

# Call for free access to preschools [AU] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

About 40,000 children each year miss out on preschool education under a fragmented and confusing state-based system, a national report says.

The report calls for a plan to ensure all children, aged between four and five, are given free access to preschool in the year before they start school. Aboriginal children should be guaranteed two years of preschool.

The report, which the Australian Education Union commissioned, says luck is the main determinant of preschool fees, quality and access.

It says federal intervention is needed urgently, and calls on the Federal Government to again jointly fund preschool education. Federal block grants for preschools ended in 1985.

NSW is singled out as the state with the most confusing and inequitable preschool system, with two departments involved in funding. Preschools funded by the NSW Department of Education charge no fees, and those funded by the Department of Community Services charge on average \$60 a week, the highest fees in the country. Victoria is the only other state to charge fees.

An education consultant, Kathy Walker, who wrote the report said: "We need to make sure that regardless of what state you live in, or the income of your family, you can have equitable access to preschool education."

Preschool participation ranges from 62 per cent in NSW to universal coverage in Queensland.

Even the terminology differs across the states, with kindergarten, preschool and child care variously used. Parents, especially those who move interstate, are confused, it says.

A NSW teacher told the inquiry: "Some children never attend preschool. Most are born to families with very little English and without knowledge of preschool or how to access it. For those families who do know about preschool, in most cases they cannot afford it."

Ms Walker said the Federal Government's new National Agenda for Early Childhood recognised the importance of the early childhood years. But it was "a great anomaly" that the Federal Government intended to leave state governments to support, fund and administer preschools.

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Larry Anthony, said the Federal Government recognised the need for "greater co-ordination and coherence" in early learning and care services.

The report recommends that the term preschool be used across Australia to describe the year before school, and that child-care centres and preschools come under the jurisdiction of departments of education in each state.

The NSW Minister for Community Services, Carmel Tebbutt, said the Government was aware of the concerns about the affordability of preschools and was reviewing the issues. Her department spends more than \$69 million a year on 800 preschools and funds other preschool programs.

- reprinted from the Sydney Morning Herald

**Related link:** National preschool education inquiry report <sup>[2]</sup>

**Region:** Australia and New Zealand <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** kindergarten <sup>[4]</sup>

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