

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

Name: Miss Courtney Maxwell

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Submission to Parliament: The Reality of Early Childhood Education in Australia

To whom it may concern,

My name is Courtney. I'm 24 years old and have worked full-time in early childhood education for the past eight years. I began studying for my Diploma at just 16, attending TAFE full-time while most of my friends were still in school. I've grown up in this sector — my mum has been a preschool director for over 15 years. I watched her live and breathe this role, shaping who I am today. As I near the end of my degree, I sometimes wonder why I didn't choose to work with children aged up to eight in primary school instead of staying in early learning.

Because if I did, I'd be paid more, supported, and seen.

Instead, we're expected to give everything — our energy, time, skills, and hearts — and still, we're treated like babysitters. The pay is insulting for the level of responsibility we carry. The expectations from the Department of Education are enormous, but what is the support? Practically non-existent. We are underpaid, undervalued, and on the verge of burnout.

We're asked to follow many regulations, which are unachievable in real settings. Worse still, there's no consistency. I've experienced three spot checks and one Assessment and Rating visit, and every single time, the interpretation of the framework has been entirely different. How is that fair? How can services be judged when the goalposts keep shifting? When will this process be made consistent across the board?

We are collapsing under the weight of contradictions. We're being asked to deliver school-level outcomes on kindergarten-level wages. And still, we show up.

I've seen this sector change. I've seen brilliant educators walk away, not because they didn't care, but because the emotional toll is too high. I've seen children fall through the cracks because the funding or support they needed wasn't there. And I've seen the joy of what this job can be — when it's done well, when it's respected and resourced.

Right now, it's not being done well — not because we aren't capable, but because we are set up to fail.

We want real reform. We want to be part of the conversations that shape our sector, not just in surveys or token consultations but through genuine, informed involvement. Because unless you've walked into our rooms and stood in our shoes, you truly don't understand what we're facing.

We are exhausted. We are passionate, but tired. And we're not speaking out because we've given up — we're speaking out because we can't sit silently while the early childhood education sector is driven into the ground.

From the outside, our work might look like songs, sandpits, and storybooks. But the reality inside the sector is confronting. It is chaotic, overwhelming, emotionally and physically draining, and, more than anything else, deeply undervalued.

Each day, educators face rooms of children, many with complex behavioural needs, trauma backgrounds, or developmental delays. We are carers, educators, inclusion officers, counsellors, nurses, and social workers. We are told to provide a high-quality, inclusive education for all, and we

want to, but how do you do that with three staff, ten children with high needs, and another ten eager to learn?

Support funding, when it's granted, is minimal. One additional educator for an entire room barely makes a dent. Often, it's not one child needing support — it's half the room. And when we say we can't do it alone, we're made to feel like we're asking too much.

The system is broken.

There is a massive disconnect between what policymakers, departments, and the public think we do and the reality of our day-to-day work. Parents still refer to us as babysitters. Meanwhile, we are expected to manage school-level compliance, documentation, and reporting without the time, pay, or recognition schools receive. We drown in paperwork that we're expected to finish after hours, unpaid. Why? Because we care. Because we want the best for these children.

But care doesn't pay the bills.

We are among the lowest-paid professionals in Australia. Many of us are studying, training, completing qualifications, and attending professional development — all while earning barely enough to survive. According to Macquarie University (2021), early childhood educators are underpaid and frequently work unpaid hours due to staff shortages and increasing demands. The University of Melbourne (2023) has highlighted that burnout among educators is rising rapidly, and it's not slowing down.

And still, the demands increase. We are expected to uphold the Child Safe Standards, embed inclusion, write Quality Improvement Plans, manage learning documentation, liaise with allied health, support trauma-informed practices, and implement intentional teaching — all while creating meaningful, play-based programs and keeping children safe and emotionally supported.

Meanwhile, we're also managing the fallout of bigger societal problems — increased screen time, disrupted home routines, attachment issues, poor nutrition, and a lack of boundaries. These behaviours show up in our rooms, and we are expected to respond with limited tools, no time, and little backup.

The early years matter. Every study, every brain scan, every research paper confirms it. But we're still treated like a warm-up act for "real" school. We're not a stepping stone. We are the foundation.

If you want quality outcomes for children, you must invest in the people who support them in their most crucial years. We need fair wages. We need consistency in regulation. We need mental health and inclusion support. We need respect. We need to be seen.

Because right now, we are doing everything — and we are doing it alone.

Please — listen to our voices. Hear our story. And act.

Sincerely,
Courtney.