

2023-24 Federal Budget Submission

Acknowledgement of Country

Community Early Learning Australia acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the First Peoples of this nation and the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work. We recognise their continuing connection to culture, land, water and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present.

About CELA

Community Early Learning Australia (CELA) is a not-for-profit, member based, organisation with a focus on amplifying the value of early learning for every child across Australia. We represent community managed and small providers and aim to unite our sector as a force for quality early education and care. Founded over 44 years ago we represent more than 1,800 early education and care services employing 27,000 plus educators. Our national influence is extended through publications and social media which have a circulation of 52,000 per week and our learning and development program which trains over 7,000 educators per year in quality practice and governance. More information about CELA can be found at www.cela.org.au

About the education and care sector

There are over 17,000 education and care services across Australia, employing over 200,000 educators providing education and care to over 1.4 million children each year. Early education and care is key to parent and carer's ability to work and contribute to the economic recovery required in Australia. Decades of research demonstrate that high quality education and care in the first five years of life - which is when 90% of brain growth occurs - can have a lasting benefit on an individual's educational, earning, relational and health outcomes, well into adulthood. The benefits of high-quality early education and care are even more striking for children from disadvantaged backgrounds or who are growing up in more difficult circumstances.

Summary Recommendations

1. An interim Government-funded wage supplement while other measures, such as bargaining reforms and review of the Award take place to drive up a more permanent wage increase
2. Investment in workforce retention strategies, including a Peer Network for educators and teachers in leadership roles, to provide the support needed to overcome professional isolation, have easy access to evidence-based research and learning opportunities to develop professional capacity.

An interim Government-funded wage supplement

Low wages are the major factor impacting workforce shortages in our sector. Government, as the major funder of education and care, must be willing to make a sustained, recurrent investment in the early education and care workforce. Families, on average, contribute 37% of the income for education and care services, with the remainder coming from Government.¹ This is the fourth highest of 30 OECD nations reporting on this measure². Our community-managed education and care services spend around 80%³ of their income on wages, yet most are unable to pay much above the Award. Increasing wages without government-funding would mean they need to pass the increase on to families in the form of fees. Higher fees will have a direct impact on parents' participation in the workforce resulting in many parents, usually women, working less days, impacting their workplace and the wider economy.

How the pay-rise for the education and care workforce is achieved is moot, whether via a Government-funded wage supplement, Enterprise Bargaining, or a lifting of the Award. Government faces the choice of either driving up wages and passing costs on to families, or funding the sector appropriately, in recognition of the social and economic benefit that flows from equitable access to high quality early education and care provided by a qualified and stable workforce.

Investment in workforce retention strategies

High quality education and care is strongly linked to the availability of a well-trained and stable workforce. Early education workforce shortages are at unprecedented high levels across Australia. In the context of comparatively low wages for highly skilled and demanding work, COVID-19 has exacerbated what was already a significant workforce shortage.

The National Children's Education and Workforce Strategy – Shaping our Future, is grounded in extensive consultations and review of evidence, and sets short, medium and long-term goals to address the challenges facing the ECEC workforce. Priority actions centre around five themes: Professional recognition; attraction and retention; leadership and capability; educator wellbeing; qualifications; and pathways, data and evidence. The strategy recognises that collaboration across governments, service providers, peaks, education and training providers, educators and teachers, and representative bodies is required to effect sustainable change.

We need a national focus on workforce development, to reduce growing inequality in educational outcomes, particularly between metropolitan and rural children, and to close the gap between aboriginal and non-aboriginal children. A skilled workforce and attractive, well supported career paths are crucial, given education and care staff play a vital role in shaping Australia's children.

The education and care workforce is challenged by high turnover - a symptom of low wages but also lack of professional identity and high workplace isolation.

¹ Matt Grudnoff (March 2022) "The economic benefits of high-quality universal early childhood education"
https://australianinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Economic_Aspects_of_ECEC_in_Australia-WEB.pdf page 14

² Ibid. Page 14

³ Warrilow P., Graham N., & Robertson C. 2021. Not for Profit Education and Care: High quality, accessible and resilient – Findings of the 2020/2021 Trends in Community Children's Services Survey, Australian Community Children's Services. Available from <https://ausccs.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/TICCS-Report-2020-Wave-6-v12012022.pdf> 20 October 2022]. Page 48

Funding a National Peer Network for leaders in early education is an effective solution to reducing professional isolation and building capacity in our existing and emerging leaders to support each other. The flow-on effect to educational teams and children will be significant.

Recommendation

Investment in workforce retention strategies, including a Peer Network for educators and teachers in leadership roles, to provide the support needed to overcome professional isolation, and have easy access to evidence-based research and learning opportunities to develop professional capacity.

Annual Investment - \$3m

Community Early Learning Australia
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