



Election Manifesto

Advocating for quality early learning for all children to ensure all children have the best start in life.



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Foreword

This Election Manifesto focuses on **equity**.

Equity in Early Childhood Education and Care means ensuring that **every child**, regardless of their background, location, family income, or individual needs, has access to **high-quality early childhood education and care** (ECEC) tailored to their specific circumstances. It goes beyond merely providing what is advertised as Universal Access. Equity recognises that some children and families encounter greater barriers and require additional support to achieve the same opportunities as others.

Our vision is clear: **A nation that protects its children protects its future**. We must ensure that every child, regardless of background or circumstance, has access to quality ECEC. This includes a commitment to a greater focus on **Accessible Early Education, including those with additional needs**.

Since 2022, the sector has been subject to immense scrutiny and continues to experience significant changes and uncertainty. Collectively, the inquiries and reviews conducted over the past four years represent a shift towards a more regulated and equitable system, with an emphasis on transparency and affordability for ECEC users.

We believe in a system where **every child, every community, and every educator matters**. A system where quality early learning is provided to every child and that focus is given to supporting regional, remote, and isolated communities to receive high-quality, sustainable ECEC. We are focused on ensuring that **affordable early education is available for those who need it most** and that in a climate where spending needs to be prioritised, funding should go where it is needed. Equity must be the key driver of any funding decisions.

This election presents an opportunity for Australia to invest in policies that will shape the future. We call on all political leaders to commit to real, meaningful change—because when we invest in children, we invest in the future of our nation.



Paul Mondo
President



A nation that protects its children protects its future

THE ISSUE

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is a profession governed by laws, regulations, and ethical standards that aim to ensure the safety and well-being of children. Most educators/teachers in the sector are dedicated professionals who strive to achieve positive outcomes for the children they serve.

The quality of the ECEC workforce is essential for children's safety and well-being and is closely linked to the broader systems that support child protection and development. Regulatory frameworks, professional development programs, and workforce support initiatives play crucial roles in ensuring that educator/teachers are well-equipped to safeguard children.

Research has consistently shown that higher workforce qualifications and ongoing professional development lead to better child safety and well-being outcomes, as educators are more skilled in identifying and responding to risks such as abuse, neglect, and emotional distress.

Australia's National Quality Framework (NQF) is a highly regarded regulatory system that incorporates legislation, national standards, mandatory reporting, and ongoing supervision elements. While the NQF is comprehensive, there are opportunities to enhance elements that improve the framework and compliance in the sector. This, combined with strengthening the knowledge and skills of the workforce, is certainly a nation that protects its children.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

ACA calls for immediate commitment to:

- Grow quality in ECEC by utilising existing resources to update and redesign the National Partnership Agreement to support more regular mandated Compliance Visits with each State and Territory.
- Foster increased safety by working with the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) to amend the National Quality Framework to separate reporting categories for incidental and serious incidents, which would provide greater transparency about the services that need support.
- Establish national consistency in child safety by developing and implementing a national reportable conduct scheme complemented by a new National Working with Vulnerable People check.
- Allocate \$500 per educator/teacher for 10 hours of backfill to support skill and knowledge professional development to promote child safeguarding practices and to build sector capacity and capability in acceptable and appropriate reporting practices that ensures child safeguarding.

Accessible Early Education - What about children with additional needs?

THE ISSUE

There has been a consistent political focus on creating *Universal Accessible Childcare*; however, no system would be universal if it is not equitable. The Inclusion Support Program (ISP), which was established to support children with additional needs, has arguably not changed since its release in 2016. The program and funding have remained inadequate, while the demand for inclusion support has increased significantly, now counting over 23,000 children across the country.

The federal government plays a critical role in ensuring that all children can succeed in ECEC, regardless of their location, background, or needs. Strengthening inclusive support starts with increasing and improving funding for programs like the ISP, which helps services support children with developmental delays and other additional needs.

Equity groups like children from low-income families, First Nations families or children with migrant backgrounds are the greatest beneficiaries of inclusive programs within ECEC¹ but the system fails their accessibility and does not provide the child or the educator/teacher with the best practice support they deserve.

Beyond funding, the government can lead a coordinated national approach to workforce capability by investing in professional development, micro-credentials, and improved pay for inclusion professionals. Inclusion must also extend to children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, First Nations children, and those in rural or remote areas who often face additional barriers to ECEC access. A national framework for inclusive ECEC, informed by data and co-designed with families and sector experts, would provide clear direction and accountability.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

ACA calls for immediate commitment to:

- Support child development outcomes by backdating the Inclusion Support Program additional educator payments to when the application is lodged, not when it is approved, and increase the minimum number of additional educator hours from 5 to 8 a day.
- Support Early Learning services to attract and retain qualified educators/teachers by increasing the funding rate for an additional educator to Cert III Level 3.2 casual rate plus super (\$32.73p/h plus 11.5% super), adjusting the rate and super to reflect changes in both the award annually as well as the increase to superannuation guarantee to 12% by 1 July 2025).

¹ SSI. Media Release. The Productivity Commission's final report: A welcome step towards levelling the playing field for all children. 19 Sep. 2024.

Every Child, Every Community, Every Educator Matters

THE ISSUE

Australia's ECEC sector faces a workforce crisis due to a shortage of qualified educators and teachers. High turnover rates, job vacancies, and challenges attracting talent, especially in rural areas, strain the sector and impact children and families. Without intervention, shortages will jeopardise service availability for families and diminish the quality of early learning, impacting children's development and Australia's economic productivity.

Retention continues to be a significant challenge, with many educators pointing to burnout, insufficient wages, and a lack of well-being support as reasons for leaving the profession. Investing in initiatives such as the ACA's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is crucial to provide mental health and well-being support, especially for those working in geographically isolated areas with limited access to services.

Furthermore, with the Gender Undervaluation Review acknowledging an opportunity to lift ECEC wages it is crucial that the government commits to a sustainable funding model for higher salaries beyond the Worker Retention Payment, which ends in 2026. Without this commitment, the sector risks ongoing instability, making retaining experienced educators/teachers and attracting new ones even more challenging.

Addressing the workforce issues now is vital to securing a strong, high-quality ECEC system that supports children, families, and the broader economy.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

ACA calls for immediate commitment to:

- Deliver a significant national recruitment campaign to attract new educators and ECEC teachers to meet current and future demand.
- Support work retention efforts and support the well-being of educators and ECEC teachers by investing \$500,000 to promote ACA's Employee Assistance Program, ensuring greater reach to the rural, remote and isolated workforce.
- Consistent with the Gender Undervaluation review, commit to delivering sustainable funding for higher wages at the conclusion of the Worker Retention Payment in 2026.

Affordable Early Education – for those that need it most!

THE ISSUE

Access to quality and affordable ECEC is essential for children’s development, workforce participation, and economic growth. Since 2022, Australia has cultivated new policy perspectives, delivered robust inquiries and implemented equitable fiscal measures to make ECEC affordable.

Since January 2024, cost-saving measures have cut ECEC expenses for over one million families by an average of 11% and up to 13.8% for family daycare services. These extraordinary savings are expected to continue, with further affordability measures expected in January 2026 through the 3—day guarantee, offering three days (72 hours) of subsidised childcare regardless of how much parents work or study, and First Nations children receiving 100 hours of subsidised care per fortnight.

These are important affordability measures. As the robust inquiries illustrated, both the universal 90% subsidy and the \$10-a-day supply-side model would disproportionately support families in the top 25% of the income distribution and come at a much higher, never-ending cost to taxpayers.

Additional affordability measures must focus on ensuring that families earning \$80,000 or less receive a 100% subsidy up to the hourly rate cap, ensuring that cost is not a barrier to participation. Without this support, the most vulnerable children risk missing out on the proven lifelong benefits of early education, exacerbating inequality and economic disadvantage.

Many areas in Australia remain underserved or entirely unserved, leaving families with no viable ECEC options. A collaborative approach between the government and the sector is necessary to identify these gaps and implement long-term, needs-based funding solutions.

Without measures prioritising children who need ECEC the most, children throughout Australia will continue to miss out, entrenching disparities in the educational and economic opportunities they deserve.

POLICY OPPORTUNITIES

ACA calls for immediate commitment to:

- To ensure equitable access to Early Education and in accordance with the Productivity Commission recommendations on affordability, families with annual incomes at or below \$80,000 should be eligible for a subsidy rate of 100% of the fee, up to the hourly rate cap.
- Ensure a collaborative approach to identify underserved and unserved markets by working in consultation with the sector.
- Deliver policies with consistent, long-term, continuous needs-based funding that truly supports unserved and underserved (regional, remote and rural locations) communities. Embed top-up funding streams, including business viability payments that appropriately reflect the needs of the community and workforce incentive payments with wrap-around support tailored to communities’ contexts and needs.

About us

The Australian Childcare Alliance (ACA) is the national peak body for the Australian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector. Our mission is to ensure every child in Australia has access to high-quality, affordable, and sustainable early learning services.

The ACA has been delivering its mission in various forms for more than 30 years. Our leadership and membership have extensive experience in early learning, training and delivering ECEC. We have over 4,500 early learning services, employing over 75,000 educators and teachers and caring for more than 360,000 families throughout Australia.

Our long history as a leading organisation is bolstered by our firsthand experience in running ECEC services, implementing government policies, and engaging with members and families nationwide. ACA plays a crucial role in transforming industry insights into policy contributions and actively assists the sector in executing policies.





Let's give our children the best start in life.

