



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

**OUR
VISION:
EVERY
YOUNG
CHILD IS
THRIVING
AND
LEARNING**

STATEMENT

Friday 16 February 2024

By: Susan Jackson, ECA SA Branch President, and
Dr Amy Graham, ECA National Advocacy and Strategic Projects Executive

ECA CELEBRATES THE SA GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT TO IMPLEMENTING ALL ROYAL COMMISSION RECOMMENDATIONS

Early Childhood Australia (ECA), both as a national peak body for the sector as well as the local ECA SA Branch, welcomes the attention on the critical early childhood years and are very pleased the SA Government has accepted and committed to implementing all of the recommendations from the 2023 Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care.

ECA are strong advocates of universal three-year-old preschool, as long as high-quality is consistent across every service and setting. Universal access to two years of ECEC has a groundswell of international evidence behind it, but only if it is of a consistently high quality irrespective of who provides it.

ECA is pleased that the SA Government has promised a flexible and inclusive funding model across the preschool sector, which aligns with our interest in all children being able to access wraparound supports when enrolled in approved preschool programs.

ECA does support targeted and proportional additional investment for those children who need extra support, such as those facing disadvantage due to poverty, family complexity and socio-demographic and cultural factors. However, well-funded universal approaches can offer benefits for all children, including and especially vulnerable children, and remain our central goal of expanded preschool provision.

A skilled, well-supported and adequately resourced workforce is critical to ensuring every child reaches their full potential and is thriving and learning. Hence, ECA are pleased with the attention on the workforce through the significant \$56 million ECEC workforce fund.

One of the most significant issues facing the education and care sector is ensuring that there are enough qualified teachers to deliver early childhood education and care (ECEC) in line with the National Quality Framework, and preschool under the National Preschool Reform Agreement. This makes achieving our shared goal of high-quality early learning opportunities for every child a significant challenge.

There are well-documented difficulties in attracting Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) and educators to the ECEC sector, a trend that has been steadily increasing since 2019. While this is not unique to South Australia, it is likely to become more problematic as SA moves to two years of preschool. In addition to this, retaining skilled and qualified staff is also a challenge because a number of educators working in non-government ECEC environments have different pay and conditions than those working in the SA Government sector, often being required to work longer hours with fewer holidays, and often more face-to-face teaching time without adequate opportunity to engage in targeted and continuous professional learning opportunities. This means that the workforce is undervalued, depleted, tired, and overwhelmed. Operationally, this can look like early childhood teachers and educators not taking leave when they need it, inexperienced educators taking on leadership roles without the necessary support and mentors available to help them learn their way.

Increasing attrition of the workforce and ongoing recruitment challenges mean that many services are reducing their capacity in response. At the same rate, cost of living pressures mean that parents are working harder than ever before to balance their work and care responsibilities. This combination of high demand and low supply of a qualified workforce is very problematic for the sector and families have been directly impacted.

Government investment in additional resources for building and supporting the ECEC workforce is welcome, and ECA welcome the Office of Early Childhood Development's commitment to engage in extensive consultation with the peak bodies such as ECA, local communities, and a range of service providers to ensure the investment is maximised. ECA also advocates for a coordinated approach across state and Federal government investments to reduce duplication of efforts and sustained resourcing of the workforce. The need to increase the supply of the early childhood workforce is in tension with the imperative of ensuring that qualifications maintain a high standard and quality of educator practice.

Just as the reasons for the workforce shortage are complex, solutions need to be equally multi-faceted and the \$56 million could be applied in a range of ways. They might include government stewardship over the sector, addressing wages and conditions, removing the barriers to upskilling, time for professional learning and training in areas they need it, access to mentors and support from experienced staff to succession plan and become effective leaders, attention on the wellbeing of staff, addressing the costs of training, professional learning and accreditation for ECEC educators.

Early Childhood Australia is the peak national advocacy body for children from birth to eight years, their families and early childhood professionals. ECA South Australian Branch is represented by Susan Jackson, Branch President and the South Australian Committee. ECA has an established working relationship with the South Australian Government and seek to be closely involved in the implementation of the reforms, leveraging our extensive knowledge and experience, strong cross-sectoral relationships and national policy team that understand the complexities of phasing in universal programs at scale.

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MEDIA ENQUIRIES: Please contact the ECA Media team on 0475 554 999 or email media@earlychildhood.org.au

ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA

Early Childhood Australia is the peak national advocacy body for children from birth to eight years, their families and early childhood professionals. For more information, please visit www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/about-us