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Self-regulating ECE college a first in the sector

More than 22,000 applications for membership have poured into Ontario's College of Early Childhood Educators since it opened in September 2008—the first college of its kind in Canada requiring registration for those who want to be recognized as early childhood educators (ECEs).

In January, when 15,000 applications were received by the college, staff went by car to the post office every day and brought back six or seven huge containers of applications," says Registrar and CEO Dainora Juozapavicius.

Mandated by the Early Childhood Educators Act in 2007, the college, with its head office in Toronto, "is akin to a licensing body. To use the title of early childhood educator or registered early childhood educator and practise the profession, unless exempted by the Act, you have to register and get certification from the college."

The primary duty of the college is to serve and protect the public interest, says Juozapavicius. "Establishing the college assures the public that if their child is in the care of an ECE then that person will be practising according to a set of standards."

Impact on recognition

Having a college also has a positive impact on recognition, a key human resource issue in the sector. "It recognizes ECE as a profession and acknowledges that ECEs can regulate themselves as a professional body. For too long people would often think of ECEs as non-professionals. Not having recognition con-

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The idea of a college had been promoted by some in the sector for decades. Its creation was endorsed by the province's Best Start Expert Panel on Quality and Human Resources, which identified strategies to strengthen the quality of early childhood education and care services.

Estimates of the number of ECEs in Ontario fall anywhere between 20,000 to 30,000. In order to receive a certificate of registration from the college, applicants must satisfy educational and training requirements stipulated in the regulations for the Early Childhood Educators Act and possess either:

- a diploma in early childhood education from an Ontario college of applied arts and technology (or equivalent outside of the province approved by the college);

- a degree from a Canadian university, with major course content relevant to early childhood education, approved by the college;
- an equivalency through successful completion of a prior learning assessment process approved by the college; or
- a letter of equivalency certificate or a recognition of equivalency certificate issued by the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario or the Association francophone à l'éducation des services à l'enfance de l'Ontario.

Applicants must also provide documentation of their educational attainment (photocopies must be signed by a guarantor) and Canadian citizenship or immigration status. In some cases employers are revisiting their hiring practices to ensure they are in line with the college requirements.

Extensive review

“The applications are reviewed by qualified staff trained in the review process,” says Juozapavicius. “Applications go through several different hands to make sure they meet the registration requirements and to verify the appropriate documentation has been submitted.”

Once an application is received it is immediately date-stamped and forwarded to a screener who ensures that it is complete and that all relevant documentation is included. A letter of acknowledgement is then sent to the applicant. The documents contained in the application are then reviewed to ensure that they are authentic and meet the actual requirements (for example that a diploma is from a recognized training institution). They are then sent to the director of registration, and then to the registrar, who examines the application and, if all the requirements have been met, issues a certificate of registration. Currently the process takes an average of four months.

There is an annual \$150 membership fee to maintain registration as an ECE. Some employers are providing financial support for the annual fee either by paying it outright, or up-front with a pay-back timetable.

“Those working in the field and their employers have generally been very supportive of the college,” says Juozapavicius. “However, there is still a need for outreach to raise stakeholder awareness of what the college does, why it came into being and what self-regulation entails.”

An area of immediate work is developing the standards of practice that will guide ECIs. “It’s our next big piece of work. We have a committee of our council established for that purpose and they will consult with stakeholders and ensure the members are engaged because it is a self-regulating body.”

As with other professional regulatory bodies, the college will also develop its own complaints procedure and processes related to disciplinary and fit-

ness-to-practice hearings.

The college is governed by a council whose 24 members will serve staggered terms of two and three years to ensure continuity. Fourteen council members are elected from the membership, and 10 are members of the public from a range of backgrounds and occupations who are appointed by the provincial government. “We are self-regulated but the key mandate of the college is the protection of the public interest. This is one of the reasons the council is composed of a combination of college members and public appointees.”

Juozapavicius said that it is too early to say whether ECE colleges will become a trend in other jurisdictions in Canada. However, the college has already sparked some international interest, and is hosting a delegation from Qatar in the spring.

To find out more about the College of Early Childhood Educators, or to download an application form, visit: www.collegeofece.on.ca.