

Now would be a good time to admit Australia's childcare system is not fit for purpose ^[1]

Instead of another rescue package, the federal government needs to start funding services

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EXCERPTS

First we had the Jobs for Families Child Care Package, because the childcare funding system was so complicated it needed to be simplified.

Then when the pandemic hit, because families were still paying such a huge whack of their incomes for childcare despite the government pumping \$8bn a year into subsidies for families, and were un-enrolling their children in droves, we had the Early Childcare Relief Package.

The only way services could be funded under this was to turn the just-built childcare subsidy off and announce free childcare.

Then when it turned out the package didn't supply enough relief to keep all services afloat, the government devised an exceptional circumstances fund. Then when it turned out that a third of all educators weren't eligible for the jobkeeper payment that the package was designed to accompany, the government decided to go back to the childcare subsidy system and introduce a new transitional payment for all services.

And then Melbourne got locked down. And once again the warnings came: our childcare centres were not going to survive and would not be around post-lockdown.

Once again looking like a deer that got caught in the headlights, education minister Dan Tehan called a press conference to promise a new funding rescue package for Victorian services to be announced ... on Wednesday.

And once again, no matter what he announces, it won't be good enough to deal with the complexities of the system.

And so now would be a really good time for the government to announce that Australia's early education and care system is not fit for purpose, that the funding is still nightmarishly complex and they are going to make a fundamental change to how they are going to fund it.

They need to stop funding parents and start funding services. You know, the way they do with that other educational system that no one ever has to worry about surviving the pandemic – schools!

Changing from demand to supply funding means not just would our early education and care services survive but also that the government, by virtue of the funding contract, would be able to absolutely demand that services are located where they are needed, that fees are kept at set levels and that quality levels are kept. (Are people aware that the federal government currently spends billions annually on subsidising families to send their children to service that do not yet meet the national quality standard for education and care services?)

Social commentators like Eva Cox have been calling for services to be funded for decades. Conservative governments don't want to do it because their mantra is nothing should come between parents and choice, whilst the Labor party throw up their hands and say it's too hard to "unscramble the egg" of our current system.

Another announcement was made yesterday. The largest employer in the sector, Goodstart Early Learning, announced they had just partnered with Good Shepherd Microfinance so their educators, as well as families, could have access to no-interest loans.

The sorts of loans that Good Shepherd offer include Household Relief loans for people to pay their rent and electricity. If that doesn't say something about how our childcare system is built on the backs of lowly paid educators and early childhood teachers, I don't know what does. (And Goodstart is one of the employers that pays above award!)

Parents everywhere, but especially in Melbourne, are trying (trying!) to work while caring for their children. The government wants more women in the workforce, wants women to have more babies. And wants childcare services to survive the pandemic. It needs our young children to have first-rate education and care. It should ensure the staff that provide this earn enough that they don't have to get loans to pay their goddam rent.

So listen up guys. Stop spending all your energies devising ad hoc funding systems to try and sustain a broken funding system. Start funding services instead. At the very least it means only having to fund 15,000-odd entities (the services) rather than the million (families) you

currently fund. Think about the administrative savings on that lot.

The very fact you have to keep fiddling with the system just to keep it going shows how messy it is.

And even if children are seen to be synonymous with mess, funding their care and education should never be.

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