

The Coalition's 'big change' to childcare was a dud. Parents and teachers deserve better ^[1]

The Morrison government's own report found their change to funding didn't make services more accessible, affordable, flexible or simpler

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EXCERPTS

Childcare is once again going to be a key federal election issue and several research reports about the policy area have been released in the last few days.

One of these found that access to childcare is (surprise, surprise) a huge problem, with childcare black spots existing across Australia. Another report found that children in some centres were going hungry, with some centres allocating as little as 65 cents a day per child for food.

Shocking, but what about the findings of a report released by the government itself?

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) was asked to evaluate the government's much-lauded Child Care Package. They reported that the package – the Morrison government's major childcare policy measure – is, basically, a dud.

The Child Care Package was introduced by the Morrison government in 2018 after an inquiry into the childcare system by the Productivity Commission. It brought into being the Child Care Subsidy, a way of funding childcare that we were assured would be simpler than the previous complex system and would mean cheaper childcare for all.

So, what did the evaluation find?

Over a third of all Australians live in childcare 'deserts', research says

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Well, firstly it examined whether the Child Care Package made childcare more accessible and flexible. Parents scrambling to find childcare to meet their needs will not be surprised to discover that the answer was nope, it didn't.

It didn't make childcare more accessible.

"Analysis of data at the time of the implementation of the CCS and the following 18 months shows no marked changes in access to childcare. There are though large differences in access geographically, and issues for children with additional needs."

It didn't make childcare more flexible either, according to the AIFS.

"There are mixed levels of parental satisfaction with flexibility. Capacity to change hours received the second-lowest parental satisfaction rating (only above affordability). Other aspects of flexibility were more neutrally rated by parents. These ratings have not changed following the introduction of the Package ... There was little change in the hours for which care was available since September 2018."

Next, it examined whether access to childcare support had become simpler.

This is the one where those families who have had to spend hours on the phone to Centrelink working out why their childcare fees had suddenly jumped by \$400 a week are probably rolling on the floor laughing.

"Parents were only weakly supportive of the system being easier to understand than the previous system, with the largest group neither agreeing nor disagreeing that the CCS system is simpler"

Then it examined if childcare was more affordable.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies' evaluation found that initially the cost of childcare did drop after the package was brought in.

"Across all families the Package has reduced the median annual net cost of child care from \$2,957 to \$2,507 per annum. As a proportion of gross family income, it has fallen from 3.0 per cent to 2.7 per cent."

But it also found that the consumer price index showed an 11.8% decline in costs in September 2018 but by March 2020 almost three-quarters of this reduction had been lost.

And it found that:

"Fees charged by services have increased at a similar rate following the introduction of the Package to what they were before the changes."

The research also examined if the Child Care Package had made childcare services more viable.

"In summary, the introduction of the Package appears to have had little impact on the viability of the sector as a whole."

So fundamentally, the Morrison government's own report found their "big change" to childcare funding hadn't really made childcare more accessible, affordable, flexible or simpler nor led to a more viable childcare sector. Damning stuff really!

But surely there must have been some good come out of the package? Did it help parents with children engage in work and education?

"ABS Labour Force Survey data, surveys of parents conducted for the evaluation and child care system administrative data show small increases in parental activity, including employment, since the Package was introduced. However, these increases are not inconsistent with increases over a period of years."

What about ensuring vulnerable and disadvantaged children could access childcare?

"The introduction of the Package has had little impact on the overall use of child care among low and lower middle income families ... There is no clear pattern on access for population subgroups, including those at a higher risk of vulnerability."

Surely the introduction of the package at least made childcare funding more sustainable for government?

"There is little evidence of any changes to the economic fundamentals of child care provision."

The executive summary of the AIFS's report says:

"More broadly, the evaluation notes there are significant challenges in the provision of early childhood education and care, including the balance between child care as an enabler of parental workforce participation and the role of early childhood education and care in child development and as an instrument to address disadvantage."

Isn't it time that the screams of parents of young children and of the educators and early childhood teachers are heard?

They are the ones that have been saying this exact same thing for decades. They have been saying that our childcare (early education and care) system just doesn't work, and it is really about time we need a government that might actually do something about the mess.

You know, rather than what the current government has done – introduce a Child Care Package that when evaluated is found to have achieved bugger all.

Apparently childcare funding reform is just another Morrison government policy failure.

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Tags: access to child care ^[4]

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