all operators play in serving families. While our planning must align with provincial direction, we take a broad view of the sector and continue to look for opportunities to support a stable, responsive system that reflects the full range of child care providers in Halton.

* Excludes one-time funding provided.

Why Early Learning and Child Care Matters

Early Development

The early years are a period of significant brain development and growth, shaping physical well-being, self-help skills, language and communication, emotional regulation, social connection, and lifelong learning. High-quality early learning environments foster belonging, well-being, engagement, and expression. In Halton Region, children's development is supported through the Our Favourite Words framework developed by Dr. Rosenbaum and Dr. Gorter at CanChild. Our Favourite Words framework for child development – Functioning, Family, Fitness, Fun, Friends, and Future - supports children, youth, families, and professionals to focus on strengths and abilities, relationships and future possibilities rather than deficits. This lays the groundwork for school readiness and long-term resilience. Access to inclusive, culturally responsive early learning experiences for all children supports equitable developmental outcomes across a diverse and growing population.

The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is a mandated survey completed by Senior Kindergarten teachers across Ontario every three years. It measures a child's performance across five general areas of development: Physical Health & Well-being, Social Competence, Emotional Maturity, Language & Cognitive Development, and Communication Skills & General Knowledge. Historically, children in Halton have achieved developmental milestones at a higher rate than the provincial average. As Figure 3 indicates, the latest EDI cycle from 2023 identified an increasing number of Halton children are struggling with one or more of the EDI domains. While Halton children continue to achieve developmental milestones at a higher rate than the provincial average, this is now marginally so. This indicates increased child developmental vulnerability and signals a need for action.

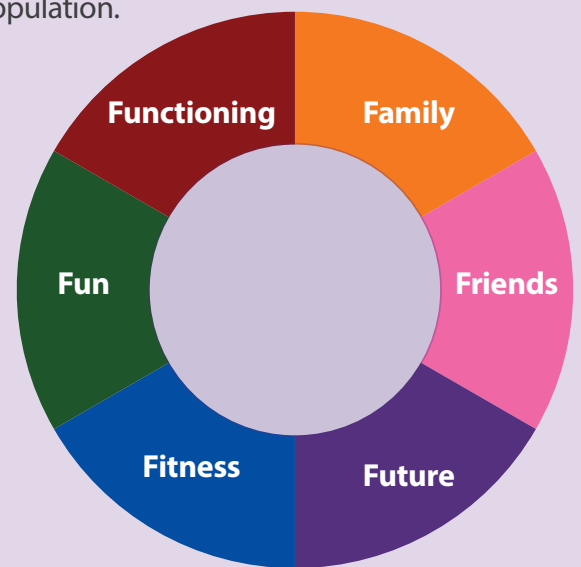
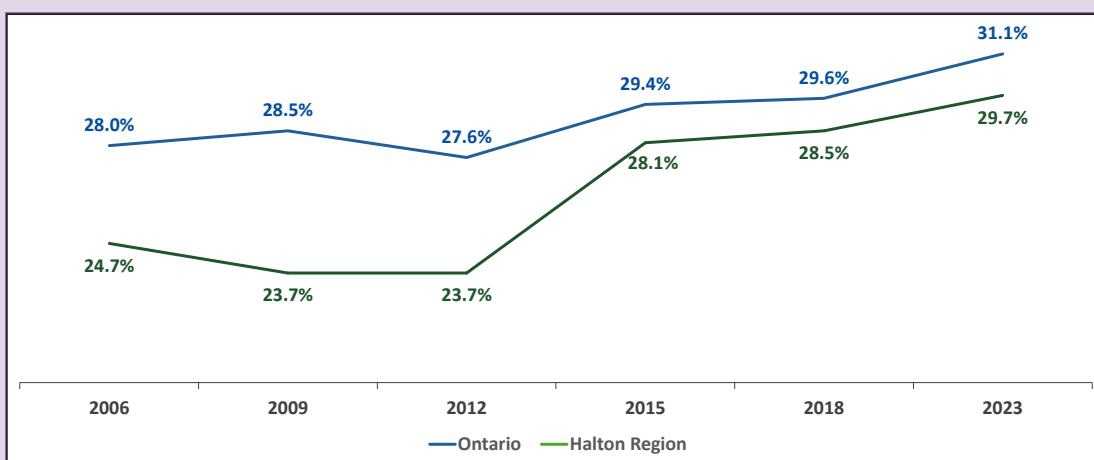


Figure 3: Per cent of Halton senior kindergarten children who are vulnerable

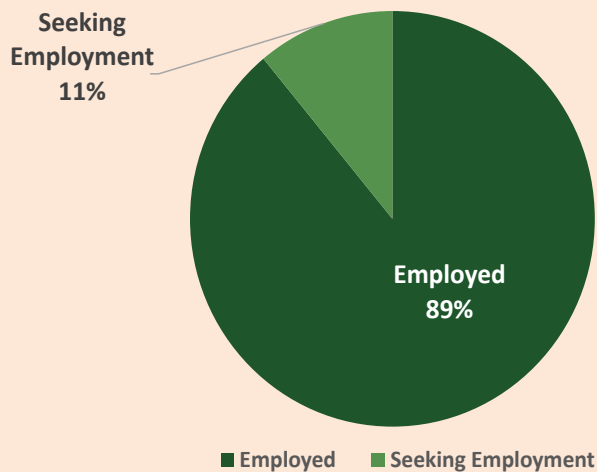


Why Early Learning and Child Care Matters

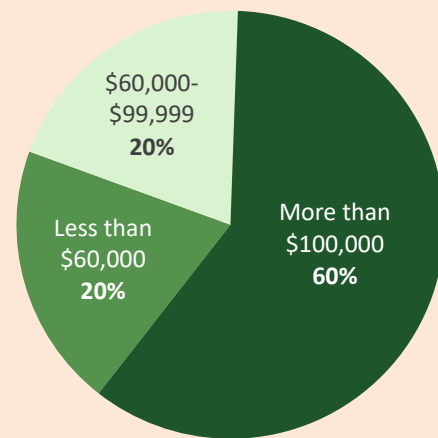
Families and Economic Opportunity

Access to safe, reliable, affordable child care enables parents and caregivers to participate in gainful employment, pursue higher education, and contribute to Halton's labour market and economic competitiveness. In 2021, 89% of Halton's labour force were employed. The remaining 11% were seeking employment.¹ Household incomes in Halton vary widely, with 60% of households earning \$100,000 or more, 20% of households earning \$60,000 to \$99,999, and 20% earning less than \$59,999.² In a region with strong employment growth and high cost of housing, access to affordable child care is critical.

Employment in Halton Region



Household Income in Halton Region



Halton has more commuters than the Ontario average. Many parents who live in Halton travel outside the Region for work. Because so many people commute, child care is especially important to help parents and caregivers maintain employment.

Caregiving responsibilities are predominantly provided by women. Access to affordable child care directly addresses this gender imbalance. It enables women to access or continue employment, advance their careers, and maintain financial stability. Halton has many households with children. Access to affordable child care benefits families broadly by helping parents balance work and caregiving responsibilities.

40%

of commuters travel more than half an hour daily.³

¹ Statistics Canada. Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population.

² Statistics Canada. Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population.

³ Statistics Canada. Census Profile, 2021 Census of Population.

Why Early Learning and Child Care Matters

A Network of Supports

Early learning and child care does not operate in isolation. It is part of a broader network of services that includes EarlyON Child and Family Centres, targeted developmental supports for children with high needs, schools, health services, and community agencies. EarlyON Child and Family Centres are free, high-quality, drop-in programs in Ontario for parents, caregivers, and children from birth to 6 years old. They offer play-based learning, parenting support, and community resources, with on-site staff often including Registered Early Childhood Educators.

Early learning and child care plays an important role in connecting families to community supports, helping children receive the services they need, and supports overall development and well-being. Halton's early learning and child care system is strengthened by collaboration across our community. Collaborative planning tables, clear referral pathways, and coordinated services help children and families access support more easily, so services feel connected rather than separate and hard to navigate.

Social Equity

High quality early learning and child care environments benefit all children, but the impact is especially powerful for families who face social or economic barriers. When children from families experiencing low income have access to stable, enriching early learning environments, it can significantly boost their development, confidence, and long-term success.

High-quality early learning experiences can help reduce developmental gaps and provide children a strong foundation as they grow. Making high-quality, accessible, affordable, responsive, and inclusive child care available for every family is an important step to reducing inequities and improving outcomes for children.



The Early Learning and Child Care System in Halton

Early learning and child care is a foundational element of Halton’s social services system. It supports healthy child development, strengthens family well-being, and advances equitable outcomes from the earliest years of life. High-quality early learning environments play a critical role promoting cognitive, communication, social, emotional, and physical development across the early years. As children engage in these settings, early learning environments have a unique opportunity to foundationally support development and set children up for future success in school and their later life trajectory.

Meaningful relationships are at the heart of this Plan and the early learning and child care system in Halton. Parents, caregivers, and children guide this work through their experiences and voices. The early learning and child care sector and community partners also play a vital role, bringing professional expertise, collaboration, and a deep commitment to children’s learning and well-being. Together, these relationships reflect the foundations of [How Does Learning Happen? Ontario’s Pedagogy for the Early Years](#), belonging, well-being, engagement, and expression, which continue to shape how early learning and child care grows and improves in Halton.

Halton approaches early learning and child care as both a social service and a strategic community investment. The choices made in system planning, such as where growth occurs, how the workforce is supported, and how inclusion is embedded, are intentional. They reflect an understanding that early learning and child care is paramount to individual outcomes and the well-being of our Halton community.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Our work is grounded in our commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion and working collaboratively with our sector partners to provide a sense of belonging and well-being for all children, families, educators and leaders.

[Ontario’s Access and Inclusion Framework](#) guides our work to support equitable access to early learning and child care, ensuring that children of all abilities, backgrounds and identities can participate actively and meaningfully, and build strong relationships with both peers and educators.

We recognize that creating an equitable system means intimately understanding the diverse experiences of families and removing barriers to their participation in Halton’s early years and child care system. Halton’s aspirational goal is for every Halton family to access early learning and child care in ways that best meet their needs.



The Early Learning and Child Care System in Halton

Truth and Reconciliation

In response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report and Calls to Action, the Region has taken steps to advance reconciliation and relationship building with Indigenous Peoples, Communities and First Nations. This work supports enhancing cultural competency and knowledge amongst Regional staff and community partners. It emphasizes the importance of building and fostering meaningful relations with Indigenous Peoples across our community.

On June 16, 2021, Halton Regional Council formally endorsed the 94 Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Articles of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) through Council Report CA-07-21, Indigenous Relationship Initiative Update.

Meaningful engagement was conducted with members of Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN) and members of the Urban Indigenous community in Halton Region. We appreciated the opportunity to listen and learn from all participants, who shared valuable learning opportunities that are reflected in this Plan. Correspondence was also sent to the Six Nations of the Grand River Elected Council.

As part of our commitment to Truth and Reconciliation, this Plan will help foster an early learning and child care system that meets the needs of Indigenous families and strengthens relationships with Indigenous Peoples, Communities and First Nations over time. We are committed to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action to create culturally competent early childhood education programs that reflect the diverse needs of Indigenous Peoples, Communities and First Nations.

Strengthening a Responsive System

Halton has a legislated systems leadership role, bringing together funding, system planning, partnerships, and direct services so these priorities are addressed in a coordinated and intentional way. This Plan is guided by five provincial priorities that support a strong early learning and child care system in Halton:



lowering fees



increasing access



enhancing high-quality child care



supporting inclusion



enhancing data and reporting



The Early Learning and Child Care System in Halton

Licensed Child Care

Halton families may access diverse types of child care. Centre and home-based licensed child care both provide early learning environments where children can thrive.

Child care is regulated and licensed by the Provincial Ministry of Education. Programs are offered in centre-based settings, home child care, and before and after school environments. The Region works closely with CWELCC licensed child care operators to support quality, facilitate diverse and inclusive child care environments, understand provincial and regional guidelines and funding, and provide support.

Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care in Halton (CWELCC)

The implementation of CWELCC has fundamentally reshaped affordability and the system structure in Halton. With 268 sites enrolled⁴, families across Halton benefit from lower child care fees for children under the age of six.

While CWELCC has made child care more affordable for families, it has also created limits that affect how quickly and where the system can grow. There is significant and growing demand for CWELCC spaces in Halton however, Provincial decisions about the number of new child care spaces determine the pace and distribution of growth in Halton.

Halton Region oversees local implementation of CWELCC, provides oversight over Provincial and Regional investments in early learning and child care, champions the need for more resources to meet community demand, and supports smooth transitions by helping children, families and child care providers navigate changes in funding and CWELCC implementation in ways that minimize disruption and maintain high-quality care.



86%

As of December 31, 2025, 86% of eligible child care sites were enrolled in CWELCC in Halton Region.



~20,000

Halton Region allocated funding to support close to 20,000 CWELCC child care spaces for children 0-5.



1,386

The Province allocated 1,386 spaces to Halton to expand the CWELCC system between 2022-26.

⁴ As of March 2026

The Early Learning and Child Care System in Halton

EarlyON Child and Family Centres: Community Anchors

EarlyON Child and Family Centres strengthen early development and community connection. These free, play-based programs for parents, caregivers, and children from birth to age six promote early learning and support parenting confidence.

Within Halton's system, EarlyON also functions as an entry point for other services and supports. EarlyON Child and Family centres contribute to early identification of developmental needs, smooth transitions into licensed care and school, and provide accessible points of connection for families navigating access to community services and supports.

EarlyON Child and Family Centres reinforce an inclusive and responsive early learning and child care system, ensuring families can access support early and close to home.

73,481

In 2025, EarlyON programs across Halton had 73,481 child visits.

64,785

In 2025, EarlyON programs across Halton had 64,785 parent and caregiver visits.

Early Learning and Child Care Workforce

The early learning and child care workforce is foundational. Early childhood educators and child care leaders build trusting relationships with children and families, create high quality learning environments, and provide the operational stability that programs rely on every day. A strong, supported workforce is essential to maintaining a high-quality system across Halton.

Ongoing recruitment and retention challenges continue to affect the stability of early learning and child care programs. Improving workforce conditions, valuing educators' skills, and supporting professional learning are key to strengthening the sector and sustaining high quality programs. A strong workforce is critical to operationalizing CWELCC child care spaces and meeting provincially legislated educator to child ratio requirements.

Recent studies of the early learning and child care workforce highlight both strengths and risks within the sector. While our sector is highly diverse and racialized, retention in the sector is concerning. Fewer than half of educators plan to remain in the sector over the next five years. Only half would recommend a career in the early years⁵.

41% identify as racialized.

51% would recommend a career in the early years.

42%

plan to stay in the sector over the next five years.

This reinforces the need for targeted strategies to improve retention, support workforce well-being, and strengthen the perception of the sector as a long-term, viable career.

5 Akbari, E., McCuaig, K., Schurter, M. Varmuza, P., Akbari, S., Mudie, S. (2024). Knowing Our Numbers: A Provincial Study with a Local Lens on the Early Childhood Education Workforce in Ontario. The Regional Municipality of Halton.

The Early Learning and Child Care System in Halton

Financial Supports and System Equity

Child care affordability is strengthened through CWELCC fee reductions. However, child care remains unaffordable for many Halton families due to insufficient CWELCC spaces allocated to Halton Region.

Halton administers Ontario's Child Care Fee Subsidy to support eligible families with the cost of licensed child care programs. This reduces financial barriers for families, while promoting economic stability. To further support families, Halton strengthens access to CWELCC spaces for families experiencing vulnerabilities by coordinating closely with child care operators.

1,763

children receive fee subsidy to attend licensed child care as of February 2026.

Services for Children with Special Needs

Inclusion is embedded across Halton's early learning and child care system through coordinated developmental and behavioural services.

- Inclusion Services strengthen educator capacity and support meaningful participation of children with diverse developmental needs in licensed child care.
- Infant and Child Development Services (ICDS) support children aged 0-5 at risk for or with developmental needs and their families through assessment, coaching, and coordinated planning in their home environment.
- Family and Community Behavioural Services (FCBS) extend support to children and youth with developmental and behavioural needs from 2 years of age to 21, reinforcing transitions and skill development across childhood and adolescence.

Together, these services advance quality and inclusion while strengthening system responsiveness, making it possible for supports that grow and evolve alongside family and community needs.



Building an Early Learning and Child Care System

Our Vision

Halton Region's Early Learning and Child Care Plan: 2026-2030 builds on a vision of ensuring all families in Halton have access to high-quality, accessible, affordable, responsive, and inclusive early learning and child care programs and services.

It is the Region's commitment to foster a system that reflects the ongoing needs of our Halton community while centering children's early learning, as guided by [How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years](#).

Our Priorities

Halton Region's 2026-2030 Early Learning and Child Care Plan was developed with input from families and caregivers, the early learning and child care sector and community partners. The Plan builds on successes and learnings of the previous plan.

Over the next five years, Halton Region will focus on six strategic priorities:

Goal	Description
Advocate for a strengthened early learning and child care system in Halton	Advocate for funding and policy changes that reflect our community's growth, cost of living and workforce needs so families can access the care that works for them.
Increase access and affordability for families	Make early learning and child care programs easier to access and more affordable so all families can participate and have choice in programs that meet their needs.
Support workforce and quality through leadership development and improving workforce conditions	Support educators and leaders by strengthening workforce conditions, leadership capacity and the environments where children learn and grow.
Enhance inclusive services that reflect families' diverse needs	Support programs and services to meet the needs of every child and family, including those with different abilities, cultures, and circumstances.
Respond to Halton's evolving community and sector	Engage with families, service providers, and the broader community to better understand current needs and adapt services quickly and effectively when needed.
Strengthen system sustainability	Build a strong, well-supported early learning and child care system that can grow, adapt to emerging sector needs, and continue to serve Halton families into the future.

Building an Early Learning and Child Care System

We are investing in sector capacity building and professional growth for the early learning and child care workforce to provide high-quality early learning experiences. By collaborating closely with school boards, public health, and community social service partners, we continue to enhance coordination and access across programs.

Using data to identify where services are most needed, Halton is shaping a strong, responsive system that meets provincial goals and the needs of our community.

System Transformation

Since the 2022–2025 Early Learning and Child Care Plan was introduced, Halton’s early learning and child care system has experienced significant transformation.

The Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) system has made child care more affordable for families. Fees are capped for all families with children under six in CWELCC programs. Almost 20,000 Halton children and their families now have access to affordable child care, paying no more than \$22 a day in 2026.

Although child care affordability has improved significantly, growth in licensed child care spaces has been limited in Halton. The Region uses a provincially mandated [Directed Growth Plan](#) to guide how and where new CWELCC spaces in Halton are allocated. Space growth is prioritized in neighbourhoods with the greatest need.

Early learning and child care sector transformation continues. The system continues to evolve based on evolving provincial direction and community need. This Early Learning and Child Care Plan: 2026-2030 is a living document. It responds to Halton pressures, supports families and operators, and focuses on accessibility, high quality, inclusion, and coordination.



System Accomplishments

Halton's 2022-2025 Early Learning and Child Care Plan guided policy and program development over the past four years. Actions of that Plan responded to CWELCC transformation and COVID-19 challenges.

Over the last four years, Halton has:

- ✔ Implemented CWELCC, reducing the cost of child care to a maximum of \$22 a day.
- ✔ Enrolled 86% of Halton's licensed child care programs into the CWELCC system (child care centres and home child care agencies).
- ✔ Developed the CWELCC Directed Growth Plan, establishing priorities for the expansion of affordable child care spaces, and identifying underserved priority neighbourhoods.
- ✔ Created and introduced Halton's Early Years and Child Care Quality System Framework, informed by research and community input.
- ✔ Implemented a tiered approach to support children's developmental needs and inclusion in licensed child care, providing universal, responsive, and intensive supports based on each child and child care centre's individualized needs.
- ✔ Launched the Early Years Resiliency Action table under the Our Kids Network, to address results from the Early Development Instrument and support early identification, healthy child development, early intervention and co-ordination of family support.
- ✔ Developed and implemented the Children's Developmental Services digital platform to support parents and caregivers, professionals, and child care centres to easily refer to developmental supports.
- ✔ Advanced equity, diversity and inclusion and Truth and Reconciliation at directly operated Regional Child Care Centres, through a commitment to professional learning and collaboration with Indigenous partners to incorporate equity-informed and diverse perspectives into daily practice.
- ✔ Supported Workforce Strategy initiatives to strengthen the recruitment and retention of a high-quality early learning and child care workforce.



System Pressures

Through community engagement and analysis of local data trends, we heard that Halton's early learning and child care system continues to face several long standing pressures as follows:

High Demand for Care

Halton continues to experience high population growth and rising demand for high quality and affordable child care spaces. As a result, many CWELCC child care programs have long waitlists, especially in fast growing neighbourhoods. The before and after school system also faces high demand and growing complexity, further challenging families' ability to access care.

Workforce Capacity

The early learning and child care workforce is the heart of a high-quality early learning and child care system. Recruiting and retaining early childhood educators remains a significant challenge, as many leave the sector due to low wages and benefits, and limited career advancement opportunities. Persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified early childhood educators further strains the system and limits growth.

Increasing Complexity of Need

Educators report increased developmental and behavioural needs among children entering their child care programs. The Early Development Instrument, a province-wide questionnaire completed by senior kindergarten teachers that assesses child development in areas like physical wellness, cognition, communication, social and emotional skills, and emotional development, shows that children in Halton are experiencing increasing developmental challenges, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. This reinforces the importance of developmental supports, educator capacity building and professional learning, and coordinated community services.

These pressures require coordinated planning across quality, accessibility, affordability, responsiveness, and inclusivity.

System Coordination

System coordination offers a key opportunity to further strengthen Halton's early learning and child care system. Community agency partners noted that information is sometimes shared in different ways and that families do not always experience smooth connections when moving between community services.

As the system grows, clearer processes and better digital tools can help bring information together, reduce manual effort, and support easier transitions for families. Improving coordination will build on what is already working well and help create a more connected and responsive system for children, families, and operators.

System Pressures

Administrative and Reporting Requirements

Since the implementation of CWELCC, administrative and reporting requirements for child care operators have increased. New funding and accountability rules require additional documentation, reporting, and financial reconciliation, placing significant demands on operators' capacity. For smaller operators, these responsibilities can reduce time available for program leadership and supporting educators and children.

Streamlined processes, improved digital tools, and system modernization can ensure good stewardship of public funding while better enabling operators and staff to focus on delivering high-quality early learning and child care.

Our 6 Goals and 26 Commitments

Goal #1: Advocate for a strengthened early learning and child care system in Halton

The Region will:

1. Advocate for CWELCC funding and spaces that meet community demand.
2. Advocate for changes to the methodology used to allocate CWELCC spaces to more accurately reflect current and future community need.
3. Advocate for a robust workforce strategy that recognizes the early learning and child care value to the economy.
4. Advocate for increased EarlyON funding to meet family needs across Halton and support growth of EarlyON programs.
5. Advocate for increased and flexible funding that matches space growth, provides flexibility for operator major capital improvements, meets the needs of children with special needs and supports a robust before and after school system.
6. Advocate for administrative funding to support increased Service System Manager responsibilities related to CWELCC.

Why this matters?

The early learning and child care system in Halton is primarily funded by the Federal and Provincial Governments. Halton Region is responsible for oversight of the system, and must comply with Provincial legislation, regulation and policy guidelines. Working together with Federal and Provincial partners, the Region has made great progress in delivering a strong early learning and child care system in Halton.

Halton faces unique local pressures including: high population growth, commuting patterns, and a high cost of living that impact local access, affordability, and workforce stability. By continuing to share these pressures with our Federal and Provincial partners, we can help ensure the early learning and child care system best supports Halton families.

Our 6 Goals and 26 Commitments

Goal #2: Increase access and affordability for families

The Region will:

7. Improve access to early learning and child care where it is needed most, subject to provincial funding and space allocation.
8. Make it easier for parents to find and get the early learning services and child care they need.
9. Work pre-emptively with community agencies to help Halton families access early learning and child care services.
10. Work with the Province and local child care operators to continue to put the CWELCC system into practice locally.
11. Strengthen local policies for a high-quality, accessible, affordable, responsive, and inclusive early learning and child care system.

Why this matters?

Families need affordable, reliable child care. In many parts of Halton, demand is higher than the number of available spaces. Strengthening access is especially important for underrepresented populations who can face greater barriers to finding care. There are child care operators in Halton that want to join the CWELCC system or expand CWELCC spaces to meet growing community demand. Increased CWELCC funding and spaces from the Provincial Government are essential to meet community need.

Goal #3: Support workforce and quality through leadership development, improving workforce conditions and providing learning environments that contribute to high-quality early learning and child care.

The Region will:

12. Support child care leaders in identifying, supporting and implementing continuous improvement within their organizations and across Halton's early learning and child care system to elevate the quality of programs for children, families, and the early learning and child care workforce.
13. Develop programs and strategies to attract and retain new professionals and upskill the existing workforce.
14. Promote early childhood education as a profession and pathways to become a Registered Early Childhood Educator.

Why this matters?

Quality early learning can change a child's life trajectory, positioning them for long-term success. High-quality early learning and child care programs are dependent on a skilled, supported, and stable workforce. Quality is also shaped by strong sector leadership, effective operational practices and workforce conditions that promote stability and well-being.

The sector faces ongoing staffing challenges, some of which require provincial action. Increasing the number of educators will support full use of CWELCC spaces and facilitate more affordable child care access for Halton families. At the local level, we can help attract new professionals into the sector, retain and upskill the existing workforce, and promote early learning and child care as a viable, long-term career. The Region's ability to meet the growing child care needs of Halton families is dependent on a vibrant workforce.

Our 6 Goals and 26 Commitments

Goal #4: Enhance inclusive services that reflect families' diverse needs

The Region will:

- 15.** Strengthen sector capacity to provide inclusive, high-quality early learning environments.
- 16.** Work with Indigenous Peoples, Communities and First Nations to advance Truth and Reconciliation and support the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, perspectives, and values in early learning and child care programs.
- 17.** Advance an inclusive and culturally responsive early learning and child care system that reflects the diversity of Halton's communities and fosters a strong sense of belonging.

Why this matters?

Children thrive when early learning environments are inclusive, culturally responsive, and able to meet diverse developmental needs.

Strengthening inclusive services in the early years helps reduce inequities and supports every child and family to feel a sense of belonging in the programs they rely on.

Goal #5: Respond to Halton's evolving community and sector

The Region will:

- 18.** Define and create a "made-in Halton" approach to measure child care needs.
- 19.** Formalize a communications and engagement approach that identifies how the Region will receive feedback, consult with and inform families, the early learning and child care sector and key partners.
- 20.** Maintain and foster strategic partnerships for ongoing system planning.
- 21.** Create an advisory structure so community and sector voices can help guide the Region in developing early learning and child care policy and programs.
- 22.** Continue to provide leadership and support to the Our Kids Network, bringing partners together through a collective impact approach so every child thrives.

Why this matters?

Halton's context is unique. It has fast-growing communities, high rates of dual-income households, and a high percentage of commuters. The needs in Halton are different than in most other regions.

It is important that Halton Region continue to hear from parents and community partners to ground our work in lived experience and local evidence. This will help us adapt quickly to emerging community needs and strengthen regional advocacy.

Our 6 Goals and 26 Commitments

Goal #6: Strengthen system sustainability

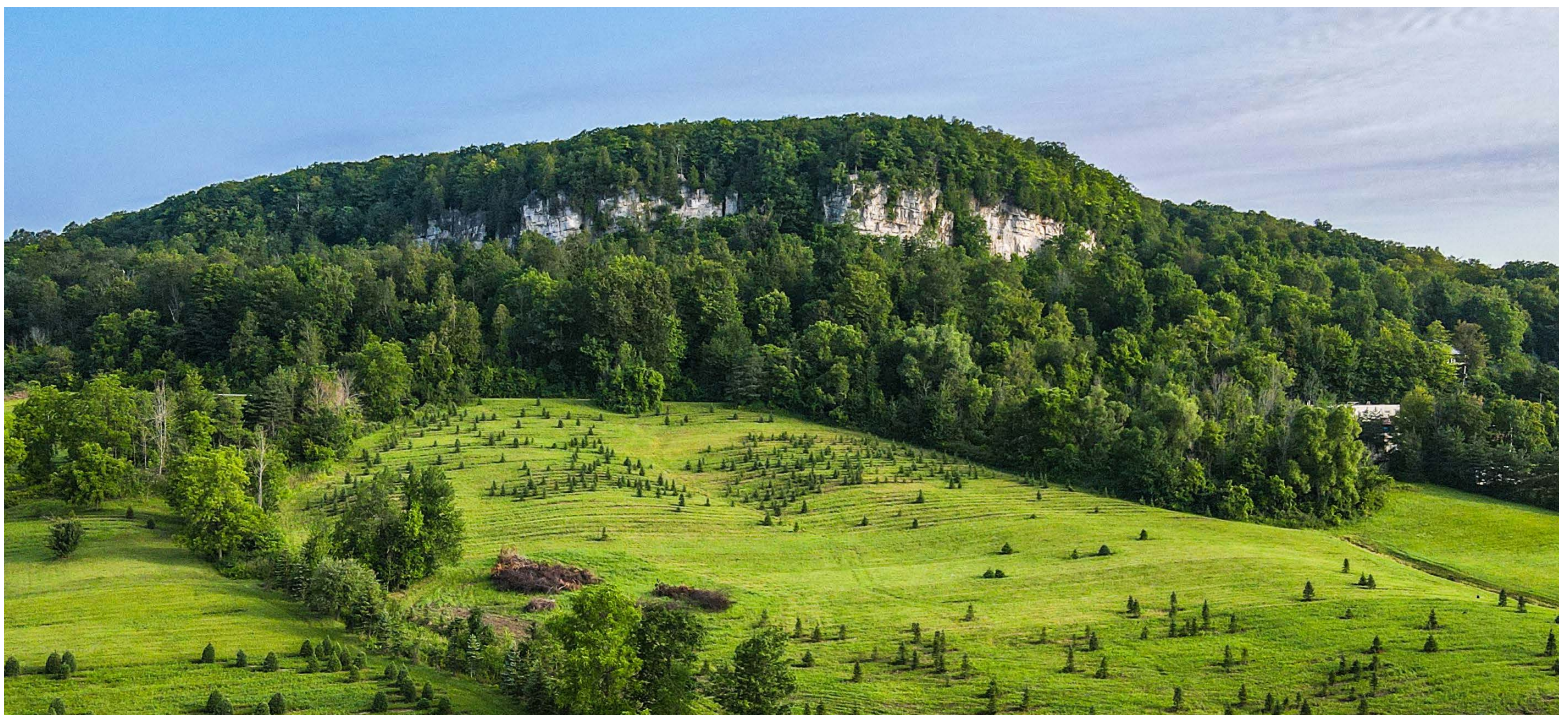
The Region will:

- 23.** Transform service delivery and make it easier for families and operators to access and provide care through IT solutions to manage early learning and child care.
- 24.** Review early years and child care system programs and services to continue to meet the needs of Halton families, early learning and child care operators and educators in an efficient and effective manner.
- 25.** Strengthen relationships with early learning and child care operators and improve customer service.
- 26.** Strengthen our use of reliable data and analytics to elevate decision-making.

Why this matters?

Families and child care operators benefit from a system that is simple, stable, and easy to navigate. Building stability requires strong system infrastructure, including modern tools, clear and consistent guidelines, and streamlined processes that reduce administrative burden.

With the right infrastructure in place, families and child care operators experience more efficient and effective service, and Halton is better equipped to manage, support, and grow the system over time.



Moving Forward Together

The Early Learning and Child Care Plan: 2026-2030 reflects our shared commitment to supporting children and families in Halton. As we continue to shape a responsive early learning and child care system, we remain dedicated to working closely with our community, deepening engagement, strengthening collaboration, and learning from those who deliver and access services every day.

Progress made delivering upon this Plan will be reported to Halton Region Council and the community.

Visit [halton.ca](https://www.halton.ca) for ongoing opportunities to partner with us in planning a system that is high-quality, accessible, affordable, responsive and inclusive.



