eccdc
early childhood community development centre

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The 29th Annual Niagara Early Learning & Child Care Appreciation and Recognition Gala Proudly Honours the Extraordinary Commitment, Dedication, and Impact of Niagara's Early Years and Child Care Community

On November 26, 2026 Niagara Falls became a place of inspiration and gratitude as local charity, Early Childhood Community Development Centre (ECCDC) hosted Niagara's Early Learning and Child Care Appreciation and Recognition Gala at the Americana Conference Centre. The evening celebrated the heart of Niagara's early years sector—its people. Early Childhood Educators, Support Staff, Leaders and community-based organizations were honoured for the passion, creativity, and steadfast commitment they bring to children and families every day. Behind each recognition presentation was a story of impact: a child supported, a family strengthened, a community enriched.

The evening's impact at a glance:
- 500 attendees joined in celebration
- 15 recognition categories highlighted early learning excellence
- 18 community partners offered presentations to highlight local achievements
- 13 business sponsors financially supported the event
- 28 local businesses donated goods or services for the silent auction

The celebration event's numbers reflect more than participation—they represent a community deeply committed to providing exceptional opportunities for Niagara's children to grow, learn, and develop to their greatest potential.

Among the evening's highlights was the recognition of this year's outstanding recipients, whose dedication, leadership, and contributions continue to make a meaningful difference in the early years and child care sector across Niagara. The Jim Bradley Early Years Advocate for Sports and Active Play recognition was presented to **Binta Diakite** of Centre éducatif La Boîte à soleil – Fitch. **Michael Alfarano** of Niagara Region Children's Services was celebrated with the Volunteer and Support Staff Spotlight, while **YMCA Child Care – Thundering Heights** received the Supporting Sustainability and Environmental Stewardship Ambassador recognition. The Licensed Home Child Care Professionalism Acknowledgement of Achievement recognized **Leticia Adu** of Niagara Region Licensed Home Child Care, **Saima Abbas** of Wee Watch Licensed Home Child Care, and **Tahira Kanwal** of Children's Learning Garden Licensed Home Child Care. **Ramage Ismail** of Niagara College received the Margaret Hamilton Graduating Student Recognition, while **YMCA Child Care – Kate S. Durdan Loretto** was recognized for its Exceptional Commitment to Fostering an Inclusive, Equitable, and Diverse Early Learning Environment. The Early Childhood Educator Professionalism Acknowledgement of Achievement was presented to **Eleni Gagnon** of Top of the Ridge Daycare, while **Myriam Tilus Mathelier** of Centre éducatif La Boîte à soleil – L'Héritage received the Commitment to Continuous Professional Learning Distinction. The Kindergarten Team Commitment to Excellence recognized **Carol Hogan** and **Rosa Vieira McGuire** of Holy Name Catholic Elementary School, Niagara Catholic District School Board, as well as **Jessica Rooney**, **Erin Deakin**, and **Christina Pagano** of Park Public School, District School Board of Niagara. The Care Advocate for Excellence in Supporting Children's Mental Health and Well-Being recognition was presented to **Allysa McLean of YMCA Child Care – Carleton**. **YMCA EarlyON – Early Forest Explorers** was named the Nurturing Children's Connection to Nature Program Champions, a recognition sponsored by Howells Farm, and the Innovative Indoor Early Learning Environment Recognition, sponsored by Mountainview Building Group, recognized **Josée Fontaine**, **Candace Brouwer Vendersteen**, **Agathe Okoa Oyono**, and **Sophie Christelle Joseph** of Centre éducatif La Boîte à soleil – Franco Niagara. The EarlyON Child and Family Centre Team Recognition celebrated **Kristin Dobbin**, **Rachelle Gibbs**, **Sandra Drapeau**, and **Sarah O'Marra** of YMCA EarlyON – St. Anthony. **Family and Children's Services – Bunting Child Care Centre** received the Kelly Albanese Child Care Program Inclusion Recognition, while **Lauri Brady** of YMCA of Niagara was recognized with the Licensed Child Care Centre Administrator Recognition for Exceptional Leadership and Commitment. The ECCDC extends congratulations to all of this year's recipients whose passion, dedication, and commitment to children, families, and the early years sector help strengthen our Niagara community every day. Lorrey Arial Bonilla, Executive Director of the ECCDC, is excited for her Team to coordinate this

event each year; "The ECCDC feels so honoured to host this annual event to provide a space for community partners to gather and celebrate the commitment, passion, and dedication of Niagara's early learning professionals. The work they do every day has a lasting impact on children, families, and our communities, and it is a privilege for our organization to support them in that important work. We are proud to stand alongside these valued professionals, recognize their contributions, and celebrate the difference they make every day for our community."

The gala also recognized the important role that local businesses and community organizations play in developing a thriving community. The ECCDC extends appreciation to Primary Event Sponsor, **Louise Kool and Galt**, for their longstanding support of this valuable event. We also extend gratitude to Media Sponsor, **Dream105.7FM** and event emcee **Aiko Iwashita**. Several local businesses and organizations also showed their support as business sponsors for this year's celebration, including **YMCA of Niagara**, **Little Ones Lunches**, **Mountainview Building Group**, **Howells Farm**, **A Child's World Family Child Care Services**, **District School Board of Niagara**, **Niagara Catholic District School Board**, **Commercial Cleaning Services**, **Skycomp Solutions**, **CIBC**, and **Steinbachs & Chapelle Chartered Professional Accountants**. Their contributions and commitment to Niagara's early years and child care sector helped make this year's celebration a memorable event.

Sincere appreciation is also extended to the many community partners who supported this year's recognition presentations, including the **College of Early Childhood Educators**, **Association of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario**, **Niagara Region Children's Services, Brock University**, **Children's Learning Garden**, **Fort Erie Aboriginal Head Start**, **Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre**, **Kiwanis Clubs of Niagara Falls, St. Catharines, Thorold and Welland**, **Métis Nation of Ontario**, **Niagara Child Care Sector Executive**, **Niagara Children's Centre**, **Niagara College**, **Pathstone Mental Health**, and **Wee Watch Licensed Home Child Care**.

The event also welcomed support from local political representatives, including Niagara Falls MP Tony Baldinelli, Niagara Falls MPP Wayne Gates, Niagara Centre MPP Jeff Burch, City of Thorold Mayor Tim Whalen, and City of Thorold Regional Councillor Ken Sentance. Their continued support and recognition of the importance of Niagara's early years and child care sector are greatly appreciated.

More than a celebration of achievement, the evening highlighted the power of collaboration, shared commitment, and the remarkable individuals who contribute to making our communities stronger. Congratulations to all recognition recipients and thank you to everyone who helped make this year's celebration memorable.

For further information, please contact Lorrey Arial Bonilla, Executive Director, Early Childhood Community Development Centre at 905.646.7311 ext.321 or **larial@eccdc.org**.

The ECCDC is a charitable organization inspiring excellence in early learning and child care through thought leadership, cutting edge training, innovative resources and coaching services highlighting best practices and emerging trends. The ECCDC exists so that early learning professionals are supported in offering exceptional opportunities for children to grow, learn and develop. In the more than 30 years since its creation by local volunteers, the ECCDC has become a leading early learning training, resource, and referral organization. The ECCDC is primarily funded by Niagara Region Children's Services.