

FUTURE MELBOURNE

NOT A MOMENT LEFT TO WASTE

3yo kinder needs help to stop kids falling behind, writes **Ashley Argoon**

ACCESS to three-year-old kindergarten for all Australian pre-school children is "vital" for the future of the nation, according to experts.

As the State and Federal governments are locked in furious argument over annual funding rollovers for four-year-old kinder, experts have claimed their commitment doesn't go far enough.

A push for fully-funded three-year-old kinder is gaining traction, while research shows greater education for preschoolers would lead to huge economic and social benefits, including reducing the burden of health, welfare and crime.

"The research is clear that this is the best form of early intervention, particularly engaging vulnerable kids and families," PwC partner and expert consultant in social policy and early childhood education Zac Hatzantonis said.

Universal access to three-year-old kinder was the "single most impactful reform Australia could undertake" to improve school outcomes with early childhood interventions, stakeholders said in a review commissioned by state and territory governments.

"The *Lifting Our Game* report, released last month, found the case for three-year-old kinder "compelling", and that it would "make a real and cost-effective contribution to improving school outcomes in Australia".

It also reported just 15 per cent of Australian three-year-olds were enrolled, compared to an OECD average of 67 per cent — unsubsidised three-year-old programs cost up to

\$500 a term for two three-hour sessions per week.

Australia is falling far behind other OECD countries for its investment in early childhood education, while recent Programme for International Student Assessment results showed a consistent decline in our students' performance.

Meanwhile, research from PwC showed greater access to early years childcare would save the economy \$30 billion by 2050 — or almost \$1 billion a year — with access to vulnerable kids saving \$13.3 billion alone.

The State government's Early Years Reform Plan showed "every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education returns between \$1.50 and nearly \$3, and the return grows to double digits for children from families experiencing disadvantage".

It will cost \$440 million for the Commonwealth to guarantee 15 hours of four-year-old kinder for 350,000 Australian children in 2019.

Experts and educators have criticised the annual rollover of government funding amid concerns crucial early years education was not being taken seriously in Australia.

"We would never think about funding our schools on a year-by-year basis," Melbourne Graduate School of Education's Patricia Eadie said.

The associate professor in early childhood education and care said given the "strength of the evidence", the nation should already be funding three-year-old kinder.

Prof Eadie said she would be "very surprised" and "more than disappointed" if Australia



Lead educator Elizabeth Leading (centre), with Scarlett (left) and Alexander (right) on the slide at Emma Mclean Kindergarten in Spotswood. Picture: LAWRENCE PINDER

didn't make a commitment by 2028, given the nation was already falling behind.

"We are one of very few OECD countries who are not providing universal access of some sort to three-year-old kinder," she said.

Studies consistently show the benefit in investing in early years education — the Victorian Department of Education reported children who attended kinder achieved National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy scores 10 to 20 points higher than those who didn't.

Mr Hatzantonis said there was an "increasing appetite" for funding three-year-old kinder, with federal and state

governments "very aware" of the benefits.

There was also a "missed opportunity" in picking up developmental and behavioural issues, and getting assistance before the child started school and fell behind.

Early Learning Association Australia interim chief executive Tina Martin said research linking investment in three-year-old kinder to future economic savings and social benefits was "making the conversation louder".

And as families lead busier lives, with a trend towards both parents in the workforce and advancing technology that could cut social time for youngsters, accessible early

HOW AUSTRALIA IS FALLING SHORT

3yo participation in pre-primary education 68.6%



4yo average hours (per year) 911



Investment in pre-primary as proportion of GDP 0.61%



years education could become even more important.

"It does set children up, it provides opportunities for families and introduces children to play-based learning environments," Ms Martin said.

Emma Mclean Kindergarten Spotswood teacher Jessica Johnston said "It's vital we invest now" in three-year-old kinder. "It's just throwing good money after bad if we don't," she said.

Vulnerable children desperately need access to quality education services, and they need it early — it's the only place we can really make a difference."



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