

FINAL REPORT



Inclusion in Childcare Policy Scan

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PolicyWise
for Children & Families

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Authors

Thea Luig, PhD, Senior Research & Policy Associate, PolicyWise for Children & Families.

Nicole Glenn, Manager, Strategic Initiatives PolicyWise for Children & Families.

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We respect the histories, languages, and cultures of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, whose presence continues to enrich our communities.

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Executive Summary

From Strong Foundations to an Inclusive ELCC System

Alberta has many of the foundations needed to provide inclusive, high-quality early learning and childcare (ELCC). The next opportunity is to strengthen how they work together across the system.

A child's experience of inclusion can vary depending on the childcare program they attend, the supports available to them, and their family's ability to navigate different systems and eligibility pathways.

This is an important challenge across Canada as well as within Alberta's ELCC system.

Alberta has invested in strong resources and programs—including *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework*, *Spark: A Guide to Culturally Responsive Early Learning and Child Care*, the Inclusive Child Care Program, and the Access, Support and Participation Program. Educators and sector organizations bring considerable expertise in inclusive practice. However, these investments are not consistently connected to the policy, funding, licensing, quality, and accountability mechanisms that shape ELCC across the province.

What Could a More Connected System Look Like?

To explore that question, PolicyWise for Children & Families worked with Alberta ELCC advisors to examine policies across Canada and look more closely at Alberta and New Brunswick—two provinces with similarly mixed-market childcare systems but different approaches to system building.

The comparison points to a simple but important finding: inclusion is more clearly embedded in ELCC systems when the policies and supports around it reinforce one another.

Across Canada, jurisdictions use many of the same tools: legislation, funding, curriculum, professional learning, inclusion supports, quality frameworks, and monitoring. What differs is how closely these tools are connected. Where they reinforce one another, inclusion is more clearly integrated into how the ELCC system operates. Where they operate more independently, inclusive practice can depend more heavily on individual programs, voluntary initiatives, and local capacity.

New Brunswick provides an example of a connected approach. It links inclusion expectations with legislation, program designation, public funding, mandatory curriculum and quality frameworks, and structured assessment of practice. Alberta relies more heavily on broad regulatory principles, voluntary frameworks, targeted programs, and operator discretion.

These differences matter for children and families, who benefit from consistent access and continuity of support. They also matter for educators and operators, who rely on clear expectations, resources, and workable supports. Finally, they matter for government and the ELCC sector, which rely on good information to understand what is working and where further attention may be needed.

Building on Alberta's Strengths

Our analysis and advisor discussions identified four opportunities for continued system development:

Strengthening connections between inclusion, quality, policy, licensing, and funding. Alberta's existing resources, programs, and expertise provide a strong foundation for more consistent expectations and supports across the system.

Enhancing how inclusion is measured and understood. Building from existing monitoring and evaluation could provide a clearer picture of access, participation, belonging, inclusive practice, and continuity of support—and how these change over time.

Creating more consistent opportunities for government-sector collaboration. Ongoing and transparent mechanisms for engagement could bring sector expertise and implementation experience more directly into policy development and improvement.

Improving coordination around children and families. Stronger connections across ELCC, education, disability, health, funding, workforce supports, and data could improve continuity and make supports easier to navigate.

Alberta already has substantial investments, expertise, programs, and frameworks supporting inclusive ELCC. The opportunity now is to bring these strengths together through a more coherent system in which inclusion is supported, understood, measured, and continuously improved.

That shift—from strong individual initiatives toward a more connected system—could make inclusive, high-quality ELCC more consistent for children, families, educators, and programs across Alberta.

Introduction

Alberta's Early Learning and Childcare (ELCC) system is at a pivotal moment. In 2025, 168,600 children (0-5 years) in the province were in ELCC (Statistics Canada, 2025b). At the same time, nearly half of parents and guardians in Alberta reported situations where their childcare needs were only partially or not met at all, including needing, but not finding care (Statistics Canada, 2026a).

Understanding of the childcare needs of families with children who have long-term conditions or disabilities is limited. Data from 2022 showed that 35% of centre-based childcare, 11% of licensed family day homes, and 6% unlicensed home-base care in Alberta were providing accommodations for at least one child with a disability of any age group (Statistics Canada, 2025a). A recent news article estimated 20,000 children were on the waitlist for Alberta's Family Support for Children with Disabilities (Stolte, 2026).

National and provincial investments have expanded affordability and access for many families, and Alberta has developed and implemented promising initiatives related to curriculum, educator learning, culturally responsive practice, and inclusion supports. However, inclusion is not yet embedded consistently across policy, licensing, funding, accountability, and public reporting.

PolicyWise for Children & Families (PolicyWise) led an advisor-engaged, policy-focused research project exploring how inclusion is supported in ELCC systems, with a focus on Alberta. In this report we share the findings from a comparative analysis between Alberta's ELCC inclusion policy landscape and other Canadian jurisdictions. We focus on New Brunswick as our primary comparator because it shared several structural similarities with Alberta, including a mixed-market delivery system and integration of ELCC with the same ministry as education. New Brunswick also had key differences worthy of exploration, such as a more explicit system-building approach to inclusion. Our goal was to better understand Alberta's ELCC policy context, identify opportunities for action, and support collaboration and coordination across the sector toward a more inclusive, high-quality system.

Project Background

For this project, we conceptualized inclusion as both a human right and a core dimension of high-quality ELCC. Inclusive systems support equitable access, belonging, meaningful participation, and responsiveness to the identities, strengths, cultures, languages, and needs of children, families, and educators.

Across Canada, inclusion is defined and operationalized in different ways within ELCC policies. Some jurisdictions emphasize access for priority populations, while others more explicitly connect inclusion to curriculum, quality frameworks, funding conditions, consultation mechanisms, and accountability processes. These differences matter because they shape how families access supports, how educators are expected and resourced to provide inclusive care, and whether governments can track progress over time.

In Alberta, the ELCC sector has identified the need for a clearer framework for defining and measuring quality, inclusive childcare. Alberta also has important assets to build on, including [*Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework \(Flight\)*](#), [*Spark: A Guide to Culturally Responsive Early Learning and Child Care \(Spark\)*](#), the [*Inclusive Child Care Program*](#), the [*Access, Support and Participation Program*](#), and sector expertise in inclusion and culturally responsive practice. However, these initiatives remain voluntary and are not strongly connected to licensing, funding, accountability, or public reporting. This creates a gap between commitment and system-level implementation.

Purpose & Questions

The purpose of this project was to strengthen understanding of the ELCC policy landscape, identify gaps and opportunities, and support coordinated action toward a more inclusive and high-quality ELCC system in Alberta.

The project was guided by two questions:

1. How are federal, provincial, and territorial policies, regulations, and accountability measures supporting inclusion in ELCC?
2. What policy approaches and system conditions show promise for strengthening inclusion as a core feature of quality, and how do these relate to Alberta?

Methods & Approach

We followed an iterative approach that involved engaging sector advisors throughout the project. We focused on identifying practical solutions that could benefit the broader ELCC sector, build on existing strengths, and leverage opportunities within the Alberta context to improve accessibility. Advisors were invited through the Council for Early Learning and Care. The group included eight members who were sector experts from across the province, most of whom were part of the Council for Early Learning and Care. We met with the advisors three times, once during each phase of the project, and invited additional feedback between sessions.

Phase 1: Setting the Direction

In Phase 1 we worked with the advisory group to define the purpose, scope, and questions for the policy scan. We also used Elicit, an artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted research tool, to conduct a preliminary literature review. The review focused on inclusion within Canadian ELCC and sources published since 2016. Our goal was to identify preliminary themes to provide context and inform our approach to the policy scan. We did not incorporate the findings from the review into this summary report. See Appendix 2 for details on our approach, a summary of the preliminary themes, and a list of sources.

Phase 2: Scanning Policies Across Canadian Jurisdictions

In Phase 2, we reviewed ELCC policies across federal, provincial, and territorial jurisdictions. These included legislation, regulations, bilateral agreements, action plans, mandatory frameworks, and select policy relevant documents. The scan examined how each jurisdiction defined and prioritized inclusion,

what supports were available, and how progress and accountability were monitored. In the findings we describe what was in the written policies. We did not assess how well the policies were implemented nor their impact on inclusion—these details were not available in the policy documents that we reviewed. The advisory group met to collaboratively make sense of the early findings and consider them in relation to the Alberta context. They identified important differences, gaps, practical considerations, and areas for deeper analysis. Their insights helped determine the focus of Phase 3. See Appendix 3 for more details on our approach to the scan, a summary of the descriptive findings, and a list of sources.

Phase 3: Comparing Policy Approaches

In Phase 3 we conducted a more detailed comparison of the ELCC inclusion policy landscape focusing on Alberta and New Brunswick. We also included examples from other jurisdictions, where appropriate. Our analysis examined how governments were building and coordinating with ELCC systems, supports for inclusion, approaches to sector consultation and engagement, funding design, curriculum and quality frameworks, and accountability. We shared preliminary findings with advisors and engaged them in a collaborative process to interpret and make sense of the results. Together, we also mapped organizations and decision makers that influence Alberta’s ELCC system and identified future policy and research priorities. In this report, we share the findings from Phase 3, including opportunities for action.

Considering Limitations

We acknowledge several limitations for consideration when interpreting the findings. We did not systematically verify the sources included within the Elicit-generated review and thematic summary (Appendix 1). As a result, we used the findings for background context only. Phase 2 involved a descriptive analysis. It included what was in the written policy documents but did not assess how policies were implemented or whether they achieved their intended results. Throughout the project, we relied on publicly available documents and the expertise and interpretations of our advisory group to provide context and practice insights. Informant interviews with government, sector, families, and implementation partners to further situate the findings in context were beyond the project scope.

Inclusion in ELCC Policies Across Canada

Our cross-jurisdictional policy scan examined how inclusion is defined, supported, and monitored within provincial and territorial ELCC policy. We found a common foundation across jurisdictions alongside considerable variation in how inclusion is understood and embedded within ELCC systems. Shared commitments centred on access, affordability, and supporting the participation of children with disabilities, consistent with the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (Government of Canada, 2017). Beyond this common foundation, jurisdictions differed in how broadly they conceptualized inclusion and how they connected inclusion to legislation, funding, quality frameworks, and accountability.

Defining Inclusion

We identified three broad orientations to how inclusion was defined or conceptualized in policy. These orientations describe patterns in how inclusion was positioned rather than a ranking of jurisdictions.

In British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Quebec, and Nova Scotia, inclusion was defined relatively comprehensively in legislation or other binding policy. Definitions extended beyond access to include dimensions such as participation, responsive program design, belonging, cultural responsiveness, or equality of opportunity. Some also connected inclusion to human rights or anti-discrimination principles.

In Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Yukon, and Nunavut, inclusion was more often described in functional terms: through what ELCC systems and programs were expected to accomplish. Policies emphasized reducing barriers and enabling participation, particularly for children with disabilities and other priority populations. Belonging, diversity, or cultural responsiveness were sometimes embedded within curriculum or pedagogical frameworks even where inclusion itself was not formally defined.

In Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories, inclusion was primarily operationalized through specific programs, funding mechanisms, space creation, disability-related supports, or guiding principles rather than through an explicit policy definition.

Across these approaches, participation and adapting programs to children's needs were common dimensions of inclusion—belonging and cultural responsiveness were less consistently embedded in binding policy. There were also differences in the populations explicitly recognized within ELCC policy. All jurisdictions identified children with disabilities or additional support needs, Indigenous children, Official Language Minority Communities, and low-income families as priority populations, while recognition of other populations varied.

Supporting Inclusion

All jurisdictions invested in supports intended to increase inclusion. Disability-focused grants, programming, or capacity-building initiatives were particularly widespread. Many jurisdictions also invested in professional development related to inclusion, cultural responsiveness, or anti-bias practice.

The breadth and structure of these investments varied. Some jurisdictions supported inclusion through a wider set of initiatives, including inclusion coordinators, equity-focused communities of practice, culturally relevant or Indigenous-led programming, and broader workforce supports. We also observed differences in how inclusion funding reached programs. In some jurisdictions, supports were primarily available through targeted grants, specific initiatives, or supports attached to individual children. In others, inclusion was more closely integrated into operational funding or broader quality systems. Our scan identified these patterns but did not assess the accessibility, adequacy, or impact of the different funding mechanisms.

Monitoring and Accountability

Jurisdictions differed substantially in how inclusion expectations were connected to program accountability. At one end, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia embedded inclusion within structured or mandatory quality-improvement systems. Programs were required to assess, plan for, or demonstrate inclusion-related practices, and these processes were connected in different ways to designation, operational funding, or quality requirements.

At the other end were Alberta, Saskatchewan, Nunavut, and the Northwest Territories, where program-level accountability for inclusion was comparatively indirect. Inclusion was supported through principles, guidance, targeted programs, grant reporting, or broader regulatory processes, with limited requirements to systematically assess inclusion-related practices or experiences.

Falling in the middle were British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, and Yukon. These jurisdictions employed a more practice-oriented approach to accountability for inclusion. Inclusion was incorporated through legislation, mandatory curriculum or pedagogical frameworks, licensing, documentation, reflective practice, or other quality processes, but generally without the same level of required standardized assessment and reporting.

Bilateral agreements added another layer of accountability. All jurisdictions except Quebec committed to reporting indicators such as inclusive spaces, participation by priority populations, public expenditures on inclusion supports, and inclusion-focused professional development. These measures primarily capture investments, activities, and access rather than children's experiences of participation, belonging, or inclusion within programs.

Looking Across the Policy System

Taken together, the scan showed that jurisdictions differed along several related but distinct dimensions including how inclusion was defined, who and what inclusion policies addressed, how inclusion was supported and funded, and how expectations were monitored and reinforced. A jurisdiction could have a broad conceptualization of inclusion without intensive program-level accountability, or substantial inclusion investments without an explicit policy definition.

The broader pattern was the degree of coherence across these policy levers. Where definitions, legislation, funding, quality expectations, workforce supports, and accountability mechanisms reinforced one another, inclusion was more clearly integrated into ELCC system design. Where these elements operated more independently, inclusion was more fragmented or dependent on individual programs and initiatives.

The scan did not tell us whether one approach produces better experiences or outcomes for children and families. Rather, it identified how different jurisdictions structure the conditions intended to support inclusion. These findings informed our closer examination of Alberta and New Brunswick and the policy mechanisms through which each province defines, supports, and holds programs accountable for inclusion.

ELCC Policy Impacts & Progress on Inclusion

While federal and provincial or territorial reporting provides information on affordability, space creation, and system expansion, there is comparatively little evidence available on inclusive practice, participation outcomes, or the experiences of children with disabilities and their families (Mahboubi, 2026). Inclusion is frequently identified as a policy priority within Canada-wide ELCC agreements and provincial action plans, yet measurable indicators of progress remain underdeveloped and inconsistent across jurisdictions (Auditor General of Canada, 2025).

Nationally, inclusion is often defined to include equity, diversity, accessibility, and belonging. However, available data focuses on accommodations for children with disabilities and not measures of meaningful participation or belonging (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022). In many jurisdictions, quality and inclusion are also treated as separate policy areas. However, some provinces are beginning to integrate inclusion into broader quality and accountability frameworks. Statistics Canada's recent work on the "five pillars" of the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework (Statistics Canada, 2026b) reflects this shift toward understanding inclusion as a dimension of overall system quality.

Available national evidence points to some progress for inclusion in ELCC as well as ongoing barriers (Statistics Canada, 2026b; Mahboubi, 2026; Inclusion Canada, 2026). For example, Statistics Canada concluded that there has been an increase in programs that offer accommodations for inclusive care for children with disabilities. In 2022, 43% of programs had one or more children with disabilities enrolled, and in 2024, 74% of centres had accommodations in place for children with long-term conditions or disabilities (Statistics Canada, 2026b). Others point out that increasing demand for childcare spaces has coincided with increasing numbers of children requiring additional support (Parkland Institute, 2025). Long waitlists for assessments remain common across jurisdictions, creating delays in access to inclusion supports where funding is tied to diagnosis or formal assessment (Inclusion Canada, 2026).

Across Canada in 2023, almost half of parents and guardians (45%) of children aged birth to five years with long term conditions and disabilities had difficulty finding childcare (Statistics Canada, 2024b). Among those who encountered difficulties, accessibility and affordability were the most common challenges. Approximately one-quarter of these parents or guardians also identified finding licensed or accredited childcare, care that met the child's special needs, and quality of the childcare as barriers to access (Statistics Canada, 2024c). See Figure 1 for more details.

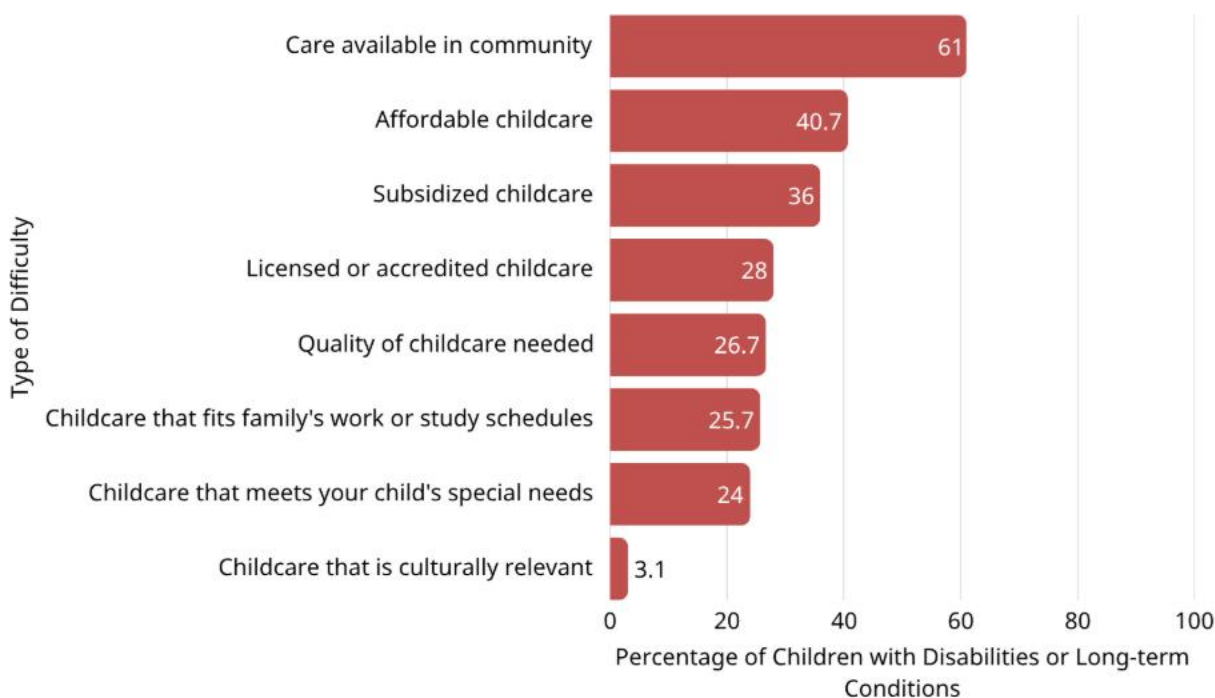


Figure 1: Types of difficulty finding childcare in Canada in 2023 for children with long-term conditions and disabilities

There is little publicly available, standardized national data to assess inclusion progress across provinces and territories. The most recent national ELCC progress report is from 2021–2022. It noted that jurisdictions adopted different priorities and indicators under the inclusion pillar, making cross-provincial comparison difficult (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2022). Inclusion-related initiatives ranged from infrastructure improvements and accessibility measures to educator training and targeted support programs, with each province measuring progress differently.

National data suggests uneven inclusion practices across the sector:

- In 2022, 43% of childcare centres reported providing accommodations for one or more children with disabilities.
- In 2023, just over half of centres reported having staff with professional development related to inclusion or disabilities.
- In 2024, most centres reported offering at least some accommodations for inclusive care.
- Some centres excluded children with disabilities from enrollment (Charters and Findlay, 2026).

A cross-provincial study comparing centre directors' experiences of inclusion between 2019 and 2024 found that many centres struggled to sustain inclusive practice in 2024 compared to 2019 (Inclusion Canada, 2026). In the same study, directors reported strong commitments to inclusion among educators and leadership teams. Educator attitudes, knowledge, experience, and centre culture were identified as the greatest strengths supporting inclusion. Staffing shortages, lack of relief staff, insufficient funding, administrative burden, and limited access to specialized professionals were among the most significant barriers. Compared to 2019, directors in 2024 reported greater difficulty accessing inclusion funding and

professional supports and cited long waitlists for assessments and support services as responsible for delays in accessing inclusion supports. Emotional support for educators and inclusion-specific training emerged as growing concerns and some directors questioned the effectiveness of one-to-one support models, suggesting they may contribute to exclusion.

In Depth Policy Comparison: Focus on Alberta

We selected New Brunswick as the primary comparator for the in-depth exploration because it shares important structural features with Alberta while taking a different approach to ELCC policy and system development. This makes it a useful comparison for examining how different policy choices may shape inclusion, quality, and accountability. We also draw on selected examples from other provinces where they illustrate policy approaches or options that may be relevant to the Alberta context.

Comparing Alberta to New Brunswick

In this section, we compare Alberta and New Brunswick across six dimensions: history and purpose, system structure, affordability and equitable access, inclusion supports, consultation and advocacy, and accountability.

ELCC System Building: History & Purpose

The ELCC policy trajectories in Alberta and New Brunswick have marked differences. New Brunswick has pursued a relatively consistent system-building approach, while Alberta has experienced shifts in governance, priorities, and policy direction. Both provincial systems have historically and continue to rely on mixed-market auspices—in 2025, 73% of full-time spaces were for-profit in Alberta compared to 70% in New Brunswick (Childcare Canada, 2026).

From 2017 to 2020 Alberta piloted a system-building model, in which participating ELCC programs received operational funding to cap parent fees at \$25 a day while enhancing quality and accessibility (Child Care Now, 2019). The pilot employed strategies to foster quality, affordability, accessibility, and inclusion such as mandatory evaluation, implementation of *Flight* and the Access, Support and Participation Program, workforce wage top-ups, and on-site professional learning. Site accreditation was linked to compliance with the training and strategies. Supporting the participation of all children, including attention to cultural diversity and language, Indigenous children, and vulnerable families were also priorities of the pilot. Early pilot evaluation results indicated emerging positive impacts on quality, including inclusive practice, which were mostly attributed to implementation of *Flight* and the Access, Support and Participation Program (Government of Alberta, 2020).

Since Alberta signed the five-year Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare agreement in 2021, responsibility for childcare has shifted across three ministries, most recently moving to the Ministry of Education and Childcare in 2025 (Auditor General of Alberta, 2025). The rationale for public investment in ELCC was also framed differently over this period. Under Children's Services, ELCC was framed primarily as a child development initiative (Government of Alberta, 2023), while under Jobs, Economy

and Trade it was positioned as labour market infrastructure supporting economic recovery (Government of Alberta, 2025a). Alberta declined the federal government's offer in 2025 to extend the bilateral ELCC agreement to 2031. Instead, the province signed a one-year extension that expires in March 2027.

New Brunswick's system-building approach began to take shape in 2008 when the province launched an early childhood strategy, *Be Ready for Success* (Government of New Brunswick, 2008b). Shortly after, the province integrated ELCC with education in the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The province later established an Early Childhood Development Task Force in 2015 to guide the development of its ELCC Action Plan (Government of New Brunswick, 2018), which formed the basis of New Brunswick's first bilateral agreement under the 2017 Multilateral ELCC Framework. The Task Force's recommendations focused on building system coherence, with public investment and management identified as strategic priorities (Child Care Now, 2019; Government of New Brunswick, 2016).

The Action Plan positioned ELCC as essential social infrastructure that supported population growth, labour force participation, economic development, and reduced reliance on social assistance (Child Care Now, 2019). The province's Quality Framework further anchored ELCC in broader goals of citizenship, democratic participation, and decision-making (Government of New Brunswick, 2025). New Brunswick signed the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare agreement in 2021 and accepted its extension to 2031 in 2025.

Together, these trajectories demonstrate greater continuity in New Brunswick's governance, purpose, and long-term planning, compared with Alberta's shifting governance structures and policy rationales.

ELCC System Structure

Alberta and New Brunswick both rely on federal funding to support ELCC expansion (Macdonald, 2026). New Brunswick has developed a coherent legislative and policy framework to support inclusion in ELCC (Childcare Canada, 2026 New Brunswick). In 2021, inclusion was embedded in the Early Childhood Services Act, requiring programs to provide inclusive environments to all children and respect diversity of children and families in alignment with the protected grounds under the provincial human rights act (Government of Canada, 2022b; Government of New Brunswick, 2022a). The province adopted a designation model and ties operational funding to compliance with legislation, regulations, and quality requirements, including expectations for inclusive enrolment (Akbari et al., 2024). Program participation in the designation model is voluntary, however only designated programs can receive Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare funding (Government of New Brunswick, n.d. b).

In addition to following inclusion policies, designated programs in New Brunswick adopt a set parent fee grid, strengthen educator capacity, establish parent committees, and implement mandatory curriculum and quality frameworks, which explicitly embed inclusion (Childcare Canada, 2026 New Brunswick). New Brunswick's system also includes tools to support reflective practice within programs, external monitoring of inclusive practice, and a centralized waitlist (Government of New Brunswick, 2024a).

In Alberta, the Ministry of Education and Childcare licenses both facility- and home-based programs, as well as Early Learning Services designed specifically for children with additional support needs. Family day homes operate through licensed agency models (Government of Alberta, n.d. b). Provincial legislation and regulations include broad principles respecting diversity and recognizing Indigenous, cultural, social, linguistic, and spiritual heritage. Regulations and licensing have limited accountability measures and enforceable inclusion requirements beyond creating and maintaining a program plan (Beach, 2020; Government of Alberta, 2025b). Facility-based programs are required to complete and submit the plan as part of their application for licensing (Government of Alberta, 2025c). Related to inclusion, a program plan specifically requires (among others) plans for engagement and quality monitoring, diversity and cultural heritage, and inclusion of children with support needs. Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare funding in Alberta is available to all licensed programs (Auditor General of Alberta, 2025).

New Brunswick links inclusion and quality expectations to designation, Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare funding, curriculum, and monitoring, while Alberta does not condition Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare funding or licensing on implementation of a mandatory inclusion or quality framework. Instead, the province includes broad inclusion principles in licensing but relies more heavily on voluntary resources and operator discretion.

Affordability & Equitable Access

Designated programs in New Brunswick must follow the Parent Fee Grid, which as of May 2026 was \$19 per day for infants and \$16 for preschool aged children in full time care (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2026; Childcare Grants and Subsidies Regulation, 2022). However, the province offers additional subsidies to low-income families, including the Parent Subsidy Program for families with children birth to five years of age in designated programs and the Daycare Assistance Program, which is for non-designated programs or school-aged children (Childcare Canada, 2026 New Brunswick). For families with a household income of less than \$37,500, childcare for children aged birth to five (preschool) is free. Considering subsidies, the average parent fee in the province is closer to \$10 per day (Childcare Canada, 2026 Alberta and New Brunswick Profiles).

Alberta regulates ELCC fees through the Cost Control Framework and For-Profit Expansion Plan (Government of Alberta, 2023a) with the goal of lowering parent fees to \$10-per-day. As of 2025, the average parent fee for licenced childcare in Alberta was \$15 (Childcare Canada, 2026 Alberta; Statistics Canada, 2025b). The province ended its subsidy program in spring 2024, which resulted in some low-income families paying more for childcare under the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare agreement (Parkland Institute, 2025; Auditor General of Alberta, 2025).

Alberta's Cost Control Framework allows operators to offer a wider range of enhanced services that outside of the scope of the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Childcare agreement. Programs can charge parents additional fees for "transportation, field trips, special programming or other additional costs that support innovation and creativity" within the program (Government of Alberta, 2023a, p. 6). The Framework is clear that enhanced services cannot be essential to the core delivery of childcare and

parents must be able to opt out of these services without penalty. New Brunswick has allowed additional parent fees for optional services, although that details of what qualified as 'optional' was unclear but may have included field trips with entrance fees and extended hours of care. Provincial updates effective from May 1, 2026, indicate that: "[designated program] operators must not charge parents more than the daily fees set out in the standard Parent Fee Grid" (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Province of New Brunswick, 2026a).

New Brunswick supports equitable access to ELCC by employing a centralized waitlist through which families can register and get matched with designated programs (Government of New Brunswick, n.d. c). As part of the designation, "the designated facility commits to providing equitable and affordable access to higher quality, inclusive early learning and childcare services by removing barriers linked to family income, children's ability and needs, language, and minority settings" (Government of New Brunswick, n.d. d., para 4; Early Childhood Services Act, 2010; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2026). In Alberta, programs are not required to enrol children with disabilities or additional support needs, and operators retain control over enrolment decisions and waitlist management (Parkland Institute, 2025).

Inclusion Supports

Inclusion supports differ considerably between Alberta and New Brunswick. New Brunswick appears to have more centralized administration and direct funding for inclusion workers, while Alberta relies on a more distributed set of programs with different mandates and eligibility pathways. That said, the two jurisdictions also have similarities, including their use of the Pyramid Model to support system-wide capacity-building and inclusive practices. The Pyramid Model framework and coaching model build capacity among ELCC educators and programs to provide universal, targeted, and intensive inclusion supports to children. In Alberta, the Pyramid Model was first piloted through the Access, Support and Participation Program in 2012. New Brunswick adopted the Pyramid Model and started piloting the program in 2023-24 (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2024b).

In New Brunswick, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development manages inclusion-related programs (Akbari et al., 2024), including the Inclusion Support Program, Early Intervention Program, Enhanced Support Worker Program, Early Learning Consultants, Universal Screening, and the Preschool Autism Program. The Inclusion Support Program and Enhanced Support Worker Program also provide funding for inclusion support worker wages (Government of New Brunswick, 2023-2024).

In Alberta, responsibility for inclusion supports is distributed across several ministries and public agencies. For example, the Inclusive Child Care Program, Access, Support and Participation Program, and Inclusive Spaces Program fall under the Ministry of Education and Childcare. Program Unit Funding, which supports children with developmental disabilities accessing Early Childhood Services, was previously administered outside the ministry responsible for ELCC but has fallen within the Ministry of Education and Childcare since 2025. The Family Supports for Children with Disabilities program is administered by the Ministry of Assisted Living and Social Services, while Alberta Health Services

provides Early Childhood Intervention programs for children from birth to three and a half years of age (Alberta Health Services, n.d.).

Alberta has developed several sector resources and capacity building tools to enhance quality and inclusion. Notable among these are Inclusive Child Care Program, Access, Support and Participation Program, *Flight, Spark*, and, more recently, *Guiding Principles for Ethical Practice* (Association of Early Childhood Educators Alberta, 2026). Although funded by the government, application of these resources is voluntary and not required for licensing nor funding.

Eligibility for inclusion supports differs across provinces and programs. New Brunswick appears to have a more integrated screening and early-intervention pathway, whereas Alberta's supports are distributed across ELCC, education, disability, and health systems with different eligibility criteria and transition points. The Inclusive Child Care Program and Access, Support and Participation Program in Alberta do not require a diagnosis nor does New Brunswick's Inclusion Support Program. In contrast, Alberta's Family Support for Children with Disabilities and Program Unit Funding programs require a formal diagnosis, and families often experience long waitlists for eligibility assessment (Stolte, 2026). New Brunswick's Early Intervention Program offers screening, assessment, intervention, and case management for children aged birth to eight who are at risk of developmental delay (Akbari et al., 2024). In New Brunswick, all children entering Kindergarten are assessed for self-awareness, cognitive development, language and communication, and physical development.

Consultation & Advocacy

We identified more evidence of formal government consultation in New Brunswick and more visible sector-led advocacy infrastructure in Alberta.

In New Brunswick, the government employs more formalized consultation processes and commitments, which predates the bilateral agreement. In 2015 the government established the Early Childhood Development Task Force to guide the development of its ELCC Action Plan. The Task Force released a report in 2016 with 30 recommendations on governance, developing ELCC as a field of practice with improved training and wages, public investment towards a coherent, publicly managed ELCC system, and building a system that protects the rights of every child (Childcare Now, 2019). The Action Plan committed to further dialogue, including a collective reflection process with families, employers, and ELCC stakeholders, the findings of which were publicly reported (Government of New Brunswick, 2023). The bilateral agreement and Action Plan continue this approach by committing the provincial government to ongoing stakeholder engagement and public reporting on consultation processes and outcomes (Government of New Brunswick, 2023, 2024a).

In contrast, Alberta does not have comparable, publicly documented infrastructure for ongoing government-sector consultation. Its bilateral agreement does not include a formal consultation commitment. The government does engage the sector to inform ELCC policy and practice. For example, it established an advisory committee to support the provincial regulation review process. However, information regarding the advisory committee's membership, mandate, and deliberations were not made public (Beach Report, 2020). Sector-led collaboratives also provide an important avenue for

ongoing dialogue and advocacy in Alberta. The Alberta Early Learning and Care Leaders' Caucus and Council for Early Learning and Care are two such collaboratives committed to ongoing dialogue with government and working together toward an inclusive, high-quality ELCC system.

Accountability

In Alberta, ELCC monitoring processes focus on health, safety, and regulatory compliance (Government of Alberta, 2025c; Beach, 2020). Inspections, annual assessments, and complaint investigations assess program operations. The province lacks publicly reported system-level measures of participation, belonging, and sustained inclusion as well as standardized, program-level inclusion indicators such as educator training in inclusive practices (Government of Alberta, 2023, 2024, 2025a). This is a key gap in the province, which leaves the sector, families, and policymakers unable to assess whether inclusion-related investments are improving access, participation, belonging, and continuity of supports.

Inclusion is often measured within capacity building initiatives in Alberta. For example, the Access, Support and Participation Program monitors program leads' growth and the implementation of inclusive practice (Kids Included, n.d.; National Centre for Pyramid Model Innovations, 2025). *Spark* training also builds skills and capacity among programs across Alberta to deliver culturally responsive and inclusive ELCC and evaluates outcomes. However, participation in these, among other provincial initiatives, is not mandatory and the related data are not publicly available. That said, the data are reported to ministries, which provides a mechanism through which they can inform decision-making and policy direction.

In New Brunswick, accountability for inclusion is built into the province's curriculum and quality assessment processes. Designated programs use the Collaborative Assessment Tool (CAT) or CAT-V to support reflective practice, observation, and feedback from Early Learning Consultants (Government of New Brunswick, 2013; Professional Learning Hub, n.d.). The assessment indicators examine areas such as equitable relationships, belonging, participation, planning, assessment, and documentation (Government of New Brunswick, 2025). These processes provide a structured approach to assessing inclusive practice and supporting continuous improvement at the program level. However, the available evidence does not establish whether assessment findings are aggregated or publicly reported, or whether the province measures system-wide outcomes related to children's access, participation, and inclusion.

Overall, Alberta monitors regulatory compliance and evaluates inclusion within selected voluntary initiatives, but Alberta lacks standardized program-level measures of inclusive practice and publicly reported system-level outcomes related to inclusion. New Brunswick has more formalized program-level assessment mechanisms tied to its curriculum and quality framework. However, the available evidence does not establish whether either province publicly reports system-wide outcomes related to children's access, participation, belonging, and inclusion.

Policy Highlights from Other Jurisdictions

In this section, we describe policy approaches from other jurisdictions that illustrate different ways governments can strengthen inclusion, quality, access, and system integration.

Assessing Quality & Enhancing Accountability

Prince Edward Island's Program Assessment Tool uses a structured, observation-based approach to support inclusion and continuous quality improvement in ELCC. The tool is administered by trained observers, including centre directors and Early Childhood Coaches, who document whether specific indicators are demonstrated, not demonstrated, or not observed. Evidence is gathered through observations of educator-child interactions, learning environments, pedagogical documentation, and conversations with children, educators, and families. Findings inform reflective practice, professional development, and program planning. This example illustrates how observable indicators can make dimensions of quality and inclusion assessable at the program level (AtlanticOER, 2021).

Providing Program-Based Inclusion Funding

Nova Scotia uses a program-based approach to inclusion funding in ELCC. The province provides supports directly to licensed childcare centres rather than attaching funding to an individual child or based on their diagnosis. All regulated programs are eligible, and the province defines "special needs" broadly to include developmental competencies, lived experiences, and well-being factors. Through the Inclusion Support Grant, centres may access funding for additional staffing, professional development, specialist consultation, and assistive equipment. Funding is allocated based on a per diem formula tied to 10% of licensed capacity, supporting a proactive, program-wide model of inclusion (Childcare Canada, 2026 Nova Scotia). This approach may reduce barriers associated with diagnosis-based funding and strengthen the overall capacity of programs to support diverse needs.

Evidence from Manitoba also illustrates some of the barriers that program-based funding may help avoid. The province's Auditor General identified barriers that can arise when inclusion supports are tied to formal diagnoses (Auditor General Manitoba, 2026). While the province's Inclusion Support Program in Manitoba was found to appropriately assess and approve eligible applications, the report noted that families may experience long wait times for assessments, reluctance to pursue diagnoses, and challenges related to complex application processes. These findings suggest that diagnosis-based funding models may delay access to supports for some children and highlight the potential value of more flexible approaches to inclusive ELCC funding and service delivery.

Integrating ELCC into Schools & Post-Secondary Settings

Manitoba has adopted policies that integrate ELCC into school and post-secondary infrastructure (Childcare Canada, 2026 Manitoba). Through its Child Care in Schools Policy, all new schools and major renovations must include childcare spaces, resulting in thousands of new spaces within school settings. The province also provides capital funding to expand school-based childcare programs for infants,

preschool, and school-age children, including before- and after-school care. In post-secondary settings, Manitoba funds on-campus childcare facilities and Learning Labs that support practical training for early childhood education students. Together, these initiatives strengthen connections between ELCC, education, and workforce development systems while expanding access to childcare through existing public infrastructure.

Advisor-Informed Policy & Research Priorities

We engaged the advisors in collaborative sense-making of the preliminary findings and to identify priorities for policy action and future investigation. These were grounded in the policy analysis and based on advisor expertise, and do not reflect recommendations validated through broad sector or family consultation.

Policy Priorities

The advisors identified four key policy priorities for action to enhance inclusion within ELCC programs and the system in Alberta. These leverage existing strengths, resources, and momentum within Alberta's ELCC system and address gaps that persist despite commitments to quality and inclusion within the bilateral agreements.

Embed mandatory inclusion and quality expectations in policy, licensing, and funding.

Alberta has invested in evidence-informed resources and initiatives that support high-quality, inclusive ELCC and workforce development, including among others: *Flight*, *Spark*, the Inclusive Child Care Program, the Access, Support and Participation Program, and the Inclusive Spaces Program. These initiatives provide a strong foundation for system-wide improvement. The next opportunity is to establish mandatory inclusion and quality expectations, drawing on and leveraging existing Alberta initiatives, frameworks, and investments.

This would move Alberta from a model where inclusion depends largely on voluntary uptake to one where licensed programs are expected and supported to provide inclusive, high-quality care. Making these expectations mandatory would also help protect and extend the value of existing public investments by ensuring that tools, training, and supports are connected to the policy and funding conditions that shape day-to-day practice.

Strengthen measurement, accountability, and public reporting for inclusion.

Alberta has an opportunity to more clearly position inclusion as a core dimension of quality. This would mean connecting inclusion-related goals across legislation, funding agreements, quality improvement processes, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms.

Regular public reporting on inclusion-related indicators could support transparency, shared learning, and continuous improvement. It would also help government and sector partners understand how investments improve access, participation, belonging, workforce capacity, and inclusion over time.

Public reporting on the inclusion-related reach and impacts of existing initiatives such as the Access, Support and Participation Program or Spark Mentorship Program may provide meaningful starting points for developing broader measures of inclusion across Alberta's ELCC system.

Establish ongoing government-sector advisory and formal consultation mechanisms.

Alberta has a strong ELCC sector with deep knowledge of children, families, educators, operators, and implementation realities across the province. A formal and ongoing government-sector advisory and consultation mechanism would create a more consistent way to use that expertise to inform policy design, implementation, and improvement.

This kind of mechanism could help government identify practical barriers earlier, test policy ideas with those responsible for implementation, and build stronger alignment across system partners. Public reporting on consultation processes and progress would also strengthen transparency and trust by showing how sector input is being considered and where action is being taken.

Develop a coordinated, long-term approach to inclusion across programs, funding, roles, and supports.

Alberta has many of the building blocks needed to strengthen inclusion in ELCC. A more coordinated, long-term approach would help connect existing programs, funding streams, and supports while allowing the system to adapt as needs and priorities change. This could include clear goals, roles, funding and workforce supports, shared data and accountability mechanisms, and stronger connections with education and other child-serving systems.

Building from existing Alberta investments and sector expertise would help identify where stronger alignment is needed without requiring a fixed or static plan. Greater coordination could support more consistent implementation across programs and regions, improve continuity for children and families, and provide a clearer foundation for ongoing policy, funding, and system improvement.

Research & Learning Priorities

In this section we describe several areas where further research and learning could inform future policy and system development in Alberta and across Canada. These priorities emerged through the policy analysis and advisor sense-making and are not based on a systematic review of the existing research literature.

Examine the implications of universal pre-Kindergarten screening.

Exploring whether, under what conditions, and for whom universal screening before kindergarten is beneficial, including the potential role of universal screening in early identification of strengths and needs, supportive transitions, and access to inclusion-related supports. Examining benefits, risks, implementation requirements, family experiences, and potential unintended consequences can inform future policy development.

Compare program-based and child-based inclusion supports.

Examining how program-based and diagnosis- or child-based approaches affect timely access to supports, child and family experiences, participation, continuity, administrative burden, and equity. Comparing costs, implementation barriers, workforce capacity, attitudes and beliefs, and inclusion outcomes across approaches.

Explore mandatory inclusive enrolment policies.

Analyzing the feasibility, implications, and risks of mandatory inclusive enrolment requirements, including consideration of funding, staffing, physical accessibility, specialized supports, operator responsibilities, and accountability mechanisms needed to support implementation.

Strengthen continuity between ELCC and education.

Examining how inclusion supports align across ELCC, Kindergarten, and early elementary school, with particular attention to transition points where eligibility, funding, services, or program requirements change. Exploring where families experience gaps or loss of supports and opportunities to improve continuity across the system.

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Appendix 2: Foundational Document Review

Purpose and Approach

Using Elicit, an AI software designed for academic literature reviews, we conducted a foundational document review. Elicit draws from large-scale academic databases, including Semantic Scholar and OpenAlex, and uses language models to support screening and data extraction. Our goal was to identify potential themes relevant to inclusion in ELCC and to inform the broader context for this project. Given the AI-assisted nature of this review and that we did not systematically verify the underlying sources, these insights do not constitute validated findings.

Limitations

While this review enabled efficient identification and synthesis of a large body of literature, several limitations should be noted:

- Not all full-text sources were accessed or independently verified.
- Data extraction and synthesis were supported by a language model and may contain inaccuracies or omissions.
- Findings reflect patterns identified in the AI-generated outputs rather than a fully validated systematic review.

As such, this review is intended to provide **contextual orientation** rather than definitive evidence.

Search Strategy

We designed a semantic search and provided Elicit with a structured query aligned with our project purpose and research questions. It focused on:

- Inclusion, equity, and accessibility in ELCC
- Policies, funding models, and accountability mechanisms
- Canadian jurisdictions, with some inclusion of comparable international contexts.

The search returned 500 records, which were screened in two stages (abstract and full-text screening).

Screening Criteria

We specified inclusion and exclusion criteria that Elicit applied during abstract and full-text screening. We tested and refined the criteria based on a preliminary screening to establish the final criteria.

Inclusion criteria were:

- Examined ELCC for children aged 0–6
- Addressed inclusion as aligned with our broad definition (e.g., disability, Indigeneity, race, income, language, gender identity)

- Analyzed or discussed policies, regulations, funding mechanisms, or system-level approaches to ELCC
- Focused on Canada, or included comparable international jurisdictions with relevance to Canadian ELCC systems
- Used study designs such as policy analysis, program evaluation, qualitative or quantitative research, case studies, or systematic and scoping reviews
- Examined system-level, program-level, or policy-level dynamics (not only individual clinical interventions)
- Were published since 2016.

Exclusion criteria included:

- Focused primarily on K–12 education without clear relevance to ELCC
- Examined only clinical or therapeutic interventions without policy or system implications
- Lacked relevance to inclusion, equity, or access
- Did not include sufficient information to assess relevance at abstract or full-text screening.

Elicit identified 59 sources based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. We cite only those that we used for the contextual summary.

Summary of Elicit-Generated Themes

Inclusion Was Widely Prioritized but Weakly Enforced

While inclusion was consistently named in federal and provincial frameworks, enforceable mandates and standardized accountability mechanisms were largely absent. Inclusion appeared to rely on system design and implementation rather than legislated requirements (Dhuey, 2024; Vanderloo, 2025).

System Design Shaped Inclusion Outcomes

Jurisdictions with more coherent governance structures and publicly managed systems showed stronger structural supports for inclusion, while fragmented and market-oriented systems were associated with greater variability in access and reported exclusion (Rentzou, 2026; Richardson, 2018).

Diagnosis-Based Funding Created Possible Access Barriers

Funding tied to formal diagnoses may exclude children whose needs are identified but not yet assessed—particularly in early childhood—pointing to the potential value of more flexible, needs-responsive approaches (Dionne, 2025; Pratte, 2024; MacCuspie, 2016).

Workforce Conditions Constrained or Enabled Inclusion

Workforce factors including limited training, low wages, and high turnover constrained inclusive practice. In comparison, sustained, practice-embedded professional learning was associated with improvements in educator confidence and practice (Koller, 2025; Taylor, 2023; Choi, 2023).

Accountability Infrastructure Emerged as a Key Gap

Standardized inclusion indicators, monitoring processes, and reporting requirements were largely

absent across jurisdictions. While tools to measure inclusion exist, they did not appear to be widely mandated or systematically used (Vanderloo, 2025; van Rhijn, 2019; Wright, 2024).

Intersectional Approaches to Inclusion Were Unevenly Addressed in Policy

Exclusion extended beyond disability to include race, Indigeneity, income, language, gender identity, and family structure, while policy responses often addressed these dimensions unevenly or in isolation (van Rhijn, 2021; Gerlach, 2024; Kissi, 2023; Ajayi, 2025).

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Appendix 3: Inclusion-Focused ELCC Policy Scan

Purpose & Approach

The cross-jurisdictional policy scan examined how inclusion was defined, supported, and monitored within federal, provincial, and territorial ELCC policy. We focused on formal policy levers that establish expectations for ELCC systems and licensed programs, including legislation, regulations, bilateral agreements and action plans,¹ and mandatory curriculum and quality frameworks.

Search & Selection Strategy

We used an iterative search process to identify relevant federal, provincial, and territorial policy documents using government websites, online legislation databases, and Google. We limited inclusion to sources that were in effect at the time of the search, were binding or mandatory, and addressed ELCC for children from birth to six years of age. This resulted in 183 potentially relevant documents for screening, 78 of which met our inclusion criteria. See the bibliography for a full list of included documents by jurisdiction.

¹ For Quebec we included the Asymmetrical Agreement – Early Learning and Child Care Component

Analysis

We reviewed included documents to identify:

- how inclusion was defined or conceptualized
- dimensions of inclusion reflected in policy, such as access, participation, belonging, responsive program design, and cultural responsiveness
- populations explicitly identified within inclusion-related commitments
- corresponding investments, programs, and workforce supports
- accountability structures, targets, indicators, and other mechanisms used to monitor inclusion.

We compared patterns within and across jurisdictions and developed descriptive groupings to characterize different approaches to defining inclusion and to program-level accountability. These groupings were analytical categories that we developed for this scan and were not ratings of jurisdictional performance. Where included policy documents referenced investments, programs, or voluntary initiatives intended to support inclusion, we captured these as implementation mechanisms associated with the policy. When needed, we used Perplexity, an AI-assisted software, to provide a preliminary summary and identify references to inclusion within policy documents.

Limitations

In the scan we focused on formal, binding or mandatory policy and therefore did not capture the full range of voluntary frameworks, guidance, local initiatives, or practices that may influence inclusion within ELCC programs. Our analysis was descriptive. That is, we focused on what policies included—the commitments and structures. We did not assess implementation, effectiveness, or children's and families' experiences of inclusion. We also did not conduct a detailed analysis of the adequacy, availability, or accessibility of inclusion-related funding and supports.

Summary of Policy Scan Findings

Defining Inclusion

We identified three distinct orientations to how inclusion was defined or conceptualized in the policy documents we reviewed: comprehensive, functional, and operational (see Table 1 for details). These orientations describe patterns in policy language and structure rather than the overall quality or effectiveness of a jurisdiction's approach.

Table 1. Inclusion Definition Orientations, Characteristics & Examples

Orientation & Jurisdictions	Common Characteristics of Inclusion Definition	Example
Comprehensive BC, MB, NB, QC, NS	• Explicit or developed • Positioned as a dimension of quality Often encompassed participation, belonging, responsive design, cultural responsiveness, human rights, or equality	Manitoba’s Action Plan described dimensions of inclusion in its commitment to “supporting inclusive, integrated and culturally receptive child care programming and services.” It included the experiences of children and families in their plan to develop a curriculum framework that supports “culturally-based programs and ensuring learning experiences encouraging acceptance of diversity and the histories and cultures of Indigenous peoples.” ²
Functional ON, NL, PEI, YT, NU	• Lacked formal definition • Primarily described through intended practice, such as removing barriers and enabling participation Often appeared in mandatory curriculum frameworks	Ontario’s Action Plan named inclusion as one of five priority areas with a focus on reducing access barriers for families “more in need.” Along with equity and quality, inclusion was described as a principle for implementation. The plan noted: “activities will capture the needs of diverse communities and preserve or enhance high quality early learning and child care programming for all.” ³
Operational AB, SK, NWT	• Lacked formal definition Primarily expressed through specific programs, funding mechanisms, space creation, disability supports, or broad policy principles	In Alberta’s Action Plan, inclusion was not conceptually defined. Priorities of the plan were affordability and supporting parent choice. In terms of inclusion, it focused on equitable space creation for those “most in need” and tracking number of spaces with inclusive programming. ⁴

Supporting Participation and Belonging

Most jurisdictions referenced participation and responsive design as dimensions of inclusion. Responsive design meant adapting ELCC spaces and programs to the needs of children. Belonging, cultural

² Government of Manitoba, Education and Early Childhood Learning. (2024). *Early learning and child care in Manitoba – A plan for action* (Manitoba’s fiscal year 2021–22 through fiscal year 2025–26 action plan, including 2023–24 to 2025–26). <https://www.gov.mb.ca/education/childcare/actionplan.html>

³ Government of Canada & Government of Ontario. (2022). *Ontario’s action plan for fiscal year 2022–23 and fiscal year 2023–24*. Employment and Social Development Canada.

⁴ Government of Canada & Government of Alberta. (2022). *Canada–Alberta early learning and child care agreement* (bilateral agreement, 2021). Employment and Social Development Canada

responsiveness, and cultural safety were less consistently embedded in binding policy. Examples of robust commitments to belonging within ELCC policies included:

- British Columbia embedding anti-racism and Indigenous-led systems
- Manitoba naming culturally responsive programming in legislation
- New Brunswick applying a human rights lens in legislation that requires responsiveness of programs to diverse families' needs, values, and cultural beliefs and across a wide set of protected grounds
- Quebec embedding equality of opportunity in its Educational Childcare Act
- Yukon naming inclusivity as a core principle of its universal childcare model.

While Alberta legislation and policy documents did not explicitly mention belonging, the Act states that children's familial, Indigenous, and other cultural, social, linguistic, and spiritual heritage is central to a child's safety, well-being and development.⁵ In Alberta, participation and responsive design are supported through approaches such as the Pyramid Model,⁶ the implementation of which is voluntary.

Funding Inclusion-Related Supports

We noted that jurisdictions differed in how inclusion-related funding reached ELCC programs. Some provided targeted grants for operators, funding for particular activities or accessibility improvements, supports linked to individual children, and funding incorporated into broader operational or quality funding mechanisms. All jurisdictions invested in programs or resources intended to support inclusion, although the breadth and focus of these investments varied. Some jurisdictions invested in broader approaches to inclusion, including culturally responsive programming, equity-focused workforce development, Indigenous-led or culturally relevant programming, and program-level inclusion capacity. See Table 2 for a summary of the investment areas identified within the documents reviewed.

Table 2. Inclusion-Related Investment Areas and Examples

Investment Area	Identified Jurisdictions	Common Characteristics	Selected Examples
Disability and additional support needs	All jurisdictions	Grants, staffing, consultation, equipment, accessibility improvements, or capacity-building intended to support children with disabilities or additional support needs.	AB, PEI, MB, and SK provided grants that can support accessibility renovations, adaptive materials, or sensory equipment.
Broader inclusion capacity	BC, MB, NB, ON, NL, NS, PEI	Investments extended beyond disability-related supports to strengthen inclusion, equity,	• NL funds Quality, Inclusivity, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility Coordinators.

⁵ Government of Alberta. (2025). *Early Learning and Child Care Act* (E-0.1). Alberta King's Printer / Open Government. <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/e00p1>

⁶ Inclusive Child Care. Resources: Pyramid Model. <https://Inclusive Child Care Programalberta.ca/resources/>

Investment Area	Identified Jurisdictions	Common Characteristics	Selected Examples
		cultural responsiveness, or program capacity more broadly.	ON funds equity-based communities of practice. NS funds professional development related to equity, inclusion, and culturally responsive practice.
Cultural and Indigenous programming	BC, YT, MB, NL, NB	Funding or policy commitments supporting culturally relevant programming, Indigenous-led planning, language, land-based learning, or integration of Indigenous knowledge.	- YT provides a Cultural Enhancement Fund. - NB supports Indigenous-led ELCC infrastructure planning. MB has supported cultural programming and integration of Indigenous knowledge within curriculum development.⁷
Workforce development	Most jurisdictions	Professional development related to inclusion, cultural responsiveness, anti-bias, or disability support, alongside broader workforce investments intended to strengthen ELCC capacity.	- Most jurisdictions identified inclusion-related professional development. - NS funds professional development related to culturally responsive practice, equity, and inclusion. - AB invests in professional learning and coaching to support inclusive environments through the ASaP program. - ON supports professional development for Indigenous early years professionals. Workforce compensation approaches included wage grids, wage enhancements, wage floors, or top-ups.

⁷ Government of Manitoba, Education and Early Childhood Learning. (2024). *Early learning and child care in Manitoba – A plan for action* (Manitoba’s fiscal year 2021–22 through fiscal year 2025–26 action plan, including 2023–24 to 2025–26). <https://www.gov.mb.ca/education/childcare/actionplan.html>

Investment Area	Identified Jurisdictions	Common Characteristics	Selected Examples
Operator Grants & Programs	YT, MB, AB, NB, NS, NL, PEI, SK	Support for purchasing materials and equipment, adjusting spaces, or consultant support for staff working with children with disabilities. Some funded operators to strengthen culture and language-based learning.	- YT operators can apply for a Cultural Enhancement Fund to embed culture, land-based, and traditional knowledge in programming. - MB provides one-time grants to operators to implement cultural programming, staffing grants to support children with special needs, and a inclusion capacity building program. AB, PEI, MB, SK all offer grants for renovations to enhance accessibility, materials, adaptive and sensory equipment.

Funding Inclusion Supports

For example, Yukon operators could access funding for cultural programming while Alberta, Prince Edward Island, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan provided grants to support accessibility improvements, adaptive materials, or equipment.

Prioritizing Groups & Populations

All jurisdictions explicitly identified children with disabilities or additional support needs, Indigenous children, Official Language Minority Communities, and low-income families as populations requiring particular attention within ELCC policy. Beyond these common priorities, jurisdictions varied in the additional populations explicitly recognized. See Table 3 for details.

Table 3. Priority Populations Identified in ELCC Policy

Population	Jurisdiction	Pattern / Policy Context
Children with disabilities or additional support needs	All	Consistently identified within inclusion-related commitments and supports.
Indigenous children	All	Universally identified as a priority, although approaches varied considerably in the extent to which Indigenous governance,

Population	Jurisdiction	Pattern / Policy Context
and families		authority, culturally specific services, or distinctions-based approaches were embedded in policy.
Official Language Minority Communities	All	Identified through federal–provincial/territorial ELCC commitments.
Low-income families	All	Commonly identified in relation to equitable access and affordability.
Black and racialized children and families	All except AB and QC	Explicitly identified in most jurisdictional policies reviewed.
Rural and remote populations	BC, NB, NL, PEI, SK, NWT	Identified in relation to access, availability, or equitable expansion of ELCC.
Families requiring non-standard hours or shift-work care	ON, PEI, QC	Recognized in relation to flexible or equitable access to care.
Lone-parent families	MB, NL	Explicitly identified as priority populations.
Children in foster care	NU	Explicitly identified as priority populations.
Families requiring atypical or hard-to-serve arrangements	QC	Identified in relation to accessibility of care.
2SLGBTQ+ Staff	NW	Explicitly identified within workforce-related inclusion commitments.

New Brunswick framed priority populations broadly through protected human rights grounds, while Alberta used broader terms such as families “most in need,” “diverse,” or “vulnerable,” which could encompass many of the populations explicitly named in other jurisdictions.

Embedding Indigenous Governance

All jurisdiction named Indigenous children and families as priority populations. However, the degree to which Indigenous governance and authority were embedded within ELCC systems differed. Examples of embedded distinctions-based approaches in ELCC legislation and governance structures included British Columbia and Manitoba where distinctions-based Indigenous data and services were within legislative frameworks. Federal and Indigenous ELCC policies provided the clearest examples of Indigenous-led governance systems.

Most jurisdictions referenced collaboration with Indigenous governments or partners or mentioned improving culturally relevant programming. For example:

- Saskatchewan referenced collaboration with First Nations and Métis partners.
- New Brunswick referenced collaboration in designing Indigenous-focused ELCC plans.
- Prince Edward Island aligned with the national Indigenous ELCC Framework.
- Nunavut and Yukon Territory framed inclusion in culturally specific ways, centring Inuit or Yukon First Nations values and aspirations within ELCC policy.

Alberta identified Indigenous children within ELCC commitments but was more limited in embedding distinctions-based governance or data approaches within the policies reviewed. Its Action Plan referenced exploring the feasibility of collecting and reporting distinctions-based data within regulated care.

Provincial-Federal Accountability

Bilateral agreements established common reporting commitments related to inclusion, consistent with the Multilateral Early Learning and Child Care Framework. Quebec was the exception, maintaining its own provincial accountability and reporting approach. These commitments primarily captured access, reach, investments, and system activities rather than children's experiences of inclusion within ELCC programs (see Table 4 for details).

Table 4. Inclusion-Related Reporting in Bilateral ELCC Agreements

Reporting Area	Examples of Indicators
Access and space creation	Number of inclusive spaces created or converted; in some jurisdictions, spaces intended to serve priority populations.
Participation of priority populations	Number of children with disabilities or additional support needs, Indigenous children, racialized children, Official Language Minority children, and children or families identified as more in need.
Public investment	Expenditures on inclusion-related programs and supports.
Workforce development	Expenditures on or participation in inclusion-related professional development and capacity-building activities.

These indicators capture system investments and reach, but offer more limited information about participation, belonging, inclusive practice, or children's and families' experiences within ELCC programs.

Governments-Program Accountability

We identified three broad approaches to how provincial and territorial governments reinforced inclusion expectations within licensed (or designated) ELCC programs: structured, practice-oriented, and indirect. See table 5 for details and examples. These approaches describe differences in the policy and accountability mechanisms identified in the scan rather than ratings of program quality or effectiveness.

Table 5. Approaches to Program-Level Accountability for Inclusion

Approach	Jurisdiction	Common Characteristics	Selected Examples
Structured	QC, NB, NS	• Inclusion embedded within mandatory quality or improvement systems. • Programs required to assess, plan for, or demonstrate inclusion-related practice. • Quality requirements connected to designation, operational funding, or formal assessment processes.	NB: Inclusion is embedded in legislation ⁸ and designation requirements linked to public funding. Designated programs use structured self-assessment and improvement processes addressing inclusive environments, participation, belonging, and culturally responsive practice.
Practice-Oriented	ON, NL, BC, MB, YT, PEI	• Inclusion embedded in legislation, mandatory curriculum, pedagogical, or quality frameworks. • Accountability relies more heavily on inspection, documentation, reflection, or program planning. • Less reliance on standardized inclusion scoring or consistent public reporting.	ON: Licensed programs implement <i>How Does Learning Happen?</i> , ⁹ which embeds belonging, well-being, engagement, and expression within pedagogical expectations. Accountability is supported through program requirements and reflective practice rather than standardized inclusion scoring.
Indirect	AB, SK, NU, NWT	• Inclusion expectations less directly connected to licensing or mandatory quality assessment.	AB: Inclusion-related expectations appear within broad legislative principles ¹⁰ and required program plans, while implementation of many inclusion and quality resources remains voluntary. Licensing primarily monitors regulatory compliance rather than standardized

⁸ Government of New Brunswick. (2010). *Early Childhood Services Act* (E-0.5). Government of New Brunswick. <https://laws.gnb.ca/en/document/cs/E-0.5>

⁹ *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years*. <https://files.ontario.ca/edu-how-does-learning-happen-en-2021-03-23.pdf>

¹⁰ Government of Alberta. (2025). *Early Learning and Child Care Act* (E-0.1). Alberta King's Printer / Open Government. <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/e00p1>

Approach	Jurisdiction	Common Characteristics	Selected Examples
		• Inclusion commonly reflected through broad principles, guidance, targeted programs, grants, or bilateral reporting. • Limited standardized program-level assessment of inclusion-related practice or experience.	inclusion-related practice.

Concluding Reflections

Through the policy scan we described variation across several distinct dimensions of ELCC policy: how inclusion was conceptualized, the populations and experiences addressed, the mechanisms used to support inclusion, and the ways inclusion was monitored and reinforced. These detailed findings informed the cross-jurisdictional synthesis and Alberta–New Brunswick comparison presented in the main report.

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