



**Early Childhood Australia**  
A voice for young children

# Early Childhood Australia Pre-Budget Submission to the 2024 Federal Budget

*January 25, 2024*

## About us

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, we champion the rights of young children to thrive and learn at home, in the community, within early learning settings and through the early years of school.

Our work builds the capacity of our society and the early childhood sector to realise the potential of every child during the critical early years from birth to the age of eight. ECA particularly acknowledges the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, and the past and current injustices and realities for them around Australia.

Find out more at: [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au)

Or contact: Samantha Page, CEO  
Phone: 02 6242 1800  
Email: [SPage@earlychildhood.org.au](mailto:SPage@earlychildhood.org.au)

Or

Dr Amy Graham, Advocacy and Strategic Projects Executive  
Phone: 0497 400 244  
Email: [AGraham@earlychildhood.org.au](mailto:AGraham@earlychildhood.org.au)

## Acknowledgement of Country

Early Childhood Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to Elders both past and present.

# Contents

<b>About us</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<i>Summary of key recommendations</i> .....	3
<b>High-quality early childhood education and care</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>A skilled, stable and supported workforce</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Registration for Teachers and Educators</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Universal and affordable early childhood education and care</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Support a responsive and inclusive service system</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>Resources for ECA-led initiatives</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>13</b>

## Introduction

**Early Childhood Australia welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the Australian Government consideration of the 2024–25 Federal Budget.**

Early childhood development is everyone’s responsibility. Improving access to, affordability and quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) opportunities benefits everyone. For the government to achieve its objectives relating to improving gender equality; increased employment, economic prosperity and productivity; and building a fairer society, Australia needs a robust, responsive and equitable early childhood education and care (ECEC) system that

- gives every child the start they deserve—thriving and learning through high-quality, inclusive, play-based ECEC experiences which are available and accessible where they live
- delivers flexibility, confidence and choice of high-quality ECEC settings to parents and caregivers engaged in work, study or at home.

At a time when all state and territory governments predict stronger budget positions and surpluses ahead, and to capitalise on the significant number of inquiries and reform processes currently underway, there is a unique opportunity to address the inequities in our current ECEC system and to create lasting change. This will happen through ensuring non-partisan political and financial commitment to ensure that every young child is thriving and learning in contemporary Australia. There is no better time to show the world that as a country, we prioritise early learning and care. The challenges and complexities of the current ECEC system are well-documented through various research, reviews, consultations and reports; now the well-conceived plan with comprehensive funding must follow to ensure a well-funded early childhood system and a supported and viable workforce sector.

Currently, and historically, there is disparity in the professional lives of teachers in school settings and those who choose to work in early childhood settings. The disparity extends beyond differences in pay and conditions. It includes inconsistencies in qualification requirements and registration processes, as well as career pathways and respect or recognition for the work that they do. This has become even more evident through and post pandemic, with the early childhood sector operating under sustained pressure due to many converging issues.

For educators, national consistency in early childhood qualifications and registration requirements will enhance the professional status of early childhood teachers, as will increased wages. For families, removing barriers to accessing ECEC, through addressing the long-standing issues with the Activity Test and improving access and responsiveness to inclusion support, will support children to thrive and learn.

## Summary of key recommendations

ECA’s recommendations for the Federal Budget aim to benefit Australian children and families now and in years to come. While there are a range of priorities we would like to see for the ECEC sector, our submission advocates for these critically important and urgent recommendations:

- 1) The Australian Government to fully fund wage increases for early childhood educators and teachers to address cost-of-living pressures, stabilise the current workforce and enable growth to meet the Federal Government’s policy objectives for universal early childhood education and care.**
- 2) A nationally consistent approach to the registration of both educators (with a diploma or certificate qualification) and teachers working in the early childhood sector, to strengthen child safety and support professional career pathways.**

- 3) Remove or significantly modify the Child Care Subsidy Activity Test as a step toward universal access to early childhood education and care and an investment in economically vulnerable families.**
- 4) Inclusion and equity measures to help every child meet their full potential and thrive, through bridging funding and the development of an Inclusion Strategy.**

ECA recognises that these are not trivial or inexpensive changes to deliver. However, the return on investment gained from spending in early childhood services and systems is well established and they are concrete steps towards the Albanese Government's election promise of universal early childhood education and care. Our recommendations directly contribute to the entitlement of every child to excellence and equity in the Australian education system and the commitment to strengthen early childhood education made by all Australian Education Ministers in the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*<sup>1</sup>.

This submission will outline why these recommendations are critical and required budgetary actions. The recommendations are discussed under the underpinning tenets that ECA consistently advocates for.

---

<sup>1</sup> Education Council. (2019). *The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) education declaration*. Education Council of Australian Governments.  
<https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

## High-quality early childhood education and care

Education and care in prior-to-school settings should be play-based and of high quality. In fact, children in all early childhood settings are entitled to education and care that exceeds the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) standards.

Universal access to high-quality, play-based ECEC services delivers positive outcomes for children and families now and into the future. This access also provides greater opportunities to reach and support vulnerable children and families. Families, especially mothers, are often wedged between imperatives of workforce participation and care responsibilities—it is important that we do not mistake current utilisation of ECEC for what families would choose if barriers were addressed. Access to ECEC supports parental participation in the workforce, and this has important economic benefits now and into the future. However, this should not be the primary goal. Rather, high-quality educational outcomes in the early years should be the driver.

*Early childhood development programs are not babysitting services for working parents but are the first tier of education and development programs that set the foundation for future success<sup>2</sup>.*

It is well established that supporting increased access to high-quality ECEC provision supports better developmental outcomes and subsequent gains in academic achievement, evidenced by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) and the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).

Building on the work of families as children’s first educators, access to caring, qualified teachers and educators is important to support young children’s learning and development in inclusive, play-based settings. The *Early Years Learning Framework (V2.0)*<sup>3</sup> emphasises the importance of relationships with caring and qualified teachers and educators, as well as the quality of the learning program provided<sup>4</sup>. The large-scale Australian ‘E4Kids’ study argued that the most significant driver of quality early learning programs was the quality of teacher-child relationships and the teaching and learning that took place<sup>5</sup>.

Staff-child ratios in early years settings play a key role in ensuring quality outcomes<sup>6</sup>. It has been identified as the most consistent predictor of high-quality learning environments because opportunities for frequent and meaningful interactions are increased. Higher ratios also promote child safety, particularly when younger children require additional support<sup>7</sup>.

Common success factors for quality ECEC programs are:

---

<sup>2</sup> Mustard, F. J. (2008). Investing in the Early Years: Closing the gap between what we know and what we do. Department of the Premier and Cabinet: Adelaide. P. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE]. (2022). *Belonging, being & becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (V2.0)*. Australian Government Department of Education for the Ministerial Council.

<sup>4</sup> Centre for Policy Development (2021). Starting better: A guarantee for young children and families. Retrieved from <https://cpd.org.au/work/starting-better-centre-for-policy-development/>

<sup>5</sup> Tayler, C. (2016). The E4 Kids study: Assessing the effectiveness of Australian early childhood education and care programs. Overview of findings at 2016. Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from [https://education.unimelb.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/2929452/E4Kids-Report-](https://education.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2929452/E4Kids-Report-)

<sup>6</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2018). Engaging young children: Lessons from research about quality in early childhood education and care (Starting Strong). OECD: Paris. Retrieved from [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/engaging-young-children\\_9789264085145-en#page4](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/engaging-young-children_9789264085145-en#page4)

<sup>7</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (n.d.). Encouraging quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Research Brief: Minimum standards matter. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/48483409.pdf>

- Delivered by a four-year degree qualified early childhood teacher.
- Dedicated space appropriate to the delivery of play-based pedagogy (indoor/outdoor).
- Program that meets or exceeds the *National Quality Standard (NQS)*.
- Program based on the *Early Years Learning Framework*.

There is evidence of high quality across settings and service types, but there are also examples of poor quality and inconsistent quality—largely due to workforce challenges and a failure to invest in some communities and cohorts (thin markets, vulnerable cohorts and ‘out of scope’ service types)<sup>8</sup>. Every service and setting providing ECEC programs for children and families should be compliant with the *National Quality Standard (NQS)* and consistently high quality.

We have identified priorities for the Federal Budget 2024 across four areas that are directly linked to supporting high quality early childhood education and care. We have also identified initiatives that ECA could deliver for the government in the 2024–25 financial year.

## A skilled, stable and supported workforce

The ECEC workforce makes an important and often undervalued contribution to children, families, community, the economy and broader Australian society. Improving workforce stability, through measures to attract and retain excellent educators, teachers and leaders in the sector is critical in this Budget. A qualified, skilled, stable and supported workforce is necessary for current and future Australian Governments to deliver on the multiple policy reforms currently taking place in early childhood including State and Territory Government expansions of preschool programs and the Federal Government’s commitment to universal early childhood education.

Within the ECEC sector, there is a strong sentiment that early childhood teachers (ECTs) deserve to be recognised and treated as professional teachers regardless of ECEC setting, part of the same teaching profession as teachers working across other age groups in primary and secondary schools. This recognition needs to extend beyond the ECEC sector, with consensus across policymakers, education departments, regulators, curriculum authorities and leaders across the entire education sector.

### Why it matters

One of the most critical issues facing the ECEC sector is the significant workforce shortages and continued recruitment challenges. Only when the ECEC workforce is supported and well-resourced can it deliver long-term benefits to children, families and society. Hence, these issues have a direct relationship with the implementation of the Australian Government’s affordability measures. Where services have reduced their capacity in response to staff shortages, the ability of families to balance their work and care responsibilities has been directly impacted.

The workforce of the ECEC sector, made up of qualified educators and teachers, experiences lower pay and less favourable conditions both generally and when compared with the school sector. This influences not only recruitment to the profession, but also retention of high-quality staff. Pay and conditions are significant drivers of educator attrition particularly in relation to the high level of responsibility that is held in ECEC services.

---

<sup>8</sup> Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (2023). *NQF Annual performance report. National Quality Framework*. [https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/2023-NQF-Annual-Performance-Report-FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/2023-NQF-Annual-Performance-Report-FINAL_0.pdf)

Quality practice occurs in the context of relationships between children and educators/teachers; therefore, workforce stability is essential. A stable and well-supported workforce enables sustained quality and consistent relationships to be established with children and families. However, striking the balance between building the workforce and ensuring high-quality outcomes remains a key challenge for governments.

While labour shortages are occurring in many sectors, the ECEC sector is unique in that it is an enabler for workforce participation of parents and caregivers. ECEC has a significant role in the Australian economy and society, underpinning both the education and wellbeing outcomes of children and the capacity of more than 1 million family households to participate in the workforce—shortages in this sector have an amplified impact on the Australian workforce more broadly.

The issues facing the ECEC sector are well understood and documented in the National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy—*Shaping our Future*, published in September 2021. The National Workforce Strategy and associated Implementation Plan<sup>9</sup> outlines 21 actions spanning six focus areas: professional recognition; attraction and retention; leadership and capability; wellbeing; qualifications and career pathways; and data and evidence. This plan has been developed with significant contribution from the sector and is fit for its longer-term purpose, towards which work has commenced.

ECA conducted a short survey of members prior to the Jobs and Skills Summit in 2022, which reflected some of these experiences and confirmed that the workforce remains under significant pressure. The need to improve pay and conditions through long-term structural reform was the highest-ranked priority for the sector, followed by an immediate wage increase, support to include children with additional needs, and a community-level campaign promoting the value of the profession.

As a sector, and indeed as a nation, there is a need to attract, develop and retain the highest quality educators, teachers and leaders in the early childhood workforce to provide excellent and equitable early childhood education and care for every child. It can be achieved, but not without sustained funding commitment to wages, attention to the wellbeing of the workforce, and a regulatory and governance system that supports and recognises this agile and dynamic workforce as critical to Australian society.

### What else is needed

Measures to address the sustainability of the ECEC workforce need to be undertaken sensibly. Resolving workforce issues will take time, and a combined effort by Federal, State and Territory Governments, peak bodies, service providers, universities and training organisations. It will not be solved by wage increases alone, however recognition through significantly improved pay and conditions with immediate benefit will likely stabilise departures from ECEC. A commitment to funding wage increases immediately will demonstrate to the workforce that they are valued and retain professionals that the sector may otherwise lose.

Hence, improvements to pay and conditions need to provide both immediate and short-term remediation strategies that address historic and ongoing disparity (retention payments, wages subsidies or guarantees) **and** progressive longer-term action targeting structural changes that seek to remunerate ECEC professionals commensurate to the value that the profession contributes (e.g. a Fair Work gender equity case changes to Awards or harmonising Awards).

---

<sup>9</sup> [National Workforce Strategy | ACECQA](#)

ECA is working with the United Workers Union to facilitate conversations between employers, peak bodies and other unions to agree to a shared approach to progressing pay and conditions for the ECEC workforce. The group has considered a range of options that could be implemented by employers, supported by peaks or progressed through bargaining processes as well as strategies that require Government support. ECA is clear that improvements in pay and conditions for the ECEC sector are essential and supports the process of multi-employer bargaining as a mechanism to achieve this.

Aligning pay and conditions for ECTs in all ECEC settings, with their primary- and secondary-qualified colleagues would be a positive step, but this cannot be solely carried by providers who would be required to increase fees to families. Financial commitment by Government is imperative.

**Recommendation 1: Commit to fully funding wage increases negotiated as part of the supported wage bargaining process for all early childhood educators and teachers**—in the short term this may be structured as payments, subsidies or grants; longer-term professional wages need to be built into the financing model for early childhood education and care.

## Registration for Teachers and Educators

For Australia to continue to have a world-leading approach to quality regulation, the *National Quality Framework* needs to evolve and the value of high-quality ECEC must be understood by families and the wider community.

The recent Review of Child Safety Arrangements under the *National Quality Framework* (NQF)<sup>10</sup> undertaken by the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) proposed a stronger registration regime for teachers and educators working in early childhood settings. This builds on previous recommendations from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) to include ECTs in teacher registration regimes and make that nationally consistent. It also aligns to the National Workforce Strategy. ECA supports a nationally consistent approach to registration for both teachers and educators; this requires collaboration across jurisdictions and investment to resource registration mechanisms.

The ECEC profession is comprised of certificate, diploma, and degree-qualified practitioners. This provides unique team structures that are often organised with high levels of collaboration and teamwork. Many staff progress from certificate and diploma qualifications into educator roles while they continue to work in the sector—bringing with them significant experience. Similarly, the variety of degree structures has created multiple pathways into the profession resulting in a diverse range of teaching qualifications existing in the sector, not all equally recognised by different employers.

One of the major issues to be addressed includes the need for mutual recognition of qualifications across jurisdictions, without compromising child safety protections and the ability of Registrars to undertake their responsibilities in maintaining and preserving the integrity of the Register. Presently, when ECTs move interstate, they may experience difficulties in transferring registration when qualifications are not similarly recognised as in

---

<sup>10</sup> Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (December, 2023). Review of child safety arrangements under the National Quality Framework. Final report – Findings and recommendations for the NQF and inter-related child safety mechanisms. Retrieved from [https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-12/Review%20of%20Child%20Safety%20Arrangements%20under%20the%20National%20Quality%20Framework-full\\_report.pdf#:~:text=At%20the%20request%20of%20the,new%20or%20refined%20systemic%20safeguards](https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-12/Review%20of%20Child%20Safety%20Arrangements%20under%20the%20National%20Quality%20Framework-full_report.pdf#:~:text=At%20the%20request%20of%20the,new%20or%20refined%20systemic%20safeguards)

their home state (e.g. a birth to five qualification not recognised in a jurisdiction where only birth to eight ECEC qualifications are recognised and accepted on the teaching register). A national register or nationally consistent approach to registration has the potential to address this.

ECA believes that nationally consistent registration requirements and alignment of qualifications for ECTs is needed to ensure that they are recognised and valued as teachers regardless of their employment setting. The following five principles should inform any reform going forward:

1. A teacher is a teacher—ECTs should be recognised, valued and treated as part of the broader teaching profession. A profession with distinct knowledge and practice requirements based on who, where and how they teach.
2. Requirements for teaching qualifications should be upheld to a high standard.
3. A broad range of qualification structures are currently recognised in early childhood education, however consistency in course length and child age range is needed.
4. Teacher registration should be inclusive of ECTs and applicable for all teaching settings.
5. Diversity in the teaching profession should be valued and prioritised—barriers to starting and completing qualifications need to be identified and addressed.

Teacher registration is managed by each jurisdiction and has different requirements depending on the context. Some jurisdictions mandate registration of teachers in school and non-school settings, whereas others limit registration based on setting type and qualification. In effect, this means that in some jurisdictions early childhood Initial Teacher Education (ITE) qualification courses must go through two approval processes for graduates to be eligible for teacher registration.

Aligning qualifications and establishing a nationally consistent registration system is important to demonstrate respect and recognition of ECTs. Elevating the profession and maintaining high standards for qualifications and registration are closely related. However, a single register should be intentionally inclusive—seeking to increase representation within the sector and reflecting the pathways to teaching that have been chartered through the ECEC profession.

Stewardship of the registration process will be needed to navigate the current, highly complex arrangements and reduce fragmentation and inconsistency in teacher qualifications and registration. ECA is well placed to support this stewardship, once Ministerial agreement is reached on one approach. Working collaboratively with the Australian Government, AITSL and ACECQA, state and territory regulators, peak bodies and unions to represent the interests of education professionals through this process will be important to navigate and address the complexity and ensure better outcomes for ECTs. ECA encourages government consideration of our role in this important work to affect positive change for the ECEC workforce; and subsequently the children, families and communities engaging with the ECEC sector.

**Recommendation 2: Allocate resources to develop a nationally consistent approach to the registration of educators (with a diploma or certificate qualification) and teachers working in the early childhood sector, to strengthen child safety and support professional career pathways.**

## Universal and affordable early childhood education and care

One of the major barriers for families accessing the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) is the activity test. A simplified subsidy system will help families access affordable and predictable education and care services for their children. ECA supports the recommendation of the Productivity Commission and others to relax the activity test to allow all families to access up to 30 hours of subsidised care a week (60 hours per fortnight) regardless of activity, providing a step towards universal access. While these changes could be introduced in time, ECA's position is that a swift and responsive roll out is needed to immediately reduce the burden on families and support children to access ECEC provision.

ECA commends the government's earlier decision to increase the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) rate through the Family Assistance Legislation Amendment Bill 2022 to deliver more affordable ECEC. ECA is also supportive of the longer-term aim of implementing a 90% universal subsidy system, which the Productivity Commission is currently exploring. ECA recognises these as important first steps towards longer-term change to ensure universal access to ECEC. The cost of accessing ECEC presents a significant challenge for families—the cost is estimated to be 23% of a couple's average wage<sup>11</sup> In 2021, the median weekly cost of 50 hours of approved centre-based ECEC services was \$540<sup>12</sup>. The most common 'childcare service-related reason' families gave for not being in the labour force was the cost of 'childcare' (26.7%)<sup>13</sup>. Of greatest concern is that disadvantaged families remain over-represented in groups with eligibility to fewer hours of subsidised ECEC (24 and 36 hours per fortnight).<sup>14</sup>

The CCS activity test assesses how many hours of subsidised early childhood education and care that children are entitled to, based on the amount of study, work and volunteering their parents do (their activity). Unfortunately, this puts the onus on families to prove they qualify for support. ECA advocates for every child to be able to access equitable, affordable and high-quality early childhood education and care experiences where they live. Similarly, we promote high-quality ECEC to parents and caregivers as valuable for their child's learning and development, and that families may exercise choice about how they access ECEC.

A simpler and fully transparent funding and subsidy system is essential to ensure every child can thrive and learn, and parents and caregivers can be supported to work, study, address challenges they are facing in life, and/or that they can choose to complement their child's home experiences with ECEC. The benefits of an increased Child Care Subsidy will only be realised if it is simplified and combined with an equity measure to ensure we do not exacerbate disadvantage and continue to lock out the families with tenuous or unstable work. ECA has previously developed an Equity Measure Proposal to amend the Activity Test and provided this to Government.

**Recommendation 3: Remove or amend the Activity Test on the Child Care Subsidy** to increase the minimum hours all children can attend to 30 hours per week.

---

<sup>11</sup> [Benefits and wages - Net childcare costs - OECD Data](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Report on Government Services 2022](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Early childhood education and care – Report on Government Services 2022 – Productivity Commission \(pc.gov.au\)](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Child Care Package Evaluation: Final report](#)

## Support a responsive and inclusive service system

We would like to see every child receiving the early childhood they deserve. The system needs to be responsive and adaptive to its end users: families. A responsive system supports families where they are at and when they need it.

Australia has great early education and care opportunities for children to participate in, so they thrive and learn in the years ahead. However, this is not the case for every child. Inclusion promotes belonging, protects the rights of children and young people with developmental delay or disability, and fosters the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people of all abilities. Inclusive practices in ECEC settings happen by intentional planning and design and evolve to meet the changing needs of children in the learning community.

Families with children who have disabilities or challenging behaviours often face exclusion from services. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) Evaluation of the Child Care Package reported a finding that 20% of families with a child with additional needs had to change services because their children's additional needs could not be met<sup>15</sup>. These families were also more likely to be dissatisfied with the service they received. The evaluation also reported the practices of services not offering places to children with additional needs or operating a quota system—capping the number of children who could attend. The impact on families in lower socio-economic circumstances are also impacted in higher proportions.

The Inclusion Support Program (ISP) has experienced increased demand and pressures, which has impacted upon the services available to support children with additional needs. In the ISP currently, there is a mismatch between funding allocation, service provision costs and the financial support provided for the necessary additional educators through the program. This needs to change so that services are not disadvantaged, or even disincentivised, when they include every child in their community.

Now the ISP Review report has been released, the next stages should encompass an exploration of what models could be implemented to support ECEC services in the current context of workforce shortages, where additional educators may not be readily available. It should also be noted that the presence of additional educators is not sufficient or sustainable. It could be likened to a Band-Aid on a haemorrhage or ambulances at the bottom of the cliff. It is additional supervision, but not inclusive practice. The system needs support for capacity-building initiatives and the provision of direct support for children—exploring ways that the system could address bespoke local needs, informed by data (e.g. Australian Early Development Census [AEDC]), for cohorts of children to improve both their inclusion and outcomes (e.g. embedding speech and language interventions, or supporting specialist secondary consultations).

During this process of whole sector reform, through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and ISP Reviews as well as the Productivity Commission inquiry, there is leverage and the impetus to reconceptualise the way inclusion and equity support is provided. ECA urges the Government to look at these reviews collectively.

Initially, the solution starts with appropriate funding for children with disabilities and additional needs attending ECEC services, to match increased demand, and fund research into models that may most appropriately help to meet their needs. However, it also requires funded professional development for leaders, teachers and

---

15 Baxter, J. & Hand, K. (2016, April). *Flexible child care: key findings from the AIFS Evaluation of the Child Care Flexibility Trials*. Australian Institute of Family Studies. [Flexible child care | Australian Institute of Family Studies \(aifs.gov.au\)](https://www.aifs.gov.au/fcs/research-and-publications/publications/flexible-child-care)

educators, so that practitioners better understand equity, inclusive practices and how to best meet the needs of diverse children and families.

ECA fully supports the interim recommendations of the Productivity Commission in relation to inclusion in ECEC services and urges the Government to commit to implementing them. The Productivity Commission has recommended that *“the Australian Government Department of Education should work with Inclusion Agencies to communicate documentary requirements for receipt of Inclusion Support Program funding more clearly to services, including the eligibility of children without a formal diagnosis.”*<sup>16</sup>

The Productivity Commission also recommends improved coordination of funding dedicated to inclusion support. ECA would like to see this further expanded to improve coordination and alignment of all the Australian Government funded initiatives more broadly to support universal access and ensure all ECEC services are inclusive environments. ECA, Be You, jurisdictional Inclusion Agencies and support providers could be better supported to build a collaborative partnership to strengthen the collective impact of the complementary federally funded initiatives.

The ambition of the reforms is to work towards a ‘foundational ecosystem of inclusion’ for all children (not just children with a disability or children with additional needs). This will take time, a multi-faceted solution and significant government investment and commitment to broader, systemic change to shift the needle and create truly inclusive practice.

Achieving truly inclusive practice will require several solutions and will take time.

**Recommendation 4: Bridging funding for services is needed immediately for additional educators** to support all children to access ECEC as we transition from the existing ISP to a re-designed model.

However, this is not the long-term solution, nor does it guarantee inclusive practice and should be the first component of a suite of broader inclusion activity.

**Recommendation 5: Commit to an Inclusion Strategy that informs the re-designed ISP model.** This Strategy should ensure it builds the capability of the ECEC workforce and encompasses:

- integrated practice development across sectors and not-for-profits
- community engagement
- professional learning for ECEC educators
- coaching and mentoring to support ECEC educators
- recognition of the unique needs of each jurisdiction and the cohorts of children they serve, using data from the AEDC and SEIFA Index to understand nuanced needs and plan for local supports
- equal support for children presenting with challenging behaviours, trauma backgrounds, experience in the child protection system or family and domestic violence; not only disability
- family-centred and strengths-based practice.

---

<sup>16</sup> Productivity Commission 2023, *A path to universal early childhood education and care*, Draft Report, Canberra, November. P. 74.

## Resources for ECA-led initiatives

ECA is well placed to lead national policy and sector development dialogues across the early childhood sector. Established in the 1940s with a large and diverse membership and active State/Territory Committees in every jurisdiction, we have the reach to engage all service and provider types. ECA is highly respected as a trusted voice and partners regularly with service providers, universities and training providers. We have highly effective communication channels including a strong presence on social media. Our online learning platform—the ECA Learning Hub—has over 70,000 active users and we run the largest national conference for early childhood professionals in Australia. ECA has a track record in the delivery of government funded programs and projects. We would like to be considered for future work in policy, sector development and professional learning.

Specifically, we could deliver the following projects in the 2024–25 financial year, to support the federal government’s priorities:

1. Responding to the volume of government inquiries and review processes has put a considerable strain on early childhood sector resources. To this end, we would encourage the government to invest in boosting our capability to engage the sector and collaborate on the development of advice to government.
2. ECA is uniquely placed to lead national consultations to design and establish a national register of early childhood educators with supportive pathways to teacher registration across jurisdictions.
3. Work undertaken for the SA Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care into quality drivers across preschool settings could be expanded to look at quality drivers for all early childhood education and care service types, including innovative models to address gaps in the current system such as thin markets and the needs of isolated families.
4. ECA has recently launched a *Management Fundamentals Program* comprising online learning with printed resources, designed to support new and aspiring managers in the early childhood sector—this has the potential to stabilise ‘churn’ at the service director level and improve human resource management capability. We would be keen to secure government investment to deliver it at scale through communities of practice with some coaching/mentoring for participants.
5. In 2023, ECA received innovation funding to develop resources to support the inclusion of children with additional or diverse needs. These resources have been very well received with a high level of uptake. With appropriate resourcing, there is a lot more we could do in working collaboratively with other inclusion support providers to develop professional learning and practice resources.

## Conclusion

The Federal Government has a clear and unwavering commitment to the early years and we commend the work initiated to develop a universal approach to early childhood education and care. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to government decision-making through the various inquiries and reviews presently underway. The Federal Budget 2024 is an important opportunity to make real progress and we welcome an opportunity to discuss these recommendations with government representatives.