

Baby boom to bust & parents learn the hard way [AU] ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

See text below.

EXCERPTS

Kindergarten numbers are hitting levels unseen for a generation as cash-strapped parents seek relief from high child-care fees. The collapse of ABC Learning and a baby boom that began in 2004 are adding to the kindergarten crush. Enrolments are at a 20-year high at Sydney's Catholic schools. State schools are still finalising their enrolment details but kindergarten numbers are expected to match or exceed last year's record high.

Up to 87,000 pupils are expected to attend kindergarten at NSW schools this year. The state president of Early Childhood Australia, Leonie Arthur, said some parents were saving cash by withdrawing their children early from child care and opting for school, bucking a trend towards holding them back until they turned six. Under NSW law, kindergarten students must turn five before July 31, although schools have the discretion to accept younger students.

"For many parents child care is expensive, more expensive than school," Ms Arthur said. "Another year in a less formal setting may be better for the child but the family often doesn't have the income.

The collapse of ABC Learning has exacerbated the situation. Parents who were unsure about the availability of child care at these centres chose the more reliable option of sending their children to school."

The president of Childcare NSW, Lyn Connolly, who represents the private child-care industry, said her members were preparing a submission for the Federal Government, urging greater financial relief for working parents who wish to keep their children in child care.

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Steven Lemos, the principal of St Mary's Primary School at Georges Hall, said he had to turn away 12 children this year because they were too young or too immature. His school had experienced a dramatic increase in kindergarten enrolments, rising from 44 children last year to 63 this year. He said 30 per cent of the two kindergarten classes would turn five this year.

The executive director of schools in the Catholic archdiocese of Sydney, Kelvin Canavan, said enrolments at Catholic schools, particularly kindergartens, had reached their highest level since 1991, with 63,525 students this year. He said kindergarten enrolments were 5673, up by nearly 200 students.

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- reprinted from The Sydney Morning Herald

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