

Creating children's future today

Joint Victorian State Election Submission

August 2018



EARLY
LEARNING
ASSOCIATION
AUSTRALIA



**Early Childhood
Australia**
Victoria Branch



Community
Child Care

Vision into Practice

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Creating children's future today

We have a shared vision for the early years in Victoria where:

- universal access to early childhood education and affordable care is recognised as an essential step toward every child's entitlement to a decent future
- the evidence supporting the critical importance of high quality early childhood education and care to educational and social outcomes is embraced by our political leaders and they take real action to ensure the continued regulation of service standards and ongoing sector reform
- services are adequately staffed today and into the future with early and middle childhood professionals who are supported and whose skills are valued and recognised
- government, the sector, and the community continually plan for the best programs, infrastructure, systems, and resources based on the latest research and real community need.

We are working together to advocate for change. This vision needs to be realised today so Victoria's children are supported to be the best they can be, regardless of whether they are in kindergarten or long day care; or early primary school or outside school hours care.

We call on all parties to create children's future today by:

- continuing the implementation of the Early Childhood Reform Plan
- ensuring a new National Partnership Agreements to guarantee ongoing funding for 15 hours of preschool in the two years before school and a renewed commitment to the National Quality Agenda
- immediately expanding three-year-old preschool to 15 hours per week in Victoria to a wider group of children experiencing disadvantage
- increasing investment in assessment and rating in Victoria to enable services to be assessed at least every three years
- leading the way with affordable high quality services accessible to all Victorian children and families

- developing and implementing a workforce strategy
- investing in the sustainability of Early Years Management Services
- developing a cross-government agreement to plan for and integrate education and care.

Victoria has made some great gains through the Early Childhood Reform Plan but there is a long way to go to achieve this vision. Together with our members, we call on all political leaders to acknowledge the value and necessity of early childhood education and care.

Our political leaders must commit to supporting and resourcing the early years in Victoria – and to make that commitment today – for our children's futures.

Our children need us to get it right on early childhood education and care in Victoria – and to do it right now.

David Worland
Chief Executive
Officer



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Marie Howard
Branch President



Early Childhood
Australia
Victoria Branch

Julie Price
Chief Executive
Officer



We have the evidence today

Over the past two years a number of significant reports have demonstrated the immense value of high quality early childhood education and care by drawing together the evidence. This research has also assessed where Australia is placed and identified how we can create a better future for children that will benefit us all.

Lifting Our Game

Written by Susan Pascoe AM and Professor Deborah Brennan (2017), this report was commissioned by all state and territory governments. The report recommended permanent funding for Universal access in the year before school for four-year-olds and progressive implementation of universal access for all three-year-olds and an increased investment in early childhood education to achieve the OECD average as a proportion of GDP.

Quality Early Education for All

Quality Early Education for All (O'Connell et al, 2016) examined the value of quality early education as 'one of the most significant investments in education and productivity that governments make'. The report identified early education as a key strategy for overcoming disadvantage experienced by children early in life.

Preschool – Two Years are Better than One

This report examined the benefits of two years of preschool and recommended that fifteen hours of preschool be universally available to all three-year-olds (Fox and Geddes, 2016).

State of Early Learning Report

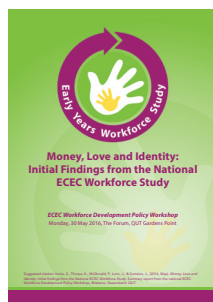
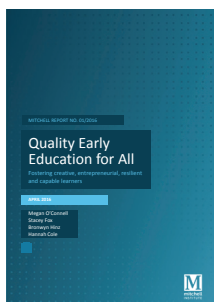
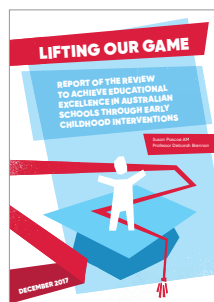
The second State of Early Learning Report released in 2017 provides an accessible overview of early childhood education and care in Australia, highlighting the low rate of investment as compared to all OECD nations (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits).

E4Kids

E4Kids (Taylor, 2016) was Australia's largest longitudinal research project studying the impact of participation in early childhood education and care programs. The project found that the quality of adult-child interactions is the most significant driver of child development and reinforced the value of high quality early childhood education and care.

Money, Love and Identity

This Early Years Workforce Study identified the critical role of a workforce strategy in attracting and retaining quality educators and teachers and outlined key elements of an effective strategy (Irvine et al, 2016).



Ensuring access for all today

Participation support today

There is increasing evidence of the criticality of the first 1,000 days of a baby's life – considered to be the time from conception, throughout the pregnancy and through the child's first two years – as providing the foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing (Moore et al, 2017). There are numerous barriers to attendance and participation in early and middle years services including language and cultural barriers, transport, disability and family functioning alongside the value families place on the role of education and care services.

Whilst there has been a remarkable increase in enrolment in four-year-old preschool in Victoria and nationally over the past ten years, attendance rates are significantly lower. The Early Childhood Reform Plan sets the direction for increased access to supports for children and families who are experiencing disadvantage and this should be further expanded. Providing free or low cost access to quality learning environments can also ensure children have the opportunity to develop with the support and guidance of educators. School readiness funding will also play an important role in supporting children to get the assistance they need earlier in a kindergarten setting.



Whilst the participation rates of Koorie children in four-year-old kindergarten have risen from 79.6 per cent to 90.5 per cent since 2014 and in three-year-old kindergarten from 37.1 per cent to 48.8 per cent, there is still a way to go. The continued implementation of the Murrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-26 will ensure that services are culturally safe and improve the participation rates of Koorie children across maternal and child health services, supported playgroups and kindergarten programs.

The Early Childhood Reform Plan sets the direction for increased access to supports for children and families who are experiencing disadvantage and this should be further expanded.

Create children's future today by:

- continuing the implementation of the Early Childhood Reform Plan
- providing free or low cost access to services to those who need it most
- continue the implementation of the Murrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026.

Ensuring access for all today

Two years of preschool for every child

Australia ranks in the bottom five of all OECD countries for its investment in early childhood education and care (OECD, 2017).

Currently, nearly a quarter of Australian children arrive at school without the skills they need to learn (Fox and Geddes, 2016). The Australian Early Development Census identified that one in five Australian children were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains of child development when starting school in 2015 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016). The results for disadvantaged children and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were considerably worse with two in five children vulnerable. The science behind brain development shows that the two years before school are optimal for learning essential skills for life. It is when children are able to pay attention and work together in groups and when it can be cost-effective to run programs.

Research shows that we can have a more equitable and better educated society if all children have access to two years of preschool as children better prepared for school, perform better at school, and are more likely to enter tertiary education (Taggart et al, 2014; Taggart et al 2015).

Commonwealth funding for universal access for four-year-olds to 15 hours of preschool in the year before school is only guaranteed until December 2019. The ongoing insecurity of funding for families, children and services is in complete

contrast to the extensive evidence of the value of early learning for all children, for their futures, and to the benefit of all Victorians.

The declining performance of Australian students in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and NAPLAN tests, despite increased investment in school education is of concern, however, it is also concerning that the evidence of the benefits of quality early learning has not been included in discussions about how to raise standards. Two years of preschool should be a central plank in the solution to the declining national academic performance.

Despite some worrying signs about a possible withdrawal of the Commonwealth from preschool funding, the State Government must continue to advocate for a new National Partnership Agreement which commits to:

- ongoing funding of 15 hours of preschool in the year before school
- long-term planning and funding to expand the education offering to two years of preschool.

The new agreement should outline a timetable for plans to grow the workforce and develop infrastructure, including taking account of the needs of rural and remote services.

States and territories are also starting to plan for a future without the Commonwealth. New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory both recently made announcements about plans to expand access to preschool to three-year-olds. Victoria can also take a lead by immediately expanding three-year-old preschool to children experiencing disadvantage to 15 hours per week and develop contingency plans for assuming full responsibility for preschool education.

Create children's future today by:

- ensuring a new National Partnership Agreement to guarantee ongoing funding for 15 hours of preschool in the two years before school
- immediately expanding three-year-old preschool for 15 hours per week in Victoria to a wider group of children experiencing disadvantage
- developing contingency plans for assuming full responsibility for preschool education.

Two years of preschool should be a central plank in the solution to the declining national academic performance.

Case study: Funding uncertainty

bestchance Child Family Care Network is an independent, not-for-profit organisation with over 700 staff members which provides a range of education and support services to children and families including early childhood education and care services at 82 kindergartens across 14 local government areas for children under the age of five and primary education for children with social/emotional and learning difficulties.

Not being able to plan in a meaningful way over an extended period, impacts on the service's capacity to develop staff to improve the quality of the education they provide. The absence of certainty creates a distraction from engaging with staff and skilling them up to what is an increasingly demanding service context. bestchance wants educators who choose the profession as a vocation, as a long-term career but the uncertainty has an impact on educators' ability to commit. Being an educator should not be a year-by-year proposition.

The potential for reducing the number of kindergarten hours beyond 2019 also creates great uncertainty for families.

'bestchance's time horizon is less than 24 months. That is simply not acceptable for ourselves or our educators, let alone for the children who will be accessing our services, not just today but in 5 or 10 years' time. We want a strong service in 10 years not just a strong service for today,'

Kevin Feeney, CEO, bestchance



Secure quality today

Service quality in early childhood is critical. Children who attend higher quality services, with highly skilled and well supported educators have better literacy and numeracy outcomes and consequently better future earnings (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2014; Fox and Geddes, 2016). Quality also plays a protective role for children against some of the risks associated with disadvantages in early childhood (Hall et al 2009; Hall et al, 2013).

However, access to high quality services in Australia is not equal. There is an opportunity divide which is drawn like a line between wealthy and poor communities, cities and remote towns, and children who are from different cultural backgrounds (O'Connell et al, 2016; Tayler, 2016).

In the 2018/19 federal budget, the Commonwealth Government ceased its funding contribution to states and territories for the assessment and regulation of the services citing the conclusion of the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda as its rationale. The reduction in funding will have a major impact on the capacity of the Victorian Department of Education to assess services, which is a key driver of quality improvement. The reduction comes at a time when Early Childhood Improvement Branches are being established to improve quality and support the roll-out of the Early Childhood Reform Plan. The loss of Commonwealth funding will have a significant impact on Victoria's capacity to deliver improved quality as originally foreseen and has the potential to put the Reform Plan and the school readiness agenda at risk.

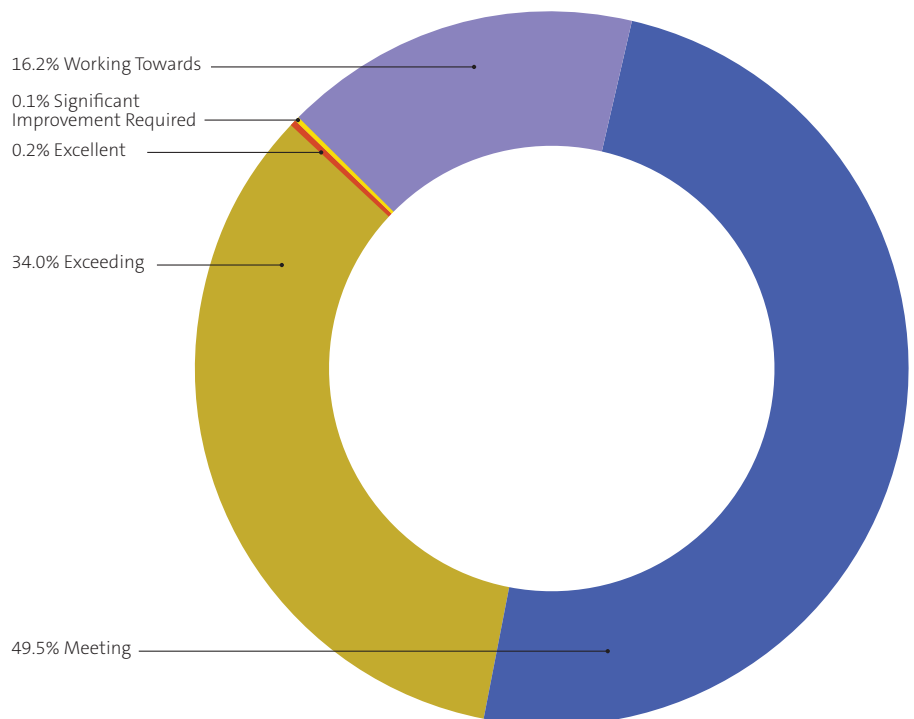
Of the 92 per cent of services in Victoria with a quality rating, only just over one-third (34.2%) are exceeding minimum quality requirements, while over 16 per cent are still working towards quality requirements or require significant improvement (ACECQA, 2018).

We want to ensure that 100 per cent of assessments take place every three years as originally planned in the National Partnership Agreement and that there is a continuous drive towards excellence so all Victorian families have access to a service of the highest quality.

Create children's future today by:

- ensuring a new National Partnership Agreement with a renewed ongoing commitment to a National Quality Agenda
- increasing investment in assessment and rating in Victoria to enable services to be assessed at least every 3 years
- leading the way with high quality services accessible to all Victorian children and families.

Figure 1: Percentage of Victorian services with a NQF quality rating (ACECQA, 2018)



Case study: Valuing quality

“I believe early childhood education is highly important – it’s the best way to start socialising and it builds up children’s confidence when they play with other children. It’s a great time for them to interact and share and get to know other communities because it’s probably one of the first times they have been in a place outside their home so it’s good that they get to be part of a different environment and learn about the world outside their little family. It’s where children expand on the learning they get from home because children are inquisitive and we need to foster their learning.

It’s important that governments subsidise the cost of going to kindergarten to make sure that children who can’t afford can come – I don’t want them to miss out on the education that the people who are now in government roles were once given. It’s also important that kindergartens get the money they need to make sure that children who have more needs get support so they don’t get lost in the system and can be part of integrated services and schools. For me kindergarten is an integral part of children’s education journey.”

Randa Feleppa

Parent, Shalimar Park PreSchool, Dandenong



Of the 92 per cent of services in Victoria with a quality rating, just over one-third (34.2%) are exceeding minimum quality requirements (ACECQA, 2018).

A strong workforce today

Develop a workforce strategy

Over the past two years there have been multiple initiatives and reviews at a state and federal level related to the early years workforce, such as changes to the provision of training and the introduction of scholarships in Victoria, and nationally, an examination of the curriculum and a review of teacher registration.

There is currently no plan in place to address the difficulty attracting and retaining staff because of low status, low wages and poor working conditions. Many parts of the sector, such as outside school hours care and kindergarten, are heavily dependent on casual and part-time employees. As part of the next phase of the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF), from 2020, centre-based early childhood services will be required to have an additional early childhood teacher if they have more than 60 children. The capacity of the sector to meet the NQF requirements is in doubt as fewer people are being attracted to early childhood teacher positions (McKinlay et al, 2018).

One of the key recommendations of the 'Lifting Our Game' Report is the development of a new workforce strategy to "support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and enhanced professionalism of the workforce, thereby improving service quality and children's outcomes" (page 13, Pascoe and Brennan, 2017).

A workforce strategy is needed to:

- plan for workforce demands arising from changes in quality requirements and population growth
- address remuneration, recognition and status of educators
- ensure quality training
- encourage and support a diverse workforce to best meet the diverse needs of children and families
- provide high quality professional development options
- recognise the value of educational leadership in pedagogical practice
- improve working conditions through guaranteed access to an Employee Assistance Scheme; on-site mental health support; and an increased focus on OHS.

A stable, capable and valued workforce will raise standards and deliver improved educational outcomes for all young children.

Create children's future today by:

- state, territory and federal governments developing a workforce strategy

A stable, capable and valued workforce will raise standards and deliver improved educational outcomes for all young children.

Prioritise early childhood qualifications

Over the past 18 months, a number of significant and detrimental changes have been made which affect the provision of training for Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and a Diploma of Early Childhood Education:

- the Victorian Department of Education and Training cut 90 per cent of licensed places for early childhood qualifications with registered training organisations (RTOs)
- a policy push towards traineeships and the TAFE sector has further restricted the supply of suitably qualified early childhood educators
- qualifications in early childhood education were not considered a priority for the Free TAFE for Priority Courses initiative.

These changes have been made with little or no consultation with the early childhood sector, RTOs or students and will directly affect the capacity of the sector to provide quality services to children as:

- the supply of suitably qualified early childhood educators will be significantly reduced
- there will be significantly increased costs for students/educators at a time when competition for staff across the social/human services and education sector is growing rapidly
- the capacity of RTOs to provide early childhood training will be dismantled, which will be difficult to re-instate, creating long-term issues.

We are calling on the State Government to review these policy changes in consultation with the sector and, at a minimum, ask that qualifications in early childhood education be included in the Free TAFE for Priority Courses initiative.

A commitment to quality training through improved regulation of RTOs and the development of sector partnerships with employers will deliver better outcomes for newly qualified graduates and services.

Create children's future today by:

- including education and care qualifications on Free TAFE for Priority Courses initiative and increase the number of funded places
- improving the regulation of funded registered training organisations
- consider training quality as part of the workforce strategy.

Case study: Integration of services

Oakleigh Primary School and Kindergarten and Out of School Hours Care community work collaboratively and share common goals, values and beliefs about the best way to support children and families on their educational path.

We encourage respectful, collaborative relationships between children, families, the school, communities and educators, with our common focus being the child. We value an inclusive, supportive and caring environment where children, families and educators come together as a community of learners. We provide support to each child to promote their health and wellbeing through a spirit of warmth and respect underpinned by a commitment to social justice.

We believe children's learning and development is supported best through meaningful and engaged play based learning. We respect and celebrate the culture and diversity within our community and beyond. We support the individual needs of our children to develop the view that learning is fun, exploratory and exciting.

Educational leadership team



Planning today for their future

Planning for changing community needs

There are currently over 450 planning applications for new long day care services in Victoria before local government councils. Occupancy is already an issue for many services across Victoria and this additional growth is set to place further strain on the sector's sustainability.

Longer-term, Victoria's population is set to double by 2050 and forecasts predict large increases in the number of children in growth areas with a 78 per cent increase in the numbers of children up to four years of age by 2031 and a 95 per cent increase in children between the ages of five and nine years of age (see Figure 2).

The Victorian Auditor-General's Office (VAGO) report, *Effectively Planning for Population Growth* (2017) identified current issues with the planning and provision of services in designated growth corridors of Melbourne as well as in other local government areas which have experienced strong population growth, such as in the cities of Moreland and Melbourne.

We are calling on the State Government to engage all levels of government to develop a mechanism for planning to tailor early childhood services to community needs.

Create children's future today by:

- ensuring that current and long-term planning are linked to community needs.

Figure 2: Projected increase in population of children aged 0–9 years in Melbourne 2011–2031
(Victorian State Government, 2016)

Age group and area	Actual population 2011	Projected population 2031	Total projected growth	
			Number	Per cent
Growth area councils				
0–4 years	79 063	140 500	61 437	78
5–9 years	73 166	142 824	69 658	95
Total	152 229	283 324	131 095	86
Remaining areas				
0–4 years	185 370	224 395	39 025	21
5–9 years	172 637	223 793	51 156	30
Total	358 007	448 188	90 181	25

Source: VAGO (2017) as cited in Victorian Government (2016)

Sustainable services today

The State Government has identified that Early Years Management (EYM) is 'the leading platform to achieve improved outcomes for all young children' with its role of driving quality reform in the sector (Department of Education and Training, 2016b). The EYM Outcomes and Draft Performance Framework specifies the requirements of EYM organisations to be high-quality, integrated, sustainable and viable early years services.

Feedback from EYM services is clear: the program cannot be provided within the current funding envelope. Long-standing

uncertainty about funding of preschool, combined with the low unit price is having a detrimental impact on the viability of organisations, many of which are drawing on reserves to survive. The inadequacy of funding also prevents quality not-for-profit providers from entering the EYM sector and deters current EYM's from taking on additional services.

In 2014, the Department of Education and Training (DET) commenced the Kindergarten Cluster Management (KCM) Strengthening Project, which informed the subsequent development of early years management. A critical finding of the resulting report, which was never released, went to the inadequacy of the core funding.

A critical finding of the resulting report, which was never released, went to the inadequacy of the core funding.

The Office of the Victorian Auditor General has scheduled an audit of the implementation of the EYM policy framework for 2019/20 to determine if it has improved the quality of kindergarten programs and reduced volunteer responsibilities. It is critical that the sustainability of EYM also be considered in this review and long-term funding increased to reflect the work undertaken to deliver quality kindergarten services.

Create children's future today by:

- investing in the sustainability of Early Years Management Services.

Understandably, families confuse 'care', with long day care and 'education' with kindergarten when both settings provide education and care.

Integrating education and care today

Funding for early years services comes from State and Federal governments with local government often playing a key role in the planning and delivery of services.

Understandably, families confuse 'care', with long day care and 'education' with kindergarten when both settings provide education and care. Similar but separately funded programs such as the Victorian Kindergarten Inclusion Support and the Commonwealth Inclusion Support Program add to the confusion.

Linking children's participation in child care to whether their parents are working magnifies the disadvantage some children experience. The Victorian State Government will bear the additional education, justice and health costs which arise for children who are not school ready and who carry the outcomes of those developmental vulnerabilities as adults.

Families want their children to be cared for in quality learning environments. Children need quality support and learning experiences whether they are in child care, kindergarten or outside school hours care. The rights of the child should form the foundation of an early childhood education system.

The Victorian Government must work together with other states, territories and the Commonwealth to develop a whole of government vision for the early years with a plan for a clear and enduring partnership. It is critical that there is a genuine and long-term commitment to an agreed vision of quality service provision across all jurisdictions and communities supported by a funding mechanism that provides certainty to families and service providers.

Create children's future today by:

- developing a cross-government agreement to integrate education and care.



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Early Learning Association Australia

More than 25 years since its creation, Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) is a peak body which works in partnership with early learning providers and parents for excellence in learning for every child.

ELAA represents over 1100 service providers in Victoria and across Australia. Our diverse membership base includes early years management organisations, independent kindergartens, local governments, long day care services, government and independent schools and out of school hours care programs. Valued for our advocacy, ELAA also provides supports and advice in the areas of governance, human resources/ industrial relations, enterprise bargaining, OHS and Road Safety Education as well as a professional learning and development and an annual conference.

ELAA is well-networked, influential and works closely with Federal, State and Local Governments and collaborates with a diverse range of organisations and peak bodies from across the education and community sectors. Together with our members and partners, ELAA is an influential advocate for excellence in early childhood education for all children.

Early Childhood Australia (Victoria Branch)

Early Childhood Australia Victoria Branch advocates to ensure quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to children from birth to eight years and ensuring that these children have a voice. Our vision is that 'Every young child is thriving and learning'.

The Victorian branch achieves this through speaking on behalf of young children to parents, governments, educators, carers and the community. We are committed to promoting high standards of practice in the early childhood sector and contribute to and comment on policy that effect young children and their families.

ECA Vic Branch is governed by a volunteer committee and is a member of the ECA national organisation. We engage our members through regular communication via social media and newsletters and hold regular forums that members can attend to keep up to date with current policy, research and issues within the sector. The Branch is strongly committed to increasing our membership and advocating for the early childhood sector work force.

Community Child Care Association

Established in 1971, Community Child Care Association (CCC) is the voice of community-based education and care services in Victoria. Building a strong and responsive sector is at the heart of what we do. We are active right across the state, providing leadership and advocacy, working with governments, and supporting education and care services.

Here to help services transform their vision into practice, we offer membership, quality training and consultancies. Our 700+ members rely on us for free professional advice and support, and to keep them up to date with industry standards, best practices and new regulations. Our heritage and reputation as a sector leader means we're the go-to place for inquiries and projects, including the Victorian Inclusion Agency.

Our deep community connections and role as the peak body for community owned, not-for-profit education and care services make us well placed to lobby key decision makers. Proactive in the evolution of the children's education and care sector, our focus is on quality service and outcomes.

