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

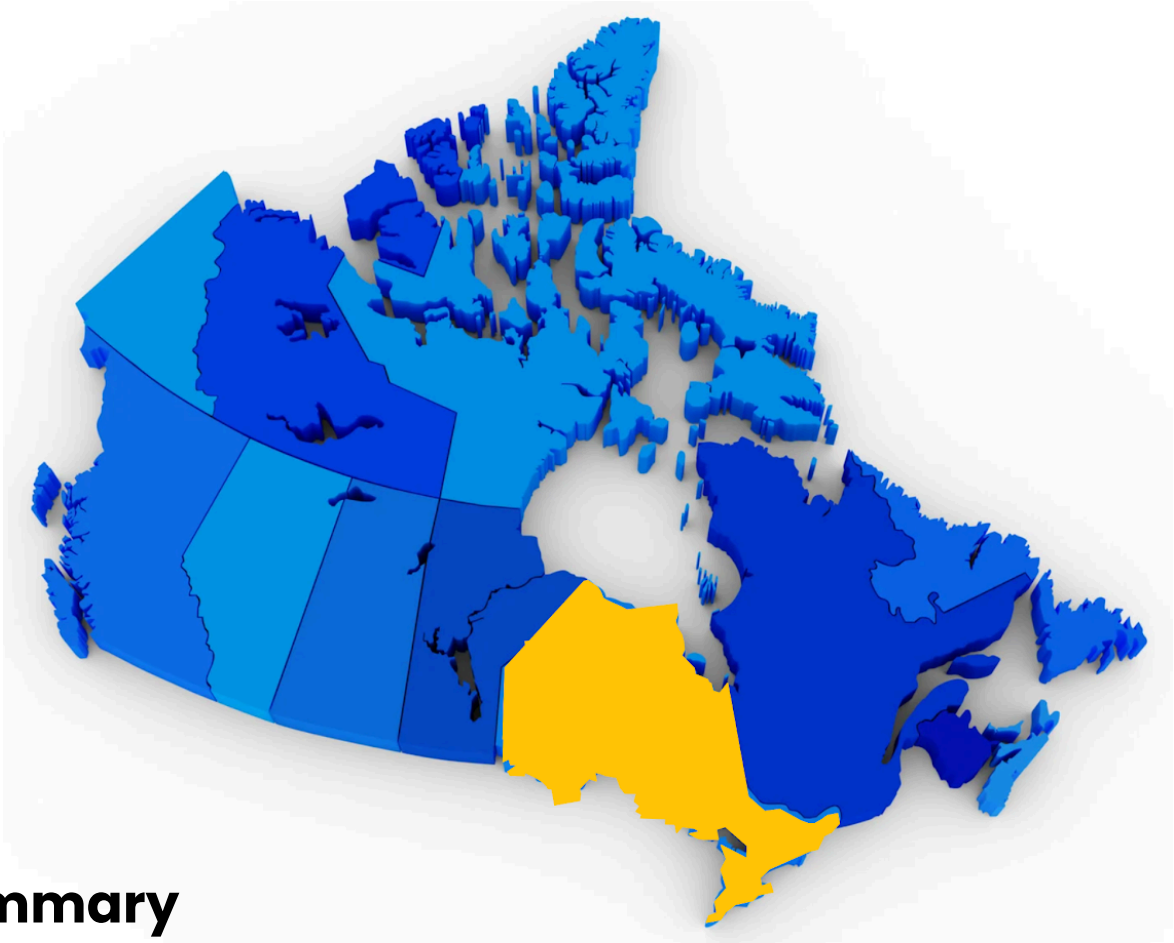
Profile of French-language ELCC services for children aged 0 to 4 eligible for French-language education in

Ontario

cnpf

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Summary

Several communities in Ontario are left with a shortage of full-time spaces in French-language early learning and childcare services for young 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 Ontario as of September 1, 2025, and suggests communities to target to optimize the impact of these new spaces.

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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 of Population*), but where there are not

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

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 Canadian women and men 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 Ontario communities, based on census subdivisions in three regions of the province (Northern Ontario, National Capital, and Ontario Peninsula) 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 Association francophone à l'éducation des services à l'enfance de l'Ontario (AFÉSEO) [Francophone Association for Early Childhood Services Education of Ontario], and direct calls to various French-language ELCC services. The identified spaces are accurate as of September 1, 2025. We have thus identified 12,364 full-time spaces in Ontario[3].

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

As this analysis is intended as an overview of the situation in Ontario, we used data aggregated at the CMA, census division, and municipal levels in this study. Three regional studies present the situation in greater detail in Ontario and are available for readers wishing to gain a clearer picture of the situation in the province[4]: Northern Ontario, National Capital, and Ontario Peninsula.

[2] Table n° 98100541 from Statistics Canada's former CANSIM database.
[3] Please note that full-day kindergarten is available to eligible 4-year-old children in French-language schools in Ontario and this program is not included in this study.
[4] These studies are available on the CNPF website: www.cnpf.ca/ripe/composantes/#etude-desert

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

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 75,235 children aged 0 to 4 eligible for French-language education in Ontario. With 12,364 full-time spaces in French-language ELCC services, the provincial average ratio stands at **0.16 spaces per child**, or 1 space for every 6 children. This means that for Ontario to become well served by French-language ELCC services, 40,300 spaces would need to be added across the province. Table 1 presents a summary of the situation regarding available spaces in French-language ELCC services and children across Ontario.

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

Region	N° of spaces	N° of children	Ratio
Ontario Peninsula	5,356	39,795	**0.13**
National Capital	5,155	25,760	**0.20**
Northern Ontario	1,853	9,680	**0.19**
TOTAL – ONTARIO	**12,364**	**75,235**	**0.16**

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 municipalities where the needs are greatest.

Ontario Peninsula

The Ontario Peninsula is the most populous area of Ontario. It is home to 39,795 children aged 0 to 4 eligible for French-language education, representing just over 30% of all eligible children in Canada. On its own, the Greater Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) accounts for 21,555 (16.5%) of all eligible children in the country.

There are 5,356 full-time spaces in French-language ELCC services in the Ontario Peninsula. This means that the average ratio stands at **0.13 spaces per child**, or 1 space for every 8 children. Thus, for the region to be well served by French-language ELCC services, the number of full-time spaces would need to be multiplied by five.

To clearly present the situation in the Ontario Peninsula, it has been divided into six sectors: the Greater Toronto CMA, the Windsor-Middlesex corridor, the Niagara-Oxford corridor, the Huron-Waterloo corridor, the Dufferin-Bruce corridor, and the Muskoka-Northumberland corridor. Table 2 presents the distribution of children and spaces in the Ontario Peninsula across these sectors.

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

Sector	N° of spaces	N° of children	Ratio
Greater Toronto CMA	3,418	21,555	**0.16**
Windsor-Middlesex Corridor	858	6,675	**0.13**
Niagara-Oxford Corridor	709	4,890	**0.14**
Huron-Waterloo Corridor	189	2,970	**0.06**
Dufferin-Bruce Corridor	143	2,820	**0.05**
Muskoka-Northumberland Corridor	39	885	**0.04**
TOTAL – ONTARIO PENINSULA	**5,356**	**39,795**	**0.13**

The Greater Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) has 21,555 children eligible for French-language education and 110 French-language ELCC services. These French-language ELCC services offer 3,418 full-time spaces, for an overall ratio of 0.16 spaces per child. This represents a shortage of 11,670 spaces for the Greater Toronto CMA.

The Windsor–Middlesex corridor, at the tip of the Ontario Peninsula, includes 6,675 children and 858 spaces in French-language ELCC services. This represents a ratio of 0.13, or just over 1 space for every 8 children. This corridor is therefore a high-need area, and 3,815 spaces would need to be added to reach the 0.7 threshold.

In the Niagara-Oxford corridor, there are 4,890 children and 709 spaces in French-language ELCC services. With a ratio of 0.14 (or 1 space for every 7 children), this corridor is a high-need area. The shortage there is 2,714 spaces.

The Huron-Waterloo corridor has 2,970 children and 189 spaces in French-language ELCC services. This represents a ratio of 0.06, or 1 space for every 16 children. This corridor is therefore a high-need area, with a shortage of 1,890 spaces.

The Dufferin-Bruce corridor includes 2,820 children and 143 spaces in French-language ELCC services. This represents a ratio of 0.05, or 1 space for every 20 children. This corridor is therefore a high-need area. To reach the 0.7 threshold and make it a well-served area, 1,831 spaces would need to be added.

Finally, in the Muskoka-Northumberland corridor, there are 885 children and 39 spaces in French-language ELCC services. This represents a ratio of 0.04, or 1 space for every 25 children. The shortage in this corridor is thus 703 spaces.

National Capital

Located around the city of Ottawa, the National Capital Region has 25,760 children aged 0 to 4 eligible for French-language education, representing just under 20% of all eligible children in Canada. On its own, the Ottawa Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) accounts for 16,040 (12.3%) of all eligible children in the country.

With 5,155 full-time spaces in French-language ELCC services, the average ratio for the National Capital stands at **0.20 spaces per child**, or 1 space for every 5 children. This means that for the region to become well served, 12,877 full-time spaces would need to be added.

To clearly present the situation in the National Capital, it has been divided into five sectors: the Ottawa CMA, Eastern Ontario, the Frontenac-Lanark corridor, the Hastings-Prince Edward corridor, and the Renfrew division. Table 3 presents the distribution of children and spaces in the National Capital across these sectors.

Table 3: *Distribution of spaces in French-language ELCC services and children in the National Capital*

Sector	N° of spaces	N° of children	Ratio
Ottawa CMA	3,445	16,040	**0.21**
Eastern Ontario	1,248	6,035	**0.21**
Frontenac-Lanark Corridor	252	1,945	**0.13**
Hastings-Prince Edward Corridor	135	755	**0.18**
Renfrew Division	75	985	**0.08**
TOTAL – NATIONAL CAPITAL	**5,155**	**25,760**	**0.20**

The Ottawa CMA has 16,040 Francophone children aged 0 to 4 eligible for French-language education and offers 3,445 full-time spaces in French-language ELCC services, for an overall ratio of 0.21 spaces per child (about 1 space for every 5 children).

The shortage of spaces in the city of Ottawa is thus 7,783 spaces.

The Eastern Ontario sector is an area with a strong Francophone presence: it has 6,035 children and 1,248 spaces in French-language ELCC services. With a ratio of 0.21 spaces, the number of spaces remains insufficient to meet the region's needs, thus classifying it as a high-need area. To reach a ratio of 0.7 and make it a well-served area, 2,977 spaces would need to be added.

In the Frontenac-Lanark corridor, there are 1,945 children and 252 spaces in French-language ELCC services, or 1 space for every 8 children (a ratio of 0.13), making it a high-need area. The shortage there is 1,110 spaces.

There are 755 children and 135 full-time spaces in the Hastings-Prince Edward corridor. This corresponds to a ratio of 0.18, or 1 space for every 6 children, making it a high-need area. The shortage there is 394 spaces.

Finally, the Renfrew division has 985 children and 75 spaces in French-language ELCC services, for a ratio of 0.08, or 1 space for every 13 children. This high-need area would need 615 additional spaces to be well served.

Northern Ontario

According to the 2021 *Census of Population*, there were 9,680 children aged 0 to 4 eligible for French-language education in Northern Ontario. With 1,853 full-time spaces in French-language ELCC services, the average ratio for this region stands at **0.19 spaces per child,** or just under 1 space for every 5 children. This means that for Northern Ontario to become well served by French-language ELCC services, 4,923 spaces would need to be added. Table 4 presents a summary of the situation regarding available spaces in French-language ELCC services and children across Northern Ontario.

Table 4: *Distribution of spaces in French-language ELCC services and children in Northern Ontario*

Region	No of spaces	No of children	Ratio
Greater Sudbury CMA	921	3,305	**0.28**
Sudbury District	26	390	**0.07**
Nipissing-Parry Sound Corridor	278	1,525	**0.18**
Algoma-Manitoulin Corridor	230	825	**0.28**
Cochrane-Timiskaming Corridor	364	2,760	**0.13**
Kenora-Thunder Bay Corridor	34	875	**0.04**
TOTAL – NORTHERN ONTARIO	**1,853**	**9,680**	**0.19**

The Greater Sudbury Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) has a population of 177,415 according to the 2021 Census. It is the CMA in Canada with the highest proportion of children eligible for French-language education relative to the total population. Specifically, it has 3,305 children and 921 full-time spaces in French-language ELCC services. The average ratio there stands at 0.28 spaces per child, or just over 1 space for every 4 children. It is therefore a high-need area. To reach the threshold of 0.7 spaces per child and make it a well-served area, 1,392 spaces would need to be added.

The Sudbury District has 390 children and 26 spaces in French-language ELCC services, for a ratio of 0.07. An additional 247 spaces would need to be added to make it a well-served area.

In the Nipissing-Parry Sound corridor, there are 1,525 children and 278 spaces in French-language ELCC services. With a ratio of 0.18, this corridor is a high-need area. This represents a shortage of 790 spaces relative to the 0.7 threshold for the corridor to be well served.

The Algoma-Manitoulin corridor has 825 children and 230 spaces in French-language ELCC services. This corresponds to a ratio of 0.28, making it a high-need area. An additional 348 spaces would need to be added to make it a well-served area.

The Cochrane-Timiskaming corridor includes 2,760 children and 364 spaces in French-language ELCC services. With a ratio of 0.13, this corridor is a high-need area. The shortage of spaces there is 1,568. This addition would make it possible to reach the 0.7 threshold, which is the benchmark for a well-served area.

Finally, in the Kenora-Thunder Bay corridor, there are 875 children and 34 spaces in French-language ELCC services, resulting in a ratio of 0.04, or 1 space for every 25 children. This makes it a high-need area. The shortage is 578 spaces in this corridor.

5- Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the areas in Ontario 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 this region.

Overall, Francophone families in Ontario do not have access to enough full-time French-language spaces in French-language ELCC services. With a ratio of **0.16 spaces per eligible child** aged 0 to 4, coverage stands at 1 space for every 6 children. This represents a **shortage of 40,300 spaces** across the province.

The Ontario Peninsula has the largest shortage, with 22,500 spaces lacking to reach a ratio of 0.7. In the National Capital, the shortage is 12,877 spaces, while it is 4,923 spaces in Northern Ontario.

As this analysis is intended to provide an overview of the entire province, readers interested in more specific data for each of the three regions are invited to consult the CNPF studies offering a detailed portrait of the National Capital, Northern Ontario, and the Ontario Peninsula. The reality remains that the shortage of spaces in French-language ELCC services is widespread across the province of Ontario, and strategies must be prioritized to lead to substantial investments.

Appendix 1

Ontario census divisions (Statistics Canada, 2021)

