

Tories' 30-hour free childcare plan fails to target poor families, says expert ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The government's plan to provide 30 hours' free childcare has been criticised by a leading global education expert for failing to target the most disadvantaged families whose children stand to gain the most.

Andreas Schleicher, education director of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), welcomed the doubling of the free childcare offer, which he said would bring England up from the bottom of the international league in terms of hours offered to an average position.

But he questioned the government's decision to target the offer at working parents, who can earn up to £100,000 each and still be eligible, rather than prioritising access for the most deprived families who may not qualify.

From September, three- and four-year-olds of working parents in England will be eligible for 30 hours of government-funded childcare per week. To qualify, each parent – or the sole parent in a single parent family – will need to earn at least the equivalent of 16 hours per week working at the national minimum or living wage.

The Conservative initiative has been widely welcomed by working parents among whom it was a clear vote winner in the 2015 election, but Labour has warned that low-income families in insecure employment or on zero-hours contracts, who may be unable to guarantee how many hours of work they will get from one month to the next, will lose out.

In addition, early years providers have warned repeatedly that they will struggle to deliver high-quality care and education – and sufficient places – with the funding being made available.

Schleicher, who made his comments at the launch of an OECD report comparing early education in the world's industrialised countries, said he understood the importance of supporting parents to get back into the workforce. But he added: "It's not just the 30 hours – it's making sure those children who need it most get the best provision."

Neil Leitch, chief executive of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, said his organisation had long argued that, given limited resources, the government should focus its spending on where it was needed most.

"As it stands, a family with a household income of nearly £200,000 will be eligible for the scheme, while another where, for example, one partner works 15 hours a week at the minimum wage in addition to volunteering, training, or further education, will not. How is this an effective use of government funding?"

"The OECD report rightly argues that when it comes to early years care and education, real efforts must be made to reach out to the most deprived families – and yet the fact remains that these are the very families who are likely to gain little to no benefit from current government early years policies."

The report, published on Wednesday, provides evidence that children who have received high-quality early childhood education experience better outcomes later in life.

On an academic level, they get significantly better scores in international Pisa tests at the age of 15. After accounting for student and school-level socioeconomic status, students who had attended early childhood education for a year or more scored an average of 25 points higher in the Pisa science assessment compared with those who had not – 30 Pisa points is the equivalent of a school year.

In countries where the proportion of under-threes in formal education and care is high, there is less obesity.

Schleicher said the UK, like other OECD countries, had made considerable advances in early years care and education. There remained, however, wide variation in enrolment rates and the number of hours available per week.

Countries such as Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Latvia and Poland provide several hours per week to a small proportion of under-

threes – Latvian children get 38 hours a week, for example.

In the Netherlands and New Zealand, fewer hours per week are provided – 20 or less – to a much greater proportion of children. Spending levels have risen, with countries such as Denmark and Norway investing most in their youngest.

Over the past two decades, many countries have taken initiatives to increase access for disadvantaged children but Schleicher, launching the report in London, said disadvantaged families in many countries still found it harder to secure early years education for their child, particularly “of the quality they need and deserve”.

Of the cohort of 15-year-olds who took part in the 2015 Pisa tests, 72% of disadvantaged students said they had attended early years education for at least two years compared with 82% of their wealthier peers. The differences in enrolment between advantaged and disadvantaged students are the largest (15-30 percentage points) in Slovenia, the Slovak Republic, Turkey and the United States.

Leitch said: “Over recent years, government policy in England has been increasingly preoccupied with making more, cheaper, places available to parents, with nowhere near enough attention paid to whether or not these places are of good enough quality.

“As this report highlights, early years education can have a significantly positive impact on children’s long term attainment, but only if the quality of the services being provided is sufficiently high.”

A Department for Education spokesperson said the government was investing more than ever into childcare, spending £6bn by 2020. “We are also supporting the most disadvantaged families with 15 free hours per week for two-year-olds, our pupil premium which is worth more than £300 a year per child and our new disability access fund, providing £615 per eligible child.”

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