

Inquiry into the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in Victoria.

Submission by Uniting Vic.Tas.

Uniting

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Introduction.

Acknowledgements.

This submission was written on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. We work in solidarity with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Australia's First Peoples and as the traditional owners and custodians of the lands and waters on which we all live and work. We recognise the continuing sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples over their lands and waters and their inalienable right to self-determination. We offer our respect to all Elders past and present.

We would like to thank the managers, educators, teachers, additional assistants, and the parent with a child accessing our Early Learning services for sharing their insights, experiences and expectations of the early learning sector. Your honesty and expertise were essential to shaping this submission and grounding it in the realities of everyday practice. Names marked with an * have chosen to use their first name in their story.

Our experience.

Uniting Vic.Tas (Uniting) is the principal community services organisation of the Uniting Church in Victoria and Tasmania. We are more than 3,500 employees and 1,500 volunteers providing a broad range of services, including early learning, child, youth and family services, alcohol and other drugs, mental health, crisis and homelessness support, and carer support. Uniting also undertakes research into community needs and advocates for social change to build more just and inclusive communities. We celebrate diversity and value the lived experience of people of every faith, ethnicity, age, disability, culture, language, gender identity, sex, and sexual orientation.

Uniting provides early learning and family support services across metropolitan and regional Victoria, including kindergarten, long day care, family day care, outside school hours care, and educator outreach programs. We are also the lead agency for the Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) and Pre-School Field Officer programs in Victoria. We currently have 73 early learning services across Victoria and, as of July 2025, we supported:

- 3196 children across our Kindergarten and early learning services.
- 206 children across 20 outside school hours care programs.
- 230 children across 22 Family Day Care Educators.
- 1100 children through our Kindergarten Inclusion Support programs, supported by 890 Additional Assistants.
- 27 Preschool Field Officers (PSFOs) working across Melbourne, Wimmera and Gippsland.

Through our broad service portfolio, we have a unique understanding of the connection between child wellbeing to development, education and broader social outcomes. Early learning is often one of our first opportunities to disrupt entrenched disadvantage and vulnerabilities linked to poverty, trauma, family stress. When early learning services are adequately resourced and supported, they become effective early intervention points – connecting families and children to the right supports across the broader system.

Our additional assistants and PSFOs also work across Uniting and other approved providers, giving us insights into broader early childhood education and care sector in Victoria. This breadth helps us to see what is working, where challenges are compounding, and what is needed to strengthen high-quality, equitable and safe early learning for every child in Victoria.

Executive Summary.

Uniting is committed to making a genuine difference for children, families and communities by delivering safe, nurturing and inclusive early learning services. We are dedicated to giving all children the best start in life – no matter where they live or what their circumstances are.

Many of our early learning services are based in areas that would otherwise have limited or no access to childcare. Of our 73 early learning services in Victoria, 45 are based in regional or rural locations.

Like many across the sector, Uniting is shocked and deeply concerned by the recent reports of child maltreatment in early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. These are simply unacceptable. We need decisive, bold action from governments and providers to redesign the current ECEC system, so every family can trust that their child's safety and wellbeing is the top priority when they walk through the doors of any early learning service.

These incidents have unfolded in the midst of a "perfect storm" of intersecting pressures that have been undermining quality, safety and universal access to ECEC. Uniting sees the path forwards as centring on three overarching areas: attracting, retaining and supporting a highly skilled and valued workforce; consistently enforcing stronger, more rigorous standards across services; and addressing the rapid privatisation of the sector and the risks this poses to equitable access and high-quality care.

Workforce shortages continue to be the single biggest barrier to accessible, high-quality early learning for Victorian families, particularly those in regional and rural areas. Uniting supports policies and incentives that attract more people to the ECEC sector, while recognising that their effectiveness depends on ensuring all new graduates are equipped with the skills and experience needed to succeed in the workforce. Existing educators are also navigating increasingly complex environments without the pay, recognition or support they need, driving low retention and only exacerbating ongoing workforce shortages.

While current standards and regulations provide a strong foundation for early learning services, there is still too much ambiguity (such as educator-to-child ratios) that permits "technically legal" but unsafe practices. With the introduction of the Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority in January 2026, there is a crucial opportunity to overhaul and properly resource the Regulatory Authority, to ensure all approved providers are consistently applying and meeting the intent of the standards.

At the same time, the rapid expansion of for-profit providers risks profit being placed over the safety and wellbeing of children and contributes to inequities in accessing high-quality early learning. A system centred on children's needs looks very different to one centred on commercial returns. Equitable funding and stronger guardrails are needed to ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive.

And underlying all of this is the persistent misconception that childcare is simply supervision, rather than a cornerstone of child development and a key lever for disrupting entrenched disadvantage.

Uniting supports the 22 recommendations from Victoria's Rapid Child Safety Review, along with wider reforms underway across Victorian and Federal Governments. We urge governments to ensure these reforms are informed with genuine sector and local community input, so they are effective, practical, sustainable, and meaningfully achieve their intended purpose.

Our submission calls for sustained, coordinated action to address the underlying issues that are impacting children, families and the broader ECEC sector. Without it, short-term policy fixes and unchecked growth of profit-driven providers will continue to exacerbate known challenges in the sector. With it, Victoria can build a system where every child has the opportunity to thrive, and is supported by a valued, appropriately skilled, and empowered workforce that delivers the safest, highest quality early learning possible.



Carol Jeffs
Chief Executive Officer



Fiona Balsillie
Executive Director Early Learning

Recommendations.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government implements the following:

NUMBER	RECOMMENDATION
<i>Attracting, Retaining and Supporting a Highly Skilled and Valued Workforce</i>	
ONE	Resource the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) to strengthen monitoring and oversight of Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) delivering ECEC courses, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A review of requirements for all ECEC courses, including mandatory course content, minimum placement hours, and how graduate readiness is assessed.• More robust assessments to ensure students are demonstrating core competencies, including evaluations by independent parties.
TWO	Invest in 'soft entry' options for people interested in joining the ECEC workforce.
THREE	Review funding for professional development to ensure greater accessibility and flexibility, particularly for regional and rural services.
FOUR	Invest in more high-quality professional development opportunities that embed ongoing learning and mentoring into services.
FIVE	Undertake a lean process review to minimise administrative burdens associated with compliance, while maintaining quality and safety.
SIX	Launch a campaign that improves professional recognition of the ECEC workforce.
SEVEN	Strengthen workforce retention through fair and sustainable pay, benchmarked against similarly skilled and qualified industries.
EIGHT	Advocate to the Federal Government for coordinated, system-wide workforce investment across the broader care sector.
NINE	Address known barriers to relocation in regional areas to support Best Start, Best Life reforms, including a commitment to investing in more affordable housing.
<i>Clear, Rigorous Standards with Stronger and More Consistent Enforcement</i>	
TEN	Strengthen screening processes for providers entering or expanding in Victoria's ECEC sector, to ensure all services consistently demonstrate a strong understanding of quality and safety standards.
ELEVEN	Mandate minimum standards of recruitment for all ECEC services and strengthen monitoring of recruitment processes.
TWELVE	Advocate to Federal Government to review the National Quality Framework minimum qualification requirements and consider expanding to adjacent industries to relieve workforce shortages, particularly in regional and rural areas.

THIRTEEN Invest in a specialised training program that enables people from adjacent industries to safely supplement the ECEC workforce in regional and rural communities, including clear eligibility criteria, adequate resourcing, and monitoring frameworks.

FOURTEEN Supports safer application of “under the roof”, by:

- **Advocating to the Federal Government to review and strengthen guidance on how ratios can be safely averaged across the whole service, while maintaining flexibility for regional and rural services.**
- **Strengthen oversight and monitoring of ratios by the Regulatory Authority, such as reviewing a service’s rosters to evaluate staffing practices.**

FIFTEEN Adequately resource any changes to ratios, including:

- **long-term workforce planning and investment so that appropriately skilled staff are available to meet ratio requirements.**
- **additional financial support to increase staffing when children would benefit from lower ratios, such as when services have maximised group sizes or have a set number of children with additional numbers.**

SIXTEEN Adequately resource the incoming Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority (VECRA) to:

- **provide additional training and resourcing for Authorised Officers to ensure compliance is being evaluated consistently and objectively across the state.**
- **adopt a more strengths-based, partnership approach to the monitoring and enforcement of standards and regulations.**

Impacts of Privatisation on Universal Access to High-Quality Care

SEVENTEEN Advocate to the Federal Government for more equitable funding models in the ECEC sector.

EIGHTEEN Advocate to the Federal Government for stronger safeguards to ensure public investment in ECEC delivers improved quality and safety outcomes, not commercial returns.

Reforms Need to be Carefully Considered, Practical and Thoughtfully Implemented

NINETEEN Design reforms in partnership with the ECEC workforce, so new requirements are practical, clearly communicated, and minimise administrative load.

TWENTY Implement Best Start, Best Life with stronger workforce planning and in partnership with local communities, to minimise unintended consequences.

Attracting, Retaining and Supporting a Highly Skilled and Valued Workforce

The quality and oversight of educator training, professional development and qualifications.

Supporting all new graduates to enter the sector with the core competencies and skills they need.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

ONE Resource the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) to strengthen monitoring and oversight of Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) delivering ECEC courses, including:

- A review of requirements for all ECEC courses, including mandatory course content, minimum placement hours, and how graduate readiness is assessed.
- More robust assessments to ensure students are demonstrating core competencies, including evaluations by independent parties.

"It all stems back to how seriously the government takes our industry. ... If it was taken more seriously, we wouldn't have these outcomes of 'I'll just let them [graduate].'"

- KIS Program Manager, metro area.

Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) play a crucial role in providing the ECEC sector with confident, capable educators who understand child development, respond appropriately to challenging behaviours, and can build secure, nurturing relationships with children. Yet, we're seeing an overall decline in the number of new graduates who arrive with those foundational skills.

Essential subjects are either not being taught in enough depth or have been removed entirely from some curriculums (e.g. music and movement). Particularly in fast-tracked qualifications, we are seeing gaps in:

- Basic skills, such as changing nappies, communicating and engaging with children, welcoming families, or leading learning programs.
- Understanding of child development and room management, including ability to identify language delays.
- Ability to engage children in meaningful activities (e.g. drawing, art, storytelling, music and movement), and instead replacing these with screen-based activities.

"I've got an example where I advertised for an Early Childhood Teacher. I had 15 applicants and did 5 interviews. 4 of them couldn't tell me what a quality improvement plan looks like, couldn't picture a room – what the room would look like, sound like, or what they would be doing in that room. They're just not ready, they don't have the skills."

- Early Learning Program Manager, regional Victoria.

We are also noticing graduates entering the workforce with limited practical experience. Placements are particularly valuable for applying theory to practice and, in our experience, make the biggest difference to a person's readiness.

"If they're not having that practical experience, they hit a kindergarten with 33 children. Five of those have got additional needs. Fifteen of those children can't speak English, and they need additional support to assimilate to their environment. And then you've got the three-year olds who need their nappy changed. And they've got to do risk assessments on absolutely everything. It's really dangerous that people don't get that practical experience."

– Early Learning Senior Manager, metro Victoria.

When graduates enter the workforce without these core competencies, we risk losing the skills and qualities that make a meaningful difference for families and children. Aymee*, a parent with a daughter at one of Uniting's early learning services, spoke to us about why she decided to send her daughter to early learning:

"I didn't want a babysitting service or an AuPair situation. ... I have a bit of an understanding of the training and the qualifications that go into early childhood teachers. I knew that if she was [at Uniting early learning centre], it's based on the education and training that they've got. It's not just babysitting. That was really important. That she was going somewhere, that she was supported in lots of different ways with qualified people rather than just somewhere that she was being watched for the day."

When describing the other qualities she valued in educators, Aymee* said:

"I think creativity is a good one to have, especially at such a young age. ... During the younger years, educators have to be a lot more creative with the things that they do during the day to keep kids engaged. ...

If they like being there and they enjoy being them with. So there's a genuine passion for children. It definitely comes through with their relationships and their energy that they bring to the room. ... And your child is happy to see them and they're happy to be there or even, just remembering little things, like, how was the holiday last week?

Even some of the activities or the artworks or the pictures and things that you get sent about what they're up to for the day. It's like, oh, such a great activity. I would never have thought of, you know, doing that. You just go oh, wow, I've been given ideas of things that I can do when they're at home."

Financial incentives and the workforce shortage appear to be driving practices where students are "basically not allowed to fail." When assessments are rushed or standards are lowered, graduates can enter the sector without the core competencies they need to succeed.

"What incentive does the training organisation have to actually test them and only put through people who show that they're capable of the qualification? They're just putting them through, because otherwise they don't get paid."

– Operations Support Officer, Early Learning.

Uniting supports policies that bring more people into the ECEC sector – including fee-free TAFE, pathways to permanent residency, and crossover courses. These incentives must sit alongside rigorous standards to ensure every course reliably equips graduates with the skills they need. Stronger monitoring and oversight is urgently needed, including a review of required course content,

minimum placement hours to ensure sufficient practical experience, and robust assessment practices (such as independent evaluation) to ensure student outcomes and core competencies are being met.

Pathways into early learning to support the 'right people' entering the sector.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

TWO Invest in 'soft entry' options for people interested in joining the ECEC workforce.

"Not everyone should be doing the course. Not everyone should be in this industry."

– Senior Manager, Early Learning.

Qualifications are only part of the picture – and don't guarantee a person is suitable for the ECEC sector. In our experience, there are other core attributes (such as curiosity, initiative, relationship-building skills, and genuine passion for childcare) that are just as essential to delivering high quality and safe childcare.

The KIS program is a strong example of a safe "soft entry" pathway that supports the right people into the sector.

No qualifications are required to become a KIS additional assistant, yet they safely work alongside educators and teachers under clear supervision. In 2023, less than 29% of investigations in our early learning services involved an additional assistant without an ECEC qualification.

KIS gives people the chance to gain hands-on experience, build confidence and, if suited, be supported to pursue formal qualifications and meet the growing demand for skilled teachers and educators. For those who find the work isn't the right fit for them, they can step away without spending time or resources on a qualification.

Professional development opportunities need to be more accessible and adequately resourced.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

THREE Review funding for professional development to ensure greater accessibility and flexibility, particularly for regional and rural services.

"The [professional development] is key because you're always trying to learn how to navigate behaviours. And there's so much going on - we've lived through COVID and everything that has come from that and parenting styles changing. It's just a melting pot of different things and we're trying to juggle it all."

– Service Leader, regional Kindergarten.

High-quality professional development gives educators the skills to respond to the children in front of them – to adapt to new challenges, shifting parenting norms, and contemporary evidence about what works for children. However, access can be limited by cost, workload pressures, insufficient release time, and staffing shortages. This can be particularly difficult for:

- Long day care services, as participation requires extra planning, flexibility and budget to cover staff absences and meet ratio requirements.

- Services in regional and rural areas, where workforce shortages make it difficult to cover staff absences, and most professional development is concentrated in metro areas or require lengthy travel.

Funding for professional development is often inadequate and comes with rigid restrictions about how it must be used. Those restrictions can make professional development less accessible, such as requiring all staff to attend a single session. While this may be less costly overall, in reality this can force a service to close for the day or leave some staff unable to participate.

Greater flexibility would allow organisations to use funding in ways that fits their operations – such as running sessions at different times or spreading training across teams – and increase participation without disrupting children and families. This flexibility is even more critical in our regional and rural communities, where workforce shortages mean backfilling is near-impossible when staff are attending professional development.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

FOUR Invest in more high-quality professional development opportunities that embed ongoing learning and mentoring into services.

The quality of professional development can also be highly variable. One-off opportunities that are disconnected from daily work or delivered by providers without relevant expertise do not always translate to real change. In comparison, we've found that programs that provide hands-on modelling, follow-up and ongoing guidance are most effective at embedding learning into a service.

"You need someone hands-on like Berry St's programme. They come in, look at the children with you, role model, be beside you, and then come back the next week and go 'what's next?' And then [staff] don't have to leave the classroom."

– Early Learning Program Manager, KIS.

More mentoring and coaching opportunities would also provide practical development opportunities, particularly in long day care settings where the structure and workloads can make it difficult for educators to reflect or share knowledge with their peers. Staff exchange programs or inter-service visits are one way that people could continue to upskill and learn from different environments after employment.

"Learning through other centres, being able to visit other centres and see what they are doing and why they are doing it would be incredibly valuable. It's a great way to learn and share [...] As I said, my placements were the best part of my university degree in terms of practical learning and development for the job, and it's a shame that stops."

– Teacher, Long Day Care, metro.

The impact of workforce conditions on educator wellbeing, retention and service quality.

The workforce is experiencing increasing demands that don't support quality care.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

FIVE Undertake a lean process review to minimise administrative burdens associated with compliance, while maintaining quality and safety.

"The expectation has changed over the years. It's different from 20 years ago because it's getting more complex, but their pay and the conditions don't commensurate with what they are doing. We expect a lot of from them - they're not just teaching, there's much more going on. [The government] is not recognising that."

– Senior Manager, KIS.

Amidst declining developmental outcomes in Australia, the role that educators play in providing high-quality early learning is crucial for supporting future generations. According to the most recent AEDC findings, while Victorian children are showing lower overall rates of developmental vulnerability compared to the national average, we are still following a concerning trend:

- The percentage of children in Victoria who are developmentally vulnerable has increased across all five AEDC domains since 2021, particularly in emotional maturity (+2.1 percentage points), social competence (+1.6 percentage points), and communication skills and general knowledge (+0.8% points).
- The number of children who are developmentally on-track has decreased from 57.2% to 53.8% since 2021¹.

Alongside increasing developmental vulnerability, educators and teachers are navigating a changing and increasingly complex landscape. Within our own services, we are seeing how the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on child development, changes to parenting practices and growing awareness of additional needs and trauma-informed practices are increasing the demands being placed on our workforce.

We've found parents are becoming more engaged in their children's lives, which is a positive and important shift that supports children's wellbeing and development. At the same time, the rise of digital communication has changed expectations about how often families receive updates. This can increase pressures on educators to produce frequent posts and photos that aren't always meaningful to learning and take time away from their core work with children.

"Back in the day, a little post-it note would be sufficient for a teacher to document something worthy of an observation. Whereas now, the expectation is that there's photos and regular updates. And I just think, who are we doing it for? Is it for the education of the child or is it for the parents? And when it becomes purely for the parents, not for education ... [that's when it increases] paperwork, and flows down to the child safety side of things. It's pulling our teams

¹ Australian Early Development Census (2024). *AEDC Key Findings 2024*. Retrieved from: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.aedc.gov.au%2Fdocs%2Fdefault-source%2Fdefault-document-library%2Faedc_key-findings-24_fs_mar25_da8_accessible.docx%3Fsfvrsn%3Da956d16e_1&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

away from their jobs.”

- Business Support Manager, Early Learning.

While educators and teachers are doing everything they can to meet these needs, they're doing so in a policy environment that hasn't kept pace with the emotional, behavioural and administrative load being placed on them. More and more time is being dedicated to paperwork for compliance purposes and for parents, which is drawing educators away from their primary reason for being in ECEC: meaningfully engaging with and teaching children.

Intended supports are also not always readily available when educators need care for children with additional needs. A KIS Program Manager describes a teacher's experiences when their application for an additional assistant was being repeatedly rejected:

"The thing that's really pushing people out is how hard the work is. One teacher said to me the other day ... 'I'm on my knees. I can't go out with my friends at night because I'm just too exhausted. I'm being hit every day by a child.' ... I speak to a teacher a day who is being hurt, beaten, spat at. Who wants to go to work and deal with that? Anywhere else it would be assault." – KIS Program Manager.

Passion and motivation are essential for delivering quality care, but this is difficult for the workforce to maintain when they are experiencing burnout, reduced job satisfaction and conditions that are impacting their wellbeing outside of work.

These conditions inevitably contribute to high turnover and a low retention rate in the ECEC workforce. According to a report into the children's education and care sector by HumanAbility, a retention gap is the leading driver behind shortages for educators, whereas a long training gap is driving the shortage in Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs)². High turnover in the sector disrupts children's sense of safety, nurturing their development and building trust, making it harder for educators to build the secure, ongoing relationships that underpin quality learning.

At Uniting, we understand we have a critical role to play in improving retention. As of 30th September 2025, our rolling turnover in early learning was lower than the average turnover rate across the whole organisation – with early learning at 14%, compared to the average 17-19%. Building positive workplace cultures with supportive leadership, respectful relationships, higher educator-to-child ratios and organisational capability are some of the key things that are important to educators and teachers when deciding whether to stay in their workplace.

"Having a positive culture, having politeness and encouragement from leadership, having organisation, positive feedback and hearing about anything you've done that's good [...] All of those things are very well known."

- Long Day Care Teacher, metro area.

However, services can only go so far within the context of broader, sector-wide challenges. Professional recognition, fairer wages (as discussed in the following section), easily accessible supports and reducing administrative workload are all necessary to improving wellbeing, retention and, ultimately, the quality of children's experiences.

² HumanAbility (2025). *Children's education and care: Workforce Plan 2025*. Retrieved from: <https://humanability.com.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/WFP/2025/WFP25%20Childrens%20Education%20and%20Care.pdf>

ECEC workforce moving to industries with better conditions.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

SIX	Launch a campaign that improves professional recognition of the ECEC workforce.
SEVEN	Strengthen workforce retention through fair and sustainable pay, benchmarked against similarly skilled and qualified industries.
EIGHT	Advocate to the Federal Government for coordinated, system-wide workforce investment across the broader care sector.

The reputation and known demands of early learning can lead to people leaving the ECEC sector for 'less stressful' or better paid industries – or prevent them from entering the workforce in the first place. Early learning is known to be underpaid, undervalued and stressful. Without the proper supports in place, people who would have an interest in this pathway can be discouraged to pursue a career.

"For those wanting to embark on this career, friends and parents would advise them not to go into it. It's not encouraging, because who would want to encourage their friends or loved ones to go in? It's a job that is known for being burned out and ... they could get hit by children and sometimes abused by parents as well."

– Senior Manager, KIS.

For those who are pursuing qualifications in ECEC, the realities of the industry can also lead to students moving into other areas. When we have students completing dual qualification in early childhood and primary school, we can sometimes 'lose' people to primary school due to early childhood environments being more demanding, difficult and stressful.

"Students are doing dual qualifications in early childhood and primary school, and they do their placements in early childhood. And they go, 'Yep, this isn't for me. I'm going to do primary school.' We've put the time into them for those 10-12 weeks, and then they say 'no, I only had to do this because I need to get into primary school.' We lose a lot of people that way as well. And it's because of the [stressful] dynamics ... people are struggling to cope."

– Early Learning Program Manager, regional area.

Australia's broader care economy is facing similar challenges with achieving fair pay, addressing workforce shortages, and rising demand for services. Because these sectors typically draw from a similar labour pool – with overlaps between aptitude, qualifications, job pathways, and necessary skills – whenever another sector raises wages, they can often draw workforce from ECEC.

HumanAbility's report into the children's education and care sector reviewed data from 2020-2021 on the mobility of the ECEC workforce in Australia, and identified that primary school teacher was the most common occupation that educators and ECTs were moving into. The second and third most common occupations for people to move into were:

- Welfare support workers and education aides, respectively, for educators.
- Educators and education aides, respectively, for ECTs, suggesting they are remaining in the sector but shifting into related roles with less responsibility and administrative demands³.

We're also seeing staff leaving to other industries where they can continue working with children with better pay and better working conditions.

³ HumanAbility, 2025.

"We're competing with NDIS, too. They can care for children with disabilities in a more targeted way - which is happening in the childcare centre or kindergarten anyway - and get twice as much money. We've lost a lot of staff because they've moved to NDIS, working with children with disabilities where it's basically one-on-one."

– Early Learning Program Manager, regional area.

According to Jobs and Skills Australia, as of January 2024, the median weekly income and the highest qualification most commonly held for the following occupations were⁴:

Occupation	Median weekly earnings	Most common level of qualification
Education Aides	\$1,098	Certification III/IV (36.3%)
Child Carers (Educators)	\$1,146	Advanced Diploma/Diploma (27.2%)
Aged and Disabled Carers	\$1,564	Certification III/IV (36.6%)
Early Childhood Teacher	\$1,660	Bachelor's degree (60.4%)
Welfare Support Workers	\$1,688	Bachelor's degree (25.8%)
Primary School Teachers	\$2,000	Bachelor's degree (69.2%)

The ECEC workforce continues to be underpaid for their level of qualifications and the demands of their roles, particularly when compared to similar roles and industries. While the Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Educators Agreement has some conditions that are attractive to the Kindergarten workforce (such as 10 weeks of leave), the pay rate is much lower compared to other industries in the private sector.

"For example, in the recent strike, one of my colleagues who's a teacher and a very good one, said, 'I would never have struck in the past. I'm not that kind of person. But the pay increase they're giving [me for] my diploma is less than what my 20-year-old son earns and he is the duty manager at Woolworths. I just can't let that go.'"

– Early Learning Program Manager, KIS.

Fairer wages that reflect a person's qualifications and the demands of the job are effective at encouraging more people to remain in the sector. The Federal Government introduced a Worker Retention Payment that funds long day care services to increase pay by 15% over 2 years. Since its introduction, ECEC job vacancies in Victoria have been reducing⁵.

⁴ Jobs and Skills Australia (2024). *Occupations, Jobs and Skills Australia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/data/occupation-and-industry-profiles/occupations>

⁵ Weatherill, J., White, P., & State of Victoria (Department of Premier and Cabinet) (2025). *Rapid Child Safety Review*. Retrieved from: <https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-09/Rapid-Child-Safety-Review-2025.pdf>

Workforce shortages and the accessibility of high quality ECEC services in regional and rural Victoria.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

NINE Address known barriers to relocation in regional areas to support Best Start, Best Life reforms, including a commitment to investing in more affordable housing.

Uniting is supportive of the Best Start, Best Life reforms introduced by the Victorian Government to expand childcare access to children and families across Victoria. We see the success of these reforms being dependent on also having the appropriately skilled workforce to support them, particularly when expanding to areas which are most in-need of access to ECEC.

Federal and state initiatives have been developed to address the workforce shortage, including:

- Fee-free TAFE and scholarships to increase the amount of people pursuing qualifications in early childhood.
- Incentives – such as relocation supplements and location incentives –to encourage people into accepting roles in regional and rural areas.

While these are important steps, our experience is that financial incentives alone are not sufficient to attracting appropriately skilled staff to regional and rural areas. A lack of housing, infrastructure and not knowing anyone in the community can make people who haven't grown up in the area reluctant to move.

"A new daycare has opened and it hasn't necessarily helped the town because we still don't have more staff. It's not necessarily how many daycares are out here. It's more that, you know, it's a small town and people can't necessarily just move out here. ... Unless they've grown up here or they're happy to have a lifestyle change, there's not a willingness to move out here and work."

– Aymee, discussing barriers to accessing early learning in her regional town.

We need more than just financial incentives to attract teachers and educators. Regional communities require broader supports to ensure that a person's basic needs – such as housing – are able to be met when they are re-locating.

CASE STUDY: HOPETOUN EARLY LEARNING CENTRE

In April 2024, Uniting was forced to close the Hopetoun Early Learning centre after months of trying to find enough qualified staff to run the centre.

Three new staff members were needed to meet requirements after several staff resigned. The resignations were a result of staff taking up roles at the government-run kindergarten next door, moving town, or leaving the industry altogether due to burnout.

Uniting undertook an extensive six-month recruitment campaign, engaged an external agency, and was offering up to \$50,000 in relocation costs. However, we were unable to find suitable candidates.

A lack of housing in the area also contributed to the services being able to entice suitable candidates.

“There just no housing” says Uniting Wimmera Early Learning Program Manager, Kate Farlow. “We offered to put them up in the local caravan park because there were no houses – it’s just wasn’t an attractive offer.”

Uniting has since handed the childcare over to the local council, who has also been unable to fill the roles. The long day care remains closed, leaving local families with limited access to childcare.

“The Wimmera is a black hole for early childhood. Families just don’t have access to it and children are not given the same opportunities as everybody else,” says Kate Farlow.

Clear, Rigorous Standards with Stronger and More Consistent Enforcement.

The adequacy of current quality and safety standards across all ECEC service types.

The adequacy of current standards depends on them being clearly understood and consistently applied by all services.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

TEN **Strengthen screening processes for providers entering or expanding in Victoria's ECEC sector, to ensure all services consistently demonstrate a strong understanding of quality and safety standards.**

"A written standard or law – in any context, not just early learning – is only as good as the people who choose to follow it."

– Senior Manager, Early Learning services.

Every child deserves to learn and grow in safe, nurturing and inclusive environments. In Victoria, the National Quality Framework (NQF) and Child Safe Standards provide a strong foundation for an early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector that prioritises safety, belonging, learning and high-quality care. However, these standards are only as effective as the systems that uphold them – and the organisations that are approved to operate under them.

From families and additional assistants working in other services, we're hearing that current standards are not always being implemented as intended, either due to not being clearly understood or unclear expectations leaving them open to interpretation.

"I can't understand how some services are meeting the requirements and the legislation you have to work towards. From what I'm hearing from families with their children in these services, I can't understand it."

– Kindergarten Service Leader, rural Victoria.

"Not every centre is like that, but it's becoming more and more like that. My team - who go out and visit services from different organisations - the ones we report are the ones where we've gone, 'Oh, there's just so much wrong here, we have to do something.'"

– Early Learning Program Manager, KIS.

Stronger screening processes by the Regulatory Authority are needed to ensure that all providers have a sound understanding of the standards before entering the Victorian ECEC sector, and that any approved providers who do not demonstrate this understanding in practice are prevented from expanding across the state. Clearer expectations and stronger oversight will lift the adequacy of Victoria's current standards from "on paper" to "in practice," supporting every child's right to access safe, high-quality early learning.

Best-practice recruitment processes for all ECEC services.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

ELEVEN Mandate minimum standards of recruitment for all ECEC services and strengthen monitoring of recruitment processes.

Every educator and teacher who enters an early learning service shapes a child's experience of care, safety and belonging. That responsibility requires rigorous screening and recruitment practices to maintain the integrity of quality and safety standards.

Mandating best-practice recruitment processes is an important step towards ensuring child safety – particularly in the context of ongoing workforce shortages, where some organisations may feel pressured between having enough staff to keep their doors open or keeping children safe.

"A woman who ran this private [early learning] service kept coming to me and saying, 'I've got this great person, I'm going to bring her onboard.' And she'd tell me the name and I'd go, 'You can't employ her.' And she'd say, 'Well, if I listened to you, I'd have no staff.' And I said, 'Do you want good staff or do you just want to meet ratios? Because you're going to end up in trouble.' She didn't listen to me, and she ended up employing these two people that destroyed the service."

– Kindergarten Program Manager, regional Victoria.

While no children were harmed in the above example, a lack of core competencies and displaying unprofessional behaviour in front of children substantially impacted on staff wellbeing, team cohesion, and service quality. This individual has since moved across multiple services, highlighting the wider sector risk when hiring safeguards aren't in place.

At Uniting, we currently exceed minimum requirements, with all employees undergoing thorough reference checks, police checks and Working with Children Checks. Due to the robust nature of these checks, we often "miss out" when suitable candidates are hired faster by organisations that do not follow the same rigorous hiring procedures.

"Within a day of us interviewing, I've had numerous people message me saying, 'I'm sorry. I've just got a full time job' and they had an interview [with the other organisation] the day before. And it's like, are they actually doing reference checks?"

– Kindergarten Program Manager, regional Victoria.

Standardising best-practice hiring procedures lifts the bar for everyone and creates a fairer playing field – especially for not-for-profits who can't compete on financial incentives alone. When the workforce is already stretched, having clear, consistent expectations matters; and can be the difference between a service staying open for families or having to close its doors.

We support the *Rapid Child Safety Review's* recommendation to update the Statement of Expectations for the Regulatory Authority to require best practice for recruitment, including background checks, child safety questions in interviews, and checking at least two previous employers (even when not listed as referees)⁶.

⁶ Weatherill et al., 2025.

Expanding minimum qualification requirements to address workforce shortages in regional and rural communities.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

- TWELVE** Advocate to Federal Government to review the National Quality Framework minimum qualification requirements and consider expanding to adjacent industries to relieve workforce shortages, particularly in regional and rural areas.
- THIRTEEN** Invest in a specialised training program that enables people from adjacent industries to safely supplement the ECEC workforce in regional and rural communities, including clear eligibility criteria, adequate resourcing, and monitoring frameworks.

Early learning services operating under the NQF have strict minimum qualification requirements a person must hold to work as an ECEC educator or teacher. Under these requirements, ECEC services cannot draw on skilled professionals from adjacent industries as relief staff, despite having the knowledge, training and safeguards required to work safely with children.

Significant and ongoing workforce shortages are impacting services across the sector, particularly those in regional and rural communities. A limited workforce means there are few back-up options when a staff member resigns or is unable to attend work, leading to service interruptions and temporary closures. These disruptions have a significant impact on families, particularly on their ability to study or earn income.

Despite a range of financial incentives aimed at attracting staff to these areas, regional and rural services continue to struggle to fill positions. Tapping into the local population may offer a more practical and sustainable solution to alleviating workforce pressures.

For example, expanding current qualification requirements could immediately increase the potential workforce in regional and rural communities. Primary school teachers, for example, have completed a qualification in Bachelor of Education (Primary), completed mandatory safety screenings, are trained in Child Safety legislation and information-sharing schemes (such as MARAM), and have extensive experience working with children and engaging with families. Yet, under the NQF, they cannot be employed and utilised as relief staff in ECEC services.

Another pathway to increasing the workforce in regional and rural communities is allowing a small proportion of staff without formal ECEC qualifications to work in long day care services, provided they have the prerequisite skills and experience to deliver quality care. To support safety and high standards of care, this would require:

- A state-endorsed training program that has been co-designed with the sector and can be delivered by ECEC services, which all unqualified staff must complete.
- Clearly defined eligibility criteria for a person to receive this training, e.g. someone with qualifications in social services that frequently works with children.
- A robust framework for how an ECEC service will monitor and support this workforce.
- Adequate financial support and resources for ECEC services to deliver the training and sustain workforce growth.
- Consideration of whether this pathway should be available universally or targeted specifically to regional and rural services.
- Applying the same rigorous hiring practices and safeguards required of all ECEC staff.

This approach would expand the availability of local workforce, create pathways into formal qualifications, and help services maintain consistent staffing while upholding quality standards.

The adequacy of staff-to-child ratio regulations, including ratios being averaged across entire services rather than applied per room

“Under the roof” needs clearer guidance and stronger enforcement.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

FOURTEEN Supports safer application of “under the roof”, by:

- **Advocating to the Federal Government to review and strengthen guidance on how ratios can be safely averaged across the whole service, while maintaining flexibility for regional and rural services.**
- **Strengthen oversight and monitoring of ratios by the Regulatory Authority, such as reviewing a service’s rosters to evaluate staffing practices.**

The NQF defines the minimum educator-to-child ratio requirements for children’s education and care services. In Victoria, this means that:

- For children under 36 months old, one educator must be present for every 4 children.
- For children between 36 months old and preschool age, one educator must be present for every 11 children.

The NQF currently allows some flexibility for services by calculating ratios across the whole service, instead of by individual rooms. This is known as “under the roof.”

When used responsibly, “under the roof” gives services the flexibility they need to respond to the different ages and needs of children. However, a lack of clear guidance means some providers stretch this flexibility beyond what is safe or acceptable. In the sector more broadly, ways this can be misused or misinterpreted can include:

- an educator being left alone with 21 children for extended periods of time, while the other educator is in another room.
- an educator on their lunchbreak being counted under ratios, despite the NQF specifying that a person must be working directly with children to be counted as part of the ratio.
- additional assistants from KIS being left alone with children while an educator takes another child to the bathroom, despite additional assistants not being counted under ratios.

When services are not implementing the standards responsibly, this creates risks to safety and quality of care. Addressing the misuse of “under the roof” is important – but the solution is not to discard the flexibility that many services legitimately rely on.

Moving to room-by-room ratios would place regional and rural services, particularly, in an untenable situation. These areas already struggle to meet ratio requirements due to workforce shortages, including difficulties covering staff lunch breaks and responding to unplanned absences. Removing the flexibility of “under the roof” would push many of our services past the point of viability, forcing reductions in operating hours or complete closure. Families in those communities – who often have no alternative providers – would be left without any access to ECEC.

These challenges point to the need for clearer guidance and stronger oversight of how ratios are applied, not the removal of “under the roof” altogether. Tightening expectations around how “under the roof” can be used, paired with improved monitoring and enforcement, can address unsafe or inappropriate practices while retaining the flexibility needed to keep regional and rural services

operational. Without that balance, the communities already facing limited access to ECEC will be hit the hardest.

Providing additional resourcing for ratios that are more responsive to children's needs.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

FIFTEEN

Adequately resource any changes to ratios, including:

- **long-term workforce planning and investment so that appropriately skilled staff are available to meet ratio requirements.**
- **additional financial support to increase staffing when children would benefit from lower ratios, such as when services have maximised group sizes or have a set number of children with additional numbers.**

Quality early learning services depend on educators with enough time, attention and emotional bandwidth to respond to children's varying needs. Current ratios can support safe and quality care – depending on the age, circumstances and needs of the children in a particular room.

A room with a higher number of children presenting with additional needs, for example, may need lower ratios. This creates space for educators to be responsive to children's varying needs, reduces stress for educators so they are not "constantly putting out fires," and ultimately benefits the wellbeing and development of children.

"There's better connection with children when the ratios are higher. If there was an increase to child-to-staff ratios, the children would benefit from those trusting relationships more than having one educator. ... Better outcomes for children's mental health and wellbeing, and less staff burnout. There'd be that opportunity to tag out if you if you were feeling a bit stressed, and that would then look after staff's mental health and wellbeing as well."

– Senior Manager, Early Learning, metro area.

As one educator described it, when there aren't enough staff available to respond to, "having to prioritise a [child's] safety need over [another child's] sadness is heartbreaking."

At the same time, a high demand for ECEC means services are experiencing long waitlists and feeling the pressure to increase the number of enrolments. New builds are increasingly designed to accommodate group sizes of up to 33 children, meaning educators and teachers are managing "a lot of different ages and a lot of different personalities" in one room.

"It's all very well for us to have increased group sizes and thinking you can manage that with three educators. But that is not quality. You've got three- and four-year-old integrated kindergarten spaces, and some of those three-year-olds are very, very young. Some of those four-year-olds are almost [developmentally] six-year-olds. It's a very broad spectrum of ages. ... We're putting [children] in these very large groups with very mixed and broad ages and we expect them to cope and just get on and have a great day at Kinder. It's hectic."

– Kindergarten Program Manager, regional Victoria.

Reducing ratios is not a simple or immediate solution. The workforce is already stretched, and not-for-profit providers would face significant additional staffing costs that they cannot absorb. Kindergartens, especially, would need increased financial support, as the introduction of Free Kinder reduces not-for-profits' capacity to absorb additional staffing costs through parent fees.

To accommodate the differing levels of needs and safely increase the number of enrolments, financial support for additional staffing could be provided to services in specific circumstances. For example, services could be funded for an additional staff member when they:

- maximise enrolments and have group sizes of 33 children, so that the number of educators increases from a minimum of 3 to 4.
- have over a set number of children with additional needs, to strengthen existing inclusion supports (alongside ongoing KIS support, as additional assistants do not count under ratios).

This would incentivise services to increase enrolments, while also ensuring ratios are more responsive to the differing ages, needs and circumstances of children in the room.

Any changes to ratios cannot be a standalone reform. They must sit alongside meaningful measures to grow and retain an appropriately skilled workforce; provide adequate funding for services to meet staffing needs; and support continuity of high-quality care for children and families.

"[Ratios] is such a complicated one, because you need more staff to create those ratios. And I'm not after bodies in the room. I'm after people who are qualified and know what they are doing."

– Teacher, Long Day Care, metro area.

Oversight of the Department of Education and the role it plays in monitoring and maintaining child safety.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

SIXTEEN Adequately resource the incoming Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority (VECRA) to:

- provide additional training and resourcing for Authorised Officers to ensure compliance is being evaluated consistently and objectively across the state.
- adopt a more strengths-based, partnership approach to the monitoring and enforcement of standards and regulations.

As Victoria's current regulatory authority for childhood services, the Quality Assessment and Regulation Division (QARD) – soon to be replaced by the independent Victorian Early Childhood Regulatory Authority (VECRA) in January 2026 – has played a key role in ensuring services across Victoria are meeting their obligations to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children.

Authorised Officers (AOs) for QARD are responsible for conducting quality assessment and rating visits to services. During these visits, we've found that AOs often interpret the standards differently, creating inconsistencies in both what they examine and the assessment outcomes that follow. When feedback lacks specificity, it can also be difficult to know exactly what needs to be improved.

Additional assistants in KIS – who see a wide range of services from different providers across the state – have similarly described the consistency of assessment ratings as "swings and roundabouts," and not always an accurate and objective reflection of a service's day-to-day practice.

AOs currently do not visit often enough to accurately evaluate services or get sufficient information about key aspects of a service, such as relationships with families. Visiting once every three years, and giving services approximately a month's warning before an assessment, also means services have the opportunity to misrepresent what actually happens in the services, such as:

- Moving or sharing equipment between services that children typically do not have access to.
- Hiring additional agency staff to temporarily increase the number of staff in a service.

Within our own services, we have found that this month's warning often creates a period of stress for staff.

"You get a month's notice and everyone in the service goes into panic for a month. Everybody takes their eye off the ball of doing what they should be doing with children, because they're so busy worrying about whether they'll pass the assessment and rating. It puts teachers under so much stress. In that month, they don't sleep. At night, they don't cope at all. They're taking mountains of work home."

– KIS Program Manager, metro area.

As more information becomes available about quality and assessment ratings, it's important that this is reliable, accurate and trustworthy for families who might be using these to find high-quality care for their children.

"Obviously it's nice to go online and see the score and that they're meeting certain requirements. That's always reassuring to go, 'OK, so they're doing the things they're supposed to be doing. Some external party has come in and agreed that they are doing those things.' And yeah, it's definitely nice to hear from other people that have their kids there or did have their kids there. But I think just going to the centre like getting a walkthrough and seeing the rooms and seeing that the kids are enjoying it and being able to talk to a couple of different educators there... you kind of can feel the energy of the place."

– Aymee, parent with a child in a regional Uniting early learning service.

A complete rethink of the current assessment and ratings process is needed. The Regulatory Authority and approved providers are all working towards the same goal – ensuring safe, high-quality for all children in ECEC services. Despite this, the current approach is often more punitive in nature and tends to create fear rather than meaningful improvement.

A more relational, strengths-based and collaborative regulatory model would support consistent outcomes across services. Such a model would need to:

- provide additional training and resourcing for AOs to ensure compliance is being evaluated consistently and objectively across the state.
- balance strictly enforcing regulations against taking a partnership approach with providers.
- support more regular visits to services, such as having a local representative that visits every 3 months.
- increase the amount of announced spot checks.
- encourage ongoing contact and AOs being more accessible to services, to increase educators' comfort with reporting any concerning practices to them.

These changes require the Victorian Government to adequately resource and fund the incoming VERCA.

Impacts of Privatisation on Universal Access to High-Quality Care

The impacts of Victoria’s predominantly privatised ECEC system, including a comparison with public, not-for-profit and cooperative models in terms of accessibility, affordability, safety and outcomes.

An over-reliance on for-profit models introduces inherent structural risks for child safety, wellbeing and developmental outcomes.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

TWENTY-THREE Advocate to the Federal Government for more equitable funding models in the ECEC sector.

TWENTY-FOUR Advocate to the Federal Government for stronger safeguards to ensure public investment in ECEC delivers improved quality and safety outcomes, not commercial returns.

"The moment that a profit can be made out of a service that's being offered to vulnerable people in our community... the priorities really change and that can be really problematic."
– KIS Program Manager.

The rapid expansion of early learning services in Victoria has largely been driven by the private sector. Since 2015, the number of long day care services has increased from 1,280 to 2,049 – with almost 90% of the new services being for-profit providers⁷.

Government policies and rising demand for childcare have positioned ECEC as an attractive, stable investment opportunity. Research by the Front Project explored how policy settings shape the long day care market in Australia, and found that for-profit providers are heavily concentrated in areas where services are most profitable. In major cities, they account for around 75% of long day care services, compared to only 15% in remote and very remote areas⁸.

While there is a known need for more ECEC services across Victoria, we are concerned that an over-reliance on for-profit models is permitting some organisations to treat children’s education and care as a “money-making exercise.” This can be reflected in hiring practices (for example, job descriptions that focus on meeting KPIs and cost-cutting, rather than providing quality education and care), inadequate staffing to reduce labour costs, and unsafe practices within centres.

The potential impacts on how services operate, the conditions staff work under and, ultimately, the quality of children’s experiences are well-documented, with:

⁷ Weatherill et al., 2025

⁸ The Front Project & Mandala. (2024). Paving the Path: Addressing market imbalances to achieve quality and affordable childcare in more places. Retrieved from: <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/research/Paving%20the%20path%20-%20final%20report%20TFP.pdf>

- Victoria's *Rapid Child Safety Review* finding that for-profit long day care services are more likely to be rated "Working Towards" the National Quality Standards (NQS) than not-for-profit long day care services, and less likely to be rated "Exceeding" the NQS (particularly in Quality Area 2: Safety and Health)⁹.
- A 2025 report by the Front Project finding that for-profit providers have a lower proportion of Excellent or Exceeding services in regional and remote areas, with only 11% of for-profit services in SEIFA 1 non-metro areas being 'Exceeding' or 'Excellent' services (compared to 28% of not-for-profit, and 36% of local government)¹⁰.
- A 2023 report by The Front Project finding that, across Australia, not-for-profit providers tend to pay above award rates, have higher educator-to-child ratios, and retain their staff for longer¹¹.

A service designed for children looks very different from one designed for profit. At Uniting, we reinvest every dollar back into providing quality, safe, inclusive and affordable services for families. The outcomes of this are clear across two years of surveying parents with a child in our early learning services, where we've consistently received overwhelmingly positive feedback. Our most recent survey was conducted during Term 3 2025, with responses from 662 families finding that:

- 92% of families agreed or strongly agreed that educators know their child well.
- 92% agreed or strongly agreed they and their child had developed a positive relationship with educators.
- 87% agreed or strongly agreed that their overall level of satisfaction with the service is very high.
- 92.9% agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend Uniting Early Learning to their family and friends.

Aymee also described the valuable impacts that early learning can have when educators are engaged and committed to children's wellbeing, care and education:

"My daughter's only fourteen months. So, a very significant, I would imagine, period of growth and time for her to be with other people. And I feel like she loves going. She gets there and she's happy to be there and she plays with the toys and she loves the educators and the relationships that she's made with them already, just being there about six or seven months is beautiful to see. And she doesn't have any other siblings. So I really enjoy that she's playing games with other kids.

So even though she's quite little, it's nice to see her like enjoying her time there. I appreciate all the setup that goes into creating that kind of space for her. ...

And there's social aspects, like her having the ability to interact with other kids, different ages, different genders, different families. She's got no siblings or little cousins or anything at home, so just having that space to be able to interact with others her own age or a little bit older, a little bit younger and just have different interactions. Her language has grown immensely just from babbling with her friends at daycare."

At the same time, the rapid expansion of private early learning services in Victoria is not reaching the communities who need it most. Across Australia, for-profit long day care services tend to be concentrated in advantaged and metropolitan areas, with there being:

⁹ Weatherill et al., 2025

¹⁰ The Front Project. (2025). *The Hidden Lever: How pay and conditions support child outcomes in low SES early childhood education and care services in regional and remote Australia*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/2025/Hidden%20Lever%20Regional%20Remote.pdf>

¹¹ The Front Project & Mandala, 2024.

- an average of 33.5 long day care places per 100 children in areas with high socioeconomic status (SES), compared to only 19.7 in low SES areas.
- an average of 34.2 long day care places per 100 children in major cities, compared to 22.9 in inner and outer regional areas¹².

The Australian Competition & Consumer Commission's (ACCC) *Childcare Inquiry* also identified that where a provider opens a service is highly influenced by how profitable or viable an area is expected to be. Household incomes were a key consideration in providers' assessments¹³. Despite the overall amount of ECEC services increasing, this does not necessarily mean providers are reaching the families who are most in-need of childcare.

There is a well-known shortage of early learning services in regional and rural communities. For families living in these areas, this can lead to long waitlists and limited choices in care. As described by Aymee, a mother living in regional Victoria:

"You almost don't get a choice. It's very much like, you know, [my daughter] was on a wait list before she was born, and it was crossing our fingers that she would get a place anywhere. So there wasn't really much choice in any particular centre. And that's just where we live, if we were in Melbourne or somewhere else that might have been a bit different. But unfortunately where we live, it's just ourselves. You have to hope you get into something. [...] It's a bit tough, but we were very, very fortunate to get a place and to have her somewhere that she loves going. ..."

I'm not sure how you necessarily fix that ... But the waitlist and the amount of staff is definitely the biggest barrier for anyone out here to get childcare."

Access to high quality early learning supports mothers re-entering the workforce and significantly improves lifelong outcomes for all children – particularly for those experiencing disadvantage, who are less likely to have access to high quality ECEC¹⁴ yet show the greatest gains from attending high-quality childcare, providing benefits such as reducing effects of social disadvantage, improving social competency and adequately preparing children for a successful transition to school¹⁵.

Current policy settings can create financial incentives for providers without a strong commitment to children's wellbeing, safety and care to enter the sector. Funding models, in particular, can provide financial gains to for-profit providers while deepening inequities for not-for-profit providers.

For example, the Federal Government's Worker Retention Payment is available to all services receiving the Child Care Subsidy – regardless of whether they are a for-profit or a not-for-profit provider. For-profit providers are able to draw on shareholder returns to absorb the costs of providing competitive wages. In comparison, not-for-profit providers like Uniting already reinvest every dollar into operational costs and service delivery.

This limits our ability to offer competitive pay in an already limited workforce, making it more difficult to attract and retain staff and ultimately keep our services open for the children and families who rely on us.

¹² The Front Project & Mandala, 2024.

¹³ Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. (2023). *Childcare Inquiry: Final report*. Retrieved from: https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/childcare-inquiry-final%20report-december-2023_0.pdf

¹⁴ The Front Project. (2021). *The case for high-quality early learning for all children*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/the-case-for-high-quality-early-learnin-for-all-children.pdf>

¹⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2015). *Literature review of the impact of early childhood education and care on learning development*. Canberra: AIHW. Retrieved from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/321201fc-ca0c-4c20-9582-7c3dc5c9d1b9/19438.pdf?v=20230605171207&inline=true>

"It's human nature that you're gonna go where the big bucks are. So again, some of the for-profit services have that ability to offer more than what not-for-profits can. It's a huge issue."
- Business Support Manager, Early Learning.

Given the large proportion of for-profit long day care services in Victoria, the Workforce Retention Payment would have been less costly to the Federal Government if it had not been offered to for-profits, or if the payment amount varied by provider type. Instead, this approach risks directing public funding into profit rather than strengthening the sector.

Reforms Need to be Carefully Considered, Practical and Thoughtfully Implemented.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

TWENTY-FIVE Design reforms in partnership with the ECEC workforce, so new requirements are practical, clearly communicated, and minimise administrative load.

Whenever crises occur in the ECEC sector, new reforms are often implemented as reactive 'Band-Aid' measures. Such reforms often add layers of complexity for services, increase the amount of compliance for staff without meaningfully improving quality or care, or provide short-term fixes to challenges that require proper planning and long-term solutions.

Staff in early learning services are already doing a large amount of documentation through different types of risk assessments, daily checklists and proper planning. Reforms that introduce more administrative requirements risks detracting educators and teachers from the primary purpose of their roles – delivering quality care and education to children.

These reforms can also often increase the amount of compliance that on-the-ground staff are having to complete, which ultimately detracts from the actual purpose of their roles and the quality of care that they're delivering to children.

"The amount of documentation required with risk assessments, with programme and planning... it's a lot of reasons why people are leaving the industry. ... We understand why and we completely support children being in safe environments. But there's got to be a cap because every time something happens, there becomes another thing they have to do. It just becomes far more about paperwork than it does about being on the floor with the children." – Early Learning Program Manager, KIS.

New procedures also need to be aligned with and practical to implement with broader reforms. For example, much-needed changes around e-safety have recently been introduced. At the same time, the Department of Education designed a new portal for teachers to apply for additional assistants. To be able to access the portal, teachers are sent an authentication code to their personal phone – which has been banned from services. For not-for-profit services, particularly, supplying work phones to all staff would be a significant expense.

Another example is additional assistants who work across multiple early learning centres. Some need to be easily contactable during the day – for instance, if their child has a disability and their school may need to reach them. When these staff move between centres, the ban on personal devices means schools don't always have a reliable way of getting in touch.

Uniting recommends the Victorian Government

TWENTY Implement Best Start, Best Life with stronger workforce planning and in partnership with local communities, to minimise unintended consequences.

"A classic example is our kindergartens are meant to be rolling out reforms and heading to 30 hours of Kinder. The Department of Education and the government sat back and went, 'Oh, we don't have the kindergarten places to be able to do this, nor do we have the actual trained

teachers to be able to roll this out.”

– Business Support Manager, Early Learning.

In Victoria, the Best Start, Best Life reforms are intended to give all Victorian children the best start in life – including building 50 new government-owned early learning and childcare centres in areas where they’re needed most.

Uniting strongly supports the rollout of these reforms and are committed to every child being able to access safe, high-quality education and care, no matter their circumstances or postcode. Alongside the expansion of centres, there is an urgent need to ensure that areas also have the appropriate workforce to support these reforms.

Without proper workforce planning, the introduction of more centres does not necessarily increase the accessibility and availability of ECEC in regional and rural communities. New centres are more likely to draw from an already limited pool of appropriately skilled and qualified educators, impacting on existing services in the area.

CASE STUDY: HORSHAM UNITING EARLY LEARNING

Horsham Uniting Early Learning has been running for over a decade. In that time, it has faced significant staffing challenges.

It is widely accepted the town needs more early learning places. However, when additional services opened, it put more pressure on an already limited pool of workers, with some Uniting employees taking up new positions elsewhere.

As a result, the centre has had to cap childcare places at 291 bookings per week, out of a possible 430 bookings. Since the beginning of 2025, there have been 19 room closures and regular reductions in the number of children able to be cared for, which has resulted in staff having to call parents and ask them to keep children home to maintain required staff-to-child ratios.

“If staff call in sick, we often have no choice but to call families as they are walking out the door, and sometimes when they arrive at the service, to say they cannot leave their child,” says Uniting Wimmera Early Learning Program Director, Kate Farlow.

While Uniting has been promoting training opportunities to increase the workforce in the area, those undertaking qualifications are still years away from employment status. The lack of childcare in the area also acts as a double-edged sword, with many interested in becoming childcare workers unable to find the care for their own children, making it difficult to study.

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