

Ratings system monitoring childcare quality 'falling short' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Education experts say a ratings system used to determine the quality of childcare centres and kindergartens nationwide is not being properly maintained, leaving some centres with assessments up to seven years old.

Early childhood education organisations are calling for the government to mandate national quality standard assessments at least every three years, saying that cost of childcare can sometimes overshadow the importance of quality.

The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority's national quality framework rates early childhood centres on whether they are excellent, exceeding, meeting, working towards or require significant improvement on national quality standards. The information helps parents decide where to enrol their children.

Data from the authority shows in Victoria, there are three early childcare education centres with ratings that are more than seven years old, 109 with ratings that are six years old and 634 with ratings that are five years old.

Other states are worse off, with 109 childcare services that haven't been reassessed for more than seven years in Queensland and 213 in South Australia.

Community Childcare Association president Julie Price said the long delays could devalue the system.

"When it's seven or five years between assessments and ratings, all services aren't necessarily improving," she said.

"If services were rated and assessed regularly, everyone would be able to have confidence in the quality system."

If a service is rated on the lower end of the scale, the department works to address quality or compliance issues. But Price said some services continuously had lower ratings without much implication, undermining the system.

Reservoir mum Alicia Hopgood, 37, said she paid close attention to the ratings when looking for a centre for her two-year-old son last year, but found the assessments were done in 2016 and 2018, so they "meant nothing".

"As a guide it was good, but ... I know that with staffing changes, management changes can happen, so it definitely made me really disregard it," she said.

"Which is unfortunate because if it was up to date it would have been a good indication of where I should be looking."

A spokeswoman for Goodstart Early Learning, which operates 640 centres across Australia, said parents increasingly relied on quality ratings as part of their decision on where to place their children.

But she said many state regulators were "falling short", with long breaks in between assessments due to underfunding and insufficient staff.

"We think that needs to be addressed as a matter of priority," she said.

Australian Childcare Alliance president Paul Mondo said it was important to ensure services lifted their game if they weren't consistently working towards the standards.

On top of the quality framework, centres must meet minimum standards of the law through unannounced and planned compliance inspections. If there are safety, health or wellbeing risks, the education department takes immediate action.

Mondo supported more regular assessments and said even prior to the pandemic, it would be five years for most services between visits.

But he said mandating anything required a financial investment to ensure there were enough people to conduct assessments.

A spokesman for the Victorian Department of Education said the wellbeing and safety of children was top priority.

"While there is no set period for reassessment, education and care services are usually visited at least every three years to ensure they are providing the best early learning and care environments for children," he said.

“Over the past two years, the pandemic has reduced some assessment capability – but compliance checks have always continued when required to enforce or in response to complaints or concerns.”

About 90 per cent of Victorian early childhood services had been reassessed in the past five years, with ratings under way for remaining services where COVID-19 restrictions allowed, the spokesman said.

A spokesman for the Acting Minister for Education and Youth said the federal government previously invested \$46 million in the Australian Children’s Education and Care Authority from 2020 to 2023 for the administration of the national quality framework.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

Tags: high quality childcare ^[4]

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