

Column: 'Quality childcare costs and we need well paid early educators to make it happen' ^[1]

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Source: TheJournal.ie

Format: Article

Publication Date: 5 Jun 2017

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EXCERPTS

Credit where credit is due and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, is the architect of a timely and ambitious blueprint in Affordable Childcare, the foundations for which must be laid over the next three months, in time for a September 2017 launch date.

However, not only is the information about what is happening in September very late, it is also very heavy administration wise, most especially for the childcare services who are expected to do the spade work to get the plans off the ground. Their time and effort involved must not be underestimated, unrecognised or unpaid.

Repeating the same mistakes

Unfortunately in Ireland we have a history of successive governments talking big on early childhood care and education plans and small on budget and never properly recognising or rewarding the role of the early years educator.

Today, we are in danger of repeating the same mistake. When will we ever learn that quality childcare costs, that return on investment is high and that we need a solid infrastructure and well paid early educators to make it happen?

Like any good architect, Minister Zappone, is dependent on a skilled team to get these plans off the ground. While affordable childcare is a very significant new policy measure, its ultimate success is dependent on the participation and engagement of Early Childhood Ireland's 3600 members across community and private services.

To make this plan a reality, this government must be willing to invest more and invest now. We are therefore calling on Minister Zappone to make provision for the payment of additional non-contact time needed by providers to administer this scheme and to support parents through the process between now and September.

The original design of the Affordable Childcare Scheme, with a dedicated parental portal, was meant to limit, indeed reduce, the administrative burden for providers. However, this is not the case in reality. And this increased administration burden can't simply be absorbed by childcare providers and must be appropriately resourced.

Based on a flawed model

Looking beyond <https://www.buddlenurseries.co.uk/> ^[3] and the current advertisements being broadcast, there is no dedicated parental portal and no automatic verification of parental income. The enhanced subvention rates and eligibility criteria for the September start of this scheme are complex and the role of providers in their delivery is crucial.

There is a very real work schedule over the summer months to make Affordable Childcare a reality for families.

The Affordable Childcare initiative is based on a flawed cost model to begin with that does not reflect the real cost of providing quality childcare. It is based on the current, unacceptable status quo whereby the majority of the sector are breaking even at best and a sizeable part of the workforce are low paid and employed on a part-time/38 week basis, with many signing on the dole over the summer.

Historic underfunding in this sector

For our part, Early Childhood Ireland is committed to working constructively with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Minister and the County Childcare Committees to ensure that Affordable Childcare delivers quality for children, sustainability for the workforce and sector and affordability for parents.

Furthermore, we welcome Minister Zappone's stated ambitions to seek significant increases in the next budget to address the historical underfunding in this sector. However, we need immediate support to get Affordable Childcare from blueprint to reality, as the countdown is on for September 2017.

We can't wait for Budget 2018 to address this financial gap and goodwill alone will not pay the people building and delivering this scheme on the ground.

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