

One-third of all preschool centres could be without a trained teacher in four years, if we do nothing ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

One-third of all preschools may lack a qualified teacher in the next four years if nothing changes, my new modelling shows.

Currently, half of all early childhood teachers have a bachelor degree, with a further one-third still working towards one. With many expected to drop out, my modelling shows a significant shortfall by 2023.

What are the numbers?

To lift children's outcomes, early learning needs to be high quality, which includes being delivered by trained staff. This is why a focus on supporting the workforce to grow is so important.

The Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business predicts Australia will need around 49,000 preschool teachers by 2023. That means we'll need an extra 29,000 from where we're at now (some of the current workforce is expected to drop off).

We are a long way from meeting the shortfall given the current shortage of teachers and low numbers of teachers in training. Across Australia, around 4,000 students are enrolled in early childhood education teaching degrees per year.

Assuming the pass rate for these teachers is around the average of 56% (as for other teaching students), this would mean around 11,200 additional teachers would be available by 2023. That would leave a shortfall of 17,800.

It's worth noting many of these degrees are for teaching from birth to Year 8, or birth to Year 12, so not all graduates would seek to work in an early childhood setting. If more teachers choose school teaching with its higher wages and better conditions, the shortage will be far worse.

If we assume there is one qualified teacher per preschool service, this means by 2023 at least one-third of all services could be without the trained teacher they need.

We're not meeting the goal

This is a far cry from the 2009 agreement made by all Australian governments to provide four-year-olds with access to preschool delivered by a trained teacher from 2013.

Early childhood teachers perform a variety of roles including planning and delivering learning programs and providing support for diploma and certificate-qualified educators, who make up the bulk of the early childhood workforce.

One outcome of the 2009 agreement was: All children have access to affordable, quality early childhood education in the year before formal schooling.

And one of the performance indicators was: The number of teachers delivering preschool programs who are four-year university trained and early childhood qualified.

In 2012, governments put transitional provisions in place. This was to give early childhood providers time to meet workforce provisions in hard-to-staff locations.

These provisions permitted educators working towards qualifications to be counted as teachers in remote and very remote areas. They also allowed services in these areas to remotely access teachers to meet their ratios.

The provisions were due to expire after five years, but were extended until 2020 given little attention was paid to workforce development for rural and remote services.

The Education Council, the meeting of all state and territory and Commonwealth education ministers, met recently to discuss early childhood.

Instead of deciding a workforce strategy to ensure these extensions end, they agreed another extension until 2021 in most states except Victoria, and until 2023 for Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

What is the potential impact on children?

Trained teachers and educators in early childhood make a difference to children's academic outcomes in school. One study showed students who attended preschool led by a diploma or degree-qualified teacher were ahead the equivalent of 15 to 20 weeks of schooling at Year 3, based on their NAPLAN results.

Many children – more than one in four from remote areas, compared to one in five from major cities – are starting school behind their peers. In very remote areas, nearly half of children start behind.

In addition to children living away from city centres, children from low socio-economic areas are most likely to be affected. They are already less likely to attend the highest-quality centres and more likely to start school behind their more advantaged peers.

A decade after all four-year-olds received their right to preschool, a shortage of trained teachers could mean one in three children miss out and start school further behind their peers as a result.

What could we do differently?

Governments have a few choices to make.

One choice is to accept the transitional provisions are actually an ongoing reality for many services and many children will miss out on trained teachers and fall further behind.

A better option would be to take workforce planning seriously and commit to investing in making sure every child has access to a trained teacher and a chance to succeed.

This would require efforts on a number of fronts. Attrition is a major issue in the early childhood education and care sector. Trained staff average just 7.4 years of experience and around 20% of the workforce intend to leave the profession within 12 months.

A key focus needs to be on keeping the current workforce. A raft of research has confirmed the major issues that need to be addressed to achieve this, including pay and conditions, professional status, and career and professional development.

A secondary focus needs to be on attracting, up-skilling and retaining new entrants to the profession. This includes examining what supports would be needed to up-skill educators to diploma and degree level.

Some of this work is happening in individual jurisdictions. For example, scholarships are available in Victoria to support the roll-out of three-year-old preschool.

A national workforce strategy is needed to build a workforce to ensure that all children, no matter where they live, are able to benefit from quality early learning.

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