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Demographic analysis and shortage of French-language early learning and childcare services

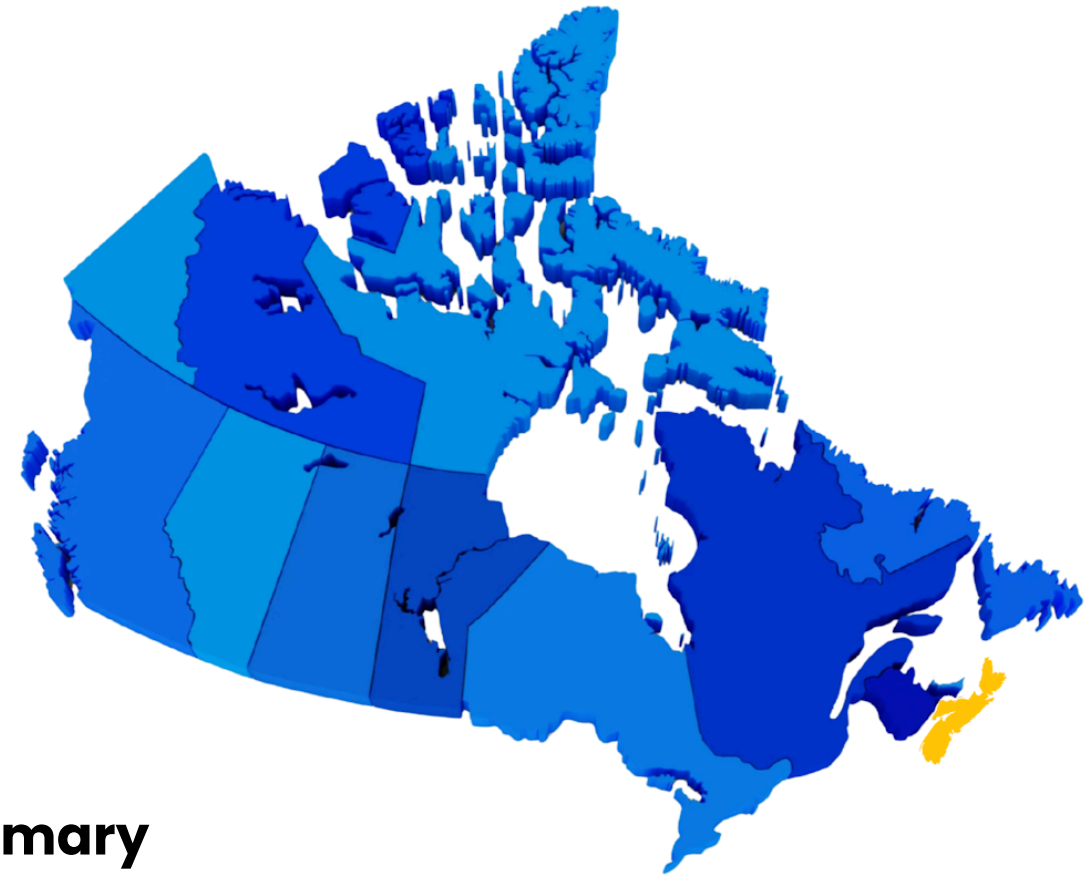
Profile of French-language ELCC services for children aged 0 to 4 eligible for French-language education in

Nova Scotia

cnpf

La Commission nationale des parents francophones

September 2026



Summary

Several communities in Nova Scotia are left with a shortage of full-time spaces in French-language early learning and childcare services for children under five years of age. As part of the federal program aiming to reduce childcare costs, it is essential that this cost saving initiative be associated with an increase in the number of available spaces. This analysis, produced by the Commission nationale des parents francophones [National Commission of Francophone Parents] (CNPF), presents a situation assessment in Nova Scotia as of September 1, 2025, and suggests communities to target to optimize the impact of these new spaces.

The project "Creation and Support of the Network of Early Childhood Stakeholders in Minority Communities" by the Commission nationale des parents francophones (CNPF) is funded by the Government of Canada through the "Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Program" under the Action Plan for Official Languages. The ideas and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors. They do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

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Note: The terms "French-language early learning and childcare (ELCC) service" and "French-language ELCC service" include the diverse terminology used in the provinces and territories, such as daycares, educational centres, early childhood centres (ECC), etc.

1- Background

In 2021, the Government of Canada aimed, in its budget, to implement an accessible and affordable early learning and childcare system for the Canadian population[1]. With the aim of helping Canadians return to work after the COVID-19 pandemic, the government identified the cost of childcare services as a barrier preventing some parents from returning to work. Budget 2021 therefore provided $30 billion over five years for this initiative, with the main goal of reducing childcare fees for preschool-aged children.

However, while the focus was placed on reducing childcare fees, this was not accompanied by an equivalent creation of spaces in French-language early learning and childcare (ELCC) services, making the shortage of spaces even more important. Five years later, accessibility remains a major challenge: many parents struggle to find a full-time space for their child in a French-language ELCC service. Fee reduction is an important incentive for parents. On the other hand, it does not necessarily make up for the shortage of available spaces. This sharp increase in demand for services by parents has not been offset by a corresponding supply of new spaces.

In a Francophone minority setting, this problem is made worse by the spread of Francophones across the territory. Early childhood stakeholders see this program as an opportunity to start new services, knowing that, obviously, many families could benefit from such a service.

This study fits into this context by identifying geographic areas where children aged 0 to 4 are present (according to the 2021 Census from Statistics Canada), but where there

[1] https://www.budget.canada.ca/2021/home-accueil-en.html

are not enough childcare services. In other words, we seek to identify, for Francophone parents looking for a space in a French-language ELCC service, the chances that they will be able to find such a space for their child. We must be aware that parents unable to find a French-language ELCC service will face two choices: delay their return to the labour market or send their child to a centre in another language, usually English.

It is important to specify that the areas identified in this document may be childcare deserts for Francophones, while overall there are enough spaces for parents of the English-speaking majority. The CNPF believes it is essential to identify areas that are Francophone deserts so that the Government of Canada's program achieves its objectives, meaning that access to childcare for Canadians is equal for parents of both official languages.

Launched in 2025, the project *Creation and Support of the Network of Early Childhood Stakeholders in Minority Communities* aims, by 2028, to improve access to high-quality, affordable, flexible, and inclusive early learning and childcare (ELCC) spaces, services, and programs in Francophone minority communities (FMCs). To achieve this, the CNPF was able to conduct studies and data analyses.

This present study aims to identify service deserts in the communities of the province of Nova Scotia, based on census subdivisions and the number of rights-holders aged 0 to 4, to determine the number of spaces in French-language ELCC services to be created to meet the needs of Francophone communities in the province.

2- Methodology

This study identifies French-language ELCC service deserts by identifying a ratio of full-time spaces per child. To conduct this analysis, we use the number of children aged

0 to 4 identified as eligible for French-language education, pursuant to section 23 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*[2], as measured by Statistics Canada's 2021 *Census of Population*. The term "child" used in the rest of this document refers to this definition.

To obtain the number of spaces in French-language ELCC services, this study uses data from the Fédération des parents acadiens de la Nouvelle-Écosse (FPANÉ) [Acadian Francophone Parents Association of Nova Scotia], the Centre d'appui à la petite enfance de la Nouvelle-Écosse (CAPENÉ) [Nova Scotia Early Childhood Support Centre], and direct calls to various French-language ELCC services. The identified spaces are accurate as of September 1, 2025. We thus identified 956 full-time spaces in French-language ELCC services across the province[3][4].

From these datasets, we were able to identify a parameter indicating, for each preschool-aged child, how many spaces are available.

To accurately represent the situation in Nova Scotia, we used the datasets that locate the children in the province as precisely as possible. While in some cases it was possible to specify a municipality directly, in others we had to fall back on census divisions or areas. The city of Halifax was divided into sectors when using this dataset. These sectors (shown in Appendix 2) were identified by postal service areas (the first three characters of the postal code).

To determine the French-language ELCC service deserts, we will use three simplified thresholds:

[2] Table n° 98100541 from Statistics Canada's former CANSIM database.
[3] The complete list of identified French-language ELCC services is found in Appendix 1.
[4] Note that preschool ("Grandir en français") is offered during the full school day to 4-year-old children eligible for Francophone school in Nova Scotia.

1. First threshold: ratio between 0 and 0.40 (in white)

It corresponds to **high-need** sectors, meaning there are more than 2.5 children per available space. On average, this means a parent waits 2.5 years before getting a space in a French-language ELCC service. Considering that a parent registers their child on a service waitlist from birth, the child will be over two and a half years old when a space is offered. By this point, the parent will likely have chosen another childcare option for their child.

2. Second threshold: ratio between 0.40 and 0.70 (in yellow)

It corresponds to **medium-need** communities, where there are between 1.5 and 2.5 children per space in French-language ELCC services. As explained previously, this means the child will, on average, get a space around the age of 2. In this case, we find ourselves in a situation where the parent might use a temporary option while waiting to get a space in a French-language ELCC service.

3. Third threshold: ratio superior to 0.70 (in green)

It corresponds to **well-served** communities. In these areas, there are enough French-language ELCC spaces, and parents can trust they will get a space for their child relatively quickly (before 18 months of age)[5]. Given that the parental leave permitted by law is 18 months, it can be assumed that children in these communities will secure a French-language ELCC space on their very first day.

Thus, only communities with a ratio of more than 0.70 spaces per child aged 0 to 4 (meaning at least 7 spaces for every 10 children) are considered properly served, while all others are classified as areas in need.

[5] According to the *Québec Study on the Accessibility and Use of Childcare Services 2021* by the Québec Institute of Statistics, 70% of children use childcare services. As Québec is a model in childcare, a threshold of 0.70 spaces per child (where 70% of children have a space) is considered sufficient.

3- Foundations of the analysis

A few elements deserve to be presented from the outset to lay the groundwork for this analysis.

Data as of September 1, 2025

Current data represent the best available information as of September 1, 2025. Given how quickly an ELCC service can close and current efforts to develop new spaces, we must be aware that a geographic area can rapidly shift from a high-need community to a well-served area, and vice versa.

Pre-kindergarten and school-age childcare services excluded

Since the purpose of this study is to present an inventory of available full-time spaces in French-language ELCC services, all preschool services offering part-time spaces were excluded from the ratio calculations. The same applies to all support services for school-age childcare programs that serve school-aged children.

Proximity to home: the primary reason for choosing an ELCC service

A study by Learn Square Inc.[6] revealed that the primary reason parents choose an ELCC service is its proximity to their home or workplace. The 2025 *Canadian Early Learning and Child Care Survey* by Statistics Canada[7] arrives at a similar conclusion: two thirds of parents mention location as a determining factor in choosing childcare services for their child.

Although censuses provide an overview of the average distance a parent travels to work, they do not indicate the destination of that commute. This means that home location data is the only usable data. Despite this limitation in the data, the proximity of the home remains an important factor in the parent's choice.

[6] Learn Square Inc., *Rapport d'évaluation des services de garde privés francophones et bilingues dans les régions d'Edmonton et Calgary*, [*Evaluation Report on French-Language and Bilingual Private Childcare Services in the Edmonton and Calgary Regions*], presented to the CDÉA, February 2021.
[7] Statistics Canada, *Table 42-10-0006-01 Parent and guardian reasons for using main childcare arrangement, children aged 0 to 5 years*, 2025.

4- Presentation of results

According to the 2021 *Census of Population*, there were 3,725 children aged 0 to 4 eligible for French-language education in Nova Scotia. With 956 full-time spaces in French-language ELCC services, the provincial average ratio is **0.26 spaces per child**, or just a little over 1 space for every 4 children. This means that for the province to be well served by French-language ELCC services, the number of full-time spaces would need to be 2.5 times higher. Table 1 presents a summary of the situation regarding available French-language ELCC spaces and children across the province.

Table 1: *Distribution of spaces in French-language ELCC services and children in Nova Scotia*

Sector	No of spaces	No of children	Ratio
City of Halifax	546	1,905	**0.29**
North-East	116	385	**0.30**
Northern	18	450	**0.13**
South-West	276	925	**0.30**
Central	0	60	**0.00**
Province total	**956**	**3,725**	**0.26**

To maximize the reach of these potential new spaces, their location is paramount. This is why a more detailed analysis by geographic area is necessary to identify the sectors where the needs are greatest.

The City of Halifax

The city of Halifax is a census metropolitan area (CMA) with a population of 482,144 according to the 2021 *Census of Population*. Due to its size, it has been divided into three sectors (see Table 2 and Appendix 2).

Table 2: *Distribution of spaces in French-language ELCC services and children in the city of Halifax*

Sector	No of spaces	No of children	Ratio
South-West	94*	805	**0.12**
Northern	210	500	**0.42**
South-East	242	600	**0.40**
Total city of Halifax	**546**	**1,905**	**0.29**

*A 42-space educational centre is expected to open in winter 2026, bringing the total number of spaces to 136.

According to data on children eligible for French-language education, there would be 1,905 children aged 0 to 4 in Halifax, which is just over half of the eligible children in the province (51%). Considering that we have identified 546 full-time spaces in French-language ELCC services, this means just under 1 in 3 children (or a **ratio of 0.29** spaces per child) would have access to French-language ELCC services. With this low ratio, a vast majority of parents must turn to English-language services, which increases the risk of linguistic assimilation even before school entry.

A more detailed analysis of the data shows that the South-West sector is the worst-served in terms of French-language ELCC services. Even though this area has the highest number of children (42% of the child population), one-sixth of the spaces are located in this sector of the city (17%). There is therefore a blatant shortage of spaces, and 470 additional spaces would need to be created in this sector to fill the lack of spaces in French-language ELCC services.

The Northern and South-East sectors have higher ratios (0.42 and 0.40, respectively), which is enough to consider them medium-need sectors. However, to upgrade them to well-served areas, they should have 350 and 420 spaces, respectively, meaning 140 more spaces in the Northern sector and 178 more spaces in the South-East sector.

Table 3 presents the neighbourhoods within each of these sectors where new French-language ELCC services could be added to be close to the homes of families with children eligible for French-language education.

Table 3: *Ideal distribution of new French-language ELCC childcare spaces in the city of Halifax*

Sector	No of spaces to create	Example of location (neighbourhood)
South-West	470	Cowie Hill
Northern	140	Sunset Ridge
South-East	178	Forest Hills
Total city of Halifax	**788**	

The Rest of the Province

Outside the Halifax CMA, there are 1,765 children and 321 spaces in French-language ELCC services. With a **ratio of 0.18**, the situation is even more challenging, as there is, on average, only 1 space for every 6 children.

To analyze the situation, the province was divided into four areas following Statistics Canada's 18 census divisions of 2021. These areas are as follows:

- **The North-East area:** Includes the territory on Cape Breton Island, namely the census divisions of Cape Breton, Inverness, Richmond, and Victoria;
- **The Northern area:** Groups the counties located north of Halifax along the Northumberland Strait, the New Brunswick border, and the Minas Basin, namely the census divisions of Antigonish, Colchester, Cumberland, Hants, and Pictou;
- **The South-West area:** Comprises the peninsula between the Bay of Fundy and the Atlantic Ocean, namely the census divisions of Annapolis, Digby, Kings, Lunenburg, Queens, Shelburne, and Yarmouth; and
- **The Central area:** Runs along the Atlantic Ocean from Halifax to Cape Breton Island, namely the census divisions of Halifax (excluding the city of Halifax) and Guysborough.

Appendix 3 presents the census divisions to accurately locate each of these geographical areas.

North-East area

The North-East area comprises the four census divisions located on Cape Breton Island, namely the divisions of Cape Breton, Inverness, Richmond, and Victoria. There are 385 children and 116 full-time spaces in French-language ELCC services in this area, representing a **ratio of 0.30** for the area as a whole.

Table 4 presents the distribution of children and spaces in French-language ELCC services, as well as the associated ratio for each of these census divisions.

Table 4: *Distribution of spaces in French-language ELCC services and children in the North-East area of Nova Scotia*

Census division	No of spaces	No of children	Ratio
Cape Breton	30	185	**0.16**
Richmond	60	110	**0.55**
Inverness	26	90	**0.29**
Victoria	0	0	**0.00**
Total North-East area	**116**	**385**	**0.30**

Richmond County is the best-served area in the entire province, with a ratio of 0.55 spaces per child. Interestingly, its only French-language ELCC service (in Arichat) accepts only 30 children, despite a capacity of 60, due to the difficulty of recruiting qualified local staff. If only the "open" spaces in this centre are considered, the ratio is cut in half and the county becomes a high-need area.

The situation is similar at the French-Language ELCC service in Inverness County (in Chéticamp), where only 12 of the 26 spaces are offered due to a lack of qualified French-language early childhood educators.

Finally, Cape Breton County, where the city of Sydney is located, has only one

French-language ELCC service, with a capacity of 30 children. With a potential pool of 185 children, 100 spaces in French-language ELCC services would need to be added to the city to make it a well-served area. Given the difficulties that other French-language ELCC services in the area face in recruiting staff, one may question the capacity of such a service to operate at full capacity.

Northern Area

The Northern area comprises the census divisions of Antigonish, Colchester, Cumberland, Hants, and Pictou. It has only one French-language ELCC service with 18 spaces for 450 children. This corresponds to a **ratio of 0.04**, or 1 space for every 25 children. All census divisions in this area are considered **high-need** areas. Table 5 presents the situation regarding spaces and children.

Table 5: *Distribution of spaces in French-language ELCC services and children in the Northern area of Nova Scotia*

0

Census division	No of spaces	No of children	Ratio
Antigonish	0*	130	**0.00**
Hants	0	130	**0.00**
Colchester	18**	110	**0.16**
Pictou	0	60	**0.00**
Cumberland	0	20	**0.00**
Total Northern area	**18**	**450**	**0.04**

* A French-language ELCC service with 40 spaces is expected to open in winter 2027.
** The West Pubnico Centre will increase from 18 to 30 spaces in fall 2026.

Antigonish County is expected to see the opening of a new French-language ELCC service in winter 2027. However, as can be observed, the capacity of this service will be insufficient given the number of children located there. An additional 50 spaces would need to be added in the county to effectively meet the children's needs.

Hants County, which has the same number of children, offers no full-time spaces in French-language ELCC services, and no service is planned at this time. However, the number of children would justify a French-language ELCC service with 90 spaces to meet the demand.

In Colchester County, there is an 18-space French-language ELCC service in the town of Truro. Once again, this capacity remains highly insufficient given the number of children in the county.

Finally, it should be noted that no spaces are available in Pictou and Cumberland counties, whereas French-language ELCC services of 42 and 14 spaces, respectively would be required to properly serve them.

South-West Area

The South-West area, which encompasses the entire peninsula of Nova Scotia, has 925 children. Including the census divisions of Annapolis, Digby, Kings, Lunenburg, Queens, Shelburne and Yarmouth, there are six French-language ELCC services offering a total of 276 full-time spaces. With a ratio of **0.30**, or 1 space for every 3 children, this area as a whole is considered a **high-need** area. Table 6 presents the situation in this area.

Table 6: *Distribution of spaces in French-language ELCC services and children in the South-West area of Nova Scotia*

Census divisions	No of spaces	No of children	Ratio
Yarmouth	89	315	**0.28**
Kings	0	240	**0.00**
Digby	128	180	**0.71**
Lunenburg	59	110	**0.54**
Annapolis	0	50	**0.00**
Shelburne	0	25	**0.00**
Queens	0	5	**0.00**
Total South-West area	**276**	**925**	**0.30**

Yarmouth County includes just over a third of the children eligible for French-language education in this area. Despite the presence of 89 spaces in French-language ELCC services, the ratio of 0.28 remains below the threshold corresponding to a medium-need area (0.40). The county can, therefore, be defined as a high-need area. An additional 131 spaces would be required to properly serve its population. This would mean multiplying the number of currently available spaces by 2.5.

Digby County (180 children and 128 spaces) is the only well-served area in the entire province. With a ratio of 0.71, children in this county can thus benefit from a sufficient number of French-language ELCC spaces.

In Lunenburg County, there is one French-language ELCC service with 59 spaces. With 110 children present, this represents a ratio of 0.54, which corresponds to which corresponds to a medium-need area.

Kings County, with 240 children, is the most clear-cut high-need area in all of Nova Scotia. The absence of French-language ELCC services makes the situation a

concerning one for parents. With the shortage of spaces reaching the 168 threshold, this represents the largest gap in spaces outside of Halifax.

Furthermore, Annapolis and Shelburne counties find themselves without French-language ELCC services. Although the needs (35 and 17 spaces, respectively) are less significant than those of Kings County, it would be interesting to consider these counties as potential targets for new French-language ELCC services, since they are high-need areas.

Finally, Queens County has a child population that is too dispersed to justify creating a service.

Central Area

The Central area includes the portion of Halifax County outside the city of Halifax, as well as Guysborough County. According to data from the 2021 *Census of Population*, there are only 60 children scattered throughout this area. It is therefore not surprising to find no French-language ELCC services there. Table 7 presents these results.

Table 7: *Distribution of spaces in French-language ELCC services and children in the Central area of Nova Scotia*

Census division	No of spaces	No of children	Ratio
Halifax (excluding the Halifax CMA)	0	55	**0.00**
Guysborough	0	5	**0.00**
Total Central area	**0**	**60**	**0.00**

5- Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the areas, counties and municipalities in Nova Scotia that experience a shortage of French-language early learning and childcare services (ELCC), where the number of available spaces is very insufficient compared to the needs of children eligible for French-language education aged 0 to 4. Without proposing an ideal model, the study mainly provides a database and descriptive analysis for individuals who plan to start a project of French-language ELCC services in the province.

Overall, Francophone families in Nova Scotia do not have access to enough full-time French-language spaces in French-language ELCC services. With a ratio of **0.26 spaces per child eligible** for French-language education aged 0 to 4, coverage is just over 1 space for every 4 children. This represents a **shortage of 1,652 spaces** across the province.

Although most missing spaces are in the city of Halifax (a shortage of 788 spaces), several other areas could benefit from opening new French-language ELCC services. Kings County, located in the province's South-West area, represents the area of greatest concern, with a shortage of 168 spaces.

Obviously, it is unrealistic to assume that every municipality can support viable French-language ELCC services, given the number of children eligible for French-language education. Therefore, it is important to use the values presented in this analysis to properly size the French-language ELCC services. In some municipalities, family-based French-language ELCC services may be the best option. These home-based services offer flexibility in how care is provided and help ensure financial stability.

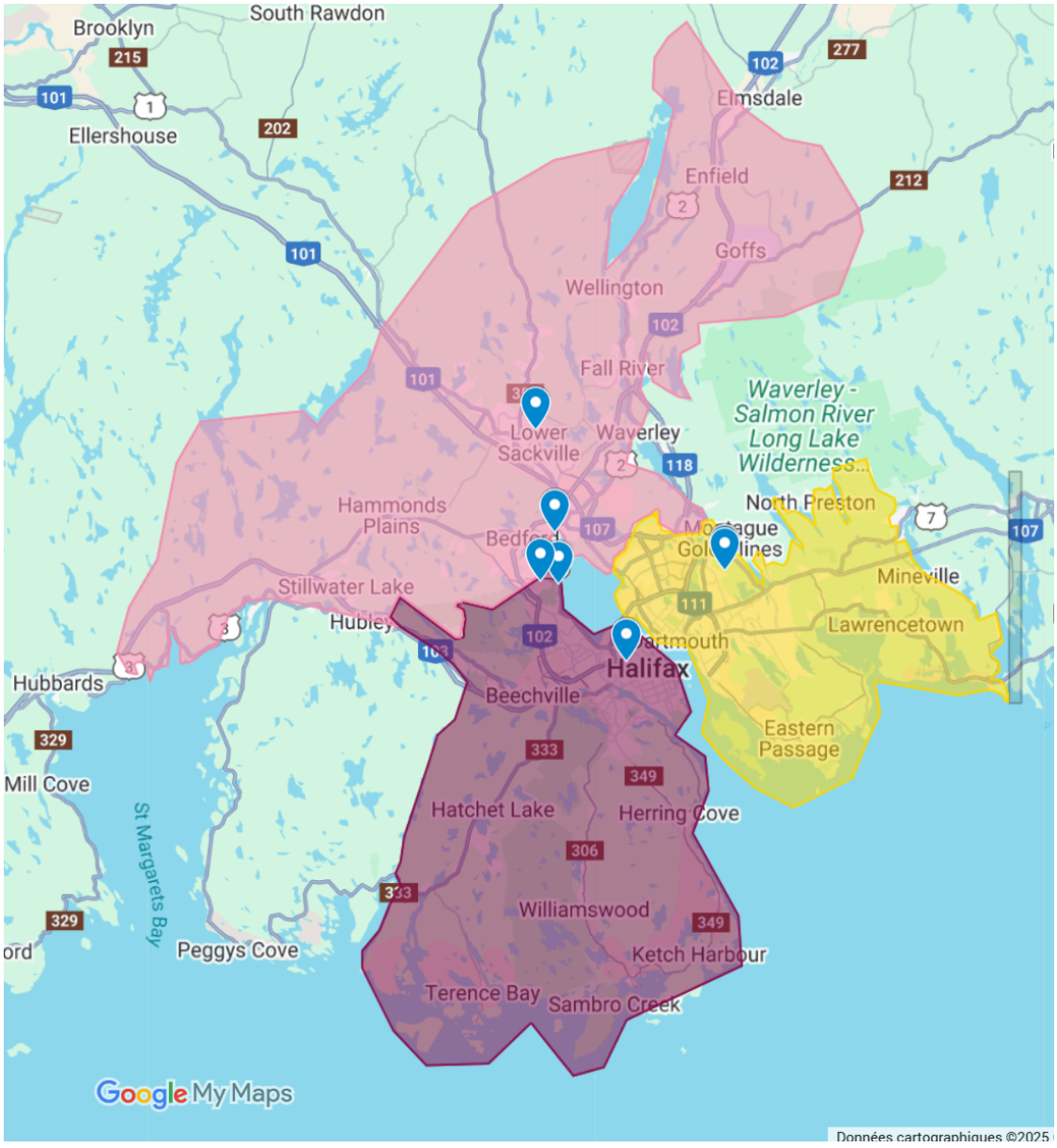
Appendix 1 – French-language ELCC services in Nova Scotia offering full-time spaces as of September 1, 2025

Municipality	Name of the French-language ELCC service	No of available spaces
Arichat	Garderie des Petites Étoiles*	60
Pointe-de-l'Église	La P'tite académie	80
Tusket	Le Jardin des petits	53
Chéticamp	Garderie Les petits poussins Daycare	26
Pubnico-Ouest	Papillons et pissenlits	18
Sydney	Brins de soleil*	30
Truro	Le Jardin d'enfants*	18
Dartmouth	Le Petit Voilier (Bois-Joli)	140
	Le Petit Voilier (Carrefour)	102
Halifax	Le Petit Voilier (Beaubassin)	94
Bedford	Le Petit Voilier (Bedford)	96
	Le Petit Voilier (Sommet)	52
Lower Sackville	Le Petit Voilier (Grand-Portage)	62
Wedgeport	Le Jardin des petits copains	18
Meteghan	Notre Jardin d'enfance	48
Bridgewater	CPE Rive-Sud+	59
Total province		**956**

* French-language ELCC services under Francophone management, but with a primarily English-speaking service.

Municipality	Name of the new French-language ELCC service (expected opening date)	Capacity
Halifax	Le Petit Voilier Mer et monde (09/2026)	42
Pubnico-Ouest	Papillons et pissenlits – Agrandissement (09/2026)	12
Pomquet	CPE Pomquet Chemin Taylor (09/2027)	40

Appendix 2 – Sectors of the city of Halifax and location of French-language ELCC services as of September 1, 2025



Caption

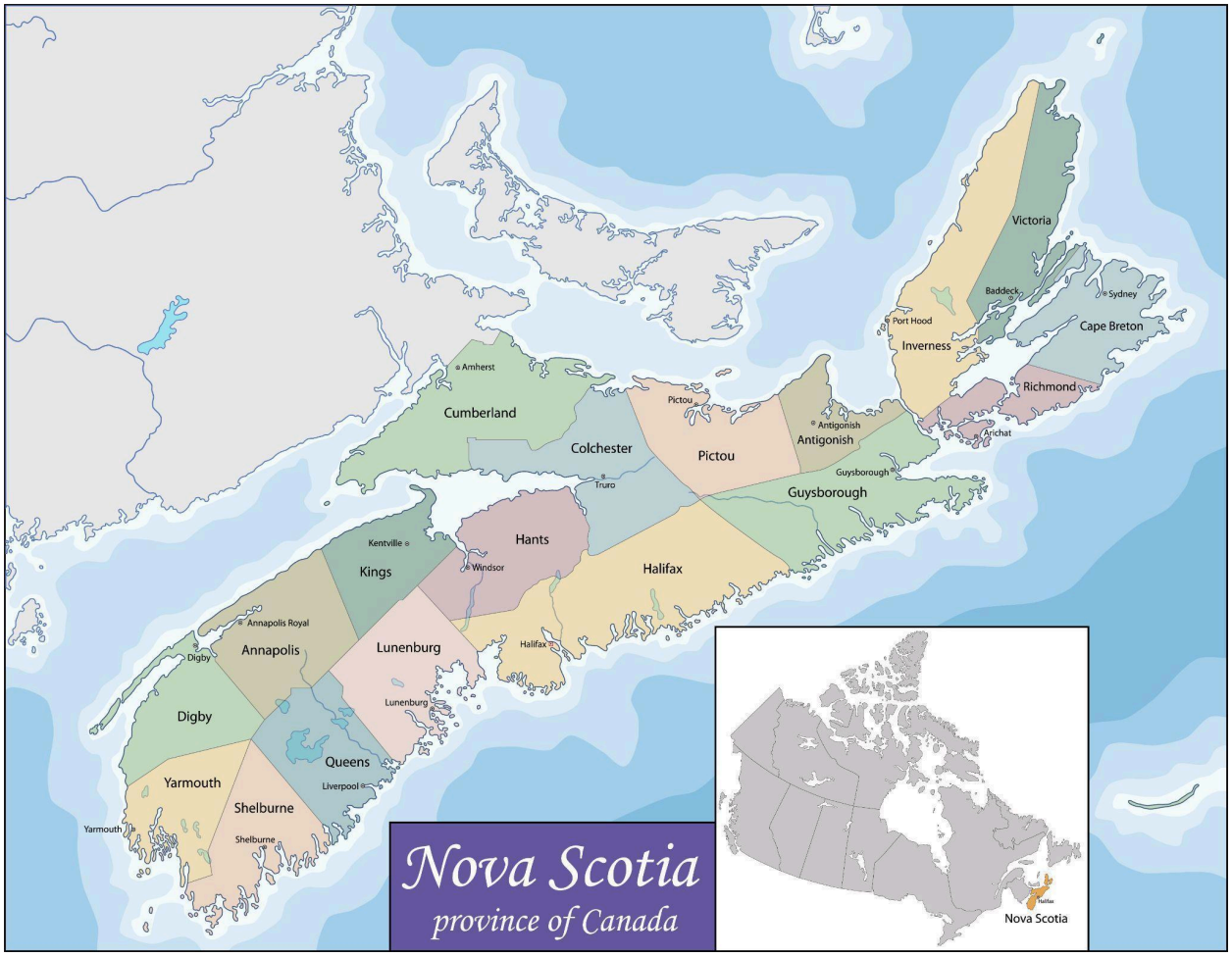
Northern

South-East

South-West

French-language ELCC service

Appendix 3 – Nova Scotia census divisions



Source: ID 80989356 @ Volina | Dreamstime.com