

INQUIRY INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SECTOR IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Albury Preschool

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Albury Preschool Submission

About us

Albury Preschool is a not-for-profit community-based preschool and has been part of the Albury community since 1945. Currently 150 families utilise our Preschool each year, with a volunteer Committee of Management elected each year at our Annual General Meeting. We have just completed major capital works to expand our Preschool and have applied to amend our service approval which would enable us to enrol up to 300 children per week (100 children per day) across four classrooms.

Since 2011 when Albury Preschool negotiated its first Enterprise Agreement, we have employed deliberate strategies, to ensure that we are an “employer of choice”, reflecting a high level of respect and regard for the skills and professionalism of early childhood teachers and educators and the value we place on creating a positive workplace culture for all employees. We recognise “Teachers as Teachers” and ensure that our Early Childhood Teachers receive parity with Primary Teachers and our Educators with School Learning Support Officers in their wages and conditions. As a result, we continue to be able to recruit, and retain, skilled Early Childhood Teachers and Educators with many staff having been employed at our Preschool for over 20 years.

The qualifications, pay and conditions of early childhood education and care employees informs every aspect of providing a quality service, ensures longevity and consistent staff being able to develop relationships with families which impacts the safety, health and wellbeing of children and the educational and developmental outcomes they are able to achieve.

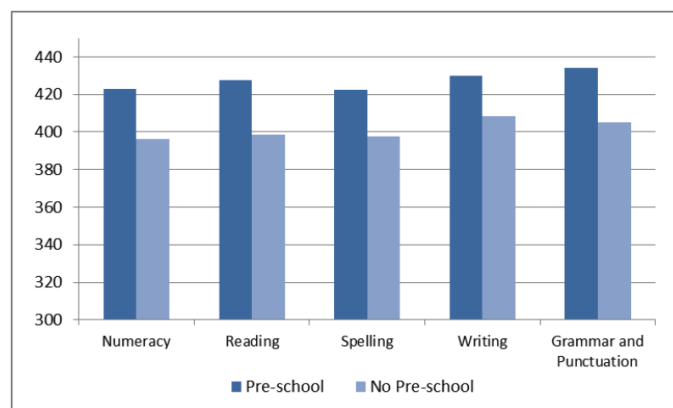
Access to high quality Early Childhood Education

Attendance at high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) services can have long-lasting positive effects on children's social and emotional, self-regulation and behavioural, problem solving and mathematic, language and literacy, and physical development, and on school readiness (see for example: Kulic et al., 2019; Melhuish et al. 2015; Taggart et al, 2015; Taylor, 2016; Zaslow et al., 2016). High quality early childhood leads to better health, employment and educational outcomes, providing significant return-on-investment for governments.

Studies such as The Australian E4Kids study (Taylor, 2016), have reported that the quality of teacher-child interactions is predicted by the presence of **university-qualified teachers** and educational leaders. Higher educator qualifications are strongly associated with improved child outcomes, as qualified educators are better able to involve children, stimulate positive interactions, and use a range of strategies to extend and support their learning.

The quality of teacher-child interactions predicted children's pre-academic outcomes at school entry and in Year 3. The quality of interaction and activities directly experienced by each child, is key to supporting the proposed Early Years Strategy vision for children's learning, wellbeing and development. It is essential, therefore, that the integrity of the National Quality Framework which introduced mandatory minimum qualifications for educators and early childhood teachers to build a highly skilled workforce is maintained to ensure high quality Early Childhood Education.

Average NAPLAN Scores in Year 3, by preschool attendance



Source: Warren and Haisken-DeNew (2013), *Early bird catches the worm: The casual impact of pre-school participation and teacher qualifications on Year 3 national NAPLAN cognitive tests*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research

Highly skilled workforce underpins quality

Work in the ECEC sector has been undervalued, with dissatisfaction with pay cited as a main reason for leaving the sector (Fenech et al., 2022). Insufficient leave provisions, little work flexibility and poor job security, lack of professional and career development opportunities, high workload and poor administrative and leadership support have also been cited as sources of staff dissatisfaction (CELA et al., 2021; Cumming et al., 2022; Fenech et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2018; United Voice, 2017)

Low pay and recognition for educators and teachers has directly resulted in staff shortages, high turnover and reduced quality. Existing research and survey data have identified that ECEC educators and teachers' wages and employment conditions form a significant barrier to efforts to increase and retain a capable and effective ECE workforce. Early childhood teachers study degrees of the same length and complexity and primary and secondary school teachers and should receive equal pay and conditions. They are responsible for children in a critical stage of development and are required to do complex individualised planning and assessment. They are also responsible for leading teams of educators.

Workplace relations reform and associated financial and workplace supports need to be put in place to address pay and condition inequities. Until we address the wage problem, we will continue to drive skilled teachers and educators away from ECEC into jobs that better reward their efforts.

In relation to working conditions, OECD recommendations include:

- Allocating time for preparation and planning not only of pedagogical but of aspects supporting process quality, such as adequate time for intra-staff communication as well as with parents and other professionals, and ongoing professional learning of different types.
- Ensuring comparable working conditions for those working in schools and ECE sector, as well as between those with the same roles in different parts of the ECE sector

The National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (the Workforce Strategy) 2022-2031 (ACECQA, 2021a) key action is to: "Investigate options for improving professional standing, and workforce pay and conditions, including examining the associated barriers and constraints"

The strategy includes 21 nationally agreed actions to be delivered over the short (by the end of 2024), medium (by the end of 2027) or long term (by the end of 2031), grouped by six inter-related focus areas:

- Professional recognition
- Attraction and retention
- Leadership and capability
- Wellbeing
- Qualifications and career pathways
- Data and evidence

We support the implementation of the Workforce Strategy and ask that the members of the committee consider these strategies in undertaking their own inquiry and the impact that workplace conditions have in providing accessible, equitable and high-quality ECEC that supports children's learning and development.

Regulatory and quality assurance system

Whilst the national quality framework is of unquestionable value, the rating and assessment process places unnecessary workload on both under-resourced and time poor regulators and ECEC services. In particular the quality ratings of a service exceeding the standards, or indeed being "awarded" an excellent rating, whilst commendable and idealistic in principle, are unnecessary and extremely time consuming in practice, with the burden falling on services to "prove" they are going above what should be the requirement to operate. Families value relationships with staff and services more than the rating given by an assessor who spends minimal time within services, where they cannot possibly capture the unique community contexts that they operate in. If we have standards that "set a high national benchmark for ECEC services", then the meeting rating should be the expectation and therefore the criteria that all services should be assessed by. This would surely reduce workload of both authorised officers and

ECEC staff considerably and allow the regulatory authority to focus on those services that are working towards meeting the minimum standards.

Not for profit versus for profit ECEC

Community based, not-for-profit preschools, whilst similar to other forms of ECEC, have two key differences between ECEC broadly, and preschool as a specific form of ECEC. The first is that preschool must be delivered by a degree qualified teacher, supported by other educators. The second is that the rationale underpinning preschool's design and funding is child wellbeing and development as the top priority.

The primary goal of for-profit centres is to generate profits for their owners or shareholders and business decisions, including staffing, resource allocation, and service offerings, influenced by the need to maintain profitability. This means that they may focus on cost-efficiency to maximise profits, which can sometimes lead to differences in the quality or scope of services provided.

Data from Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACEQA) shows for-profit childcare services are, on average, rated as lower quality than not-for-profit services. Inquiries suggest this divergence is due to staffing levels, qualifications and pay. In 2023, the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) found large for-profit providers spend significantly less on staffing than not-for-profit providers. This has impacted sector quality with disproportionately high numbers of staffing waivers

The childcare system has also been designed and funded to facilitate parental workforce participation without focusing on the impact this has on children and families.

Thank you for considering our submission within the scope of the Inquiry.

Kind regards

Jo Barton

Director/Nominated Supervisor