

Rebuff for child care experts [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The Federal Government has rejected the recommendations of its own child-care experts, refusing to increase the child-care benefit to pay for an increase in wages for workers.

Children and Youth Affairs Minister Larry Anthony last night agreed that child-care workers were underpaid, but said moderate wage increases should be financed by parents through higher fees, and not by the Government.

The Child Care Workforce Think Tank, convened last April, has concluded in a new report that the biggest issue facing the sector is poorly trained and poorly paid child-care workers.

The report, published without fanfare on a departmental website just before Christmas, recommended that the Government should increase spending on the child-care benefit so that wages could rise without disadvantaging parents. But the Government rejected the recommendations in a formal response appended to the report.

The report from the 55 panel members said that child-care workers were poorly paid and often insufficiently trained, thanks to differing standards across states, and a shortage of staff that made it difficult for workers to take any time for continuing education.

There are now nearly 80,000 child-care workers in Australia, some of whom are paid as little as \$6 an hour. They take care of nearly 800,000 Australian children who visit child-care facilities regularly.

Parents can claim a maximum child-care benefit of \$133 per child each week, but have to pay the gap themselves.

Mr Anthony said that the average family on a \$50,000 income faced gap payments of about \$100 a week, which he said was reasonable. Only 25 per cent of families used child care, he said, and it would be unfair to ask for further general subsidies.

A series of cases will come before the Industrial Relations Commission this year and unions hope they will yield a wage increase for child-care workers.

But this will translate directly into fee increases for parents unless the Federal Government increases its spending on the child-care benefit, which already costs \$1.6 billion a year and is projected to cost \$8 billion over the next four years.

Labor's spokeswoman on children's issues, Jacinta Collins, said the Government's response to the report was not good enough. "I think the reason why this report has been released on the eve of Christmas is because the sector's going to be very disappointed with what they've been waiting for with bated breath for some time," she said. But Senator Collins would not commit Labor to increasing the benefit.

Professor Oberklaid said it was difficult to understand how the Federal Government could avoid taking responsibility for child-care standards. "Child care is one of the few things, along with general practitioners, that the Federal Government really does have sway over," he said.

- reprinted from The Age

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[2]

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