

A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK AND TALK ABOUT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

When it comes to early childhood education, Australia is being left behind compared to OECD countries – many have already having moved to universal free preschool for three and four year olds. The overwhelming majority of a child’s brain development happens in the first five years, and research consistently shows that every dollar spent on early learning pays significant dividends that grow over the life of the individual. It is especially significant for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Currently, NSW has the lowest participation rates in preschool and invests the least per child while having the the most expensive services in the country. We need to do better.

The policy settings for early education and childcare has seen the entry and expansion of for-profit long day care sector in NSW. Profits are being derived from a service while educators in the sector are struggling to survive on the unacceptably low rates of pay.

The Greens want to change the public discussion about early childhood education. It shouldn’t be described as an industry – It is a critical public and community service. It should not be seen through the frame of workplace

participation – the kids must come first.

While supporting the learning and development of our children requires governments to understand the diverse needs of parents and families, including the ability to work, access to high quality early learning should be encouraged and facilitated for all children, regardless of the employment circumstances of their parents or ability to pay.

The Greens want to see early learning brought into the free universal public education system. This has the advantage of improving access, improving forecasting of service needs, bringing workers in the sector in line with public sector wages, and leveraging early learning facilities

that would be built into our public schools to ensure preschools and other early learning services have a guaranteed place within our local communities.

This transition will take some time as the mix of services change, but no greater investment can be made in the future wellbeing of our citizens and society as a whole.

KEY POINTS TO GREENS' PLAN:

The Greens have a plan that will put the learning of our young people first and support parents and families to give their children access to high quality early learning.

Key points include:

- **Transition to free, universal access to preschool for all children from the age of three for a minimum of 15 hours a week.** Many other countries have already extended preschool access to three year olds and introduced free services. This investment reflects the value of early learning for individuals and the wider society. It's time we caught up.
- **All new primary schools in NSW to include early learning centres in school design and construction and prioritise the construction of facilities into existing school grounds based on need and where space allows.** Early learning centres will be designed to ensure there are suitable facilities to house public preschools or existing community preschools, as well as out of school hours care, playgroups and other wrap-around services such as high-needs and health support. These centres will be about creating the space to build the school community from a child's earliest years and to support local families,

recognising that important early learning starts well before preschool.

- **Review the rules and guidelines around facilities leasing for early learning services,** including in state government and local council facilities, to ensure that existing services, especially OOSH and playgroups have reasonable security of tenure to reflect the work they have done to build support for these services. These services should not be treated as simply contracted services to be re-tendered as they often have long established links to local communities and have been started and built by volunteer effort and community goodwill.
- **Stricter enforcement of outdoor space requirements,** with clear limits on exemptions given to centres (158 exemptions given in 2017). A key part of a child's education comes from outdoor, play-based learning and this must be prioritised.
- **Establish an annual \$20m OOSH and Playgroup Facilities Grant program.** Many services rely on facilities and infrastructure owned by state school or local councils. These services may not be considered high priority for the owner or manager in regards to retaining the service or for maintenance and upkeep of facilities. Creating a dedicated fund to invest in upgrades to facilities used by these services that is separate from the maintenance budgets of the facility owners/managers, will reduce the burden on services having to fight for critical maintenance work and ensure our young people have safe and suitable facilities in which to learn.

FUNDING THE PLAN

Funding to support this plan needs to be built into education department budgets and where relevant extracted from negotiations with the Federal Government in National Partnership Funding arrangements.

BACKGROUND

NSW has the most expensive early childhood education system in Australia with some of the lowest participation records. NSW also has the highest percentage of private operators (including profit and non-profit community centres). Only around 100 public preschools operate in NSW. In contrast, many private schools have associated childcare and preschool facilities.

NSW Government spends the lowest proportion of its budget on early learning compared to other states, at only 0.4 per cent. We spend the lowest amount per child and parents pay the highest amount to access services. We trail behind other states with regard to meeting the national target of children attending 600 hours of preschool in the year before full-time schooling.

This can in part be attributed to the mix of services in NSW. In NSW, most preschool services are delivered in long day care centres environment the state has more for-profit operators than other jurisdictions when compared to community-based and public preschool services. This different mix is part of the story of why NSW accessibility rates are lower and why the cost of delivering services seems to be higher. Ultimately, this mix means there is a constraint on the ability of our early learning sector to deliver the best outcomes for children and families.

2017 STATE OF EARLY LEARNING REPORT

- NSW trails the country in participation of four-year-olds in preschool programs at 81 per cent compared to 89 per cent nationally.
- NSW trails in terms of the national target of 600 hours of preschool in the year before full-time schooling.
- The 2015 statistics in the report show in NSW just 77% of children participated in preschool for more than 15 hours per week in the year before full-time school, compared to 91% nationally.
- Enrolment rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in preschool programs in the year before school lag behind those of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children only in New South Wales and Queensland.
- Australia ranks below the OECD average for the participation of three-year-olds.
- Australia also ranks below the OECD average for the participation of four-year-olds.
- Nationally, one in five children were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains (social, emotional, language, general knowledge, cognitive and physical development.) when they started school. Two in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were developmentally vulnerable.
- Australian research shows that children who attend an early learning program led by qualified early childhood teachers are up to 40 per cent ahead of their peers in standardised testing by Year 3.
- NSW spends the lowest proportion of total budget expenditure on early childhood services of any state of territory, at only 0.4 per cent.

THE CASE FOR UNIVERSAL EDUCATION FOR 3 AND 4 YEAR OLDS

Many OECD countries provide free or almost free universal education for three-year-olds and four-year-olds. Most Scandinavian countries have had the policy in place for some time. England and New Zealand are on track to meeting that target.

Research shows three-year-olds and four-year-olds are very receptive to quality early childhood education. The research of Dr Edward Melhuish informed the United Kingdom government in setting its policy. It showed that the children who benefit most are those from disadvantaged backgrounds. These children, unfortunately, are often on track to a lesser life, one of lesser physical and mental health, lagging behind in finishing school, in attaining tertiary education, in employment and in general wellbeing. The research shows that these children benefit from two years of quality education, especially when it is coupled with access to good quality public health. The advantages are not just social.

As Dr Edward Melhuish writes:

“In reality, the aims of equality and future productivity merge. Policies that recognise that learning capabilities are primarily formed during the first years of childhood, and which act to improve life chances, serve both of those goals.”

MEDIA COMMENT

EARLY LEARNING CENTRES IN ALL NEW PUBLIC SCHOOLS UNDER GREENS EARLY EDUCATION PLAN

The Greens have called for a radical rethink of preschool and early learning services announcing a policy that would start to bring preschool for three and four year olds into the state’s public education system.

The plan includes a proposal to build early learning centres in all new public primary schools and retrofitting over time existing schools based on local need and space availability. This investment in public preschool facilities will help ensure access to free, universal preschool for all three and four year olds for up to 15 hours per week.

The Greens plan also commits to supporting the many early learning services including out of school hours care, playgroups and other services relying on school and council owned and managed facilities, to guarantee tenure and ensure facilities are appropriately maintained and upgraded. Tighter regulations to ensure childcare and preschool facilities in NSW comply with outdoor space requirements would also be introduced.

Greens Early Education Spokesperson Justin Field said, “This is about putting kids first and recognising the value of quality early education and the work of educators in the sector.

“We need greater public investment in early learning. NSW has the lowest preschool access rates and the highest fees while also having the highest rates of for-profit operators. We need a rethink of how we deliver these critical service that puts children first.

“The Greens want to see a transition away from the provision of for-profit early learning to preschool being part of the free, universal public education system. This will continue to include collaborations between schools and the community and not-for-profit preschool services and where appropriate not-for-profit long day care services.

“Other countries have moved to deliver free preschool for three and four years olds because the benefits it delivers is significant, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. By bringing these services into the public education system, we can also start to address the significant issues with low pay in the sector which is having a significant impact on the gender pay gap.

“The benefit of using school grounds to construct these facilities is that they can be more easily leveraged to help deliver before and after school care, Playgroup, mothers and fathers groups and other wrap around services to support children and families including early intervention programs and postnatal and early years health services.

“This is about building a supportive learning and care environment for families from the youngest years and changing the way we think and talk about early education and care.”

THE GREENS PLAN INCLUDES:

- Transition to free, universal access to preschool for all children from the age of three for a minimum of 15 hours a week.
- All new primary schools in NSW to include Early Learning Centres and prioritise the construction of facilities into existing schools based on need and where space allows.
- Review the rules and guidelines around

facilities leasing for early learning services in schools and council facilities to ensure ongoing certainty of access.

- Stricter enforcement of outdoor space requirements, with clear limits on exemptions.
- A \$20m OOSH and Playgroup Facilities Grant program.

Justin Field is available for comment on 0439 205 835.