

What Australian educators need from the next Federal government ^[1]

This year has been difficult and stressful and it's only May. We've seen Australia re-open its borders causing all-time highs in our COVID-19 case numbers, and floods causing confusion and wreaking havoc for children, women, families and early educators –

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EXCERPTS

There are at least a half-dozen early childhood centres in Queensland and New South Wales that are closed due to flood damage and unlikely to open until the second half of the year, if they're lucky enough to get a tradie in.

What will happen to the children whose stability, routines and strong relationships with their early educators have been taken away indefinitely? Or the families who will now have to travel further and may struggle to find suitable early childhood education and care? And what will happen to the early educators who, through no fault of their own, will be left without employment and have to make difficult decisions about their future?

The fact is, long before the devastating Black Summer bushfires, COVID-19 and now the floods, there was a workforce crisis in early childhood education. I speak to a lot of educators and directors who are under immense stress. Too many workers are leaving, they feel so guilty for doing it, but you can only go so far when you're running on empty. They know that leaving contributes to the problem and adds to the stress on those who stay, but mental health and family priorities are becoming too much.

At my centre in Canberra, we've had five educators resign so far this year, another has moved to a casual role, and two are on maternity leave. In this time, the centre has successfully recruited one staff member. Speaking to another director in the area recently, she had six educators on leave and was filling in as the centre cook, the director, the break cover, and admin (indefinitely).

These aren't isolated stories. This is happening in almost every centre across Australia, and it's even worse in rural towns where the demand for ECEC is high but cannot be accommodated due to a lack of qualified staff.

Without urgent action, the early learning sector will lose skilled educators to industries who can offer them better pay and more stability.

We know children are our future, the leaders of tomorrow, and the ones who have suffered lockdowns, unstable routines, and more upheaval than any generation has seen in a long time.

This is why early learning must be at the top of the agenda for whichever party forms the next Federal Government. As an educator, my top priority for the politicians contending for my vote is early learning reform. The system has become unnecessarily complex and needs a complete overhaul.

Everyone working in early childhood education deserves respect and better pay for the essential service they provide children, families, and our community. A wage rise now would help ease the workforce crisis and would be life changing for a lot of educators and their families.

And finally, an additional eight weeks of paid parental leave for educators to care for their own children would also be an incentive for more people to stay in the sector.

We see a lot of educators leave when they have children of their own because leaving your own child in care when they are so young, to care for other people's children seems counter intuitive.

Mid-pandemic, we saw fee relief introduced to ECEC centres which gave families, many of whom were frontline and essential workers, the opportunity to take on additional work. This came at no additional cost to parents because of the government's financial support for providers.

During this time, we saw centre intake percentages go up, families entrusting centres with their smallest, most vulnerable humans because the country was aware of just how important stability, routines and early learning are in a young child's life.

While the fee break for families was crucial to a lot of families, many failed to understand just how detrimental it was to the providers.

Whoever forms our next federal government needs to step up and commit to reforming of our early learning system. This is not a small feat; all parties will need to be involved and support the government, down to the children and everyone in between.

Now is the time to act, now is the time to truly rethink our early learning system – the future of Australia depends on it.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

Tags: child care workforce ^[4]

federal government ^[5]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/05/what-australian-educators-need-next-federal-government> [2]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care-workforce> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9140> [6]

<https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9040>