

Big Steps 10 Year Policy Vision: for a world-class early childhood education sector



Everyone agrees: education is the key to unlocking a child's potential. We can't have a thriving nation if we don't nurture our youngest citizens. We are the educators on the frontline of early childhood education and care (ECEC) every day. We see the challenges, barriers and opportunities of our sector every day. We are the experts on what families and children need. We are shaping Australia's future, one child at a time and that's why we have come together to deliver this vision. We owe it to every Australian child to take a long-term view of policymaking in ECEC. It has been piecemeal and short term for far too long and it has led to a sector which is failing everyone: failing families, failing children and failing educators.

In the face of rapid and uncertain technological change in Australia's education system, investing in high quality ECEC is a safe, responsible and innovative choice for governments who want to look to the future. Our Big Steps ten year policy vision for a world-class and future-proof Australian ECEC system encourages Governments to do this.

It is a plan to ensure that quality is high, every educator is valued and that no child is left behind. It is a plan to ensure that if you become a parent in the next ten years then you know you have an early childhood sector that you can trust and rely on because it is high quality, affordable, accessible, and world class preparing your child for the future in every way. However, none of this can be achieved if governments continue to devalue our professional work. Our low wages cannot keep subsidising the system - that is the government's job. Our first step on the path towards a world-class high quality Australian early childhood sector has to be a big step with government funding for equal pay for educators.

WE HAVE TEN BIG REFORMS FOR OUR TEN YEAR BIG STEPS POLICY VISION. BY 2028...

- ① The Government will prioritise education at every stage of a child's life and invest at least 1 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in ECEC;
- ② The Government will fund equal pay for educators;
- ③ Every child will have at least two days universal access to early learning from the age of one;
- ④ Educators will be professionally paid, trained and respected;
- ⑤ The National Quality Framework (NQF) will deliver on its promise: ensuring every ECEC service is high quality;
- ⑥ The children who stand to benefit most from ECEC will have access to what they need;
- ⑦ Families and communities will have equitable access to ECEC through planned provision;
- ⑧ ECEC and parental leave will give families the opportunity to spend a year with their babies and seamlessly transition to ECEC when they want to;
- ⑨ There will be a commitment to ongoing excellence in ECEC, driven by the findings of an independent research body;
- ⑩ A Cabinet minister will have responsibility for Australian children's early education, health and welfare.

1. By 2028 the Government will prioritise education at every stage of a child's life and invest at least 1% of GDP on ECEC...

Education is one of the most enduring and powerful instruments governments have for tackling inequality. The first five years of life lay all the foundations for a child's future capabilities as an adult: 85 to 90 per cent of the brain develops during this time and it is in this period that children's capacities for learning, behaviour, thinking, communication, and emotional and social skills are set. These foundations, or the lack of, last a lifetime. Strong investment in ECEC can break the cycle of disadvantage and set children on a strong educational course for life. Investing early also makes economic sense.

Australia is a wealthy country; we can and should have an ECEC system in which all children are given the best possible start in life by skilled educators earning professional wages. By 2028, Governments will know that a child's mind is as valuable in the first years of life as it is at the age of six and invest in ECEC - the first big step in a child's education. Australia will invest at least 1 per cent of GDP in ECEC, placing us in the range of comparable OECD countries and edging us closer to best practice investment. Comparable countries like New Zealand already spend over 1 per cent of their GDP on ECEC. It is not a coincidence that Australia also continues to trail New Zealand in school performance. As a roadmap for increased investment, by 2023 Australia will reach the OECD average spend of 0.8 per cent of GDP on ECEC and by 2028 reach at least 1 per cent of GDP. Based on current GDP projections, that would mean over \$30 billion annually to ensure a world-class ECEC system.



2. By 2028 the Government will fund equal pay for educators...

By 2028, Australia will value every child and value every educator with government funding of equal pay. Valuing children means allowing them to develop and learn with qualified and experienced educators with whom they can form ongoing, secure attachments in a nurturing environment that is sufficiently and expertly staffed. We can't have a world-class system where 1 in 4 educators across the country plan on leaving the profession within the year, largely due to low pay. Just as concerning is that our most qualified educators and those who take up further training or upgrade to an early childhood teaching degree are the most likely to leave.

Valuing educators means according them the professional pay they merit for the professional work they perform. By 2028, ECEC work will no longer be economically and socially undervalued as a consequence of its historical association with unpaid 'women's work'. ECEC will be understood and respected as a complex field that requires educators to have significant technical skill and knowledge to assist children to develop emotionally, cognitively and socially. Like their counterparts in schools, educators' knowledge of early childhood developmental stages, language acquisition, individualised play-based pedagogy and behaviour management will be well known. Professional pay will raise quality across the system, arrest existing levels of employee turnover, attract the best and the brightest new recruits to the sector and offer educators rewarding career paths, as well as developing the human potential of our children. By 2028, early educators' pay will reflect the value of their role in shaping our children's future.



3. By 2028 every child will have at least two days' universal access to early learning from the age of one...

We believe a child's life chances should be shaped by their innate abilities, not where they were born or how much their parents earn. 1 in 5 Australian children arrive at school developmentally vulnerable, already behind their peers in their acquisition of basic executive brain functions. Without targeted intervention, the children that start behind stay behind; but inequality doesn't have to be set by the start of school. Early childhood education is the first big step in a child's education. The evidence is clear and everyone agrees: two years access to universal early learning is an affordable, effective and achievable reform. Australia can make this change sooner rather than later. Our Big Steps vision is that by 2023 all three and four year olds will have universal access to two days' early learning. Then by 2028, all children aged one to five will have two days' universal access to early learning, if their parents want it. A universal system is just that: for everyone regardless of where they live, what their parents earn or which type of service they attend.

Early learning should be seen as a valued place for a child's education. Not a drop off and care place. Parents, communities, and stakeholders need to understand that early learning is an important, hands-on experience, where children create partnerships and connections. Educators push and test children's limits in a safe, educational environment.



4. By 2028 educators will be professionally paid, trained and respected...

Improving qualifications, training and working conditions is an essential quality ECEC policy lever and by 2028 Australia will have an ECEC workforce strategy that does just this. In addition to government funding of professional wages, Australia's workforce strategy will ensure a high quality vocational education and training (VET) sector with mandated training times and quality practicum placements for all ECEC qualifications. There will be an alignment of the industrial award with the NQF to mandate individual and team pedagogical programming time. Awards and agreements will also reflect new classifications, such as 'Educational Leaders' with clear pathways to grow these leaders.

There will be funded, ongoing, embedded and evidence-informed professional learning for all educators and an ECEC fit-for-purpose registration system for all teachers and educators. Best practice professional development for all educators means better development outcomes for all children. Like educators in schools, early childhood educators will have one day per quarter of paid professional development and structured opportunities to participate in practitioner research. There will also be strong transition-to-school programs between schools and ECEC to ensure smooth transitions for children and families. There will be targeted programs to increase the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce to ensure culturally rich ECEC services are available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait children. By 2028, it will be understood that quality ECEC is absolutely dependent on quality educators and there will be the policy levers to match.

5. By 2028 the NQF will deliver on its promise: ensuring every ECEC service is high quality ...

By 2028, the NQF will deliver on its promise to ensure every ECEC service is striving for and achieving high quality. There will be long term, well-funded, and nationally-coordinated regulators that assess and re-assess quality ratings on a timely and consistent basis. There will be incentives built into the NQF that promote quality for children and career paths for educators. A qualified, supported and professionally paid workforce that can pursue decades-long careers in the sector is key to quality and ensures a full return on the investment made in the NQF.



6. By 2028 the children who stand to benefit most from ECEC will have access to what they need...

Disadvantaged, indigenous, vulnerable and additional-needs children will have the best ECEC in the country, in the amount and intensity they need and there will be culturally rich and appropriate policy levers to engage and encourage their participation. As a first step, long before we get to 2028, the activity test will be scrapped.

7. By 2028 families and communities will have equitable access to ECEC through planned provision...

No country that primarily relies on the market to deliver services has an equitable, affordable and quality ECEC system. Families also deserve choice. By 2028, different levels of government will work together to ensure that the provision of ECEC places are adequate and adaptable for all Australian communities. No child will be left behind. In practice this means government funding, coordination and strategies to smooth supply, meet demand and ensure the right type of high quality ECEC services are going where they are needed.

“Vulnerable families have most to gain from early learning but are the least likely to take advantage of it, due to cost and poor relationships with ECEC services. Making ECEC more accessible to these families will flow on to other education results and life outcomes for all socio-economic groups.”

8. By 2028, ECEC and parental leave systems will be harmonised giving families the opportunity to spend a year with their babies and seamlessly transition to ECEC when they want to...

By 2028, parents will have the opportunity to be there for their babies' first smiles, steps and words. Parents will have access to 12 months' parental leave including superannuation payments. Families can choose how to divide the parental leave between the two primary carers, but a portion of the leave (at least 12 weeks) will be non-transferable 'take it or leave it' secondary-carer/father's leave. Australia is a great place to live. We value hard work, a fair go and equal opportunity for all and that's why our Big Steps vision wants professional wages for educators, parental leave, and flexible work better shared between parents. All three tackle gender inequality. Professional wages for educators is a crucial step in redressing the imbalance between women's and men's earnings in Australia and improving the quality and status of jobs in female-dominated fields. Likewise, increased uptake of parental leave and flexible working hours by men to support raising families increases women's equality, career progression and overall retirement savings. By 2028 a modern economy like Australia's can't afford anything less than a harmonised ECEC and parental leave system.

9. By 2028 there will be a commitment to ongoing excellence in ECEC, driven by the findings of an independent research body...

By 2028, there will be an independent research body to implement a comprehensive ECEC research agenda and data linkage project. It will monitor child outcomes and prioritise qualitative practitioner research to drive the world's best practice in early education. As a start, by 2023, a new post-NQF cohort will be introduced to the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) and there will be increased data linkage between NAPLAN, PISA, AEDC and ECEC data. By 2028, we will be building an evidence base that links data about an individual's early childhood education in terms of type, duration, dosage, and quality with their demographic, geographical and socio-economic characteristics. This will be firmly linked to child outcomes - including both school performance and post-education outcomes. It will also be linked to educator qualifications, training, professional development and working conditions as these are essential determinants of quality ECEC. In fact, research shows that stimulating and engaging interactions between educators and children in conditions of continuity, care and trust are the most important determinant of quality in ECEC. Focusing research on these interactions and ensuring they are best practice is key to our vision for a world-class sector.

10. By 2028 a Cabinet minister will have responsibility for Australian children's early education, health and welfare...

By 2028, as a result of a national campaign Australians will know that a child's mind is as valuable at the early years as it is at the age of six. Australians will know that a world-class and future-proof education system must encompass both early childhood, early learning and schools if we want to improve school outcomes and prepare children for the jobs of the future. After all, the capacities formed in the early years - which underpin critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, collaboration, and motivation - will be of prime importance to every worker in the 21st century. There will be a national cross government and cross portfolio early years' framework to recognise this and early childhood education will be seen as the first big step in a child's education and the best way to tackle inequality. The critical early years will be at the top of Australia's political agenda. A cabinet minister with responsibility for every Australian child's early education, health and welfare will also ensure it stays that way.

Valuing children means valuing educators

Australian families and children need an early childhood education sector that they can trust and rely on, one that fundamentally recognises the rights of children to access high quality education and care as well as supporting parents to return to work knowing their children are getting the best start in life. Only a sector that is high quality, affordable, accessible and world class can deliver for families. The first step is to recognise the value and contribution of the early childhood educators who underpin this sector, and hold the future of our children in their hands.



