

Labor push for one-stop shop childcare plan [AU]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

[The Australian Labor Party] is planning a long-term overhaul of childcare and early learning that could lead to an integrated system of "one-stop shops" for the care and education of under-fives.

Key Labor adviser on family policy, Australian National University demographer Peter McDonald, has urged the party to work towards state and federal co-operation in early childhood education and childcare "in the interests of Australia's children".

"The problem is that we have parallel systems," Dr McDonald said.

"We have a childcare system which is funded by the commonwealth and supporting women's employment.

"Then there is the state preschools system, which is quite variable across the states in what it provides.

"It is addressed to early childhood education rather than women's employment, with hours that don't really suit working women very much."

An increasing number of childcare centres have early childhood education for three and four-year-olds.

Meanwhile, some preschools are being used for childcare by busy mothers who cannot get past the long waiting lists to get their children into a childcare centre. "There's a huge overlap between the two systems," Dr McDonald said.

"Sometimes there are difficult situations where children are shipped from one centre to another. It's a bad system overall -- it's inefficient, and the two systems should be brought together into a single system."

Dr McDonald admitted the plan was complicated.

"It involves the states and the commonwealth in being co-operative in the interests of Australia's children," he said.

Dr McDonald said the plan could take a long time to implement, but should be started now.

"It's been a problem for the past 20 years ... but this requires almost a national summit approach," he said.

Dr McDonald said Australia would probably not go as far as the French "ecoles maternelles" early childhood model.

This offers free education and care for three and four-year-olds, attached to primary schools, for about 30 hours a week. "I don't think we'd be going that far because of cultural differences," he said. "For three and four-year-olds you could offer no more than 20 hours early childhood education but the hours are set so it does assist mothers to work."

Labor's spokeswoman on children and youth Jacinta Collins said the federal Government had not gone far enough with its national agenda for early childhood.

Only 60 per cent of Australian children receive some form of playgroup-style early childhood education or accredited formal childcare before they go to school.

Senator Collins said the main problem facing parents was a shortage of long daycare places.

- reprinted from the Australian

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