

ENHANCING EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN DUFFERIN COUNTY

A CASE STUDY ON
COLLABORATIVE WORKFORCE
DEVELOPMENT AND DIVERSITY
INITIATIVES

July 2025

NIJU MATTHEW
RYAN GIBSON



UNIVERSITY OF
GUELPH

Background

Workforce development is a critical challenge confronting rural economies throughout Ontario. In 2024, an online survey was distributed to all Community Future Development Corporations and Workforce Planning Boards throughout Ontario to better understand rural workforce development trends. The results from the survey can be found in two reports: [Findings from Community Futures Development Corporations](#) and [Findings from Workforce Planning Boards](#). As part of the survey, participants identified innovative rural workforce development initiatives.

This report is a case study of one of the innovations identified. The case study identifies the innovative approaches, goals of the initiative, successes, and transferability to other rural communities. This report is part of a series of rural innovative workforce initiatives as part of the Addressing Labour Shortages through Newcomer Attraction initiative. Further case studies and additional information on the research initiatives can be found at <https://ruraldev.ca/lsna/>.

Introduction

In a dedicated effort to enhance the Early Childhood Education (ECE) workforce, Dufferin County, has initiated a significant program targeting the development and diversification of professionals in the field. This initiative, grounded in the partnership between educational institutions and local governance, is multifaceted, addressing not only the immediate need for skilled educators but also the broader aspects of diversity, quality, and accessibility within the sector. To better understand the geographical context of this case study, Figure 1 provides a map of Dufferin County within Ontario, illustrating the region's expansive area.

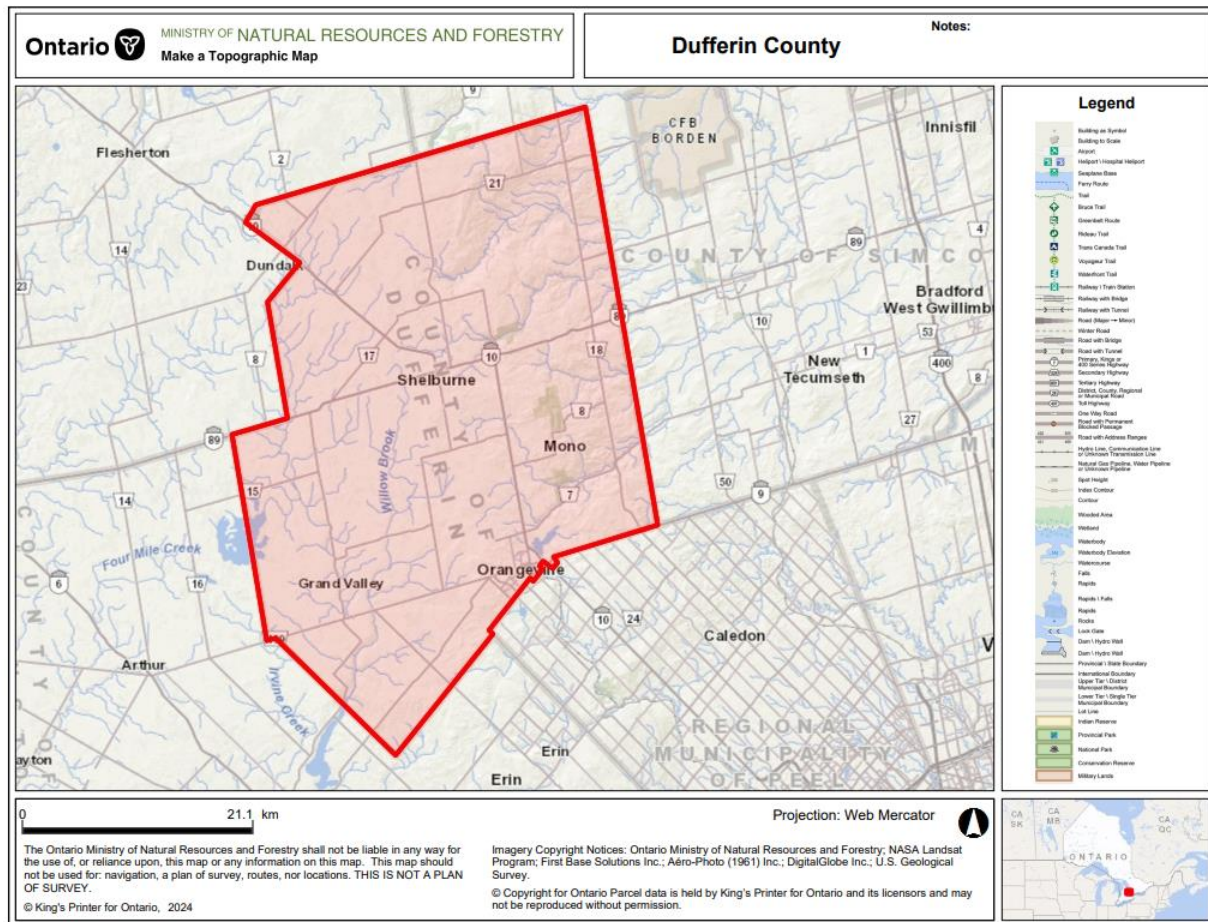


Figure 1: Dufferin County (*Make a Topographic Map, 2024*)

Central to this strategy is the introduction of bursaries aimed at providing financial support to aspiring ECE professionals (Georgian College, 2022). This move is part of a larger workforce development strategy by Dufferin County, which includes efforts to emphasize the importance of maintaining high academic standards and to make ECE education more accessible, especially for those demonstrating financial need (Georgian College, 2022).

In parallel, Dufferin County has launched a comprehensive marketing campaign in collaboration with Ontario's Early Years and Child Care Service System Managers to raise awareness about the value of licensed childcare and to disseminate vital information to the public (Ball, 2023). This campaign not only shines a light on the importance of quality in childcare but also advocates for the fair compensation and recognition of Early Childhood Educators, while ensuring that the sector can attract and retain skilled professionals (Ball, 2023).

Additionally, the initiative actively involves the community through surveys, engaging families, educators, and students in a dialogue to gather insights and feedback. This collective input is instrumental in shaping the future strategies and activities under the

Dufferin Workforce Strategy, further solidifying the community's role in the development and enhancement of childcare services (Eeuwes, 2023).

Innovative Approach to Addressing Labour Shortages

Dufferin County, in partnership with Georgian College, has implemented an innovative approach to address the labour shortages in the Early Childhood Education (ECE) sector. Recognizing the critical importance of a skilled and diverse workforce in providing high-quality childcare services, the county has launched a multifaceted initiative to attract, support, and retain ECE professionals.

Bursary Initiative

At the core of this approach is the Bursary Initiative. Dufferin County is funding 18 new bursaries specifically for local residents who wish to pursue studies in early childhood education at Georgian College (Georgian College, 2022). These bursaries, valued at \$2,000 each, aim to make ECE education more accessible, particularly for full-time students who demonstrate financial need. This initiative reflects the county's commitment to nurturing the next generation of ECE professionals by removing financial barriers to education and training in this vital sector. Moreover, the possibility of renewing these bursaries for the second year of the program incentivizes students to maintain high academic performance (Georgian College, 2022).

Focus on Diversity

Understanding the value of diversity within the ECE workforce, Dufferin County has allocated four of the eighteen bursaries to students who self-identify as Black, Indigenous, or Francophone. This targeted approach not only promotes diversity within the sector but also ensures that the ECE workforce better reflects and can effectively serve the diverse communities in the region (Georgian College, 2022).

Support from Key Personnel

The initiative is further strengthened by the active involvement and support of key personnel. Lori-Jane Del Medico, the Program Manager for Early Years and Child Care at Dufferin County, has been instrumental in highlighting the importance of accessible, inclusive, and high-quality childcare for the economy. Similarly, Brenda Burman, the Campus, Government, and Employment Programs Manager for Georgian's Orangeville and South Georgian Bay campuses, has been actively involved in development of innovative collaboration through industry connections in supporting students pursuing this in-demand career path (Georgian College, 2022).

Federal Funding and Program Management

The initiative is also supported by federal funding. The Early Childhood Workforce Agreement, signed between Canada and Ontario in August 2021, provides significant one-time federal funding to support the retention and recruitment of a high-quality childcare and early years workforce. Dufferin County, as the service system manager, plays a pivotal role in planning and managing licensed childcare services and EarlyON Child and Family Centres in the region, ensuring that the funds are utilized effectively to strengthen the workforce (Georgian College, 2022).

Curriculum and Professional Development

The ECE program at Georgian College, available at multiple campuses, focuses on the holistic development of children, integrating play-based experiences and emphasizing the role of educators as responsive caregivers. The curriculum respects the diversity, identity, and rights of children and families, preparing students for practical field placements where they can apply their skills and engage with the community, fostering partnerships that enhance the quality of childcare services (Georgian College, 2022).

Goals and Objectives

The collaborative initiative spearheaded by Dufferin County and Georgian College is anchored in clearly defined goals and objectives aimed at addressing the immediate and long-term needs of the ECE sector. These goals and objectives are not only focused on remedying the labour shortage in the sector but also on elevating the quality and inclusivity of childcare services.

Enhancing Accessibility and Financial Support

One of the primary goals is to enhance accessibility to ECE programs. By introducing bursaries, the initiative seeks to alleviate financial barriers that prospective students might face. This financial support aims to attract a larger pool of candidates to the ECE field, thereby addressing the labour shortage (Georgian College, 2022).

Promoting Diversity in the ECE Workforce

Another critical objective is to promote diversity within the ECE workforce. The initiative acknowledges the importance of having a workforce that reflects the diversity of the community it serves. By allocating specific bursaries to underrepresented groups, the initiative aims to encourage a more diverse range of individuals to pursue careers in early childhood education, fostering an inclusive and culturally responsive childcare environment (Georgian College, 2022).

Strengthening Workforce Development and Professional Growth

The initiative also aims to strengthen workforce development and professional growth. Through the bursary program and the ECE curriculum offered at Georgian College, the initiative seeks to ensure that future ECE professionals are well-equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, and competencies. The program's emphasis on holistic child development, play-based learning, and responsive caregiving ensures that graduates are prepared to meet the high standards expected in the field (Georgian College, 2022).

Fostering Community Engagement and Feedback

Engaging the community and incorporating feedback into future strategies and activities is also a central objective. By involving families, educators, and students in surveys and feedback mechanisms, the initiative aims to gather valuable insights that can inform the continuous improvement of childcare services and workforce strategies (Eeuwes, 2023).

Ensuring Sustainability and Quality in Childcare Services

Finally, the initiative aims to ensure the sustainability and quality of childcare services. This involves advocating for fair compensation and recognition of ECE professionals, as well as ensuring that childcare services meet the highest standards of safety, responsiveness, and nurturing care. The collaboration with various stakeholders, including the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Ministry of Education, underscores this commitment to elevating the overall standard of childcare services in the region (Ball, 2023; *Ontario Early Years | Dufferin County*, 2024).

Success in Achieving Goals

The strategic initiative by Dufferin County and Georgian College has made significant strides in achieving its set goals. The program's multi-dimensional approach, targeting various aspects of the ECE sector, has yielded notable successes in workforce enhancement, diversity promotion, professional development, and quality assurance in childcare services.

Achievement in Financial Accessibility and Workforce Enhancement

The bursary initiative has been a cornerstone of the program's success. By providing financial assistance to aspiring ECE professionals, Dufferin County has successfully attracted more candidates to the field, addressing the labor shortage in a meaningful way. The renewal option for these bursaries, contingent upon maintaining good academic standing, has further incentivized excellence and commitment among the students (Georgian College, 2022).

Progress in Promoting Diversity

In its commitment to diversity, the program has made commendable progress by allocating specific bursaries to underrepresented groups. This move has not only promoted inclusivity but has also enriched the learning environment, ensuring that the future ECE workforce is reflective of the community's diverse fabric (Georgian College, 2022).

Advancements in Professional Development and Curriculum Excellence

The ECE program's curriculum, focusing on holistic child development and responsive caregiving, has been instrumental in preparing students to meet the sector's high standards. The inclusion of field placements as part of the curriculum has provided students with invaluable hands-on experience, fostering partnerships with families, other professionals, and community programs (Georgian College, 2022).

Positive Community Engagement and Feedback Integration

The initiative's approach to involving the community through surveys has provided crucial insights into the needs and expectations of families, educators, and students. This feedback has been pivotal in shaping the development of new strategies and activities for the Dufferin Workforce Strategy, ensuring that the program remains responsive and aligned with the community's evolving needs (Eeuwes, 2023).

Upholding High Standards in Childcare Services

The collaborative efforts with various stakeholders, including the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care and the Ministry of Education, have ensured that the childcare services in the region adhere to the highest standards. The advocacy for fair compensation and recognition of ECE professionals has further contributed to the sustainability and quality of these services (Ball, 2023; *Ontario Early Years | Dufferin County*, 2024)

Challenges and Future Prospects

The initiative by Dufferin County and Georgian College, while successful, encounters challenges that need addressing to ensure its sustainability and effectiveness.

Key Challenges:

- **Sustainability of Funding:** Ensuring ongoing financial support for bursaries is crucial to maintain and potentially expand the program (Georgian College, 2022).

- **Diversity and Inclusivity:** Continuously adapting to meet the diverse needs of the community and ensuring that ECE services are culturally responsive remains a challenge (Georgian College, 2022).
- **Industry Standards and Stakeholder Engagement:** Keeping the curriculum and teaching methodologies up-to-date with industry standards and maintaining active engagement with stakeholders are essential yet challenging tasks (Ball, 2023; Eeuwes, 2023).

Future Prospects and Advocacy:

- **Expansion of the Bursary Program:** Exploring new funding sources and partnerships could enable the expansion of the bursary program to support more students and a broader range of educational projects (Georgian College, 2022).
- **Enhanced Inclusivity and Professional Development:** Building on the initiative's commitment to diversity, future efforts can focus on enhancing inclusivity in the workforce and offering continuous professional development for educators (Georgian College, 2022; Ontario Early Years | Dufferin County, 2024).
- **Robust Community Feedback Mechanisms:** Strengthening platforms for community input can ensure that ECE services continually evolve to meet the needs of families and children (Eeuwes, 2023).

Uniqueness and Transferability

The initiative by Dufferin County and Georgian College stands out for its comprehensive and multifaceted approach to enhancing the ECE sector. This section explores the unique aspects of the program, the factors influencing its transferability to other regions or sectors, and its potential for broader application.

Distinctive Elements

The initiative's unique strengths lie in its holistic approach to addressing the needs of the ECE sector. The bursary program, promoting both financial accessibility and diversity, serves as a model for workforce development. The collaboration between educational institutions, local governments, and the community ensures a well-rounded approach to enhancing the quality of childcare services and supporting the professional growth of ECE educators (Georgian College, 2022).

Factors Affecting Transferability:

While the initiative offers valuable insights, its transferability may be influenced by several factors:

- **Resource Availability:** The availability of financial resources and the willingness of stakeholders to invest are crucial for replicating the bursary program in other regions (Georgian College, 2022).
- **Community Needs and Diversity:** The specific needs and diversity of the community should be considered when adapting the program to different regions to ensure that the services provided are relevant and inclusive (Georgian College, 2022).
- **Policy and Regulatory Environment:** The local policy and regulatory environment can significantly impact the program's implementation and success in other regions.

Potential for Broader Application:

The program's foundational principles and strategies have the potential for broader application:

- **Scalability of the Bursary Program:** The bursary program can serve as a scalable model for other regions or sectors looking to attract and support aspiring professionals (Georgian College, 2022).
- **Adaptability of Community Engagement Approaches:** The strategies for community engagement and feedback collection can be adapted to suit different contexts, ensuring that the services provided are aligned with the community's needs (Eeuwes, 2023).
- **Framework for Advocacy and Professional Development:** The initiative's focus on advocacy, fair compensation, and professional development provides a strong framework that can be applied to other sectors, promoting the recognition and growth of professionals (*Ontario Early Years | Dufferin County*, 2024).

Conclusion

The strategic initiative undertaken by Dufferin County and Georgian College represents a significant step forward in addressing the challenges faced by the ECE sector. Through a multifaceted approach that includes financial support, diversity promotion, community engagement, and a strong emphasis on quality and professional development, the program has demonstrated a deep commitment to enhancing the ECE workforce and the childcare services offered in the region.

The bursary program, serving as the cornerstone of the initiative, has effectively broadened access to ECE education, thereby contributing to workforce development and diversity within the sector. The proactive community engagement, through surveys and feedback mechanisms, has ensured that the program remains responsive to the needs and aspirations of families, educators, and students. Furthermore, the collaboration with various stakeholders has reinforced the initiative's approach, ensuring a comprehensive and well-rounded strategy that addresses multiple facets of the ECE sector.

While the initiative has encountered challenges, including the sustainability of funding and the continuous adaptation to meet diverse community needs, it also presents promising prospects. The potential for expanding the bursary program, advancing inclusivity, fostering professional development, and strengthening community feedback mechanisms offers avenues for further growth and enhancement of the ECE sector.

The initiative by Dufferin County and Georgian College serves as a model for innovative and collaborative efforts in the field of early childhood education. Its commitment to financial accessibility, diversity, quality, and community engagement provides a solid foundation for the continued advancement of the ECE workforce. By addressing the present challenges and leveraging the opportunities for future growth, the initiative is well-positioned to make a lasting impact on the quality and inclusivity of childcare services, ultimately contributing to the holistic development and wellbeing of children in the region.

References

- Ball, M. (2023). Dufferin County partners with Ontario Early Years and Child Care Service System Managers to raise awareness of licensed child care sector | Dufferin County. www.dufferincounty.ca. <https://www.dufferincounty.ca/news/dufferin-county-partners-ontario-early-years-and-child-care-service-system-managers-raise>
- Eeuwes, N. (2023). *Dufferin County families with licensed child care share their experiences*. FM101 Orangeville Today. <https://www.orangevilletoday.ca/2023/04/20/dufferin-county-families-with-licensed-child-care-asked-to-share-their-experiences/>
- Georgian College - New bursaries from Dufferin County for Georgian College to support Early Childhood Education workforce*. (2022, August). Education News Canada. <https://educationnewscanada.com/article/education/level/colleges/2/974128/new-bursaries-from-dufferin-county-for-georgian-college-to-support-early-childhood-education-workforce-.html>
- Make A Topographic Map*. (2024). www.lioapplications.lrc.gov.on.ca. [https://www.lioapplications.lrc.gov.on.ca/MakeATopographicMap/index.html?viewer=Make A Topographic Map.MATM](https://www.lioapplications.lrc.gov.on.ca/MakeATopographicMap/index.html?viewer=Make%20A%20Topographic%20Map.MATM)
- Ontario Early Years | Dufferin County*. (2024). www.dufferincounty.ca. <https://www.dufferincounty.ca/early-years-and-child-care/dcece>

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the [Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance](#), a collaboration between the Government of Ontario and the University of Guelph. The authors would like to acknowledge Elzbieta Mastej and Heather Douglas for their assistance in preparing the final report.