



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT

Consultation on key initiatives of Set up for Success

June 2022

About Early Childhood Australia

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit, membership-based organisation that was first incorporated in 1938. We work at both the national and local level, with active State and Territory Committees in each Australian jurisdiction and a National Board of Directors. Our membership includes early childhood professionals, services, schools and organisations that share a commitment to the rights and wellbeing of young children.

Our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning. To achieve this vision, we champion the rights of all children from birth to the age of eight to thrive, learn and play at home, in the community, within early learning settings and through the early years of school. Our work builds the capacity of our society, including families and early childhood professionals, so that every child—regardless of location, household income or individual needs—can be nurtured to achieve their potential.

ECA acknowledges the unique place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our society, the past and current injustices and realities for them across Australia, and the enduring strength of their cultures and identities. We commit to being at the forefront of achieving a reconciled nation that values, respects and celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being.

Find out more at: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

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Acknowledgement of Country

Early Childhood Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community—including the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people of the region now known as the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). We pay our respect to the Elders past and present; we recognise that they have nurtured and taught children on these lands for many thousands of years and we honour that history.



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Key contributors to this submission

Early Childhood Australia has prepared this submission with contributions from the ECA ACT Committee and Be You Early Learning.

ECA ACT Committee

The ECA ACT Committee provides a voice to early childhood professionals and is committed to supporting and promoting best practice early childhood education. The committee has members from across all types of early childhood services and provides support to all professionals who work in this sector in Canberra. It also aims to foster dialogue and interactions between professionals to assist them in understanding the range of services available to families.

Find out more at: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/state-territory-branches/act/

Be You Early Learning

Be You is the national Mental Health in Education initiative, funded through the Australian Government Department of Health and delivered through a partnership between Beyond Blue, headspace and ECA. Be You provides resources, tools, professional learning and consultant support to schools and early learning services nationally, to build mentally healthy learning communities. ECA provides implementation support directly to early learning services, educators and leaders nationally, including 146 early childhood education and care services currently participating across the ACT. The ECA team has more than 10 years' experience providing implementation support and professional learning to early learning services in the ACT through KidsMatter Early Childhood from 2009–2018 and Be You Early Learning from 2018 onwards.

Find out more at: <https://beyou.edu.au/>



Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT

Consultation on key initiatives of Set up for Success

ECA has prepared this submission with contributions from the ECA ACT Committee and Be You Early Learning.

This paper is divided into three sections to respond to each of the consultation topics, including:

- developing an ACT Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Workforce Strategy, including introducing educator professional standards, increasing coaching and mentoring opportunities, and establishing a professional learning fund
- recognising early childhood education in ACT Law
- delivering the new Preschool Reform Agreement (2022–2025).

We have detailed our response in the next section and summarised our recommendations immediately below.

Recommendations: Summary

Developing an ACT Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Workforce Strategy

ECA Recommendation 1: Undertake comprehensive analysis of teacher and educator career paths to identify attraction and retention strategies.

ECA Recommendation 2: Invest in initiatives that develop the qualification pipeline to ensure adequate supply of ECEC professionals at all levels.

ECA Recommendation 3: Invest in workforce diversity recruitment strategies to attract a wide and representative pool of ECEC professionals.

ECA Recommendation 4: Fund services to participate in initiatives that support educator mental health and wellbeing.

ECA Recommendation 5: Address disparity in pay and conditions between different segments of the sector.

ECA Recommendation 6: Resource the sector to meet the needs of vulnerable groups and enable them to access two years of preschool.

ECA Recommendation 7: Run a community-level campaign to raise the profile of the ECEC profession.

ECA Recommendation 8: Engage in ongoing consultation with the sector to track implementation of the strategy and respond to emerging issues in the sector.



ECA Recommendation 9: Work to broaden the scope of the Teacher Quality Institute (TQI) registration to address disparity between early childhood teachers working in different settings.

ECA Recommendation 10: Acknowledge the limitations in relation to recognition and transferability of educator professional standards to other standards.

ECA Recommendation 11: Consult with the sector to ensure that proposed educator professional standards add value to the profession and align with the National Quality Framework and language of the profession.

ECA Recommendation 12: Provide funding for release time for ECEC services flexibly, to enable teachers and educators to engage in professional learning opportunities in the context of workforce shortages.

ECA Recommendation 13: Partner with local providers, including ECA, to deliver tailored, jurisdiction-wide professional learning to the ECEC sector.

ECA Recommendation 14: Invest in management and leadership skills as critical skills to support and develop the workforce.

Recognising early childhood education in ACT Law

ECA Recommendation 15: Leverage recognition of early childhood education in ACT Law as an opportunity to connect practice between education settings.

ECA Recommendation 16: Use the language of the sector in the legal act to demonstrate respect for ECEC alongside school-based education.

Delivering the new Preschool Reform Agreement

ECA Recommendation 17: Establish requirements that tie funding to the delivery of 15 hours per week of high-quality, play-based preschool programs led by qualified early childhood teachers.

ECA Recommendation 18: Expand the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement in line with the Centre for Policy Development's call for two years of quality preschool before school, including three-year-old children, to provide universal access to high-quality, play-based early learning led by a bachelor-qualified early childhood teacher, for at least three days a week in the two years prior to school.

ECA Recommendation 19: Invest in models of coaching in long day care settings to build the sector's capacity to deliver the reform agreement.



Recommendations: In depth

Developing an ACT Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Workforce Strategy

The early years are critical for child development because this is when humans experience the most rapid period of growth and change across the lifespan¹. A stable and competent early childhood education and care workforce is critical to ensuring that we support children during this time and provide rich learning experiences that set the foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing.

Challenges facing the sector include negative perceptions of, and variations in, pay and conditions across services and career pathway opportunities. A literature review on determinants of quality in early childhood education found that, overall, the most significant factors affecting quality across age groups and service settings are the education, qualifications and training of the workforce². A strong, qualified workforce is essential to delivering quality education and care. High quality ECEC services have a significant impact on children that lasts throughout their lives².

The *Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT* provides the ACT Government with the opportunity to be an exemplar jurisdiction for leading workforce strategies that support and sustain the ECEC profession in delivering high-quality services to children and families.

Workforce strategy

Consultation questions

- What issues do you think are specific to the ACT's ECEC sector that aren't necessarily experienced nationally?
- What elements would you like to see addressed in the workforce strategy?
- Do you know of any current strategies used to attract, support and retain educators?
- How can we encourage people to enter and remain in the early childhood profession?
- What approaches need to be established to create pathways into the early childhood profession?

Issues impacting the ACT's ECEC sector

The primary issues that the ACT Workforce Strategy needs to address are the significant shortages affecting the sector. The ACT ECEC system has a range of structural issues embedded in it that are exacerbating staff shortages. These include: disparity in pay and conditions across settings; inconsistent teacher-registration requirements; and inconsistent requirements for staffing across program types.

¹ Van Leer, B. (2006). A Guide to General Comment 7: 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood'. United Nations.

² Huntsman, L. (2008). Determinants of quality in childcare: A review of the research evidence. NSW Department of Community Services, Centre for Parenting & Research. www.community.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/321617/research_qualitychildcare.pdf



Workforce shortages

There is a national shortage of early childhood teachers (ECTs) (degree-qualified) and educators (diploma- and certificate-qualified), but this is exacerbated in the ACT, where shortages are particularly acute.

ECT roles in non-school environments (including long day care, family day care and outside school hours care) typically offer lower remuneration and less attractive working conditions than those in the public sector preschool and school sector. These roles often require the ECTs to work longer hours, more weeks each year and often involve more face-to-face teaching time per week. They also have fewer opportunities to engage in targeted and continuous professional learning (including professional learning communities) and may have additional responsibilities for leading the education program across a service or staff team.

The additional work demands combined with lower remuneration rates make it difficult for services to attract ECTs or retain them once they are qualified and experienced. Services often invest considerable resources in supporting educators to upgrade their qualifications to a teaching degree, only to lose them to the preschool or school sector.

Workforce shortages are not limited to ECTs. There is also a shortage of educators with VET qualifications and trainees willing to engage in qualification training. Once again, while these are national problems, the issues are compounded in the ACT. Some factors thought to contribute to this include the relatively high cost of housing in the ACT and the competitive employment market beyond the education sector, including the public service.

Employers operating licensed ECEC services are constrained in the remuneration rates they can pay because of the impact that has on the gap fee between the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) benchmark rate and the fees they charge to families. If that gap gets too large, families are often forced to reduce their use of ECEC. To maintain utilisation rates that are viable, gap fees need to be kept within a range that families can afford. There is an argument for regional adjustments to the CCS benchmark rate to accommodate variations in the cost of service delivery, including higher wage rates in high-cost housing markets, but this is not a current feature of the federal government's CCS system.

Inconsistent teacher-registration requirements

In the ACT, there is no requirement for ECTs working in an ECEC setting that is not part of a school to be registered with the Teacher Quality Institute (TQI). This means that ECTs working in ECEC services in the ACT are unable to be professionally registered. This creates an anomaly whereby a teacher delivering a preschool program for three- to four-year-old children in a long day care service is not required to be registered, while a teacher delivering a preschool program for the same age group in a public preschool attached to a school is required to be registered. It implies that teaching outside a school setting is less important or of lower value—creating another disincentive for ECTs to stay in non-school settings. This leaves ECTs working in the ACT at a disadvantage compared to New South



Wales (NSW), where all ECTs working in an approved centre-based setting must be accredited under the NSW Education Standards Authority³.

Inconsistent requirements for outside school hours care

Outside school hours care (OSHC) services make up more than one-quarter of all services approved under the National Quality Framework (NQF) and should be recognised within the workforce strategy. There are currently no national qualification requirements for OSHC educators or teachers. While there is a national requirement that an OSHC educator is required to hold at least a two-year qualification, state and territory requirements vary significantly. In the ACT, accepted qualifications include OSHC and school-age education and care certificates and diplomas alongside leisure and youth work qualifications. There is also a requirement for qualified educators to have completed the equivalent of two years of full-time study along with two years of experience working with children over preschool age. This is problematic because it means that the skills required for the provision of OSHC services do not warrant a recognised qualification or skillset, undermining the importance of quality programming. It is also a lost opportunity; a large proportion of staff working in OSHC services are student teachers who could benefit from working with qualified/experienced teachers. There is also scope for more emphasis on health and wellbeing programming in OSHC, which could be supported by appropriate professional development for staff. The National Outside Schools Hours Association (NOSHA) has developed a VET qualification in OSHC that is yet to be widely adopted by registered training organisations (RTOs)—this could be supported in the ACT.

Strategies to attract, support and retain ECEC professionals

The workforce strategy will require intentional strategies to bridge the diverse range of operating structures within the ECEC sector across the jurisdiction. This will include strategies that develop the qualification pipeline while increasing diversity in the workforce and supporting educator mental health and wellbeing. Other significant issues relate to how the sector is valued. Addressing these will require improving pay and conditions; raising the profile of the profession and workforce, particularly for vulnerable groups; as well as including the sector in ongoing consultation.

Analysis of career pathways of educators and teachers

The ACT Government could undertake analysis of the career pathways of ECTs and educators in the ACT. The scope of this analysis could include the number of teachers and educators who come from other states or overseas, how many train locally, how many start in ECEC and move into community or school-based preschools.

Through this analysis, the ACT Government could identify and showcase examples of successful attraction and retention strategies adopted by local services. This work could have as specific focus on

³ Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority. (2018). *Early childhood teacher registration and accreditation*. www.acecqa.gov.au/qualifications/early-childhood-teacher-registration-and-accreditation



identifying examples of what drives successful attraction and retention (for example, pay parity, workplace flexibility and retention incentives) and how they are practically implemented.

This work could inform local employers and broader initiatives, such as relocation payments, retention bonuses and training scholarships.

Developing the qualification pipeline

A high proportion of teachers end up completing bachelor qualifications after first starting in ECEC with a diploma or certificate qualification. This group of educators enters teaching roles with a foundational understanding of the sector and actively chooses to progress in the profession. The ACT Government should continue and grow its scholarship programs to enable existing educators to gain an approved early childhood degree qualification (alongside continuing to target school leavers and new recruits into ECEC qualifications).

Additional effort is required to develop the pipeline of qualifications to attract new educators into Certificate III qualifications and propel Certificate III-holders into diploma qualifications. The ACT could support this pipeline by extending its scholarship programs to certificate- and diploma-level qualifications, to ensure that there is adequate supply at all levels of staffing.

In addition, the ACT could develop partnerships between local ECEC providers and RTOs to enable educators to upgrade their qualification while they work. The following is a description of a program running in the ACT, as an example of a promising approach.

Baringa Early Learning Centre has recently received funding from National Careers Institute to launch Early Learning Connection, a program for women who are seeking to commence or progress their career in the ECEC sector. The program has two streams: a diploma pathway developed in partnership with Canberra Institute of Technology; and a bachelor pathway developed in partnership with University of Canberra to support ECTs. Both pathways seek to help women re-engage with study and work in a supported and flexible environment. The program, through careful matching and tailored support, seeks to progress the career aspirations of participants, while also addressing staff shortages in the ECEC sector by providing quality candidates.

This program is open to residents of the ACT and surrounding regions.

Another strategy that could help address the shortages of teachers in long day care settings is to encourage or incentivise newly qualified ECTs to spend time working in non-school-based ECEC settings before taking up roles in preschools and public schools. The ACT could complement this by brokering relationships across services types and between employers to enable ECTs to work across preschool and long day care settings in ongoing ways.

In parallel to these practical ideas, high standards and expectations of qualifications should be embedded in the strategy. While there are some innovative models that provide fast-tracked qualifications through intensive delivery, they should not be confused with shortcuts that provide quick qualifications. ECA would caution against models that reduce any of the requirements of certificate, diploma and bachelor qualifications.



Workforce diversity

The strategy should consider the recruitment and retention of a diverse and inclusive workforce that reflects the diversity of the local community and provides children with positive experiences of inclusion.

For example, 97% of the ECEC workforce is female. Strategies to encourage more males to join the sector warrant exploration. Gender stereotypes and public attitudes are likely to be a factor here—community education and recruitment messaging could be explored, as well as support structures such as peer networks.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the proportion of people with a disability employed in the ECEC sector is well below community representation (1 in 5). ECA has identified the potential for a sector-development project to bring disability employment services together with ECEC employers to support collaboration and address barriers, including common myths (e.g. that regulatory requirements preclude the employment of people with sensory or mobility impairment). There are some good examples of individual educators/teachers with a disability working successfully in the sector, but they are not widely recognised. A strengths-based campaign promoting the benefits of diversity in the workforce and examples of practice in accommodating disability in ECEC settings could increase employment opportunities for people with a disability in this sector and support inclusion.

Inclusion would also be enhanced by increasing the cultural diversity of early education, including an increase in the number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander educators and teachers working in early childhood services. Education authorities in a number of jurisdictions (including NT & QLD) are partnering with Indigenous training providers and community-controlled organisations to support trainees to complete their qualifications, through flexible training delivery and culturally responsive mentoring.

More broadly, the workforce strategy should include actions to promote an ECEC workforce that is culturally safe and inclusive for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, as well as educators and teachers who identify with the LGBTQI+ community. This might include ensuring that all ECEC staff have access to relevant professional learning, and celebrating diversity through awards or scholarship programs.

Educator mental health and wellbeing

The strategy should consider how educator mental health and wellbeing can be supported at all levels—by government, service providers and service leadership and individuals. The ACT has the potential to be a leading jurisdiction in advocating for the notion that educators' wellbeing is a collective responsibility. Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of educators will help make the sector more attractive and contribute to staff retention. Equal value for the work of all educators, regardless of the education setting, is also crucial. Working in the ECEC sector carries a lot of mental-health risks so the strategy needs to address how effective support can be provided to the workforce as a whole.



Be You can help in the development of staff mental health and wellbeing policies to ensure that supporting wellbeing is embedded into organisational strategy, policy and practice from the highest level. When educators feel supported, this contributes to their workplace wellbeing. The strategy should include explicit measures to support wellbeing. This could include providing, or partnering with Be You to provide, support for services to develop policies and practices for positive workplace environments that attend to the wellbeing of educators to support attraction and retention of staff.

Parity in pay and conditions

The workforce strategy and associated initiatives cannot begin to adequately address the issues faced by the sector without considering the structural disparity that exists across the current ECEC system in the ACT. Only when these structural differences are addressed will other strategies—targeted at supporting professional learning, coaching and mentoring, and introducing educator professional standards—gain traction.

Advocating for a regional adjustment to the CCS benchmark rate could contribute towards better condition in Commonwealth-funded programs.

Sustaining benefits for vulnerable children

Several international studies have demonstrated how two years of quality preschool can lift the outcomes of all children, particularly for children who are developmentally vulnerable⁴. Furthermore, it is increasingly being recognised that two years of preschool provide greater benefits for children experiencing disadvantage—for them one year of preschool may not be enough to close the achievement gaps⁵. The ACT's model for the Quality Early Childhood Education for Three-Year-Olds initiative saw ECEC services partnering to provide quality early learning for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. Services involved were provided with trauma-informed practice professional learning, which was a critical component of the initiative. Professional learning alone, however, is not adequate to support the complex needs of vulnerable groups.

Additional support through above-ratio external coaching would help teachers and educators transfer this learning into their settings to ensure that the focus on supporting children, educators and families is maintained while remaining compliant under the NQF.

⁴ Yoshikawa, H, Weiland, C, Brooks-Gunn, J, Burchinal, M, Espinosa, L.M., Gormley, W.T. ... Zaslow, M. (2013). *Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education*. Society for Research in Child Development and Foundation for Child Development.

⁵ Fox, S., & Geddes, M. (2016). *Preschool—Two Years are Better Than One: Developing a Preschool Program for Australian 3 Year Olds – Evidence, Policy and Implementation*. Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 03/2016. www.mitchellinstitute.org.au



Raising the profile of the profession

Early childhood educators and teachers often report feeling undervalued and underappreciated for the essential role they play in children's development. There is limited public understanding of the value of play-based learning for young children or how educators and teachers scaffold, structure and support early learning. A targeted campaign that promotes the importance of the early years and the positive impact of ECEC when led by a professional workforce should be embedded into the workforce strategy.

Ongoing consultation and engagement

While the creation of *Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT* engaged the Early Childhood Advisory Council as a representation of the early childhood sector, the continued collaboration has been intermittent. Consultation—such as the one we are responding to—is valued, but having an ongoing mechanism to provide feedback is required to track emerging issues and opportunities.

The Children's Education and Care Assurance Forums are not opportunities to reflect on the implementation of the strategy. Historically, regular forums were held on areas of focus for the entire early childhood sector to engage in. The reinstatement of these forums would add value and provide opportunities to make minor changes in policy implementation to achieve better results. Additionally, having a regular forum where providers and other experts (academics, training providers and recruitment/workforce services) could connect over questions of practice would support collaboration across the sector.

Recommendations

ECA Recommendation 1: Undertake comprehensive analysis of teacher and educator career paths to identify attraction and retention strategies.

ECA Recommendation 2: Invest in initiatives that develop the qualification pipeline to ensure adequate supply of ECEC professionals at all levels.

ECA Recommendation 3: Invest in workforce diversity recruitment strategies to attract a wide and representative pool of ECEC professionals.

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ECA Recommendation 8: Engage in ongoing consultation with the sector to track implementation of the strategy and respond to emerging issues in the sector.



Educator professional standards

Consultation questions

- What do you think the benefits are of having educator professional standards for the sector?
- What elements would you like to see included in the educator professional standards?

Upholding professional standards is a key component of being TQI-registered for teachers; however, as previously noted, this only currently reaches teachers who work in school settings. ECA believes that all early childhood teachers, regardless of the setting, should be eligible to register under TQI.

Implementing educator professional standards without a recognised and transferable registration process runs the risk of teachers and educators perceiving them as lacking the intended significance associated with upholding professional standards. While the development and implementation of educator professional standards provides an opportunity to increase the visibility of the profession, it is important to note this as a material limitation.

Any process to develop educator professional standards needs to be undertaken in close consultation with the ECEC sector, to ensure strong alignment with the NQF and language of the profession.

When weighing up the development and implementation of educator professional standards, it is important to:

- balance the additional effort and workload required to engage with and assess practice against the standards
- ensure coverage of the standards across different levels of qualification in the sector
- provide implementation, training and ongoing support to embed the standards
- consider whether meeting or becoming accredited under the standards will be transferrable or recognised by other bodies
- gauge whether meeting or becoming accredited will result in a material benefit for educators.

It is imperative that implementation of any educator professional standards provides a demonstrable benefit to educators beyond a symbolic form of recognition; and to children and families beyond that which is provided through the NQF.

Recommendations

ECA Recommendation 9: Work to broaden the scope of the Teacher Quality Institute (TQI) registration to address disparity between early childhood teachers working in different settings.

ECA Recommendation 10: Acknowledge the limitations in relation to recognition and transferability of educator professional standards to other standards.

ECA Recommendation 11: Consult with the sector to ensure that proposed educator professional standards add value to the profession and align with the National Quality Framework and language of the profession.



Coaching and mentoring

Consultation questions

- Can you share examples of great coaching and mentoring partnerships that supported workforce development?
- How could coaching and mentoring partnerships help us better respond to workforce needs?

Coaching and mentoring new graduates

Coaching and mentoring plays a critical role in supporting and retaining early career teachers and educators. These programs aim to retain new graduates in the sector and ensure that they are supported and thriving in their profession. Many jurisdictions have introduced formal mentoring programs that match experienced ECTs with early-career ECTs to support them in their developing practice (see example: Victorian Department of Education and Training, [Effective Mentoring Program](#)).

The Early Childhood Wellbeing Project, led by Macquarie University, has begun to provide research evidence that professional supervision and mentoring contributes to workplace wellbeing and retention. Access to professional supervision and mentoring, in particular for early career educators and leaders in ECEC settings, may assist in attracting and retaining high-quality educators. Mentoring programs generally include training for both mentors and participants in the program and facilitate connections and reflection on teaching practices and delivering high-quality programs for children. ECA has developed resources to support ECEC professionals' engagement in mentoring relationships, with a focus on reflections and relationships.

Using targeted approaches to coaching and mentoring: Be You Early Learning

Be You Early Learning provides a model for effective coaching and mentoring that combines professional learning opportunities with implementation support. Be You aims to increase the knowledge, skills and confidence of educators so they can contribute to mentally healthy communities for children, families and educators. The initiative is provided at scale and is sustainable, equitable and accessible to every ECEC service in the ACT and nationally. ECEC services that are registered as Be You Learning Communities have access to ECA's team of consultants who provide implementation support, including advice, guidance, professional conversations and mentoring. Be You Consultants support leaders with: planning of professional learning; reflection and action on, and about, mental health; and measuring the outcomes of engaging in Be You. Consultants also help services connect Be You to their Quality Improvement Plans, service vision and goals.

Currently there has been a very good uptake of Be You in the ACT, with 146 (46%) ECEC services registered as participating Be You Learning Communities and assigned a Be You Consultant, compared with 31% nationally. The combined expertise of the three partner organisations—Beyond Blue, headspace and ECA—is available to early learning services that engage with Be You tools, resources, professional learning and Consultants for workforce development. Be You supports educators' autonomy and agency in accessing professional learning opportunities.



Be You Consultants provide implementation support to groups and individuals through national online events and sessions and personalised online consultations. As an online initiative, any service in the ACT or nationally is able to access the Be You Consultant team.

Professional learning fund

Consultation questions

- What are the barriers to accessing professional learning within the non-government part of the sector?
- Are there particular areas that need to be targeted for professional learning?

Barriers

One of the most significant barriers that the non-government sector is currently facing is staff shortages, which have a direct impact on services' ability to release staff for professional learning opportunities. Even when funding is available to backfill positions, services are often unable to find cover to release staff to attend professional development. Many educators are reporting working longer hours and additional shifts to cover for staff shortages—this further limits their capacity to engage in professional development outside of their usual hours.

It is, however, imperative that funded professional learning and support for backfill be progressed, as this can have a positive impact on service-level engagement. For example, in Victoria, services are able to access Victorian Government's School Readiness Funding to engage in professional learning, including Be You. This funding requires services to set clear goals based on local data and needs of their community. Funding is available to services to release or pay for extra staff hours to engage in professional learning. Services are accountable to report to the government about how they have used the funding and what has been achieved with it. The ACT Government has also previously offered funding for backfill to support services to participate in the Be You program.

Opportunities

ECA is well regarded by early childhood professionals and providers for producing high-quality professional learning resources, including publications, events and online learning. We are aware of the increasing demand for content on supporting inclusion of children with additional needs and trauma-informed approaches in the sector—particularly following two years of disrupted access to services and additional support.

ECA is well positioned to partner with the ACT Government and other local providers to deliver tailored, jurisdiction-wide professional learning initiatives. In 2014, we established the ECA Learning Hub, which provides high-quality online professional learning. Our Learning Hub has a reach of 35,000 learners through our Learning Management System (LMS).

In the development of professional learning resources, we engage subject matter experts from the early childhood sector to translate research and identify best practice. Our resources 'speak the language of educators and teachers' and can be used across a diversity of settings (i.e. long day care, preschool,



family day care, etc.). All ECA content is evidence-based and reviewed at numerous levels to ensure quality and clarity. We can deliver high-quality tailored professional learning to target a specific learning need or improve access for a particular cohort.

Management and leadership skills

ECA has connections with a wide range of services and we know what a difference a good manager and/or leader can make to the stability of a setting and the team of professionals therein. Through sector feedback, we also know that leadership skills are not always included substantively in ECEC qualifications that generally underpin career progression—leaving new managers and leaders to learn on the job. In response to this, ECA has developed a *Leadership Program* along with a *Management Program* to support teachers and educators in addressing this significant gap.

Investing in professional learning related to ECEC leadership and management has the potential to provide returns in the form of retention of a motivated workforce, both for individual services and the sector more broadly.

Recommendations

ECA Recommendation 12: Provide funding for release time for ECEC services flexibly, to enable teachers and educators to engage in professional learning opportunities in the context of workforce shortages.

ECA Recommendation 13: Partner with local providers, including ECA, to deliver tailored, jurisdiction-wide professional learning to the ECEC sector.

ECA Recommendation 14: Invest in management and leadership skills as critical skills to support and develop the workforce.



Recognising early childhood education in ACT Law

Recognising early childhood education in ACT Law will provide an opportunity to articulate the unique contribution that the ECEC profession makes within the broader education system. This will increase opportunities to develop collaborative practices between services; for example, between schools and ECEC and OSHC settings. Relationships between ECEC services and schools are crucial to supporting children's learning and development.

Some services in the ACT, such as occasional care and playschools, are out of scope of the NQF. Recognition of early childhood education in ACT Law will provide a framework to support embedding a shared understanding and language of ECEC practice—guided by the NQF.

The introduction of the Education and Care Committee for OSHC services and their partnered schools on government sites, for example, has highlighted how important collaboration is for supporting innovation. Additional support is required in this space to ensure that both parties are aware of their obligations and roles. The provision of forums—where questions of practice could be explored, facilitated and supported by a dedicated team of officers from the Education Directorate—and ongoing tailored support will amplify the relationships and quality of delivery.

Additionally, recognising early childhood education in ACT Law will enable deeper conversations about practice in children's early years. ECA defines early childhood as the years between birth and the age of eight. As such, practices that support children's learning throughout early childhood span school, ECEC and OSHC settings. Including early childhood education in ACT Law has the potential to drive more sophisticated approaches to holistically supporting children's early learning.

Language

Language is a key element that is important when recognising early childhood education in ACT Law. ECA has developed the [How to Talk About Early Childhood Education and Care](#) resource, which can guide the use of language that demonstrates respect for the profession. It is important that any reference to early childhood in ACT Law demonstrates respect for the sector and its importance alongside school-based education.

Recommendations

ECA Recommendation 15: Leverage recognition of early childhood education in ACT Law as an opportunity to connect practice between education settings.

ECA Recommendation 16: Use the language of the sector in the legal act to demonstrate respect for ECEC alongside school-based education.



Delivering the new Preschool Reform Agreement

ECA welcomes the five-year extension to the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement and the certainty it brings to service planning and viability—and access to ECEC services for young children.

Funding follows the child: Use in non-government ECEC settings

The ‘funding follows the child’ approach can enable greater flexibility in the delivery of the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement in non-government settings. It can also provide a significant opportunity for collaboration across operation types. ECA recommends that the ACT Government put in place a requirement that ties funding to the delivery of 15 hours per week of high-quality, play-based preschool programs led by qualified early childhood teachers. Similar arrangements exist in Queensland (see [Queensland Kindergarten Funding Scheme](#)) and Victoria (see [Kindergarten Funding](#)). These programs require that the kindergarten program is planned and delivered by a qualified teacher over a minimum of 15 hours per week for 40 weeks of the year (600 hours per year). Each jurisdiction displays a Kindy Tick (Queensland) or Kinder Tick (Victoria) respectively to demonstrate that it meets the requirements to provide funded kindergarten programs.

Quality and hours of attendance

ECA calls for an expansion of the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement, in line with the Centre for Policy Development’s call for two years of quality preschool before school, including three-year-old children, to provide universal access to high-quality, play-based early learning led by a bachelor-qualified early childhood teacher, for at least three days a week in the two years prior to school.

The Department of Education, Skills and Employment notes that ‘Children who engage in quality play-based early childhood education are generally better prepared to start primary school and enjoy better educational outcomes’⁶. These benefits increase when investment is expanded to include three-year-old children, particularly those experiencing vulnerability^{5, 7}. Extending preschool to three-year-old children will allow educators to identify children at risk of educational disadvantage, including those not reaching developmental milestones or demonstrating low pre-literacy skills such as in language (the word gap).

Building capacity

Long day care services make up more than half of all services approved under the NQF. They typically operate for at least eight hours per day and 48 weeks per year. They employ the majority of

⁶ Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2021). *Preschool Reform Funding Agreement*. Commonwealth of Australia. www.dese.gov.au/preschool/preschool-reform-funding-agreement

⁷ Pascoe, S., & Brennan, D. (2017). *Lifting our game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions*. Victorian Government.



educators and teachers in the ECEC sector and will, therefore, need additional resourcing to support capacity building to deliver on the outcomes of the reforms.

Professor Edward Melhuish, a leading expert on ECEC, indicates that an effective and efficient way to improve the quality of ECEC is to provide in-house professional development to educators⁸. Joyce and Showers⁹, experts studying the impact of professional learning, have demonstrated that coaching provides the biggest yield from investment (see table).

Models of professional learning			
Professional learning offered	Impact on knowledge	Impact on skill	Impact on practice
Theory	10%	5%	0%
Theory + Modelling	30%	20%	0%
Theory + Modelling + Practice	60%	60%	5%
Theory + Modelling + Practice + Coaching	95%	95%	95%

Joyce & Showers⁹

We propose a model of coaching delivered by an external coach who is not included in staff-to-child ratios. The coach would work in the setting to focus primarily on improving the quality of the program and secondarily on developing coaching capacity within the service so that they would subsequently become the coach to the team.

There is an opportunity through the registration of ECTs by TQI, for teachers to apply for certification as Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers. This model could also support coaching within and across ECEC settings by leveraging Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers as coaches.

Recommendations

ECA Recommendation 17: Establish requirements that tie funding to the delivery of 15 hours per week of high-quality, play-based preschool programs led by qualified early childhood teachers.

ECA Recommendation 18: Expand the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement in line with the Centre for Policy Development's call for two years of quality preschool before school, including three-year-old children, to provide universal access to high-quality, play-based early learning led by a bachelor-qualified early childhood teacher, for at least three days a week in the two years prior to school.

ECA Recommendation 19: Invest in models of coaching in long day care settings to build the sector's capacity to deliver the reform agreement.

⁸ Melhuish, E. (2017, 6 October). Presentation to ACT Members of the Legislative Assembly.

⁹ Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (2002). *Student achievement through staff development* (3rd ed.). Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.