

Push to extend pre-school to three-year-olds as Aussie kids risk falling behind the world ^[1]

All three and four-year-olds must be enrolled in pre-school to stop Australia children falling behind the rest of the world in early learning skills, experts warn.

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EXCERPTS

A push to extend pre-school education to three-year-olds is being promoted by the influential Mitchell Institute at Victoria University and Early Learning Association Australia.

Mitchell Institute director Megan O'Connell told The Saturday Telegraph two years of pre-school was "proven to lift performance at school and later in life".

But she said Australia did not have systems in place to enforce mandatory attendance at pre-school.

Early Learning Association Australia said a national mandatory pre-school model would require "advice and input from many voices including parents, educators, early learning providers and government".

"Early Learning Association Australia would value the opportunity to contribute to that national conversation," interim chief executive Tina Martin said.

A new report *Lifting Our Game* commissioned by state and territory governments recommends "progressively expanding access to quality early childhood education, for example pre-school for all three-year-olds".

The Mitchell Institute said it was "time for Australia to commit to pre-school for three-year-olds".

Ms O'Connell said: "Governments need to ensure a place at pre-school for all three and four-year-olds and support families so children can attend.

"We have almost all four-year-olds attending pre-school (and) we urgently need to build on this momentum and make pre-school available for three-year-olds as well. Most OECD countries offer two years of pre-school — some have for decades — so it is incredibly frustrating that Australia hasn't made any progress to introduce a second year at pre-school."

Evidence uncovered by OECD researchers links two years of pre-school with student performance later at high school — particularly in science.

Early Learning Association Australia also supported the plan to extend access to a minimum of 600 hours a year of early education to three-year-olds.

Ms Martin said the benefits for children and the nation were "well documented".

"Participation rates in four-year-olds at pre-school indicate that Australian parents clearly value high quality early childhood education programs," she said.

New data shows pre-school numbers are exploding in NSW with enrolments up by almost 40 per cent in just a year due to lower fees and parents heeding advice that an early start to their children's learning is vital.

Studies show many children who start school without core skills never catch up.

In last year's federal budget, the government allocated an extra \$428 million to support pre-school programs this year, benefiting around 346,000 children.

Rainbow Cottage at Cambridge Gardens in Sydney's west is among many preschools that have noticed rising demand for places.

NSW Early Childhood Education Minister Sarah Mitchell said choice was important for families but quality was not negotiable.

-reprinted from The Daily Telegraph

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