

# Outdoor-Based Early Learning and Child Care

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*A Feasibility Study for a Minimum Viable Licensed Early Learning and Child Care Business in Canada:  
Challenges and Opportunities*

Prepared for The Lawson Foundation

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**“Imagine early learning and child care without walls or fences – programming and regulations which are not tied to classrooms or buildings.”<sup>1</sup>**

## Rationale

There is a need for more Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) spaces in Canada, and the act of licensing ELCC sets minimum standards for safety and quality while allowing both parents and ELCC practitioners to gain access to grants and bursaries to make ELCC more affordable. At the same time, the popularity of outdoor-based learning and recreational programs is growing, and there is a large body of research that speaks of the developmental value of outdoor play and experiential learning for children.

Children, parents, early childhood educators, policy makers and health professionals all seem to agree that licensing outdoor-based ELCC is a pragmatic approach to address the growing demand, increase accessibility, and provide children with robust educational, social, practical, and emotional skills.

This feasibility study’s purpose is to create a minimum viable operational model for a non-profit business that operates a licensed outdoor-based ELCC program.

There are a variety of approaches with different names that employ similar core practices when children are able to interact with, learn from and understand the natural world around them as part of their early child development. Regardless of nomenclature, the common principle is that outdoor-based programs operate for the majority of time out-of-doors, with only short-term shelter requirements during inclement weather, a need for privacy away from the group, or a refuge during hazardous situations.

## Scope of work

The market research to inform this feasibility study first surveyed 14 outdoor-based program operators in Ontario. The survey results were then augmented by 60- to 90-minute interviews with 16 individuals representing 13 organizations (two of which completed the survey). The interviewees included practitioners in BC, ON, and Newfoundland, and policy experts in Washington State (USA), Ontario, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland and Labrador.

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<sup>1</sup> Christine Alden and Kim Hiscott, in progress.

This primary data was then combined with significant secondary research from experts—academics, consultants, policy makers and others—across North America. Social Delta then applied a social enterprise lens to the analysis in order to propose a minimum viable model for operating a licensed outdoor-based ELCC non-profit business for children.

### Assumptions

The model is based upon a business operating under the following assumptions:

1. It is possible for a licensing body in each jurisdiction to agree on the appropriate regulations to be used to license an outdoor-based ELCC program.
2. Staff for this business need to have strong qualifications in both Early Childhood Education and outdoor learning and leadership, as excellent staff will fundamentally dictate the quality of the outdoor-based program.
3. Staff with the necessary qualifications need to be paid as well or better than in other child care settings, including ELCC.
4. The target audience for the model business is families with children who are toilet trained, but not yet enrolled in Kindergarten (i.e. 2.5-5 years old).<sup>2</sup>
5. The model is built on data and policies from different jurisdictions, and should outdoor-based ELCC be licensed for other age groups in any specific jurisdiction in Canada, the findings would have to be amended in accordance with the local context and market conditions.

### Conclusion

Research and practice suggest that it is possible to license outdoor-based ELCC in such a way as to protect the rights and safety of children and create a rich learning and play experience while being sufficiently flexible to address a variety of outdoor learning environments. A functioning regulated model in Washington State offers a blueprint to adapt, and this report documents multiple approaches to address concerns of both policy and practice. There will be some investments needed in training government policymakers and regulatory officers as well as educators, but these investments are modest relative to the costs of providing quality ELCC.

It is important to recognize that this feasibility study is based upon the creation of a minimum viable social enterprise offering ELCC under *average* conditions across a large, diverse country with varying costs of labour and business inputs, and with different jurisdictional requirements. The business projections presume that legislation and regulations can be developed—and possibly replicated or adapted across jurisdictions and this will vary by province, as current licensing parameters for ELCC already vary by province.

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<sup>2</sup> The choice to limit the business model to this group was based upon the consultations with existing providers of outdoor-based programs.

**Recognizing that operational choices will be dependent on local conditions, this report concludes that a minimum viable outdoor-based licensed ELCC business would provide quality programming to 12 children between the ages of 2.5-5 years old supported by four qualified educators and one part-time administrative staff at a cost of ~\$23,638 per space, on average.**

If parents are expecting to pay only \$10/day, as is the stated goal of the Federal Government's Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) program, then government investment would be \$21,238 per new space. If parents were to pay \$550 per month (the national average in 2023 was \$508), then governments would then be expected to contribute \$16,750 per space.

It must be noted that these figures are estimates for NEW outdoor-based spaces, built from the ground up and requiring an initial investment of \$62,000 in modest shelter and other start-up costs. If existing unlicensed Forest or Nature Schools, of which there are hundreds already operating across the country, were to be granted an ELCC license, then many of the start-up costs may be unnecessary and the annual operating cost per space would go down. Similarly, if the start-up costs were covered by a capital grant or a private donation, then the annual financing of the start-up investments would be unnecessary. In the scenario where there was not a loan to pay for start-up costs, then the unsubsidized cost per child would decrease to \$22,396, and the fully subsidized (\$10/day) cost per space is estimated to be \$19,996.

Although it is difficult to accurately assess the annual costs of creating a new indoor ELCC space in Canada, primarily because of the large capital costs of building new buildings, this study suggests that it is equally or more cost effective, and possibly quicker, to consider licensing OB ELCC businesses to generate new ELCC spaces as part of the national initiative to increase the available number of licensed ELCC spaces in Canada.

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# THE BUSINESS CASE

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Providing ELCC as a service is a social enterprise, in that the customer (parent and/or granting agency) pays for a service for which there is an intrinsic social value: providing quality early learning and valuable experiences for the next generation. ELCC in Canada is currently provided by private sector businesses, non-profit and public organizations, co-operatives and sole proprietors. ELCC providers can be either licensed by governments or operate without a license. Licensed and unlicensed facilities have both benefits and drawbacks, with some of the major elements represented in the following graphic:

	Benefits	Drawbacks
Licensed ELCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parent confidence.</li> <li>• Eligible for operating grants or subsidies for families.</li> <li>• Quality assurance by an external assessor (gov't).</li> <li>• Staff are ECE trained or led, as required by legislation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher operating costs to meet licensing criteria.</li> <li>• Higher operating costs and more stringent requirements to meet licensing criteria favors larger providers.</li> <li>• Competitive market for ECE qualified staff.</li> <li>• Lack of available spaces in many communities.</li> </ul>
Unlicensed ELCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Free-market option, where customer can choose.</li> <li>• Can have lower overheads for the operator.</li> <li>• Flexible operational choices: location curriculum, pricing.</li> <li>• Often family-like settings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No formal oversight.</li> <li>• Parents lack access to subsidies.</li> <li>• “Buyer beware” as prices and or quality are determined by the provider.</li> <li>• No requirement for ECE qualifications.</li> </ul>

Note that an unlicensed program with children may be subject to other forms of licensing, other than being a *licensed ELCC* provider, such as being licensed as an “independent school” or as a “recreational program.” (The naming of these qualifications differs by the legislation in various jurisdictions.)

Beyond program licensing, there are other certifications, accreditations and training programs for staff and organizations that may well increase the positive impact of the ELCC program on the child, the family and the community.

For the purposes of this study, it is assumed that all individuals and organizations are attempting to operate their ELCC or child recreational/educational programs to maximize the wellness and social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of children in a safe environment. Licensing, therefore, is not necessarily a determinant of quality of care, even if parents might feel

licensing serves as a proxy for quality. This study does not investigate the relative quality of unlicensed versus licensed programs; the goal of the study is to document the key elements of a quality program and presume those elements will form the basis of creating an operational plan and budget for an outdoor-based ELCC business that would be eligible for license.

The following list offers compelling reasons to consider licensing outdoor-based ELCC:

1. **Quality:** Research indicates that outdoor-based programs provide high-quality, enriching experiences for children.
2. **Existing Supply:** There is a growing number of outdoor programs being developed for children by both trained educators and outdoor recreation and education enthusiasts.
3. **Lack of Access:** Existing outdoor-based programs are expensive and typically only operate part-time. Licensing will ensure affordability and increased access to both ELCC and to nature, AND provide necessary oversight.
4. **Demand/Need:** There is a critical need for more ELCC spaces in the country, and licensing non-profit outdoor-based programs will help meet the demand.
5. **Demand/Want:** Many parents want to provide their children with a better understanding and awareness of the natural world, and actively seek recreational or experiential programs for their children for the intrinsic benefits such a program can offer.

Where there is demand, a supply, an acknowledgement of value and a strong social value proposition, there is a need to consider how to best create a robust business model which supports maximizing the social impact of outdoor-based ELCC. A business model relies on developing a fair, robust and protective licensing regime, but such a regime already exists in other countries and the adaptation of their experience and approach, combined with a commitment on the part of Canadian provincial/territorial leaders suggests that licensing outdoor-based ELCC is achievable.

This study seeks to address some of the practical elements of what sort of investments—licensing and more—that need to be considered in order to create feasible full-time outdoor ELCC businesses.

*“The Canadian Public Health Association calls upon all parents/caregivers, educators, child care providers, school boards, public health professionals, the private sector and all levels of governments and Indigenous peoples’ governments to improve access to unstructured, child-led play.”* From the 2019 Children’s Unstructured Play Position Statement<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cpha.ca/unstructured-play>



# PROJECT METHODOLOGY

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This study gathers information from a selection of experienced practitioners and policy makers in different provinces (NL, NS, ON, and BC) in order to document a "minimum viable business model" for an outdoor-based, licensed ELCC business. The primary research has been combined with secondary research, and informed by business principles that apply to any successful social enterprise. From the research and analysis, Social Delta offers an operational blueprint for a small outdoor-based ELCC business focused on safety, quality, fun, accessibility, and financial viability.

In order to create a feasible scenario for licensed outdoor-based ELCC, several key elements have been considered as follows:

- How licensing requirements would have to change and then be applied;
- What sort of shelter space would need to exist;
- What are some of the program design elements;
- The role, if any, of third-party outdoor training (like Forest School training) or certification;
- Approaches to manage safety and risk outdoors;
- Ensuring that children from diverse financial and social backgrounds are welcomed;
- Human resource needs, qualifications and recruitment strategies; and
- How these outdoor-based programs might be able to create cost-effective viable options for parents seeking quality ELCC.

## *Survey of Ontario Providers*

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As part of this study (and which contributed to a presentation to Ontario municipal leaders)<sup>4</sup> an online survey was sent to 56 organizations in Ontario that provide outdoor-based learning opportunities for children. The survey focussed on asking what are some of the concerns and aspirations of practitioners interested in exploring the concept of licensed outdoor-based ELCC in the province.

The list of recipients included organizations offering recreation programs, forest schools, and ELCC with a significant outdoor learning component. The list included both licensed and unlicensed providers. The detailed results from the survey are included in [Appendix A](#). Although the sample size is small and only represented one province, there were a few key findings relevant to this feasibility study, as follows:

1. There is an appetite to create outdoor-based licensed ELCC spaces;
2. This appetite comes from both unlicensed and licensed program operators;

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<sup>4</sup> Ontario Municipal Social Services Association Exchange Conference, May 8, 2024, "Beyond the Building: Advocating for a New Outdoor Model of Early Learning and Child Care", panel moderated by Christine Alden.

3. There is a belief that with the licensing of outdoor-based programs, significant numbers of new ELCC spaces could be created for all age groups, particularly those between 2.5 and 5 years old;
4. There is a strong desire that licensing will make outdoor-based programs for children more accessible, as it will allow for funding and/or bursaries to support all parents;
5. There was a general consensus that licensing for outdoor-based ELCC should focus on quality staffing, emergent child-centred curriculum, hygiene practices, safety protocols, operational standards and policies and not on the current requirements for indoor space and food preparation;
6. There is a general concern that licensing bodies (in Ontario) will be unable or unwilling to adapt licensing requirements to make it possible to offer licensed outdoor-based ELCC;
7. There are also logistical, procedural, financial, staffing, and marketing challenges to create new outdoor-based spaces that need to be addressed.

Two of the survey respondents were also contacted for a further conversation in order to gain a deeper perspective from them.

### *Interviews With Experts*

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Social Delta reached out to 24 individuals representing experts from both the fields of policy and practice in ELCC. Of those contacted, 13 interviews were conducted to get first hand perspectives from 16 experts on the challenges, opportunities, required considerations and experiences to date for operating outdoor-based programs for children. The interviews focused on what specifically needs to be considered in order to convert those existing outdoor programs into licensed ELCC spaces and what are the important elements to consider in crafting a feasible business model for outdoor-based licensed ELCC.

The list of interviewees is included as [Appendix B](#).

The discussions generated information, recommendations and basic operating requirements that have been captured in the pages below, and have been included in the assumptions and recommendations for the business model.

# SECTION 1: THE OUTDOOR LEARNING LANDSCAPE

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## *General Framing*

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There is a growing body of academic and experiential evidence that outdoor play and outdoor-based learning has dramatic and positive effects on the social, education and personal development of children. There are a myriad of programs already operating for children of all ages where the focus of the program is to learn from and about the natural world. Nature is seen as a place where children can thrive, moving freely, testing their limits, take (age-appropriate) risks, follow their interests and build a stronger appreciation for the natural world around them.

Many researchers and practitioners feel that learning through guided play in the outdoors translates into children who are happier, more active, curious, confident and collaborative. For all the individuals contacted for this research product, it was clear that most felt that quality programming in outdoor environments creates optimal conditions for learning and childhood development.

For those who are unfamiliar with outdoor learning, there is perceived fear that outdoor-based ELCC is more dangerous due to extreme weather events, unmarked hazards (like sticks and rocks), limited shelter options or insufficient lavatory or washing facilities. However, as many practitioners like to point out, the dangers and risks of outdoor play are often exaggerated and can be mitigated by staffing excellence, good planning, investment in appropriate facilities and gear, and trusting children to know and quickly determine their own boundaries. Ironically, these mitigating factors are all effective for programs that are operated out of “bricks and mortar” facilities as well. In fact, educating policy makers, regulatory officers, and parents are key determinants of success for the prospect of outdoor-based licensing.

“Among the early learning community, those who understand the science of how young children learn are those most likely to lean into outdoor learning as a component of a quality learning environment.”

“People who know the importance of play-based learning, sensory experiences, and safe, consistent connections to caregivers quickly grasp the benefits of outdoor learning. They accept, and in some cases expect, outdoor learning as part of the description of quality early learning.”

—2023 Steiner Foundation Report

## *Canadian ELCC Supply Challenges*

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Canada is facing a serious challenge to provide licensed ELCC that is high-quality, convenient and at a cost that is affordable to all families. Statistics Canada reports that in 2023, 56% of children aged 0-5 were in either licensed or unlicensed ELCC. In that same year, 49% of parents reported that they struggled to find ELCC. Moreover, 26% of parents seeking ELCC in 2023 reported that they were still on a waitlist, and 78% of childcare centres reported that they had an active waitlist in 2022.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/231205/dq231205a-eng.htm>

The cost of ELCC decreased from 2022 to 2023, possibly as a result of government policies and the CWELCC program roll-out. Although fees vary depending on many factors (geography, number of children registered, the age of the children, etc.), Statistics Canada notes that the average cost of full-time ELCC to parents is between \$499/month (4-5 yr olds) and \$562/month for 0–3-year-olds. Notably, the average cost of full-time ELCC in urban environments is significantly higher than in rural locations: \$587/month versus \$454/month.<sup>6</sup>

Assuming that a typical month will have ~20 childcare days, and assuming that the average cost across all jurisdictions and age groups is approximately \$508/month, that suggests that the **average price per child in full-time ELCC in Canada in 2023 was ~\$25/day**, provided that parents were able to find an available ELCC space.

The federal government, in an attempt to address this shortage of ELCC spaces, has introduced the Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) program which endeavors to create both more quality ELCC spaces, while lowering the price to \$10/day over a period of years. Against this seemingly positive federal government policy announcement, the concept of licensing outdoor-based ELCC programs could well generate new spaces requiring a relatively low investment on the part of cost-sharing governments. Without the need to build new buildings or buy expensive real estate upon which to build, the overall investment may well be lower. In [Section 3](#), this cost saving will be discussed further.

### ***What Constitutes Outdoor-Based Programming?***

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Whether they are called Forest Schools, Nature Schools, Outdoor Day Programs, Recreational Camps or even the original Kindergarten (literally, Child Garden in German), outdoor-based programs for children can be designed as educational, recreational or cultural.

There are a variety of approaches with different names that employ similar core practices when children are able to interact with, learn from and understand the natural world around them as part of their early child development. Outdoor-based programs encourage exploration of the landscape, age and child-appropriate risky play, an emergent child-centred curriculum, a delight in getting wet, dirty and weathered, and a respect for the land and those entrusted to protect it,

Regardless of nomenclature, the common principle is that outdoor-based programs operate for the majority of time out-of-doors, with only short-term shelter requirements during inclement weather, a need for privacy away from the group, or a refuge during hazardous situations. The programs may operate in fields, forests, glens, mountains, or even city parks, or on other government or Indigenous land with permissions.

### ***Forest and Nature Schools***

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Many of the individuals contacted for this study either operate a Forest or Nature School, or they've had some training in the principles that have been developed to guide outdoor-based

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

learning and recreation programs offered through this growing movement of practitioners and beneficiaries.

“This model of education started in the 1950s in Denmark and is...an education model used throughout the U.K. and within most Scandinavian countries. Children within this model of education spend their entire days outdoors exploring local woodlands, creeks, meadows, and ponds. They follow a play and experiential-based curriculum and learn from natural materials found in the outdoors. Emphasis is placed on exploring local habitats, connecting to indigenous cultures and a sense of place, as well as practising sustainability and conservation in a child-directed and age-appropriate manner. On a daily basis, children will hike, snowshoe, birdwatch, track animals, identify plants and animals, compost, build birdhouses, engage in lots of art activities with natural materials, build fires and shelters, and grow and cook their own food.”

--Marlene Power, from her presentation at the Canadian Government Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development, December 2012<sup>7</sup>

Forest School Canada, run by the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada, offers training on the approach and related skills of Forest School programs, and hundreds of practitioners have taken this training since it was first offered in 2012.<sup>8</sup> The training alone is not a certification, and it is not formally accredited, although if trainees choose one of three “pathways to certification” and complete 12 months of online coursework, they will get a certificate of completion, which allows trainees to claim Forest School certification, however, there is no grading of success for those who have taken the course.

However, this training is considered by many to be an excellent program to provide practical skills to support outdoor learning for all ages. Forest School Canada seeks to generate a cadre of individuals who are offering outdoor-based learning in a variety of settings serving children and youth of all ages. Many of these individuals also seek to share their training and experience with others, thereby creating a viral growth in people with qualifications to support outdoor-based learning.

Forest/Nature Schools are founded on three pillars:

- Trust
- Reciprocal Relationships
- Freedom

Forest/Nature School (FNS) adhere to the following guidelines:

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<sup>7</sup> Downloaded from: <https://openparliament.ca/committees/environment/41-1/58/marlene-power-1/only/> on October 25, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> <https://childnature.ca/forest-school-canada/>

1. Takes place in any outdoor space, including urban greenspace, playgrounds, forests, creeks, prairies, mountains, shoreline, and tundra.
2. Is a sustained process of regular and repeated sessions in the same outdoor space, supporting children to develop a reciprocal relationship with the Land, and an understanding of themselves as a part of the natural world.
3. Views children and youth as innately competent, curious, and capable learners.
4. Is led by educators who share power with learners through play-based, emergent, and inquiry-driven teaching and learning methods.
5. Values children’s play—self-directed, freely chosen, intrinsically motivated—in and of itself.
6. FNS programs provide adequate time and space for children and youth to dive deeply into their play.
5. Views risky play as an integral part of children’s learning and healthy development, and is facilitated by knowledgeable, qualified educators who support children and youth to co-manage risk.
6. Relies on loose, natural materials to support open-ended, creative play and learning.
7. Values the process as much as the outcome.
8. Prioritizes building reciprocal relationships with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, who have been learning from this Land since time immemorial.
9. Practices, policies, and programming reflect and prioritize the building of engaged, healthy, vibrant, and diverse communities through consideration of access and equity in our decisions and actions.

Source: *Child and Nature Alliance of Canada* (<https://childnature.ca/about-forest-and-nature-school/>)

From the interviews conducted, it became clear that the Forest School methodology and approach mutually reinforce the training and education of those who become certified Early Childhood Educators (ECEs). Many Forest and Nature Schools seek to hire ECEs as a way to reinforce the quality of their programs; similarly, many licensed childcare providers consider a Forest School training to be an asset in their programs. (Notably, one of the “pathways to certification” at Forest School Canada is a “Lead Designation in a Professional Setting” designed specifically for those working in formal ELCC or other education settings.)

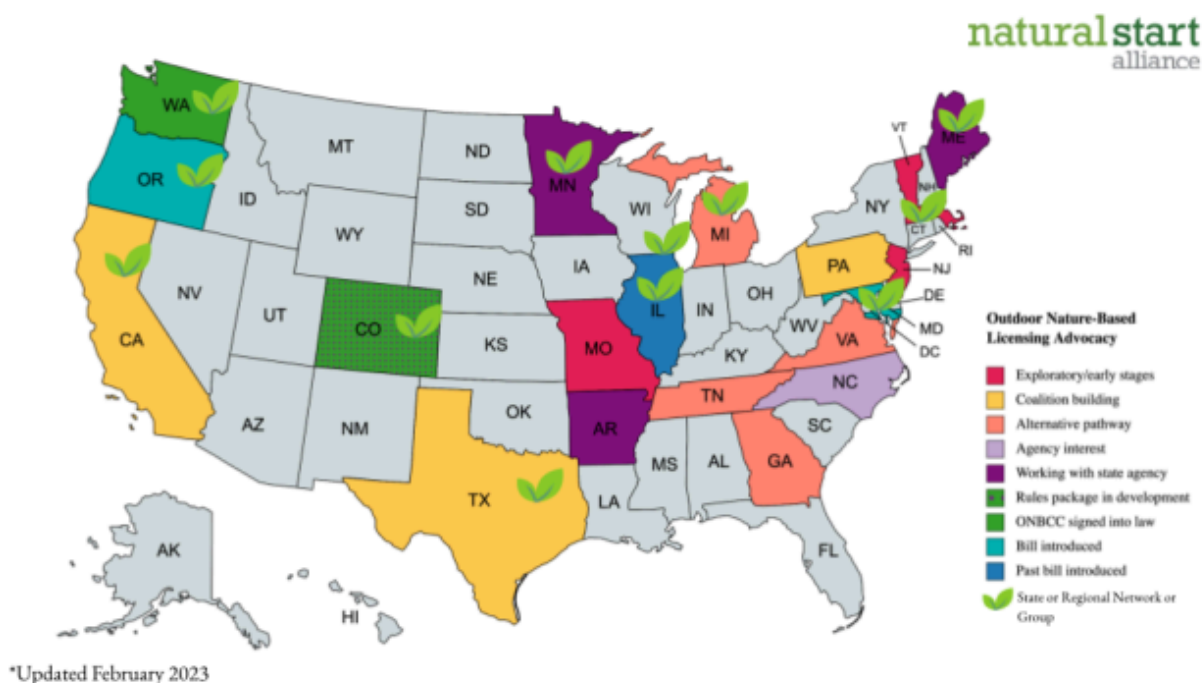
Regrettably, from the perspective of some government licensing bodies, the Forest School training is perceived to be a good thing, but without formal accreditation, a form of independent third-party review, or even a robust grading process, it may not be considered sufficient as a metric to be used to document the qualifications of staff. By comparison, ECE certification is most certainly considered sufficient, and in many jurisdictions, licensed ELCC must be run predominantly by certified ECEs.

## American Precedents

Washington State is currently the only jurisdiction in North America that has successfully created a framework to allow for outdoor-based licensed ELCC. As of May 7, 2024, there are 17 licensed ONB (their working term for Outdoor Nature Based) ELCC programs, providing currently 332 ELCC spaces. It is worth noting that the number of programs—and the number of spaces—fluctuates as the program goes through early days.

Notably, the Washington State flagship endeavor was initiated by legislation. The state legislature in 2017 passed a bill that introduced the need for what they refer to as licensed outdoor nature-based (ONB) ELCC, which set the ball in motion for the government staff to figure out how to make it happen. As of Feb 2023 two other states, Oregon and Maryland, have passed similar legislation, which suggests that there will soon be licensed programs in those jurisdictions as well. In fact, in Oregon, “The Early Learning Council will adopt rules governing the certification of outdoor childcare programs, which will become operative on July 1, 2025.”<sup>9</sup>

The following map, provided by the North American Association for Environmental Justice through their Natural Start Alliance, offers an indication of the status of discussions regarding ONB certifications by state as of February 2023.<sup>10</sup>



Notable in this graphic is the high correlation between the existence of a regional network and more advanced discussions and/or legislation.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted on May 28, 2024 from <https://licensingoutdoorpreschoolsinoregon.org/>

<sup>10</sup> Graphic extracted from <https://naturalstart.org/bright-ideas/two-states-have-introduced-legislation-license-outdoor-preschools>

The cornerstones of regulations in Washington include specific consideration and investment in the following elements:

- Staff qualifications & training
- Outdoor active supervision & ratios
- Written policies on risk-benefit assessment methodologies
- Detailed site inspections (removal of hazards, mitigations) & emergency plans (access to shelter)
- Building of relationships of trust between the licensee and the licensor
- Risk management plan (e.g., wildlife, foraging, missing children, seasonal changes to hazards)
- Weather-related policies & practices (clothing, conditions, limits)
- Food safety & food preparation, outdoor toileting & hygiene
- Fire prevention & fire safety policies & practices
- Environmental policies & practices
- Engagement and collaboration with Indigenous partners

Much can be learned from the five-year pilot and the two years of operational experience in Washington State. And indeed, it is valuable to continue to monitor the progress of licensing conversations and processes in both Oregon and Maryland. However, it will be important to adapt what has been learned in the US to address the Canadian context and variations in climate.

### *Cloudberry Case Study*

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The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador has recently explored the potential to license outdoor-based ELCC, and Cloudberry Forest School is the test case to develop a workable business model.

Cloudberry already addresses several of the key elements of this research. They employ certified ECEs, the staff have Forest School training, they have a long-term lease with a private land owner who is highly supportive of their mission, they operate year-round programs for all ages (although some of those programs are not full-time), and they have developed a time-tested curriculum which respects the abilities, age-appropriate risk tolerance and interests of the children in their care.<sup>11</sup>

This feasibility study offers a model for a business that is based upon an “average” of data collected in different jurisdictions. Social Delta will work with Cloudberry to develop a very specific business plan rooted in the rules, (possibly new regulations), community structures, and experience of ELCC provision in the jurisdiction of Newfoundland and Labrador. It is important to

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<sup>11</sup> For greater detail on Cloudberry, see evaluation reports from the study available at <https://sites.google.com/cloudberryforestschool.org/cloudberryforestschool/the-road-to-regulation>



note that this feasibility study is only a foundation and further work must be done to support every specific operating Forest School seeking to become a full-time licensed outdoor-based ELCC provider.

### *Lawson Foundation ELCC Investment*

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The Lawson Foundation has developed an Outdoor Play Strategy<sup>12</sup> and work over the last three years has focussed on systemic change in ELCC through the investment of almost \$5m in eight demonstration projects across the country, each with a different focus. Cloudberry Forest School is identified as one of eight projects and the only project focused on licensing and this report contributes to that discussion.

### *ELCC Licensing Requirements*

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“Licensed childcare is tightly regulated, which is necessary to ensure the safety and protection of children in our care, but it can sometimes feel incredibly restrictive and prohibitive.”—Current provider of licensed ELCC in Ontario

This quote recognizes two key concepts: one, licensing is necessary to protect the best interests of the child; and two, the licensing requirements sometime make operational decisions harder and more costly. This sentiment was not unique amongst licensed ELCC providers and certainly common for outdoor-based program operators who had considered seeking an ELCC license. However, there are also organizations offering outdoor-based recreation programs for children that are cautious of licensing their programs, as they fear that regulations might actually increase their costs and restrict them in their operational decisions.

Every jurisdiction publishes the rules and regulations that licensed ELCC providers must accept (see [Appendix C](#) for some of these links). However, many of these rules are based on “bricks and mortar” criteria, which are not easily translated to an outdoor-based program. Current regulations often focus on designated indoor and outdoor play areas, typically with a numerical allotment for minimum acceptable space (For example, legislation in Ontario requires that indoor play areas must be 2.8 square metres (30 square feet) per child, and fenced outdoor areas must be 5.6 square metres (60 square feet) per child.<sup>13</sup> If the program is going to be mostly outdoors then applying many of these “bricks and mortar” criteria for licensing doesn’t make sense.

Some current licensing requirements focus on staff qualifications, curriculum, procedures, and some of these elements can be applied to an outdoor-based program. This is discussed in more detail in the various thematic aspects of ELCC presented in the following section.

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<sup>12</sup> Available at <https://lawson.ca/our-work/outdoor-play/second-phase/>

<sup>13</sup> The 2.8 square metres must be unobstructed space so storage rooms, counters, any fixtures are to be deducted from the amount.

## SECTION 2: THE FINDINGS, THE CHALLENGES & THE RECOMMENDATIONS

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The principal finding from this research is that parents, ELCC practitioners, academics and policy makers primarily agree that outdoor-based early learning is valuable for early child development and learning. There are very few detractors of this belief.

However, in practice, there are some concerns. There are challenges or perceived challenges from different stakeholders about how to create outdoor-based licensed ELCC. The three big areas that practitioners and experts agree will be critical for licensing are shelter, staffing and policies.

The following pages address the identified key concerns from practitioners and policy makers, grouped by theme, and some possible methodologies to address or mitigate these challenges.

### *Shelter/Space*

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As noted, virtually every licensed ELCC program, regardless of jurisdiction, tends to focus their licensing requirements on the physical space where ELCC is offered. Minimum square footage per child, available bathrooms, physical accessibility, food preparation areas, heating/cooling, first aid stations, fire suppression or control, are some of the criteria currently used by licensing agents to ensure that an ELCC facility is safe and suitable. If the building criteria (and admittedly other criteria) are met, then the license is granted to the organization.

In outdoor-based programs, everyone interviewed agreed that there is a need for some form of appropriate shelter in

*“[There is] a misperception that new facilities/infrastructure are needed for high-quality early learning outdoors”  
--Licensed ELCC provider*

which children and staff could take refuge from severe weather, where they can dry out their gear or get warm (or cool off), where they can rest momentarily, or where they might receive medical or private attention. Outdoor-based programs see shelter as something that needs to be rudimentary, as the principal space for programming, play, teaching, learning, exploring and socializing is outdoors.

After conversations with several outdoor-based operators, Social Delta has coined the expression “a snow angel sized space” per child to summarize the amount of space needed for shelter in a full-time, outdoor-based program. This undeniably Canadian expression was wryly endorsed by many operators, and might be more accurately translated into approximately 9 ft<sup>2</sup> (or 1 m<sup>2</sup>) per child.

The other concept that has been endorsed by many providers is to borrow or lease space and or shelter from other organizations, public buildings or even private landowners. Sharing space with other community based or community minded entities is a way to lower overall operating costs while using resources that already exist and may not be fully operating at capacity.

Interviewees stressed that an outdoor-based program must operate for the majority of the time outdoors. If children spend most of their time indoors, as a result of staff being undermotivated, fearful, or undertrained, then the ELCC will require more indoor space and will become more of an “indoor environment with outdoor play” option, which already exists and would require little or no adjustment to the licensing requirements already in place.

If there is sufficient indoor space for shelter, then there is no real constraint on outdoor space per child. Notionally, Washington State licensing requires a minimum of 4000 ft<sup>2</sup> (372 m<sup>2</sup>) per child of outdoor play space, but this figure is hardly relevant, as 4000 ft<sup>2</sup> is roughly the size of two tennis courts. Many, if not most, outdoor programs in all but the most densely populated urban areas would have much more than that as available space to play.

## Staff

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Every respondent endorsed the fact that quality ELCC relies on trained, qualified staff. Staff ability, pedagogical knowledge, experience, temperament, social skills and caring for children are all fundamental. In most jurisdictions in Canada, licensed ELCC expects a majority of the staff to be certified Early Childhood Educators.

Staffing ratios are set by legislation and vary by age level, but are similar across most jurisdictions in Canada. The table on the following page, taken from Ontario’s *Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014* provides typical ratios.

Every practitioner interviewed suggests that the staff ratios expected under the current licensing scheme in their jurisdiction are low for outdoor-based programming; they assert that there needs to be a minimum of two staff for even the smallest size group, and thus staffing ratios of 2:10 or even 3:12 are considered appropriate for outdoor-based programs for pre-Kindergarten children, for example.

## Staff to child ratios

Licensed child care centres must meet the following **minimum** staff-to-child ratios. They may choose to have more staff but may not have less staff than set out below.

Age group	Age range	Ratio of staff to children	Maximum number of children in group
Infants	younger than 18 months	3 to 10	10
Toddlers	18 to 30 months	1 to 5	15
Preschool	30 months to 6 years	1 to 8	24
Kindergarten	44 months to 7 years	1 to 13	26
Primary and junior school age	68 months to 13 years	1 to 15	30
Junior school age	9 to 13 years	1 to 20	20

Two key challenges regarding staffing for outdoor-based licensed ELCC became evident in the research: availability of ECE staff and determining/quantifying supplemental qualifications.

### Availability:

As noted above, practitioners feel comfortable operating programs which are likely more staff-heavy than current licensing requirements. Therefore, on average, it is anticipated that there would be a 25-30% increase in staffing required for any age group. Moreover, practitioners feel that for licensed outdoor-based ELCC, there should be an equal emphasis on hiring ECE qualified staff.

Regrettably, there appears to be a shortage of qualified ECEs in almost every jurisdiction studied. Where there are ECEs trained, they tend to take on the jobs offering higher wages, and currently that is with government, in schools, or with larger licensed ELCC providers. In order for smaller licensed providers, or indeed newly licensed outdoor-based ELCC providers, it will be difficult to attract the best of the existing cadre of ECEs and it will take time to ramp up training programs at community colleges to increase the supply of qualified ECEs.

Indeed, some practitioners even mentioned that the federal promise of increased availability and lower costs for licensed ELCC doesn't take into account that there are not enough ECEs to make that possible. This shortage of supply dramatically questions the possibility of increasing the

number of available licensed ELCC spaces, whether in outdoor-based programs or in more traditional “bricks and mortar” programs.

### Supplemental Qualifications:

The ECE training is robust, but most post-secondary ECE programs do not currently provide specific training on outdoor-based skills and approaches to play and learning. ELCC providers seek to hire staff (or train staff) with a strong pedagogical approach to outdoor learning and with greater outdoor skills: fire building, tool handling, rope knowledge, botanical knowledge, wilderness first aid, to name a few.

As noted in Section 1, there are training courses available to operate a Forest/Nature School, and a portion of that training certainly focusses on building outdoor skills, relevant to educational programming for all ages. However, this training is not accredited, and indeed there is no way to determine if a person who has taken the training demonstrated excellence in these skills. There is no specific “outdoor-based ELCC certificate” available for practitioners or regulators to rely upon.

There are other training programs for recreational leadership, such as High Five in Ontario,<sup>14</sup> CUI training course for adventure operators,<sup>15</sup> multiple wilderness first aid, kayaking, foraging, mountaineering training organizations,<sup>16</sup> and of course there are college programs on outdoor recreational leadership<sup>17</sup> or other relevant university/college degrees in biology, geology or forestry, for example. These training and educational opportunities may be accredited or non-accredited, but they may well serve as a proxy for supplemental training for outdoor-based ECEs.

Those who are running outdoor-based programs for children indicated that there is also no substitute for experience. Therefore, individuals with camp counsellor experience, family camping or hiking experiences, years spent in the Scouting movement, time spent working in a job in nature (forest ranger, fire fighter, hunter/fisher, ski instructor, marina operator, etc.) or even time spent travelling or living in remote locations all possess valuable, practical skills that could supplement their training as ECEs.

The challenge, then, is how to quantify and consider these lived experiences, training programs, college diplomas or degrees in setting regulations or metrics for licensing agreements.

One interviewee suggested that the licensing should not dictate the right qualifications, but that the license should be granted to organizations that demonstrate proactive hiring and/or

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<sup>14</sup> See more information on High Five at <https://www.prontario.org/qualitystandards/highfive>

<sup>15</sup> See more information on CUI training at <https://challengesunlimited.com/training/>

<sup>16</sup> This 2012 blog post offers links to a variety of outdoor recreational training programs across Canada: <https://woodlandwoman.ca/learn-outdoor-skills-in-canada/>

<sup>17</sup> College-based outdoor recreation programs are listed on the Outdoor Council of Canada website at: <https://outdoorcouncil.ca/resources/outdoor-training-organizations/>

professional development programs that seek to draw upon these many supplemental training or education programs. In this way, the determination of outdoor-based skills is an internal human resource strategy, not a government licensing dictum.

Another suggestion put forward was to create a national third-party body comprised of practitioners that could independently assess, verify and “score” outdoor-based ELCC staff based upon some combination of supplemental training, lived experience and education. This model might mirror the “Agency” model used to license home-based ELCC in Newfoundland: The government provides a license to an Agency, and home-based practitioners work under the auspices of the Agency license. The quality of ELCC is the responsibility of the Agency, who can have multiple ways to assess quality and safety on a case-by-case basis.

A last recommendation was that current ECE programs at educational institutions could offer an extra “module” for outdoor-based skills. Those who trained as ECEs could elect to get the further qualification and would have to pass a course with presumably both a practicum and a theoretical component. This curriculum may well be developed in consultation with existing Forest School trainers or practitioners and would provide a measurable rating of competency and knowledge and then could be assessed by provincial ECE associations for membership and/or government staff for licensing.

A last note about staffing is that those ELCC workers who love nature and who have lived in nature tend to love working with children in a natural setting. They report increased job satisfaction, better working conditions, support for their mental and physical health, and overall joy in working outdoors year-round. Many practitioners—even those with ECE qualifications—reported that they begrudgingly have accepted lower wages in order to work outdoors with kids. One might presume that if the pay were commensurate with other ECE positions, or if there was a pay increase for those with extra qualifications for outdoor-based ELCC, then licensed outdoor-based ELCC programs would attract more of the existing supply of ECEs into their work.

## Wages

Every province sets a wage grid for those with ECE certification. The Newfoundland and Labrador government updated and published their wage grid in April of 2024,<sup>18</sup> as follows:

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<sup>18</sup> See downloadable document available at [www.gov.nl.ca/education/files/ECE-Wage-Grid-Policy-and-Standards-Manual.pdf](http://www.gov.nl.ca/education/files/ECE-Wage-Grid-Policy-and-Standards-Manual.pdf)

ECE Wage Grid 2023 to 2026				
Certification Level	Hourly Rate			
	Base	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Trainee	\$18.06	\$18.42	\$18.79	
Level I	\$21.25	\$21.68	\$22.11	\$22.55
Level II	\$25.00	\$25.50	\$26.01	\$26.53
Level III	\$28.75	\$29.33	\$29.91	\$30.51
Level IV	\$33.06	\$33.72	\$34.40	\$35.09

ECE Wage Grid 2023 to 2026				
Certification Level	Annual Salary			
	Base	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Trainee	\$35,357	\$36,064	\$36,786	
Level I	\$41,597	\$42,429	\$43,277	\$44,143
Level II	\$48,938	\$49,916	\$50,915	\$51,933
Level III	\$56,278	\$57,404	\$58,552	\$59,723
Level IV	\$64,720	\$66,014	\$67,335	\$68,681

These salary figures are based upon 7.5-hour workdays, 261 days a year. Employees are paid for all statutory holidays. These are gross wages/salaries, and payroll deductions for tax or other contributions are not included in the calculation. As of May 2024, there is new funding available that allows for ECEs in Newfoundland and Labrador to receive contributions to a pension, but this has not come into effect at the time of writing.

Note that there are three options for additional compensation. First, there is an administrative bonus (calculated at 10% of salary), which ranges over four steps from \$4,894-\$5,193 per annum. Second, there is a “Labrador Allowance” of \$5,178 per year for those working as ECEs in the Labrador region. Third, there is a Francophone bonus of \$5,178 per year for ECEs working in Francophone ELCC. Note that the level of Certification is not set by the government but by the independently operated Association of Early Childhood Educators of Newfoundland and Labrador (AECENL).<sup>19</sup> The “steps” are defined by years of service, where the Base salary applies in the first 12 months, Step 1 from 1-5 years, Step 2 from 6-10 years, and Step 3 for those practicing for 11 or more years.

By comparison, in Ontario, rates are somewhat higher. In January 2024, the Government of Ontario raised the base rate of pay for ECEs to \$23.86/hour.<sup>20</sup> For further context, in Manitoba the wage range will be \$21.30-\$36.81/hr, effective July 2024.<sup>21</sup> The highest wage in Manitoba is for an experienced director (ECE III) supervising a program with over 150 ELCC spaces.

The CWELCC program funding is allowing provinces to increase the wages of ECEs and there are new wage grids being issued in 2024. It is important to note that the ECE certifying bodies in each province, and certainly ECEs themselves are advocating for higher wages, especially in the face of current inflation rates.

## *Policies*

Licensed ELCC operators have strong documented policies and procedures on many issues. These policies are typically enshrined in documents such as a Parent Handbook, Board minutes, staff

<sup>19</sup> See <https://www.aecenl.ca/> for more on the provincial association of ECEs in Newfoundland.

<sup>20</sup> See the Ontario announcement of ECE wage changes at <https://news.ontario.ca/en/backgrounder/1003832/supporting-child-care-in-ontario>

<sup>21</sup> Manitoba ECE wages presented at [https://www.manitoba.ca/education/childcare/students\\_workforce/wage\\_grid.html](https://www.manitoba.ca/education/childcare/students_workforce/wage_grid.html)

orientation manuals, and quick reference manuals located on the premises. Many of these policy statements are available freely for download or viewing online.

The unlicensed recreational/educational operators who were interviewed also had excellent, comprehensive policy documents—a testament to the quality of these practitioners. Furthermore, a review of websites for outdoor programs across the country also highlighted the fact that most had policies, typically in a parent handbook format—that were published for prospective clients to review.

All practitioners offering outdoor programs for children had some form of documentation that had the parent sign a document indicating that they were aware of the risks. In about half of the interviewed cases, this document is a formal waiver of liability in which parents agree to not hold the operator liable; other operators offered an “informed consent” document which simply allowed parents to acknowledge there were risks involved in outdoor play and that they accepted those risks.<sup>22</sup>

When considering how to license outdoor-based ELCC, it is important to create licensing criteria using a Risk-Benefit Assessment methodology. Washington State licensing agents use this approach already, as it is flexible enough to account for vastly different outdoor or nature settings. One interviewee quipped, “It is impossible to license nature,” which under the current approach of checklists and regulations may seem very true. However, if a licensing agent can consider the risk of a particular concern versus the benefit to child development made available because of that concern, then there is a way to “license nature.”

For example, if there is a ravine at the site, then there is a potential risk to children. However, if there are policies that make access to the ravine safe, and the views afforded by the ravine are awe-inspiring, or the flora present is beautiful or interesting then the risk of the ravine is offset by the benefit of having a program near a ravine.

The same approach could be used for other licensing concerns: fire, tree-climbing, water sports, etc. The benefit of these sorts of activities or settings can be tremendous for children’s development, joy and learning. Licensing criteria must allow for a rational balance between the inherent risks and the potential opportunities.

Both policy makers and practitioners agree that for licensing agents to be able to conduct a Risk-Benefit Assessment, they need to be given both the training and the latitude to apply that training in building relationships with organizations seeking licensing. In the case of Washington State, this increase in training and the increased time to assess a program has a direct cost—in both staff time and professional development—and this needs to be taken into account when governments choose to license outdoor-based ELCC.

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<sup>22</sup> “Informed consent” is recommended practice as per the Canadian Risk Benefit Assessment Framework published by CNAC.



Risk is not the only issue for which an outdoor-based program operator requires policies. Based upon the research, the following list was compiled featuring the policies and legal documents that operators and licensors felt would be appropriate for licensed outdoor-based ELCC providers:

- **General Safety:** Written policies that are both preventative and also inform a staff/organizational response to a common first aid problem (such as a cut or scrape, dehydration or early signs of heatstroke, allergic reactions, dirt in the eye, etc.)
- **Emergency Policies:** Written policies to govern responses to more significant potential threats: fire, evacuation, lightning or other severe weather, a significant fall or trauma, or inappropriate behavior of a child, parent or staff member.
- **Staff Duties:** A handbook for staff to use as a training tool to identify their roles in both daily operations and in situations of emergency.
- **Communication:** Policies that outline expected communications between the operator and parents, health authorities, licensing bodies, funders, police, child protection officials, social workers, or other stakeholders.
- **Food:** Written policies on allowable foods (typically with respect to food allergies) and other expectations of both staff and parents to ensure that children have the nutrition and water necessary to ensure their comfort, safety and participation.
- **Behavioral:** There must be a set of policies to address challenging behaviors from children (such as aggression, fear/panic, disobedience, mental health crises), from parents (such as intoxication, aggression or intimidation, chronic lateness, abuse), and staff (such as abuse, delinquency, incorrect application of policy).
- **Land Use agreements:** In many cases, outdoor programs operate on government-owned land, unceded territory, or private land, and there needs to be some form of contract, or memorandum of understanding (MOU) to ensure that access to that land is not threatened arbitrarily.

One interviewed agency representative mentioned that they conduct safety drills for staff (akin to a traditional fire drill, but for risks that might exist in the outdoors: lightning, out-of-control fires, dehydration, heatstroke, setting a splint, building an emergency shelter, disrupting a bee hive, etc.) Some of these preparatory drills include the children increasing their own awareness and ability should a challenge arise in a natural environment.

One large ELCC operator feared that creating a complex system to “license the outdoors” may actually restrict progress. The respondent indicated that child safety should always be paramount, and licensing has to exist for ELCC operators, but they feared that too many licensing requirements might stall the whole initiative. Indeed, “perfect is the enemy of the good” (Voltaire) and the respondent’s position is that it would be nearly impossible and inappropriate to regulate all aspects of an outdoor-based program because the value and the challenge of the outdoor program is that nature is dynamic, and therefore unpredictable. The respondent’s assertion is that any licensing program needs to allow for competence of the operator to make

decisions in the best interest of the children *in situ*, rather than creating endless lists of requirements which may, or may not, be relevant. As noted above, Washington State has navigated this balance between licensing fixed requirements versus licensing operator competency, experience, and preparedness.

## Education Curriculum

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The benefit of hiring ECEs who have experience or training in outdoor recreation or education is that they have the skills and knowledge to merge their ECE training with the opportunities and constraints of working outdoors. There are many resources available to support the development of outdoor learning and play.<sup>23</sup>

A key element of many outdoor-based programs is that the curriculum is emergent and play-based, where the children are able to help shape the adventure and activities based upon their own intrinsic skills, interests, imagination and risk tolerance. The educator is there as a facilitator, a prompter, and to provide oversight.

Research into an outdoor-based curriculum quickly brings forward the concept of “age-appropriate risky play,” which obviously varies based upon not only age, but also the appetites and abilities of each individual child. Outdoor-based programs frequently endorse a philosophy that taking risks is not only appropriate, but vital for the development of skills, risk awareness, and problem solving. Outdoor-based programs require that staff embrace the notion of risky play, because risk is inherent to play.

*“Risky play has substantial benefits across various aspects of children's health, including their physical, mental, and social-emotional development. Physically, it increases activity levels and reduces sedentary time, contributing to lifelong physical literacy and possibly enhancing the immune system.”<sup>24</sup>*

A central tenet of age-appropriate risky play is the assumption that each child is competent to determine their own level of risk. One child may naturally want to climb to 20 feet up a tree, another will not want to climb at all. Educators must be able to allow for both children to find their own level of risk, supporting the risky climber in safe approaches and the risk averse child in finding an activity in which they do feel comfortable.

To be clear, age-appropriate risky play does not suggest kids can elect to engage in activities that are beyond their skill level or temperament, but it does allow for a willing child to learn how to

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<sup>23</sup> For school age children, the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (Ophea) offers an outdoor education toolkit at <https://ophea.net/outdoor-education-toolkit>. The Outdoor Learning Store is a social enterprise with a raft of resources for outdoor educators at <https://outdoorlearningstore.com/>

<sup>24</sup> This statement was published by Sick Kids Hospital in Toronto on Feb 9, 2024 and is available at <https://www.sickkids.ca/en/news/archive/2024/the-importance-of-risky-play-for-childhood-development/>

use a hatchet (to cut wood), climb a steep incline, wrestle with friends, play near potentially dangerous elements (lake, ravine, road), or to explore areas that are not mapped or fenced in.

There is a noted difference between risks and hazards. A **risk** involves a situation where a child can assess a challenge and decide their course of action based upon personal preference and self-perceived skills. **Hazards** are situations where the potential for injury is beyond a child's capacity to recognize it as such or to manage it and there is little to no benefit of the experience for the child. Outdoor educators seek to minimize or eliminate hazards while supporting taking risks.<sup>25</sup>

## *Sanitation*

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Sanitation is more complicated for children who have not yet been trained to use a toilet. For this reason, many outdoor recreation programs for young children (under 2.5 yrs) require more infrastructure for sanitation, including running water, a place to remove/rinse soiled clothes, garbage removal for diapers, and possibly more than one toilet.

However, for children who are toilet trained (even if they have the occasional accident), outdoor-based programmers indicate that the sanitation needs are very rudimentary and require a toilet (pit toilet is fine), privacy, and some way to wash hands.

Getting dirty is a hallmark—some even argue an absolute necessity—of outdoor-based learning. Of course, getting dirty also requires getting clean, but according to outdoor educators this can be accomplished with simple soap and clean water in a practical, low-cost functional outdoor hand wash stations with a foot pump or other possible solutions if plumbing is not available.

In many urban outdoor-based programs there may also be publicly available facilities that can be used if there are sufficient staff to chaperone a child (or children) to use the bathroom. This chaperoning role is a key reason why a minimum of three staff is recommended by several practitioners: two to remain with the group...where one can back up the other if necessary... and a third to stay with a child who needs to use a bathroom or needs medical care, or privacy, or shelter.

## *Food*

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Many existing unlicensed outdoor-based programs for children only operate part-time (4 hours/day or less). When asked why they didn't operate full-time, many indicated that one of the considerations was that they were unable or unwilling to regularly prepare and provide food in an outdoor-based program. The consistent advice gleaned from outdoor-based operators was to expect children to bring food and snacks from home. The operators could then make space available to safely store and then eat that home-provided food. This reality supports the rationale

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<sup>25</sup> [https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/portfolio\\_page/risk-benefit-assessment-for-outdoor-play-a-canadian-toolkit/](https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/portfolio_page/risk-benefit-assessment-for-outdoor-play-a-canadian-toolkit/)

for this business plan to focus on a model in which families are willing to send prepared food and children are old enough to eat independently.

### *Gear*

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Outdoor-based programs require quite a bit of gear, depending on the program requirements. It is not unusual for a Forest School, for example, to maintain a supply of extra blankets, ropes, tarps or tents, extra boots, tools, extra clothing, or backpacks, snowshoes or skis, and any number of other items necessary to support safe outdoor play.

Outdoor gear requires storage space that is dry, secure, and animal-free for when they are not in use. This space doesn't necessarily need to be heated, although there may be occasions when gear needs to be able to hang up to dry. One program uses a re-purposed shipping container. Another has an unheated wood cabin. Another has a converted barn.

This gear storage space can be attached to or held within the proper heated shelter, but it need only be close to the area where it will be used. The proper heated shelter is where perishable supplies would be kept, such as first aid supplies, food (from home), fresh water, or books and/or games.

### *Equity and Inclusion*

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One of the main drivers for practitioners seeking licensing of an outdoor-based ELCC program is to make it possible to access government grants and subsidies that are only available for families enrolled in licensed ELCC. Unlicensed outdoor educational programs currently operate by charging families for the programming in order to pay for the costs. Operators try to keep costs to a minimum in order to make it affordable. However, research indicates that outdoor programming fees are frequently set at \$70/day or more, when traditional ELCC costs range from as little as \$10/day (in CWELCC-eligible programs) to \$25/day; even the highest cost for a licensed program is almost a third of what a parent will spend on an unlicensed outdoor-based program.

If outdoor-based programs were able to apply for grants and bursaries as licensed ELCC, then they could make their spaces available for a broader number of children, offering the benefits of outdoor learning and play to families who may otherwise have difficulty paying for the fees at their current level. These families may also have less access to nature and the outdoors so these programs can reduce that inequality as well.

As one Forest School operator stated, "Licensing is a means to create accessibility."

### *Indigenous Learning and Reconciliation*

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The majority of practitioners operating an outdoor-based program appear to have a commitment to Reconciliation and typically operators have a deep commitment to recognizing that Indigenous children and families have been living, working, playing and learning on the land for generations;

not only is there a strong sense that outdoor-based childcare should be respectful, they can also learn from the experience of First Nations, Métis and Inuit across the country.

There are two notable and related themes that appeared in the research. One theme is that licensing ELCC is considered by some practitioners to be a “Settler” construct, and therefore creating certifications and licensing requirements automatically may be seen as an affront to Indigenous communities. The second theme is that outdoor-based childcare programs offered *within* Indigenous populations are often based upon traditional cultural values and are therefore unlikely to meet requirements imposed by licensing agencies; therefore, the outdoor-based Indigenous ELCC may not ever be eligible for the grants and bursaries that are based upon a licensing process, and this ineligibility could be seen as reinforcing inequalities.

For those operators and policy makers who are seeking to develop ELCC programs which incorporate Indigenous learning, practice and access to unceded lands, there has been significant investments in working with local indigenous leadership to seek ways to work together in curriculum, licensing and access.

## *Financial*

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Although rates vary tremendously, the average cost for a parent paying for childcare in Canada is \$508/month in 2023, according to Statistics Canada<sup>26</sup> (~\$25/day totals to ~\$6000 per year). This fee can be reduced if a family is eligible for government subsidies or other financial supports, but these supports are only available for families using licensed ELCC facilities, and are typically prorated depending on a family’s net adjusted income.<sup>27</sup>

“There is a real lack of financial support from government and we can only ask families to pay so much before we make forest education unaffordable for some families. It is a balancing act in drawing families in, maintaining financially viable numbers and following the forest school philosophy.” -Leap for Joy Open Air Learning<sup>28</sup>

As noted above, unlicensed programs such as a Forest or Nature School typically charge between \$50-\$70/day, as they receive no ELCC subsidies or grants and they must charge their clients (parents) a market rate that pays for their staff and other operating costs.

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<sup>26</sup> Estimate provided in a blog post at

<https://simplysmartchildcare.com/how-much-is-the-cost-of-daycare-in-ontario-simplysmart-2/>

<sup>27</sup> See <https://www.ontario.ca/page/child-care-subsidies> for the list of available financial supports from Federal and Provincial governments (Ontario) for parents with children.

<sup>28</sup> This quote was a comment made on a blog post at <https://childnature.ca/whats-in-a-name/>

## SECTION 3: THE BUSINESS MODEL

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ELCC is currently offered in a wide array of business models. There are small, unlicensed services run by a parent in their home who is supervising a small number of children (as allowed by each jurisdiction). There are experienced professionals operating similarly small unlicensed facilities. There are private ELCC facilities that may be operated by a company for the benefit of its employees. There are also publicly delivered programs by municipalities and school boards. There are also non-profit organizations devoted to ELCC, possibly operating many sites across a city or region, often with multiple programming options (including some with Forest Schools) and multiple funding sources.

After reviewing the cost structures, the ownership models, and the size of various programs, this study offers a minimum viable model for a full-time, year-round, non-profit, licensed outdoor-based ELCC business offering services to families with children aged 2.5-5 years old, referred to by many as “Preschool” age.

School-age children (6+) and infants and toddlers (under 2.5 yrs) are not part of this proposed business model, as their needs are very different and significantly change the cost structure of a minimum viable business model. It is understood that if licensing policies are to change to allow for outdoor-based ELCC, then those policies must apply to programs offered for children in all age groups. A similar business model can certainly be developed for the younger and older children adapted from the model proposed below.

The rationale for excluding school-age children and toddlers/infants from this feasibility study includes the following observations offered during the interviews:

- School-age children, primarily would need part-time (before-/after-school programs, with full-time during the summer only). Interior shelter options could be more limited, as older kids in shorter programs during the fall/winter seasons can be outdoors more often and for longer spells.
- Younger children will need higher staffing ratios, increased sanitation facilities, potentially more interior shelter space for napping, resting or warming up/cooling off, and the ability to prepare and provide food.

Notably, many of the current Forest/Nature school providers contacted expressed some discomfort at the prospect of offering full-time outdoor-based programs for toddlers and infants. Further investigation is needed to develop and determine the feasibility of programming for infants and toddlers, and for school-aged children. One respondent referred to the core understanding of outdoor-based ELCC: “There needs to be a shift: currently, child care exists in an indoor environment, with an outdoor enhancement. Outdoor-based ELCC would exist outdoors, with an indoor enhancement.”

## *Incorporation Recommendation*

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A prospective licensed outdoor-based ELCC program can exist as a sole proprietorship, a private company, a non-profit corporation or a co-operative. The legal incorporation status should not be a constraint to licensing or operations. Certainly, in Washington State outdoor-based ELCC licenses have been issued to operators from all sectors.

The legal incorporation chosen does not dictate the policies, practices or programming for children. The quality of any ELCC program is determined by the operational mindset, the staffing, and the preparedness of the operators, not necessarily by its legal incorporation.

Having said that, interviewees report that parents often feel comforted by seeking ELCC from collectively-owned organizations (either non-profit corporations or co-operatives). In part, these legal structures offer parents an opportunity to sit on the governance team and thus affect the operations/finances of the organization. For most, however, there is a sense that if the business is operating in a non-profit collective manner, then the costs to them will be minimized as they will not seek to maximize profit. Furthermore, non-profit organizations may also be eligible for funding (particularly if they are registered as a charity) which may further decrease costs for ELCC. And lastly, under the CWELCC program, funding is being prioritized for non-profit ELCC providers, which again means that parents might prefer the expected benefits of lower fees of non-profit providers.

## *Key Assumptions*

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To build a financial model for a minimum viable outdoor-based licensed ELCC facility, Social Delta has made the following assumptions based upon the primary and secondary research:

1. ELCC would be offered year-round, 5 days a week, for 10 hours a day (8:00am-6:00pm)
2. Minimum number of children registered: 12
3. This business model is designed for children between ~2.5 (toilet trained) and 5 years of age.
4. Minimum number of educator staff: 4, always working in at least pairs.
5. Total area of shelter required (at 9 ft<sup>2</sup>/child plus 65 ft<sup>2</sup> for staff and storage): 200 ft<sup>2</sup> (18.6 m<sup>2</sup>)
6. Total area of storage required: ~100 ft<sup>2</sup> (9.3 m<sup>2</sup>)
7. The cost of shelter is estimated as a one-time cost of \$40,000, to purchase or build one rudimentary heated, insulated building, an unheated storage facility, and a suitable private toilet. If the business is able to borrow or lease space from another organization, then the one-time cost would decrease to \$15K for storage and toilet, but there may be an annual rental rate of estimated to be \$3000/year (~\$15/ft<sup>2</sup>).
8. The assumption is that the use of the forest/field/glen or park would have no fee. (No rent for property.)

9. Wages for staff: \$25.00/hour plus 4% holiday pay. This creates an annual base salary of approximately \$48,750 per employee, on average. (See table below.)
10. Each child will require ~\$100 worth of gear, first aid supplies and other consumables, not including their personal gear from home.
11. To determine feasibility, the assumption is that all ELCC spots are filled with paying customers.
12. Professional development (for all staff members) each year: \$2000.
13. The Executive Director also serves as the administrator, responsible for marketing, invoicing, client relations, licensing paperwork, purchasing supplies, maintaining records, and developing new programming as necessary. They are also available to fill in when other staff members are absent, and they represent the business in funding agreements, and public engagements.
14. There will be no food preparation (unless part of a programmatic element) and all children are expected to bring lunch, snacks and water from home.

**Note on the estimate to build a shelter:** As a point of reference, a 200 ft<sup>2</sup> “bunkie” kit can be purchased for ~\$15,000, each, or the buildings can be constructed by an owner/operator for an equivalent cost of materials.<sup>29</sup> There would be extra costs to winterize such a bunkie, and to possibly add an exterior covered deck or screened in porch for a further ~\$5,000 in materials. The \$40,000 cost estimate used in this budget is based on the experience of two interviewees and based upon an assumption that the cost of labour would be approximately equal to the cost of materials for a simple build. This 1:1 ratio of materials to labour is common in rudimentary construction. Furthermore, online estimators of the cost per square foot of building a house place that cost at about \$135-\$250 a square foot. A modest structure in a non-urban/forest setting would likely be between \$27,000-\$38,000 based upon this calculation.<sup>30</sup>

**Notes on the estimate of staff wages/salary:** This calculation is based upon an average across many jurisdictions, as the wages for ECEs vary considerably. The wages represent competitive wages in any jurisdiction, based upon the research. It is expected that staff will work five days a week for 50 weeks. The assumption made is that of the four employees, there will be two junior people, two with some experience, and one who is more experienced and will have administrative, marketing, customer relations, licensing reporting, and curriculum development duties.

Four (4) line staff are needed such that there are two staff available at the beginning and the end of each 10-hour day, and such that during key program times, the ratio of 1:4 is maintained. Note that every OB ELCC may choose a different staff complement of full-time or part-time workers, and the staff model in this feasibility study is just one workable option.

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<sup>29</sup> See <https://bunkielife.com/product/hideaway-bunkie-199/> for an example of a prefabricated small building.

<sup>30</sup> See <https://wowa.ca/how-much-does-it-cost-to-build-a-house> for information on per square foot house building estimates in Canada.



Salary Calculations								
			Hourly	Hrs/day	Days/year	Total	4% holiday	Total
Line Staff	Staff 1	Base salary	\$ 24.00	7.5	250	\$ 45,000.00	\$ 1,800.00	\$ 46,800.00
	Staff 2	Base Salary	\$ 24.00	7.5	250	\$ 45,000.00	\$ 1,800.00	\$ 46,800.00
	Staff 3	ECE II	\$ 26.00	7.5	250	\$ 48,750.00	\$ 1,950.00	\$ 50,700.00
	Staff 4	ECE II	\$ 26.00	7.5	250	\$ 48,750.00	\$ 1,950.00	\$ 50,700.00
		Average	\$ 25.00	7.5	250	\$ 46,875.00	\$ 1,875.00	\$ 48,750.00
Exec Director/Owner		ECE II or III	\$ 28.00	7.5	250	\$ 52,500.00	\$ 2,100.00	\$ 54,600.00
Total Salary								\$ 202,800.00

Note that this staffing matrix excludes market considerations that may exist in specific jurisdictions, and may also undervalue the cost of benefits, such as CPP, EI, or group health plans. For any organization adapting this research model for a business plan in their jurisdiction, they would have to capture the true costs in that market. Salary costs, for example, in a major urban market may have to be higher to attract applications or to retain qualified staff. Similarly, salaries may be lower in rural jurisdictions where the cost of living may not be as high.

By the same token, if a specific OB ELCC business is to be made accessible for children with special needs, there may need to be greater investments in the number of staff members, or in staff members with specific skill sets. Of course, a fully accessible business might also have increased costs related to capital expenses for buildings, toilets, paths and parking. None of these extra costs have been estimated in this feasibility study.

### Business Environment

The outdoor-based ELCC will typically plan to spend 90-95% of the time outdoors, including for meals, breaks, and activities. The children and staff will only be indoors in cases of extreme weather, illness/injury, required private time, or to change or use the toilet. Staff will need to be prepared to manage the program including activities, eating, planning and interactions with children primarily outdoors.

All staff will have first aid kits, emergency supplies, a communication device (walkie talkie or cell phone, depending on location), extra food and water and appropriate clothing to remain comfortable in any weather.

The children need to be dressed appropriately for the weather and must bring some form of backpack to carry extra clothes, water bottle, bug spray, sunscreen, their own food, snacks and medication if necessary (such as an EpiPen or prescribed antibiotics).

## *Finances*

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It is important to recognize that creating a minimum viable social enterprise offering ELCC is an exercise in seeking average conditions across a large, diverse country with varying costs of labour and business inputs, and with different jurisdictional requirements. As licensing is put in place for outdoor-based ELCC, it will surely vary by province, as current licensing parameters for ELCC already vary by province.

Nevertheless, the following budgets have been established based upon the assumptions noted above, with a recognition that costs per child, and prices paid by parents will likely vary from this model in different jurisdictions.

**Outdoor-Based ELCC feasibility budget**

One Year, based upon full time enrollment of children ages 2.5-5 yrs old

Earned Income						Variable Costs					
	Unit measure	Unit volume	Unit Price	Quantity/year	Revenue		Quantity	Unit Cost	Expense	Notes:	
Fees from parents per month	per child	12	550.00	144	79,200.00	Staffing	4	48,750.00	195,000.00	Assuming ratio of 1:4 minimum, never less than 2 cost of gear bought per child	
Gear fee	per child	12	100.00	12	1,200.00	Outdoor gear supplies	12	100.00	1,200.00		
Registration Fee	per child	12	250.00	12	3,000.00						
<b>Total Earned Revenue</b>					<b>\$ 83,400.00</b>	<b>Variable Costs \$ 196,200.00</b>					
Government Investment						Fixed Costs					
	Unit measure	Unit volume	Unit Price	Quantity/year	Revenue				Annual Expenses	Rationale	
Grant/bursary income	per year	12	16750.00	12	201000	Advertising/Marketing			5,000.00	web, posters, business cards, any promotion	
						Insurance			2,400.00		
						fees/licensing/membership			1,000.00	for professional associations, cooperatives, etc)	
						office expenses			250.00	printing, invoicing, mail, etc.	
						Staff training			2,000.00	\$500 per line staff	
						first aid supplies			1,500.00	used per year, upgraded	
						legal/accounting fees			100.00	staff prepare accounts. Fee is for incidentals	
						Rent			-	Assumption is there is no rent for the land	
						Maintenance/repairs			1,000.00	on business assets	
						Administrative Salary			54,600.00	Owner or Executive Director salary	
						Property taxes			-	no allocated property taxes	
						telephone/utilities			2,400.00	hydro, telephone, cable, etc. (200/month est)	
						fuel (non vehicle)			1,000.00	wood for heating per year	
						Motor Vehicle			1,200.00	\$100/month for gas	
						Bank fees			100.00	interest charges, NSF fees	
						Amortized start up costs			14,908.23	repayment of interest and capital over 5 years	
<b>Total Grant Revenue</b>					<b>\$ 201,000.00</b>	<b>Fixed Costs \$ 87,458.23</b>					
<b>Gross Earnings</b>					<b>\$ 284,400.00</b>	<b>Total Costs \$ 283,658.23</b>					
					Net Income	\$	741.77	Salaries as a % of total annual costs:			71.5%
					Cost per child	\$	23,638.19				
CWELCC Calculations					Fees per child (CWELCC \$10/day)	\$	2,400.00				
					Funding per child required at \$10/day	\$	21,238.19				
					Difference in Government investment under CWELCC:	\$	4,488.19				

The budget above has been developed as if an outdoor-based ELCC program is being created from scratch. In point of fact, some of the start-up costs may already have been paid for, which would reduce the amortized annual amount calculated as a fixed cost. Nevertheless, the chart below outlines the expected start-up costs, and calculates the monthly, quarterly and annual payments if the start-up costs were financed at 7.5%.

Outdoor-Based ELCC Start-Up		
Start Up Investments Required		
Purchase of shelter	\$	40,000.00
Advertising & Signage	\$	5,000.00
Legal Fees (contract, bus registration)	\$	2,500.00
Website upgrades	\$	4,000.00
Equipment purchase	\$	8,000.00
Miscellaneous Cash Required	\$	2,500.00
	\$	-
<b>Total Start Up Costs:</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>62,000.00</b>
Total Financing required	\$	62,000.00
Financing Rate (annual)	7.5%	Monthly Interest Rate: 0.63%
Term in months	60	(5-year term)
Discounting rate	49.91	
Monthly interest and capital payment	\$	1,242.35
Quarterly interest and capital payment	\$	3,727.06
Annualized interest and capital payment	\$	14,908.23

### Notes on the Feasibility Budget

The budget above allows for three different scenarios in which new OB ELCC spaces are created:

1. If the full cost is borne by the government, the cost per space is \$23,638.
2. Where parents pay \$550/month, the government would have to pay \$16,750.
3. Where parents pay \$10/day, as per the CWELCC goals, the government would have to pay \$21,238.

It must be noted that these figures are estimates for NEW outdoor-based spaces, built from the ground up on rent-free available land. Many existing forest schools and outdoor-based programs operate without paying rent, and if a new outdoor-based ELCC business is developed, it is reasonable to assume that the educators could find rent-free (or very low rent) space to operate, even in urban environments.

The figures for OB ELCC are even more affordable if it was not necessary to finance the \$62,000 in start-up costs over five years. Financing costs (at 7.5% per annum) increased the operational overhead by ~\$14,908 per year. There are two scenarios in which start-up costs could be minimized or removed from the budget above:

1. If existing unlicensed Forest or Nature Schools, of which there are hundreds already operating across the country, were to be granted an ELCC license, then many of the start-up investments might already be made.
2. If governments or community minded donors were willing to make one-time capital investments to pay for start-up expenses.

Therefore, if the feasibility budget above were to be revised to remove the annual financing expense, then the unsubsidized cost per child would decrease to \$22,396, and the fully subsidized (\$10/day) cost per space would drop to \$19,996.

The table below summarizes the costs for both new and converted spaces in the three scenarios:

	OB ELCC total cost/space	Cost/space if parents pay market rates (\$550/month)	Cost/space if parents pay \$10/day under CWELCC
Newly Created Programs	\$23,638	\$16,750	\$21,238
Converted Existing Outdoor Programs (no start-up costs)	\$22,396	\$15,500	\$19,996

### *Comparing Outdoor vs Indoor ELCC*

Any true comparison between the cost of outdoor-based versus indoor-based ELCC spaces is difficult to make. However, even a cursory examination suggests that it is reasonable to consider licensing OB ELCC as an affordable way for governments to generate new ELCC spaces for Canadian families.

The costs of erecting (or renovating) buildings to house new indoor-based ELCC spaces are enormous, and vary tremendously by jurisdiction. These costs may also be amortized over decades or may be paid for by government through other funding envelopes, but even so, the annual cost per new indoor space will have to include all the staffing and safety considerations currently expected for quality care, as well as a significant cost for the creation and maintenance of a building year-round. Outdoor-based ELCC spaces do not require million-dollar capital investments in real estate, and it is reasonable to consider this option as a lower burden for governments seeking to investment in ELCC.

Nevertheless, both practitioners and policy makers acknowledge that staffing ratios for outdoor-based ELCC would be higher than equivalent “bricks and mortar” businesses, but even with increased ratios, the annual cost per ELCC space is worth comparing.

It is possible to draw some comparisons between the OB ELCC costs estimated in this feasibility study with the investments that are willing to be made in Nova Scotia. In May of 2024, the Nova Scotia government, using funding made available through the CWELCC program, announced an initiative to help fund new ELCC spaces. In that announcement, they offer \$20,000 per space for leasehold and rental properties. For properties owned by the child-care operator or if the ELCC program is in a public building, such as a university, projects can receive up to \$40,000 per space created.<sup>31</sup>

Given the Nova Scotia example, and assuming that there is no requirement for a significant annual rent and no requirement for the buying of a new building, then the investment in licensing outdoor-based ELCC is a feasible, affordable and practical way to increase available ELCC spaces.

A licensed ELCC provider in Ontario currently posts on their website that the percentage of their annual budget that pays for staff is 86%. The calculation above for a minimum viable outdoor-based ELCC business suggests that 71.5% of the expenditures would pay staff. Note, that this comparable percentage allows for a 1:4 ratio of qualified professionals to children. Moreover, qualified ECEs with outdoor-based experience and knowledge will be offered a wage which is on par with what would be prescribed in any current ECE salary grid in the country.

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<sup>31</sup> See announcement on NS ELCC investment at <https://news.novascotia.ca/en/2024/05/02/new-program-increase-child-care-spaces>

# CONCLUSION

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There is little doubt that outdoor-based licensed ELCC programs will be valuable, and many educators believe that this approach is almost inevitable. Success is more likely when governments endorse the premise that outdoor-based ELCC is valuable through legislation, help to define regulations specific to outdoor-based programming, and then provide funding which is comparable to existing incentives for “bricks and mortar” facilities.

Representing the only jurisdiction in North America which has successfully designed, tested and operationalized a regime to license outdoor-based ELCC, Debbie Groff of the State of Washington was guided by the simple principle of “not if, but how.” This feasibility study offers a viable business model that has been grounded in conversations with experienced outdoor educators. It is a preliminary investigation offering a foundation of how to set up an outdoor-based ELCC business that meets the safety needs of an enrolled child, cultivates a unique and valuable learning environment, pays (doubly) qualified staff to run the program, and increases accessibility to quality ELCC options for parents.

“For a movement to have reach, for every child in Canada to have the opportunity on a regular basis to get their boots muddy at daycare or school, we must grapple and grow. We must stumble, we must be curious, we must debate. There is no perfection or utopia here, Forest School is a messy place where messy ideas are practiced and played out.” --Marlene Power, 2019<sup>32</sup>

There are operational challenges for outdoor-based ELCC, but respondents have offered strategies to address those challenges, and the cost implications of those strategies have been included in this business model. One policy interviewee stated, “What it all comes down to is risk.” Educators and ELCC practitioners seek to address concerns about risk in order to be licensed, and in order to gain access to government grants and subsidies to operate. This business model outlines what might be expected costs to ensure that the business is safe, and may serve as a starting point to discuss how outdoor-based ELCC can be licensed and then benefit from the CWELCC funding available.

Licensing outdoor-based ELCC is not only possible, it is practical, beneficial, and cost-effective at an estimated \$23,638 per child each year. Moreover, based upon the business model proposed, and based upon existing organizations becoming licensed, it may be a relatively quick way to create more quality ELCC spaces in Canada.

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<sup>32</sup> From “What’s in a name?” Blog Post, <https://childnature.ca/whats-in-a-name/>

# APPENDIX A: ONTARIO ONLINE SURVEY

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The following is a summary of the data collected with a survey on opinions regarding licensing outdoor-based early learning and childcare, conducted April 24-May 3, 2024.

## *Purposes of the survey:*

1. To get basic information, including challenges and operational elements, from those organizations that are interested in providing outdoor-based licensed ELCC.
2. To identify those who are particularly advanced in their desire to license their outdoor based programs for children, to participate in an interview for more information.
3. To estimate the potential increase in available licensed ELCC spaces in Ontario if there was a mechanism to license outdoor-based programs.

## *Data Set:*

The survey was sent to 56 organizations offering outdoor programming employing early childhood educators in Ontario. Some of these are larger organizations that offer licensed ELCC and have some element of outdoor-based learning, and others are unlicensed organizations that offer outdoor-based programs for children (such as Forest Schools)

## *Response:*

- 26 organizations viewed the survey page (46%)
- 12 responded to all or some of the survey (21%)
- 8 completed the entire survey (14%)

Respondents who provided an organization name (11):

- Rideau Valley Conservation Authority
- Circle R Ranch
- Out to Play Inc
- Emmanuel at Brighton Child Care Centre
- The Nature School, Kortright
- Family Space Quinte
- Nature's Calling Environmental Education
- Cedar Wild Nature Connection
- The Owl's Nest Holistic Alternative School
- At Last Forest Schools
- TimberNook Elgin

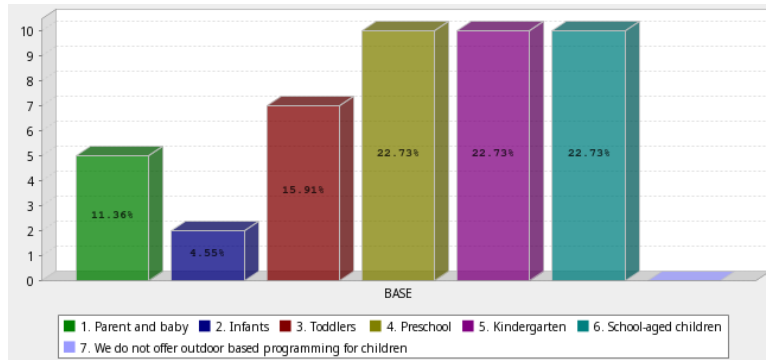
## *Basic Respondent Data:*

Recognizing that the sample size was small, these results cannot be expected to represent all organizations operating out-door programs for children. Nonetheless, it was interesting to learn the following:

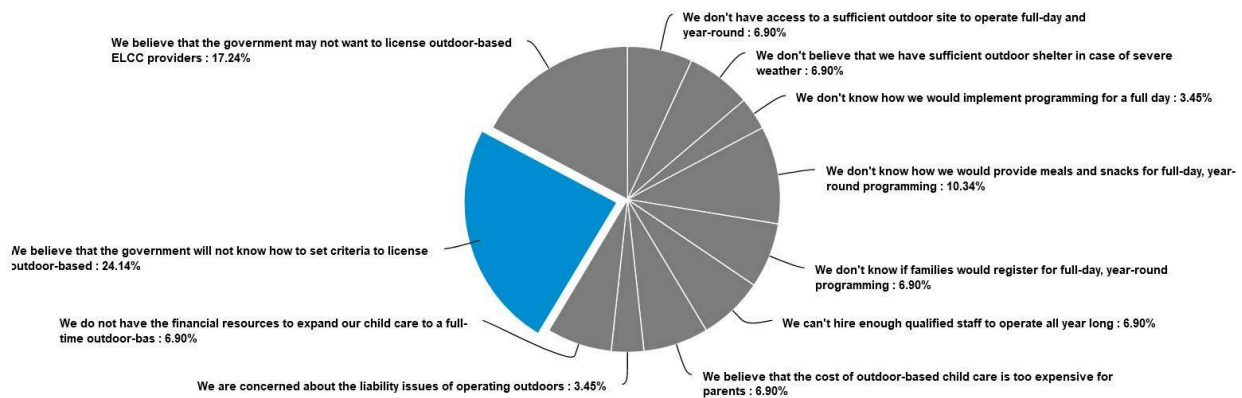
- 25% of respondents were existing licensed ELCC providers
- 33% of respondents were not licensed but were interested in becoming licensed



- None of the respondents ran ONLY summer programs. Therefore, all respondents ran either full-time or part time programs throughout the year. 46% offered part time programming year-round, 23% offered full-time programs year-round and 30% offered full-time summer programs with part-time programs for the rest of the year.
- Respondents offered programs for all age groups, from “parent and child” to “school age” (see chart below)



- Almost 40% of respondents provided specialty gear for children, but other than bug repellent and/or sunscreen, children at these programs were responsible for their own raingear, backpacks, boots, hats, snowsuits, and mittens.
- 90% of respondents expected the children to arrive with their own food for the day.
- Half of the respondents charged between \$50-\$75 per day for their programs.
- Only one respondent charged only \$10/day under the Canada Wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) Program.
- For those operating unlicensed outdoor programs, 50% of their staff were ECE certified.
- When asked to present the challenges they face or expect to face in licensing their outdoor-based programs for children, the two most popular responses were that they either believe the government does not want to license these programs (17%), or that the government does not know how to set the appropriate criteria for licensing (24%). (see pie chart below)



## *Proposed Licensing Criteria*

When asked to recommend criteria that might be appropriate for the government to consider to allow for licensing outdoor-based ELCC, there were many suggestions, which have been assembled by general category below: (asterisks indicate where an idea was presented by multiple respondents)

### STAFFING

- Qualified and experienced (and passionate) ECE staff (\*)
- Recognizing additional training and qualifications of staff (i.e. forest school practitioner, Ontario College of Teachers, etc.), (\*)
- Seasonal training for staff
- Staff above and beyond ratio to support activities like fires, tools etc.

### SAFETY

- Policies and procedures to ensure the safety of the children/educators/families (\*)
- Established safety systems (\*)
- Site Risk-Benefit Assessments, (\*)
- Activity Risk-Benefit Assessments
- Daily Risk-Benefit Assessments
- Emergency Procedures
- Missing Person Procedures
- Tornado and Severe Weather Policy
- Confidentiality policy
- Behavior Guidance Policy
- Abuse Policy

### CURRICULUM

- A child-centred, inquiry-driven, emergent play-based pedagogy (\*)
- Emergent land-based curriculum (\*)
- Support for children who may have behaviours or be flight risk
- Learning provocations focused on connection to the land, literacy, movement and gross motor, and art.

### SHELTER/SITE

- Outdoor play spaces set up to nurture child-led learning experiences, including woods with trails and open areas (\*)
- An indoor space with a means to warm up in winter, dry off in wet weather (\*)
- Shelter for inclement weather but not the same space needed for traditional centres as this space is costly and would not be used as the outdoor environment is the classroom
- Remove the requirement for fenced areas.
- Remove the requirement for kitchen areas if meals are provided from home.
- Remove the requirement for specific napping areas (we can nap outdoors sometimes).
- Bathroom (port-a-potty)
- Storage space
- Access to water (for drinking, cleaning)

- We use public washrooms which may not pass the current requirements either.

#### COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

- Employee Handbook Parent Handbook
- Communication policy
- A means to demonstrate the learning for families

#### OTHER CRITERIA

- Proper insurance
- Quality back-up outdoor gear for children and youth
- And a note from one respondent: The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada has done some important work on defining quality indicators and should be considered a stakeholder, thought leader in this.

#### *Projecting New Licensed ELCC Spaces*

Can we predict how many new full-time licensed ELCC spaces might be made available if existing outdoor-based programs were to be licensed? Any projections from these survey results may not adequately represent the actual possibilities, as the sample size is small, the participation is biased in favor of such a licensing arrangement, and some of the organizations contacted may not yet even be considering licensing options, or outdoor recreation options. Moreover, there are many privately-run outdoor education and childcare programs that may well consider expanding if they were to alter their program to qualify for government funding for licensed ELCC spaces.

Nonetheless, even with a small sample size of 8 organizations responding to this particular survey question, it is clear that if financial restrictions were removed and licensing of outdoor-based ELCC programs became possible as a matter of government policy, then there is an opportunity to generate new spaces in all age groups except infant. The chart below documents the responses from the different agencies. Notably, the average increase was 60 new spots per organization, with the bulk of those new spots in Pre-school and Kindergarten age groups.

<b>POSSIBLE NEW ELCC SPACES</b>						
	Infant	Toddler	pre-school	Kindergarten	School age	Total
TimberNook Elgin		10	10	10	25	55
The Owl's Nest Holistic Alternative School			10	20	11	41
Nature's Calling Environmental Education			20	15		35
The Nature School, Kortright		30	30	30	30	120
Emmanuel at Brighton Child Care Centre		30	48	26		104
Out to Play Inc		16	16	16		48
Circle R Ranch				15	15	30
Rideau Valley Conservation Authority			15	15	16	46
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>479</b>
<b>Ave/org</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>60</b>

## *Conclusions*

This is a small survey, and any conclusions must be tempered. There are many organizations, both licensed and unlicensed, in the province of Ontario that use outdoor education models and experiences for children. Many early childhood educators are also trained in Forest School methodologies or have lived experience in outdoor education or recreation.

Unsurprisingly, those who responded to this survey are keen on--and even largely optimistic about--the possibility of licensing outdoor-based ELCC. There are, in effect two groups interested in this concept and who responded to this survey: those who are existing licensed ELCC providers interested in outdoor education; and those who are outdoor education/recreation providers who are interested in becoming licensed ELCC organizations.

Organizations recognize that there are financial, logistical, staffing, marketing and licensing challenges to this innovative approach to ELCC. However, practitioners feel that if these challenges are overcome, there is a tremendous ability to increase available licensed, high-quality ELCC spaces by including full-time, year-round outdoor based programs. Recommendations from practitioners about how to develop the licensing criteria focus on quality staffing, robust child-led curriculum, and safety protocols, standards and policies, while limiting the current requirements for indoor space and food preparation.

This survey was an initial part of a larger research project on the basic requirements for licensing outdoor-based early learning and childcare in different Canadian jurisdictions. Those who responded to this survey and expressed an interest in more detailed conversations will also be able to feed into the larger research project.

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWED EXPERTS

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The following 14 individuals were interviewed to inform this feasibility study from a set of experts in the field who have experience or vested interest in the development of licensed outdoor-based early learning and childcare.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Organization</i>
<i>Kim Hiscott</i>	<i>Andrew Fleck Children’s Services (ON)</i>
<i>Debbie Groff</i>	<i>Child Care Deputy Senior Administrator, Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families (USA)</i>
<i>Belva Stone</i>	<i>Muddy Boot Prints (BC)</i>
<i>Louise De Lannoy</i>	<i>Outdoor Play Canada (ON)</i>
<i>Kelly Birch</i>	<i>Emmanuel at Brighton Child Care Centre (ON)</i>
<i>Cathy Poole</i>	<i>YMCA Greater Vancouver (BC)</i>
<i>Laura Molyneux and Lori Dalton</i>	<i>Cloudberry (NFLD)</i>
<i>Emily Recoskie and Jill Wickins</i>	<i>Compass (ON)</i>
<i>Brenda Ferguson</i>	<i>Today’s Family (ON)</i>
<i>Lara Purvis</i>	<i>Out To Play (ON)</i>
<i>Marlene "Marnie" Power</i>	<i>Playful Mindset (ON)</i>
<i>Krystal Therien</i>	<i>Government of Nova Scotia, Director ELCC</i>
<i>Shelley Kapraelian Kim Butt</i>	<i>Government of Newfoundland and Labrador</i>

# APPENDIX C: FURTHER REFERENCES

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The following links offer ideas and opinions that have informed this report, but are also worthwhile resources for further review.

## Canadian Jurisdictions:

- Ontario Regulations on Child Care: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/child-care-rules-ontario> and the related act: <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/statute/14c11>
- Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement with Ontario- 2021 to 2026 <https://www.canada.ca/en/early-learning-child-care-agreement/agreements-provinces-territories/ontario-canada-wide-2021.html#h2.04>
- Federal Secretariat on Early Learning and Child Care <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/early-learning-child-care.html>
- Newfoundland Operating Grants Program: Child Care <https://www.gov.nl.ca/education/childcare/operating/>

## International

- Natural Start (US) Blog Post: <https://naturalstart.org/bright-ideas/two-states-have-introduced-legislation-license-outdoor-preschools> and research project at [https://naturalstart.org/sites/default/files/staff/storer\\_pisces\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://naturalstart.org/sites/default/files/staff/storer_pisces_final_report.pdf)
- Outdoor Early Learning Alliance of Oregon (US): <https://licensingoutdoorpreschoolsinoregon.org/>
- Washington State assessment process to license ONB Child Care: <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/ONB-Initial-Checklist.pdf>
- Washington State promotional material for potential licensees: [Become a Licensed ELCC & Early Learning Provider | Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families](https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/services/early-learning-providers/licensed-provider/onb)
- Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families: Outdoor Nature-Based Child Care Programs <https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/services/early-learning-providers/licensed-provider/onb>
- Washington State Legislative criteria: <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=110-302>
- Scottish Government investment in outdoor play and learning: [www.gov.scot/policies/early-education-and-care/outdoor-play-and-learning/](https://www.gov.scot/policies/early-education-and-care/outdoor-play-and-learning/)
- David Catlin Consulting: (US) [www.davidcatlin.com](http://www.davidcatlin.com)

## ECE Information

- A summary of wage grids for Early Childhood Educators in different Canadian jurisdictions is published by the Canadian Child Care Federation at <https://cccf-fcsge.ca/ece-resources/professional-development/journey-early-childhood-education/ece-salary-information/>

- College of Early Childhood Educators <https://www.college-ece.ca/>

#### Other Resources

- Outdoor Learning Store: [www.outdoorlearningstore.com/](http://www.outdoorlearningstore.com/)
- Early Learning and Child Care Information Hub: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/71-607-x2021007-eng.htm>
- Report on ECEs in Canada: <https://ecereport.ca/en/overview/#learning-environment>
- Playful Mindset: <https://playfulmindset.ca/>
- Explore Nature: A Detailed Report with Information, Reviews, and Insights <https://www.ourkids.net/school/explore-nature/1356>
- Where to Learn Outdoor Skills in Canada: <https://woodlandwoman.ca/learn-outdoor-skills-in-canada/>
- Outdoor Education Training - Challenges Unlimited <https://challengesunlimited.com/training/>
- Forest and Nature School Practitioners Course - Child and Nature Alliance of Canada <https://childnature.ca/forest-school-canada/>

#### Risky Play

- Why Children Need Risk, Fear, and Excitement in Play, Outdoor Play Canada <https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/2024/03/22/why-children-need-risk-fear-and-excitement-in-play-and-why-adults-fears-put-them-at-risk/>
- The importance of risky play for childhood development <https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/resources/?category=31>

## APPENDIX D: PRACTITIONER WEB SITES

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The list below is a sample of the practitioner websites reviewed for this study. The list includes both licensed and unlicensed programs for children where there is a specific focus or program featuring outdoor-based education and play.

- Ecoschools Canada: [www.ecoschools.ca](http://www.ecoschools.ca) (listing of various Eco-schools)
- Natural Start Alliance: <https://naturalstart.org/map> (US based, but with many Canadian listings on their map)
- Outdoor ECE Database, Outdoor Play Canada  
[https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/portfolio\\_page/outdoor-ece-database/](https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/portfolio_page/outdoor-ece-database/)
- Coulee Critters Forest & Nature School: <https://www.couleecritters.com>
- Nature Discovery Forest School and Child Care, Waterdown  
<http://www.daycarebear.ca/family-home-daycare-dayhome/3869-nature-discovery-forest-school-and-child-care-waterdown.html>
- Common Digs Forest School <https://www.commondigs.com/forestschool-index>
- Discovery Child Care Kindergarten Forest & Nature School  
<https://www.discoverychild.on.ca/forest-school/kindergarten-program/>
- Roots and Boots Forest School Society <https://www.rootsandboots.ca/>
- Upper Canada Child Care Forest School  
<https://uppercanadachildcare.com/our-programs/forest-school/>
- Natural Start Tiny Trees Preschool  
<https://naturalstart.org/about/member-spotlight/tiny-trees-preschool>
- The Truro Forest School, Nova Scotia <https://www.truroforestschool.ca/>
- Wild Wonders Forest School <https://www.growingwildwonder.com/>
- Wild Child Kids Outdoor Education <https://www.sierraclub.ca/programs/wild-child/>
- Rising Roots Forest and Nature Programs <https://www.risingrootsns.com/>
- FORESTKIDS <https://forestkids.ca/>
- Barrie Forest and Natural Learning School <https://barrieforestschool.com/>
- Bushkids <https://bushkids.ca/>
- At Last Forest Schools <https://www.atlastforestschools.com/contact-us/>
- Emmanuel at Brighton Child Care Centre <https://www.emmanuelchildcare.ca/>
- Muddy Boot Prints <https://muddybootprints.com/>
- Out to Play – Forest and Nature School <https://outtoplay.ca/>
- Compass Early Learning Centre <https://www.compasselc.com/>
- Wild & Immersive <https://wildandimmersive.ubc.ca/>



# NOTES TO THIS REVIEW

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This document has been written primarily to indicate the costs and structure of a hypothetical, small licensed outdoor-based ELCC business. It is not a business plan, nor does it reflect the necessary costs and variables in all contexts. It is a model based upon common elements that have been shared with Social Delta that may be faced by organizations wishing to offer licensed outdoor-based year-round ELCC.

Although many issues and ideas have been discussed by many practitioners and policy makers over the last years, this document is an attempt to capture the key elements of dynamic conversation and to introduce a “minimum viable business” model to document a possible practical Canadian application of these many discussions.

It is recognized that every business will need to conduct its own research specific to their region, legislative context, and their client base in order to determine feasibility. It is recommended that any organization wishing to embark on creating an ELCC business, licensed or otherwise, do so following a formal business planning process to accommodate appropriate information gathered from the market in which they plan to operate. All recommendations and observations in this research are based upon information shared by various current stakeholders and should be subject to scrutiny as time passes, as licensing requirements evolve and as market conditions change.

Although every effort has been taken to provide sound guidance and to identify and address a wide range of risks, the author of this document takes no responsibility for any business losses or financial liabilities that may result in the application of these set of recommendations, nor any subsequent set of recommendations or actions based upon this summary.

All financial information in this document has been expressed in Canadian dollars unless specifically noted.