



30 June 2021

## About Early Learning Association Australia

Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) is a peak body for early childhood education and care (ECEC) service providers. Our vision is excellence and equity in early childhood education and care. Our diverse membership base of over 625 service providers managing services at over 1,300 locations includes early years management organisations, independent kindergartens, local governments, long day care services, government and independent schools and out of school hours care programs. More information about ELAA can be found at <https://elaa.org.au/>.

## Introduction

ELAA welcomes the opportunity to make this submission on behalf of our members to inform the development of a Victorian Early Childhood Workforce Strategy. We acknowledge the work of the Victorian Government to date including the wide range of strategies which are currently being implemented to attract early childhood teachers (ECTs) and educators to the sector and to support their retention.

We also recognise the urgency for action. 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 undertaking a survey to ascertain the nature and scale of these shortages and look forward to advising DET further.

Our sector is at a critical juncture, and 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.

Our submission is structured around the key themes of retention, attraction and partnerships and focuses on both existing mechanisms that could be scaled, and evidence informed initiatives that could be funded and evaluated. We note when a key strategy includes advocacy at the Australian government level.

Growing the workforce to meet the demands of the state-wide expansion of three-year-old kindergarten is a significant challenge. ELAA and our members are keen to work with the Victorian Government and the Department of Education and Training to continue to pursue innovative ways of attracting and re-attracting teachers and educators and helping them to feel valued and connected to the pursuit of excellence in early learning for every child.



## Retention

### Retention payments

We believe an immediate focus on the workforce strategy must be on retention. We know that 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. There is a constant, significant investment in the early childhood workforce due to the high level of attrition.

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, and could be broadened to incentivise teachers near retirement age to stay in the workforce. We note existing early childhood teacher incentives, and believe this model could be more broadly applied across the community kindergarten sector to stem attrition. For example incentives could be trialled to support staff retention in services with high levels of vulnerable children to ensure access to quality services is maintained for the children who need it most. Retention payments could be considered for hard to fill diploma roles.

### Re-attraction payments and support to stay

Workforce re-attraction payments could be implemented to attract trained staff at all levels back to the workforce. Drawing on the current model of incentives, incentives could also be provided to diploma level and potentially certificate III staff who have not been in employment in childhood education and care since 2020. Re-attracting staff is a cost effective and expedient way to rebuild the workforce, and staff at all levels are needed to provide support and backfill teacher shortages in the absence of casual relief teachers.

Additional support should be provided to staff re-entering the workforce after a period of time out, including a supported induction, training on changes to the system and access to mentoring and coaching to address underlying issues, outside of remuneration, that motivated an exit from the workforce. ELAA would be



pleased to discuss further a package of supports that could be trialled to increase retention of re-entering educators and teachers.

## **Invest in workforce wellbeing**

Burnout is frequently given as a reason for leaving the sector, 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 for all Victorian teachers and educators, as is to be made available through VECTEA
- Mental Health first aid training for staff
- Be You – extending capacity for real time training.

These provisions should be extended across Victoria, and ELAA is advocating for their inclusion in the National Workforce Strategy.

## **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 entire ECEC workforce will reduce the risk of service closure due to COVID-19 exposure.

## **Support leadership and workplace culture**

After pay and conditions, good leadership and a strong workplace culture makes a difference for staff retention. In addition to current Victorian initiatives aimed at new teachers, support for new educational leaders is vital as services with strong educational leadership have greater retention (TICCS 2020). A peer learning network is currently being trialled in New South Wales to support educational leaders.

Initiatives that could support leadership and workplace culture include:

- a professional learning program focused on key drivers of retention
- resources to address key skill gaps and stressors, such as supporting vulnerable children and
- a peer learning network to support all educational leaders.

## **Review workloads**

It has been a number of years since a review of the workloads of teachers and educators has been undertaken. Increasing administrative and reporting responsibilities, such as for school readiness funding,



and the implementation of reforms, are time intensive and require resourcing from an already stretched workforce. A review of role expectations and how staff spend time, including outside standard work hours, would provide valuable learnings about the pressures on the workforce and support identification of ways to ensure that teachers and educators maximise the time they spend with children.

## Recognising and scaling innovative practice

ELAA notes existing innovative grants, aimed at supporting retention of teachers in their first five years of ECEC. Given the widespread workforce shortage challenges, we believe there is worth in providing innovative grants to showcase and evaluate practice across the sector. Examples such as sharing an ECT between services to create a full-time role, pooling School Readiness Funding to build educator capacity through coaching and building relationships to enable more supported teacher placements could be evaluated with a view to sharing good practice and scaling. There is potential for peak bodies to be funded to work with members to identify, support and evaluate innovations as services are stretched to apply for grants, even when they are able to identify and would benefit from funding to trial innovations.

## Attraction

### Advocate through Education Ministers for the 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 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.

### Improve support for traineeships to boost completions

There are significant funding incentives to support the hiring of trainees. Many early childhood services would benefit from hiring trainees but may not know where to start, or lack resources to support and mentor trainees. Targeted programs would support the recruitment of trainees, including external support for mentoring to enable quality services to hire a number of trainees. Present staffing shortages are limiting the hiring of trainees.

The Victorian Government funded targeted traineeship programs in other sectors, such as disability care, have been effective in recruiting diverse entrants such as African women and doubling the completion rates by providing mentoring to relieve employer burden and wrap around financial and academic support (Future



Social Services Institute, 2021). A similar model should be trialled in early childhood to support recruitment of a diverse range of early childhood educators.

## Supporting services to offer quality placements

Services are reporting that current staffing shortages are impacting their ability to provide placements for students – and the new Certificate III with its extended placement requirements will exacerbate this strain. Services are more likely to host pre-service teacher placements given the necessity to build the teacher workforce and are rewarded by the daily fee providing recognition of the additional burden posed by hosting a student. Consideration could be given to developing a placement model that encourages and rewards services to provide quality placements to vocational students.

## 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.

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.

ELAA is advocating that the National Workforce Strategy looks to the VECTEA as a guide to how wages and conditions can be improved.



## Attracting men to the sector

It is important that children experience diversity through their role models. Gender diversity within the workplace is also associated with increased productivity and performance. The labour market is being increasingly influenced by technology with fewer roles in areas such as manufacturing and increasing opportunities in those which are service-based, such as in the teaching and caring professions. ELAA would welcome a broad-scale campaign that:

- capitalises on the opportunities these changes present to attract more men
- contributes to breaking down the stereotypes associated with working in the sector
- promotes the career pathways, including transition pathways available
- provides a peer support network to encourage completion and retention.

## Partnerships

### Support partnerships to address local casual relief teacher shortages

A challenge for many services at present is securing casual staff for backfill. Service closures and program modifications have been reported because of the shortage of casual relief teachers. Support for local partnerships, such as through a local council, to engage a teacher on a full-time basis to be available to a number of services could be an effective and cost-effective solution.

### Grow collaborations with tertiary institutions

There are a number of collaborations between tertiary institutions and services underway to examine how to build the capacity of teachers as mentors and coaches of students on placement, as well as how to enhance the placement experiences of students and their connection to the early childhood sector. These collaborations provide professional development opportunities for staff, maintaining their connection to evidence-based practice. They also support innovative recruitment and retention strategies that connect students to services and early childhood.

The sector is in need of skilled and talented educators as well as teachers - partnerships with vocational education providers could help lift training quality including ensuring students are better prepared for placement. A suite of supports to develop the skills of diploma and certificate-qualified educators as mentors would add significant value to the placement experiences of students and help to lift quality.

## Submission: Victorian Early Childhood Workforce Strategy



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We would be pleased to discuss any aspect of ELAA's submission and welcome the opportunity to further the development of the Victorian Early Childhood Workforce Strategy. Please feel free to contact Megan O'Connell, Director – Advocacy Solutions, Early Learning Association Australia on [moconnell@ela.org.au](mailto:moconnell@ela.org.au) or 03 9411 4102.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'David Worland', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

David Worland