

Michael Petrie
General Manager, Strategy, Communications and Consistency
Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority

1 June 2021

Dear Michael

Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA), Community Child Care (CCC) and Community Early Learning Australia (CELA) are writing as the member organisations for the community based early childhood education and care sector – a sector of around 5,000 services located in many communities across Australia. We welcome consideration of longer-term measures to secure a quality workforce as part of the National Workforce Strategy. We also wish to highlight immediate and medium term actions needed to support and retain the workforce that are in addition to current actions being taken in Victoria and New South Wales.

Urgency to act

Our members are regularly reporting that they cannot fill vacant positions and that if a staff member falls ill, they are in many cases having to close rooms or the service. We are concerned our sector is at a critical juncture, and that families will not be able to access services if we do not act immediately.

We partner with a range of recruitment agencies that advise they are not able to support services with permanent staff and the pool of casual staff for backfill has been depleted. COVID-19 has seen a loss of overseas teachers and educators, whilst many casual educators have moved to more permanent employment in other sectors. Burnout in educators and teachers is increasing as they are challenged with maintaining COVID-19 vigilance and supporting an increasing number of vulnerable families.

We urge the implementation of immediate solutions whilst the National Workforce Strategy is being finalised to stem the tide of staff exiting the sector.

Immediate actions

The following actions, if implemented, would support retention of the current workforce which is essential to retain experience and quality, and minimise the reliance on new entrants.

1. Support workforce retention and re-attraction through retention payments

Retention rates in early childhood are a significant and persistent problem in Australia and internationally, with turnover of around a third of the workplace per annum and higher still in rural and remote areas (Thorpe, 2020). The number of students undertaking training is diminishing, and is not sufficient to meet demand. The cost of training students is significant, around \$12,000 per diploma qualified educator and around \$50,000 per teacher, with around three times as many students undertaking training as the number graduating given low completion rates.

One option is to provide trained educators and teachers with a retention payment. Retention payments are a useful mechanism to reward persistence of newly qualified teachers. In the first instance a trial of retention payments could be offered in difficult to staff areas.

Workforce re-attraction payments could be implemented to attract trained staff at all levels, who have not been in employment in childhood education and care since 2020, back to the workforce. The current experience in Victoria may provide evidence as to the efficacy of this.

2. Invest in workforce wellbeing

Burnout is frequently given as a reason for leaving the sector, and particularly given the pressures of COVID-19 and the impact of staff shortages exacerbating workplace stress. Additional provisions that would support increased wellbeing include a range of fully funded strategies such as:

- Providing guaranteed access to an employee assistance program for counselling support
- Mental Health first aid training for staff
- Be You – extending capacity for real time training.

3. Support leadership and workplace culture

With such high staff turn-over and the nature of small services, inexperienced staff can quickly find themselves in leadership positions and managing others. Knowing how to supervise, support and develop staff and to create a positive workplace culture is challenging if you are only just developing your own sense of identity in the workforce.

We recommend the adoption nationally of initiatives that are currently underway for some services in Victoria or New South Wales, to ensure staff across all early childhood services can benefit, such as:

- Mentoring for new teachers and new early childhood education leaders

- Networking including support for an ongoing peer learning network.

4. Prioritised safe re-entry of overseas adults and students

With many immigrant ECEC staff having left Australia at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an opportunity to prioritise safe re-entry (via quarantine) of overseas adults and students that have previously worked in ECEC in Australia, or who have an interest in working in the Australian ECEC sector. This option would have a rapid positive impact on supply, particularly of educators.

5. Prioritise COVID-19 vaccines for the ECEC workforce

ECEC services have remained open throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and teachers and educators remain more exposed to risk of COVID-19 infection than other adults. Prioritising access to COVID-19 vaccinations for the ECEC workforce will reduce the risk of service closure due to COVID-19 exposure.

Medium Term measures

6. Improve availability and take-up of traineeships

There is significant funding available in the Federal Budget for the Boosting Traineeship initiative. Many early childhood services would benefit from hiring trainees but may not know where to start, or how to support and mentor trainees. Targeted programs would support services to recruit trainees in a location and place in early childhood education and care services, with support provided to the service to understand their obligations and to maximise support provided to the trainees.

Targeted traineeship programs in other sectors, such as disability care, have been effective in recruiting diverse entrants and doubling the completion rates by providing wrap around financial and academic support (Future Social Services Institute, 2021). We encourage governments to examine and trial a model to attract and retain a diverse workforce in hard to staff services.

7. Improve pay and conditions of sector employees

Low pay has been identified as the central cause of low retention of ECEC staff (McDonald et al, 2018), alongside challenging working conditions and an absence of career opportunities. The recently re-negotiated Victorian Early Childhood Teacher and Educators Agreement (VECTEA) has

terms and conditions which are significantly more beneficial than the modern awards and other relevant agreements in the sector, including:

- Significantly higher pay compared with the modern awards, the *Children's Services Award 2010* and *Educational Services (Teachers) Award 2020*.
- Superior leave entitlements, including paid parental leave, personal leave and family and domestic violence leave
- Professional development, organisational days and planning time
- Access to an employee assistance program providing confidential counselling to discuss personal or work-related issues.

The VECTEA, which is currently with the Fair Work Commission for ratification, will contribute significantly to the attraction and retention of staff working in Victorian standalone kindergartens. Extending these benefits to all teachers and educators, considering different ECEC delivery settings, would make significant inroads into the sector's workforce challenges, but requires additional government investment.

We would be pleased to meet to discuss the further development of the National Workforce Strategy and urgent actions jurisdictions can implement. Please feel free to contact Megan O'Connell, Director – Advocacy Solutions, Early Learning Association Australia on moconnell@elaa.org.au or 03 9411 4102 to arrange a time.

Yours sincerely,



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cc:

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