

Preschool

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Children who go to preschool do better at school, stay longer, earn more, use less welfare, commit fewer crimes, are more likely to own their own homes and get better jobs. Yet there are no national standards, a patchwork of State, local government and community run centres, no coordination between governments, Federal Government disinterest, little access for 3 year-olds, a great reliance on parents for organisation, prohibitively high fees and 57,000 children estimated to be missing out on preschool altogether, many of them in childcare.

Like primary, secondary and tertiary education, preschool should be a joint Commonwealth/State funding responsibility.

"We know lots about the risk factors to avoid, and the protective factors to encourage for better outcomes for children and young people. ...but we are failing to put this knowledge into action."

Prof. Fiona Stanley et al,
*Children of the
Lucky Country*

Our Action Plan

- Joint Commonwealth and State government agreement to fund 20 hours a week of free preschool for all 3 and 4 year old children, including those in family and long day care.
- Class sizes limited to 15 children per qualified preschool teacher and assistant (with reductions in group size for each child with special needs), funding allowing flexibility for reasonable fluctuations in preschool populations and for rural and remote preschools with as few as 5 children.
- An outreach program providing high quality early childhood education, intervention and support for 0 to 3 year olds in a range of community settings, including playgroups and childcare, with priority for children with potential for educational disadvantage.
- Responsibility for preschool transferred to State and territory education department and school, preschool and childcare facilities co-located where possible.
- Centralised curriculum and teaching support and, for Indigenous children, culturally and linguistically appropriate curriculum and materials developed in collaboration with Indigenous communities.
- Wage and conditions for preschool teachers on par with primary school teachers.
- Additional teacher training places to ensure an adequate supply of university-qualified early education teachers for preschools and in child care with priority given to Indigenous applicants.
- A national, early childhood education training program for staff to upgrade qualifications and progress in their careers and for professional development and support networks.

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- Better linkages with maternal & child health services, childcare and primary school, coordination with other childhood development services, and networks that can provide educational support for parents in helping their children.
- Additional refurbishment funding to improve preschool facilities, many of which are sub-standard and capital funding for the establishment of new early childhood education facilities in areas of need.

The Issues

Australia is the lowest spending of 24 countries in the OECD. Average country expenditure on education for 3-4 year olds is 0.5% of GDP, and Australia spends just 0.1% of GDP. The Federal Government has played almost no role in preschool education since 1985 when the Labor Government withdrew funding of \$33 million a year. Research in NSW has found that 70% of preschools have been forced to reduce the number of early childhood trained teachers and reduce staff overall because of concerns about running costs.

Increasing fees to parents is not a solution because it is likely to decrease the participation of children from families already burdened by high fees – the very children who most need the opportunity to be involved. Roughly 14% of children miss out on preschool in the year before school, and often this is because their parents cannot afford the fees, which can be up to \$1,600 a year. Even the contribution of a few dollars a day can be beyond the ability of some parents.

Preschool attendees do not attract the Commonwealth's Child Care Benefit available to participants in other childcare and education programs, including long day care.

Children with special needs derive the greatest benefit from preschool, yet many have no access. About half of eligible 4 year old Indigenous children do not enrol in preschool education. Although 8% of 3-5 year old children have a disability, only 6.4% are involved in preschool and an estimated 15,500 children from non-English speaking backgrounds are missing out on a preschool education across Australia.

Too many children in Australia who are currently enrolled in preschool education in a range of settings do not have access to a four year trained early childhood education teacher. A switch to per capita funding in some States has meant large class sizes and teachers being forced into part time employment. In some cases, preschool teachers are paid around 8% a year less than their primary school peers.