# Quality and Safety of Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care System

## 2 October 2025


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**Submitted to:** **Education and Employment References Committee**

## Part 1. The IEUA

The IEUA is a federally registered union representing our state and territory branches who, in turn, represent university educated teachers and educators employed in early childhood education (ECE) services. Our members work in kindergartens, preschools, long day care centres and early intervention services. More broadly, we represent staff in faith-based schools, community colleges and post-secondary services in the non-government sector. We are the only union with coverage of principals, educational leaders, teachers, school support staff and early childhood teachers and educators.

Our union has won improvements in pay and conditions for ECE teachers and educators and negotiated hundreds of stand-alone collective agreements in the ECE sector. The IEUA has approximately 75,000 members and seven decades of experience in representing members.

This submission is informed by the experiences of our membership in ECE settings and responds to the inquiry terms of reference where relevant to the priorities of our membership and the wider early childhood education workforce.

Identifying and implementing policy, regulatory and industrial solutions to urgently and genuinely ensure child safety in ECE settings will depend upon governments and employers conducting ongoing and comprehensive consultation with education and ECE workforces and unions.

The federal office thanks the IEU NSW branch and its members for their extensive contributions to this submission.

Our union wishes the Education and Employment References Committee well in their development of the report and recommendations to government.

**IEU Member Feedback:**

*"The link between a strong and stable workforce and child safety is so clear in everything. You can't have a safe environment for children if you are having this high turnover, high casualisation, inexperienced leadership. [...] it's everywhere in the sector. It's no surprise to me why there are safety issues."*

**ECE Centre Director**
**Regional NSW Preschool**

**IEU Member Feedback:**

*"The quality of teachers and the pre-service teachers that come to our services for placements, and the drop in the quality we are seeing, is really questionable. It all comes down to what they are being taught. It used to be face-to-face 4 years of training and now it's being fast-tracked, and it has really affected the safety and wellbeing that we are providing for children."*

**ECE Centre Director**
**Metropolitan NSW Preschool**

**IEU Member Feedback:**

*"The data clearly shows that community-based preschools are a model for quality early childhood education. That quality is a result of a framework that matches schools and a framework that prioritises education run by qualified early childhood teachers. We know that low wages and lack of qualified staff impact on quality. We know high staff turnover in LDC impacts on quality as children experience a revolving door of teachers and educators which places staff and services in survival mode. (We need to) ...ensure regulations which give children access to qualified early childhood teachers 100% of the time ...to improve quality and safety."*

**ECE Centre Director**
**Regional NSW Preschool**

## Part 2. Recommendations

### Pay and Conditions

1. Pay and conditions for teachers and educators in the ECEC sector should be comparable with pay and conditions that are applicable to equivalent positions in primary schools. The safety and quality of ECEC depends upon attraction and retention of an experienced and qualified workforce and that requires pay and conditions parity with primary schools.

2. Governments should provide funding for preschools / kindergartens on condition that they are covered by enterprise agreements ensuring teachers and educators receive fair remuneration and working conditions.

3. To ensure that the ECEC workforce are paid appropriately, industrial instruments should be strictly enforced. This means employers should face serious penalties for non-compliance with the relevant awards and enterprise agreements; particularly underpayments and failure to pay superannuation. No service should be rated as "Meeting the NQS" if they engage in unlawful exploitation of employees.

4. Ensure sustainable workloads for the ECEC workforce through the introduction of mandatory Workload Impact Assessments (similar to the Teacher Workload Impact Assessment contained in the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan) and a review of excessive documentation.

### Work Health and Safety

5. The safety and wellbeing of the workforce need to be prioritised and delivered by holding all employers to account if they fail to provide a safe workplace. The safety of children in ECEC is dependent upon the safety and stability of the workforce.

6. Training and clear advice and support must be provided by the regulatory authorities to prevent employees from experiencing violence in the workplace (including violence by young children).

### Children's health requires relationships to take precedence over documentation

7. Healthy developmental and educational outcomes for children must be better supported by workload changes that will allow staff to spend more time focusing on the safety and learning needs of children. Workload changes required include less time required for data collection and documentation. Excessive documentation does not improve child safety, worker safety, or service quality and hinders teachers' and educators' capacity to keep children safe and to meet children's and families' needs.

8. Staff-child ratios need to be improved to ensure these provide for responsive and developmentally appropriate support for the increasing cohort of children with additional needs enrolled in services.

9. Funding to support children with additional needs must be increased to reflect the full cost of providing 1:1 support for the duration of the child's attendance.

**Improving Centre Accreditation**

10. The accreditation and rating (A&R) process needs to be changed to a strength-based process that inspires services to improve the quality of their practice. Currently the A&R process is instead causing stress and burnout that causes the ECEC workforce, and teachers in particular, to leave the sector.

11. Develop a culture that fosters trust in Directors and Teachers. They should be valued, respected and recognised as educational experts and professionals.

12. Improve clarity regarding what is expected in A&R and increase consistency and transparency regarding ratings and reports.

13. A&R deadlines should be flexible and responsive to competing priorities at different times of the year, including periods of higher workload intensification such as settling in new children at the start of the year and the completion of Transition to School Statements late in the year.

14. Duplication should be removed, including removing the requirement for services to upload additional evidence to refute draft reports/ ratings, despite such evidence being provided or available during A&R visits yet not requested.

15. All Authorised Officers should have a specialist degree in ECEC and a minimum of 2 years' experience working in the sector.

**Reviewing Higher Levels of Centre Accreditation**

16. IEU members support a review of the Exceeding and Excellent ratings, with services instead assessed against a single high standard of meeting or not meeting the NQS. This would replicate the registration system in schools, and significantly reduce stress and burnout, as services would not consider they were in competition with one other. Pressure from employers for directors to achieve a higher-level rating would also be alleviated.

17. Under the current arrangements, the Exceeding themes (practice is embedded in service operations; practice is informed by critical reflection; and practice is shaped by meaningful engagement) could be determined by observing practices in the service. The Union considers the expectation that services document how these three themes are embedded in relation to the entirety of each quality standard (each of which is comprised of multiple quality descriptors) is both duplicative and excessive and takes valuable time and resources away from the supervision of, and interaction with, children.

18. The resources and time devoted to achieving and conferring Exceeding or Excellent ratings, both at the service and regulatory authority level, would be better devoted to improving centre practices, which would positively impact the day-to-day experiences, learning and development, and safety of children in ECEC.

**Improving the Safety and Wellbeing of Children**

19. Serious consideration should be given to the allocation of expertise and resourcing by regulatory authorities. The A&R process evaluating the Exceeding and Excellent levels should be paused for at least 12 months to enable the regulatory authorities to focus on addressing regulatory breaches that endanger the safety and wellbeing of children.

20. The regulatory authority should provide ongoing support and professional development to build capacity in services that were previously identified as not meeting the National Quality Standards (NQS).

21. Government and regulatory authorities should provide free training (short and accessible online) covering regulatory obligations (including reporting obligations) for voluntary Management Committee members.

22. All employees that work directly with children should be required to undertake child protection training, provided free of charge and during paid time.

23. Approved Providers must be required to ensure that the service has policies and procedures in place relating to providing a child safe environment. The policy should include a clear procedure in place for employees in cases where suspected abuse occurs at the centre, including where it appears the policy is not being followed. If, for example, the employee reports a child protection matter to the Nominated Supervisor and/ or Approved Provider they must be aware of avenues to escalate a matter if their employer does not take appropriate action.

**Reviewing and changing regulatory systems**

24. Government should conduct an urgent review of the A&R system to evaluate whether Australia's NQS rating and regulatory systems are generating non-core work that takes educators' focus away from children's education and safety.

25. Increase resourcing to the regulatory authorities to enable more frequent and full assessments of service quality including unannounced spot checks.

**Stop funding and incentivising large for-profit and corporate chain childcare**

26. Make large for-profit ECEC centres ineligible for government funding in the same way that for-profit schools are ineligible for government funding. Large for-profit centres continue to average substantially lower quality standards and poorer employment practices than Not for Profit (NFP) providers, inevitably placing quality of care and child safety at risk.

27. Remove childcare subsidies and all incentives from the large for-profit providers with the longer-term objective of removing the profit motive from the inherently high risk child care and child education setting.

28. Australian governments must resume greater responsibility for ECEC as a public function and also support NFP and community-based ECEC providers rather than incentivising private business actors in a multi-million dollar industry.

**Model childcare on state government-owned and run primary schools**

29. Develop and implement major medium-long term reform converting large for-profit childcare centres into government-owned, with the longer term objective of arriving at the same model for large ECEC centres as state government-owned and run primary schools.

30. Co-locate ECEC centres with primary schools where possible and increasingly incorporate childcare into and modelled on the primary school system.

**Support expansion of Not for Profit and community-based ECEC services**

31. Deliver major increases in government funding and supports for NFPs and community-based ECEC services. Government funding, policy, legislation and regulation must maximise quality of care and child safety by maximising NFP and community-based ECEC service expansion as provider types that consistently deliver safe, quality ECEC.

## Part 3. Introductory comments on ECEC and child safety

National and international studies have established the paramount importance of safe and high quality ECEC for children's health including its role in developing children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills to transition well into school and to live healthy and productive lives.[1] Government investment in the formative first five years is crucial for shaping long-term health and academic outcomes than subsequent education and reduces the need for costly intervention programs later in life.[2]

Annual investment for Universal ECEC generates double the invested amount in flow-on economic benefits.[3] Price Waterhouse Coopers comprehensive 2019 cost-benefit analysis of ECEC in Australia found a benefit-cost ratio wherein for every one dollar invested in ECEC two dollars is generated through increased tax revenues, wages and productivity, and reduced welfare and criminal justice spending.[4]

A well-resourced ECEC system can also significantly reduce intergenerational social injustices because it provides the most beneficial outcomes for children from First Nations, remote, and lower socio-economic and educational attainment backgrounds.[5] Children who start or fall behind at school typically cannot catch up and may be disadvantaged socially and economically for the rest of their lives.[6]

Despite Australia's duty to act in the best interests of the child, having ratified the International Convention on Rights of the Child in 1990, and the cost-effective benefits of ECE, the sector is increasingly unable to function.

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[1] Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission's (HREOC) Report Emerging Themes: National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education, 2000: https://www.oecd.org/australia/1900259.pdf.

[2] Centre for Future Work at the Australia Institute, An Investment in Productivity and Inclusion: The Economic and Social Benefits of the TAFE System: https://futurework.org.au/report/an-investment-in-productivity-and-inclusion; Human Rights Commission (HRC), Rural and Remote Education Inquiry Briefing Paper School Education for Students with Special Needs, https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/rural-and-remote-education-inquiry-briefing-paper-11.

[3] Price Waterhouse Cooper, The Front Project: A Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia: Economic Analysis of Universal Early Childhood Education in the Year Before School in Australia, 2019: https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO%20ANALYSIS%20Full%20Report.pdf.

[4] Price Waterhouse Cooper, The Front Project, 2019: https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECO%20ANALYSIS%20Full%20Report.pdf

[5] Institute of Early Childhood Division of Early Childhood and Education, Macquarie University, OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy: Australian Background: https://www.oecd.org/australia/1900259.pdf

[6] Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), Learning outcomes of students with early low NAPLAN performance, https://www.edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/aero-aip-2-learning-outcomes-early-low-naplan-performance-aa.pdf.

## Part 4. Inquiry into the quality and safety of children in childcare services

*The link between a strong and stable workforce and child safety is so clear in everything. You can't have a safe environment for children if you are having this high turnover, high casualisation, inexperienced leadership. [...] it's everywhere in the sector. It's no surprise to me why there are safety issues. (Director, Regional NSW Preschool)*

### 1. The health and safety of children in childcare services across the country

The biggest systemic danger posed to children's safety and health in ECEC is the broken for-profit model dominated by large commercial operators using irresponsible employment practices and cutting safety corners to maximise shareholder dividends and CEO salaries and bonuses.

Nearly 50,000 children are registered in for-profit long daycare centres that do not meet the national quality standards according to ACECQA data.[7] Sexual abuse, neglect and avoidable safety incidents are increasingly being exposed in media, such as the March 2025 ABC Four Corners investigation into ECEC, and must be treated as a catalyst for major, urgent, and long term reforms.[8]

The IEU supports the upholding of the highest standards of safety, health, and wellbeing for all children in ECEC services. However, these standards must not be regulated and implemented in such a way as to undermine the rights of teachers and other employees or to deny them their right to procedural fairness. Protecting children and respecting the professional rights of teachers are both essential and inter-dependent factors in maintaining a safe and just ECEC environment.

Existing legislation and regulation emphasise the need to maintain the safety, health and wellbeing of children in ECEC services. However, effective implementation is critical to achieve this outcome. The IEU's experience representing members in ECE services has shown that investigations led by regulatory authorities can at times be overly zealous or aggressive, undermining trust in the process and causing dire impacts on teachers' career prospects. Investigative processes must ensure that teachers are treated with dignity, presumption of innocence, and the right to a fair and timely process. There need to ensure fair, proportionate, and respectful investigations to satisfy the need for both child safety and employee/employer confidence in the system.

To maintain the integrity of safety checks and A&R visits, it is essential that Authorised Officers are appropriately trained and experienced to ensure they have a solid understanding of working in ECEC environments. The IEU urges the use of Authorised Officers with ECEC-specific knowledge to ensure a fair and informed assessment of allegations of breaches of relevant legislative obligations relating to child safety.

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[7] ACECQA; NQF Snapshot Q4 2024: https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-02/NQF%20Snapshot%20Q4%202024%20FINAL.pdf.

[8] ABC, Betrayal of Trust: Australia's Childcare Crisis: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-17/betrayal-of-trust/105063150.

The IEU notes that allegations relating to child safety against teachers—even when unfounded—can have devastating impacts on the reputation, employment and career of ECEC teachers. The IEU calls for robust support mechanisms for teachers under investigation, including clear notification of the actual allegations and access to union support, with equal weight being given to written responses to allegations. Protecting children's wellbeing requires a parallel commitment to the wellbeing of the employees entrusted with their care.

Lastly, to make urgently-needed progress towards ensuring the health and safety of children across the country, ECEC services, teachers and other staff must be adequately remunerated, trained, and resourced to deliver the safest and best possible learning experiences. Investment in both teacher development including child protection training for all employees and adequate pay and conditions of employment will translate to better service quality that goes further towards ensuring that all children can reach their full potential, both academically and socially. Currently, for example, the National Regulations only require one employee on the premises at all times to have child protection training. Research shows that high-quality ECEC programs are crucial for fostering positive educational and developmental outcomes for young children.

**2. The effectiveness of Australia's childcare regulatory system, including the performance and resourcing of state / territory regulators and ACECQA, in maintaining and improving quality**

The ECEC sector and Australia's childcare regulatory system face complex challenges and urgent repairs, reforms and long-term support and vision are needed. More teachers and educators are leaving the sector at unprecedented rates due to factors such as burnout and dissatisfaction.

One major factor driving high staff turnover is the excessive workload caused by the volumes of often duplicative documentation that must be completed. Teachers constantly report that the amount of paperwork they are required to complete limits their interaction time with the children.

A 2025 Australian national survey found, for example, that ECEC teachers and educators spend less than a third of their working hours on their core work, that is, working directly with children, work which is necessary for child safety and development.[9] An urgent review of the A&R system is needed to evaluate its detrimental effects on dedicated contact time for early childhood teachers. The data and wider research indicate that Australia's NQS rating and regulatory systems are generating non-core work that reduce educators' time for quality interactions with children, consistent with what our members report.[10]

[9] Harper et al, Workload demands, unpaid hours, and concerns about time with children: a survey of Australian early childhood educators, The Australian Educational Researcher: https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-025-00847.

[10] Bullough, R., Hall-Kenyon, K. M., & MacKay, K. (2014). Head start and the intensification of teaching in early childhood education. Teaching and Teacher Education, 37, 55–63. https:// doi. org/ 10. 1016/k. tate. 2013. 09. 006; Harper, E., McGrath-Champ, S., & Wilson, R. (2024). Perspectives on teachers' work in

Employees must ensure the Education and Care National Regulations are met at all times (there are hundreds of Regulations, but not all apply whilst the service is operational, some depend on service type and jurisdiction.)[11] Centres must develop an extensive suite of policies tailored to their service and context.

ACECQA provides a set of 23 guidelines for preschools and long day care services to assist in the development and review of policies. Services are required to ensure their policies are current, reflect their individual context and cover any relevant state or territory specific requirements when drafting their policies and procedures.[12]

Regulation 170 of the National Regulations requires reasonable steps to be taken to ensure staff follow policies and procedures. The steps taken depend upon individual policies and procedures. ACECQA provides guidance in the form of 'Six reasonable steps to ensure staff follow policies and procedures'. The resource provides guidance for providers and services to consider when developing strategies to meet regulation 170.[13]

Services in NSW, for example, are required to implement the Child Safe Standards, including engaging with the 54-page guide produced by the Office of the Children's Guardian, to reflect on current practice and implement the 10 Standards.[14]
There are 7 Quality Areas containing a total of 40 quality indicators. The Guide to the National Quality Framework is 686 pages.[15] Services must also develop a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) using either their own format or one of the ACECQA templates. The 81-page Self-Assessment Tool (SAT) is used by services to prepare for their Assessment and Ratings visit and may serve a dual purpose as the QIP. [16]

One member reported that to achieve 'Exceeding' in all 40 quality indicators, she provided five pieces of documentation for each indicator multiplied by 3 to demonstrate how each of the three Exceeding Themes is embedded in their practice for each of the 40 indicators. Completing such extensive documentation is not supported by working conditions and it appears that employees are expected to meet these expectations in their own time without remuneration. The Educational Services (Teachers) Award contains only 2 hours of non-contact time per week for teachers employed in long day care service (no non-contact time for teachers employed in preschools) and 2 hours of non-contact time for Educational Leaders (no non-contact time for Directors).

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Australian early childhood education and care settings: Evidence and ecology. Early Childhood Education Journal. https:// doi. org/ 10. 1007/ s10643- 024- 01745-2.

[11] Education and Care National Regulations: https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/sl-2011-0653.

[12] ACECQA Preparing NQF Policies and Procedures: https://www.acecqa.gov.au/resources/opening-a-new-service/preparing-nqf-policies-and-procedures.

[13] ACECQA Six reasonable steps to ensure staff follow policies and procedures: https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-11/13-Six-steps-staff-policies-procedures%20v3.pdf

[14] Office of the Children's Guardian: https://ocg.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-12/g_CSS_GuidetotheStandards.pdf.

[15] ACECQA Guide to the NQF: https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-01/Guide-to-the-NQF-250101.pdf.

[16] ACECQA Self-Assessment Tool: https://www.acecqa.gov.au/assessment/quality-improvement-plans#SAT

Each service must appoint an Educational Leader to oversee the implementation and evaluation of the educational program. The Educational Leader Resource is 155 pages in length.[17] Teachers and educators are required to document children's learning through formative and summative assessments. They are required to demonstrate the Planning Cycle, linking their observations of children's learning to the outcomes in the 70-page Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF).[18]

As part of the assessment process, teachers must also complete a 10-page Transition to School Statement (TTSS) for each child.[19]

Regulation in the sector is extremely complex with the:

- more than 400 individual National Regulations
- 7 NQS quality areas containing 40 individual quality elements
- Guide to the NQF of 686 pages
- Self-Assessment Tool of 81 pages
- Educational Leader Resource of 155 pages
- Early Years Learning Framework of 70 pages
- the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations of 20 pages

This documentation needs to be substantially reduced. Teachers and educators do not have time to read, reflect on, and implement over 1000 pages of information. With the extensive amount of documentation teachers and educators are expected to comprehend and complete, it is little wonder they report that they do not have adequate time for interacting with children, interaction that is so important for development and safety.

Impact on the Wellbeing and Morale of Directors, Teachers and Educators

Directors have indicated they and/ or their staff are intending to leave the sector due to their experiences with centre accreditation.

Directors feel that there is inadequate focus on the wellbeing of educators. There is inadequate consideration of their dedication, hours worked, outside hours study, time required to support families with complex needs, and children with challenging behaviours, and/ or additional needs, all while caring for their own families. Directors report that teachers and educators have lost faith in the A&R process, and their confidence and sense of purpose have been eroded due to the inconsistency and subjectivity of accreditation decisions.

[17] ACECQA Educational Leader Resource: https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-04/ACECQA_Educational_Leader_Manual_WEB.pdf.
[18] Early Years Learning Framework: https://www.acecqa.gov.au/belonging-being-becoming-early-years-learning-framework.
[19] NSW Department of Education: https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/early-childhood-education/working-in-early-childhood-education/media/documents/transition-to-school/Transition_to_school_digital_statement-form.pdf.

*"Our centre is very focused on the compliance and documentation at the moment that I feel does affect our focus and I feel that it does impact on the children. The amount of work required for this process takes our focus away from the children. I've never seen in my long career so much burn out and stress among educators as expectations on staff continue to increase with A&R." (Director, NSW Metropolitan Preschool)*

In 2024 the IEU approached ACECQA to clarify the documentation requirements necessary to comply with the A&R process as a known driver of work intensification. The result of that engagement was a collaboration between ACECQA and the union on a set of four fact sheets that provide specific advice to ECEC workers and providers in both school age care and early childhood. The Educational Program Documentation Information Sheets confirm the evidence requirements necessary to satisfy the A&R process, without producing excessive or duplicative documentation.

**3. The impact of childcare providers' employment practices on quality and safety**

Childcare providers' employment practices are among the largest factors determining the quality and safety of care. Quality and the safety of children is undermined by governments and employers failing to invest in the early childhood workforce.

National and comparative international studies including in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States demonstrate the causal relationship between poor child safety and quality of care in ECEC and poor employment practices. Workforce instability and widespread chronic burn-out lessen the quantity and quality of ECEC workers' attention to and interactions with children. These safety and quality issues are caused by poor employment practices including: unsustainable workloads; low wages; low job satisfaction and wellbeing; absence of professional development opportunities; and inadequate support for high needs children.[20]

A recent Australia-wide survey also shows the negative impacts on children's safety and quality of care in ECEC caused by poor employment practices that increase the unsustainability of workloads of workforce stability. This includes non-payment for non-contact hours that ECEC teachers spend on the compulsory documentation that lessens their time working directly with children, work necessary for child safety and development in ECEC.[21]

[20] Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL]. (2021). Australian teacher workforce data. National teacher workforce characteristics report. Retrieved from https:// www. aitsl. edu. au/ docs/ default lt- source/ atwd/ atwd- teach er- workforce- report- 2021. pdf? sfvrsn= 126ba 53c_2; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]. (2020a). Providing quality early childhood education and care: Results from the starting strong survey 2018. Retrieved from, https:// www. oecd- ilibrary. org/ sites/ 30100 5d1- en/1/ 2/4/ index. html? itemI d=/ conte nt/ publication/ 30100 5d1- en&_ csp_= d5ed6 0fb5c 4d257 bbb63 58fc7 741a5 21& itemI GO= oecd& itemC onten tType= book# secti on- d1e13 314.

[21] Harper et al, Workload demands, unpaid hours, and concerns about time with children: a survey of Australian early childhood educators, The Australian Educational Researcher: https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-025-00847.

Areas in which childcare providers' employment practices must change if there are to be the workforce-dependent improvements in care quality and child safety in ECEC include:

- contact and non-contact workloads that are unsustainable;
- unpaid work hours undertaken to cope with excessive documentation;
- ECEC's feminised workforce being among Australia's lowest paid;
- high staff turnover disrupting relationships between teachers, educators and children;
- inadequate access to professional development;
- insufficient support for children with high learning and support needs.

The IEU calls on the government to address the urgent need for improvements to the prevailing pay and conditions of employment for those working in the ECEC sectors. This is crucial to:

- ensure that the government investment in TAFE and university courses is effective because graduates progress to employment in the sector;
- reverse the trend of declining university enrolments in early childhood teacher education courses;
- retain qualified early childhood teacher graduates in the ECEC sector rather than losing them to schools or other employment;
- ensure high quality ECEC services can be delivered.

Attraction and retention crisis caused by inadequate pay and conditions

Reliable, high-quality ECEC depends upon attraction and retention of a stable, experienced and qualified workforce, benefiting children and the community. The attraction and retention crisis will only be resolved by substantial improvements in wages and conditions and appropriate valuing of the profession. The skilled ECEC workforce needed will not emerge or be maintained through university and VET fee support and pathway options alone. These measures must be combined with removing the large gap between pay and conditions in schools and in the ECEC sector.

Solving the attraction and retention crisis will require ECEC teachers and educators to be treated on par with their primary school counterparts including by achieving pay parity with rates of pay applying in schools and enhancing professionalisation. Substantial improvements in wages and conditions are required to provide the highly-feminised and ethnically diverse workforce with a standard of living adequate for their health, wellbeing and security.

The potential for ECEC workers to access fair bargaining opportunities was delivered by the Federal Government's *Secure Jobs, Better Pay Act* (2022). The IEU, United Workers Union and the Australian Education Union achieved 15% funded pay increases through the Long Day Care Multi-Employer Agreement (the MEA), a direct result of our joint multi-employer bargaining application.

However, the rate of pay for very experienced early childhood teachers in the MEA, whilst significantly higher than the applicable Modern Award rate, remains over $22,000 lower than the $125,763 paid to their colleagues in schools (as at the date of this submission). A graduate teacher is paid between $7,000 and $14,000 more in a school than in a centre covered by the MEA.

Preschool teachers and educators were excluded from accessing the Commonwealth funded pay increases, so the gap between preschool teachers and their primary colleagues in NSW covered by the Educational Services (Teachers) Award earning $93,289 is $32,474 for an experienced teacher. The IEU's position is that governments have a responsibility introduce funding to address the pay and conditions in ECE.

Unreasonable expectations on staff

In addition, some private providers expect teachers and educators to undertake duties that fall well outside their professional responsibility, such as cleaning the centre including cleaning toilets, mopping floors, vacuuming carpets/ rugs, wiping out children's lockers, cleaning windows etc. These duties should not fall on teachers and educators who are responsible for the delivery of educational outcomes for the children. Not only does it diminish the professional status of the teaching profession, but it takes staff away from their fundamental role of supervising, caring for and educating children, thereby jeopardising their safety.

Teachers and educators must be responsive to concerns and questions raised by parents. This can include discussions that take place upon drop off/ pick up or prearranged times regarding children's development, behaviour and significant events that affect children, including those that occur in the child's family life. Sometimes this includes navigating child custody arrangements, including who is authorised to collect children, days allocated to each parent and navigating relationships with parents whose approaches to parenting are not necessarily consistent. This information is essential to enable staff to protect vulnerable children.

Impact of inadequate support for children with additional needs

The enrolment of children with additional needs is increasing with members reporting 35-60% of children enrolled at their service have learning support needs. Extensive documentation is needed for each of these children including Individual Learning Plans and/ or Individual Behaviour Support Plans developed with input from families and specialists, funding applications, appropriate resources need to be accessed or made (such as visual schedules and social stories). Teachers are often asked to fill in checklists and other forms for specialists (psychologists, occupational therapists etc) and may need to undertake specialised training including medical procedures such as PEG tube feeding and the use of EpiPens, Makaton for non-verbal children.

Funding has not kept pace with the number of children presenting with diagnosed learning support needs, undiagnosed needs, or challenging and extreme behaviours.

These children need assistance to participate in the program, and in some cases, to prevent them causing harm to themselves, other children, teachers and educators.

Funding for a child with a diagnosis of high learning support needs (HLSN) covers a maximum of 4-5 hours for an Educator with a Certificate III qualification, yet a child with learning support needs may attend for 7.5 hour days in preschool or for 10-hour days in long day care. IEU members have reported that funding does not even cover the casual loading for the 4-5 hours for a Cert III staff member. As this funding is paid only when the child is in attendance, it is not possible for services to employ fixed term employees (who would be paid during school holidays), leaving constantly changing casuals, who are unfamiliar with the children and the daily routine, to plug the gaps.

A ratio of one adult to ten 3 to 5 year old children is not at all adequate when a significant proportion of those children have medical, developmental and/ or serious behavioural needs, particularly when so many children are unable to attract permanent funding due to a lack of a formal diagnosis and reluctance of parents to agree to their child being assessed by a specialist. Teachers and educators report ever increasing numbers of children with additional needs and challenging and even extreme behaviours – highly qualified teachers and educators would be most valuable additions to the room. Further, there are reports of casuals refusing to take HLSN shifts because they are too challenging. Teachers and educators have received injuries including being bitten, kicked, scratched and chunks of hair pulled out.

Members report feeling unsupported by their employer when they report physical assaults by children. Injuries caused by violent children are minimised and not taken seriously. We are aware that in some services, injuries caused by children are now the highest reason for injury reports, overtaking physical injuries, such as trips and falls.

The lack of support for children with learning needs, or who display extreme behaviours, is a potential risk to the health and safety of that child and other children, as well as to staff who struggle to care for children with inadequate support.

Impact of staff shortages

Due to high turnover and difficulty in attracting and retaining staff, members report either that they are the only staff member qualified at Diploma or Teacher level (the others are trainees) or they are the only permanent staff member. The lack of staff means teachers and educators are not able to access even the minimum non-contact time to complete the extensive documentation required by licensing conditions.

Some teachers and educators have advised the Union that they are unable to take their lunch break away from the children due to staffing shortages, or that staff employed with HLSN funding to support children with additional needs are being counted in ratios during break times. Others have reported that the lack of staff in their service has led to teachers / Nominated Supervisors not willing to risk taking annual leave when the other qualified employees are casuals, because they are held responsible for what occurs in the service even when they are not on the premises.

In some services, teachers and educators report that due to staff shortages they are frequently required to work additional hours/ are unable to leave at the end of their 8-hour shift because staff: child ratios must be maintained at all times. Long day care services hold staff meetings after the children have left for the day. These monthly meetings are often two hours in duration, held between 6-8 p.m. after they have already worked between 8 and 9.5 hours that day.

## 4. The role of private for-profit incentives and their impact on childcare quality and safety

*"The data clearly shows that community-based preschools are a model for quality early childhood education. That quality is a result of a framework that matches schools and a framework that prioritises education run by qualified early childhood teachers. We know that low wages and lack of qualified staff impact on quality. We know high staff turnover in LDC impacts on quality as children experience a revolving door of teachers and educators which places staff and services in survival mode. (We need to) ...ensure regulations which give children access to qualified early childhood teachers 100% of the time ...to improve quality and safety". (Director, NSW Regional Preschool)*

The increasing exposure of the subjection of children in Australia's ECEC centres to sexual abuse, criminal neglect and sometimes fatal safety incidents presents governments and employers with an imperative to deliver major urgent and long term sector reforms.[22] It is the large for-profit operators that urgent major reforms must be focused on. Priority safety reforms should include removing all incentives, subsidies and all government funding for the large for-profit providers.

For-profit providers make up 70 per cent of the childcare industry and represent 95 per cent of industry growth. Of Australia's 25 largest providers, 21 are for-profit. Large ECEC companies listed on the stock exchange are worth hundreds of millions of dollars, with sales nearing a billion dollars in 2024 and CEOs on multi-million dollar packages.

Corporate chain ECEC centres have been shown to offer the lowest quality of care in all aspects.[23] The highest quality is offered by not-for-profits and community-based centres and a similar quality of care is offered by independent private centres.[24] Breaches of employment practices by ECEC providers and their impact on child safety and service quality) occur at much higher rates in large for-profit centres where the priority is profit and poor employment practices are used to save money at the expense of child safety and care. The profit motive is dangerous in a childcare and education setting because as the research shows it hinders quality of care and the safety of children.

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[22] ABC, Betrayal of Trust: Australia's Childcare Crisis: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-03-17/betrayal-of-trust/105063150.
[23] Australia Institute, Childcare Quality in Australia: https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DP84_8.pdf.
[24] Australia Institute, Childcare Quality in Australia: https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DP84_8.pdf.

Profit incentives enable the continuing expansion of commercial providers that pose the most systemic danger to children's health and safety. These providers consistently average lower quality ratings than NFPs. ACECQA data shows that nearly 50,000 children are registered in for-profit centres that do not meet the national quality standards.[25] 11% of for-profit long daycare fails to meet national minimum quality standards whereas only 7% of NFPs are not meeting minimum standards. 28% of NFPs exceed national standards compared to only 13% of for-profit centres.[26]

The findings of the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) 2023 inquiry point to the profit motive as the reason for the lower safety standards in the big business for-profit centres.[27]

Large for-profit providers spend much less as a percentage of their budget on staffing than NFPs and community-based ECEC centres by:

- paying staff less; for-profits are more likely to pay award or ECWRP rates rather than higher enterprise agreement rates;
- employing fewer staff (including not meeting staff: child ratios in the National Regulations at times);
- hiring less qualified staff;
- employing a higher percentage of casual and part-time staff;[28]
- continuing to operate without the requisite number of qualified staff because regulators grant staffing waivers;[29]
- continuing to operate below standards for years because of an under-resourced regulator that responds to breaches by advising centres to apply for staffing waivers after giving prior notice of inspection.[30]

Members in profit centres report managers physically assaulting staff and throwing equipment at staff for requesting extra non-contact time to prepare documentation.

Qualified teacher directors have been replaced by Certificate III educators. It costs less to employ staff with fewer qualifications.

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[25]ACECQA; NQF Snapshot Q4 2024: https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2025-02/NQF%20Snapshot%20Q4%202024%20FINAL.pdf.

[26] ACECQA; NQF Snapshot Q4 2020; https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/NQFSnapshot_Q4_2020.pdf

[27] ACCC Childcare Inquiry 2023: https://www.accc.gov.au/inquiries-and-consultations/finalised-inquiries/childcare-inquiry-2023/december-2023-final-report.

[28] ACCC Childcare Inquiry 2023: https://www.accc.gov.au/inquiries-and-consultations/finalised-inquiries/childcare-inquiry-2023/december-2023-final-report. ACEQA; National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy: https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-04/WorkforceStrategy-ConsultationFlyer-2021.pdf; United Workers Union, *Exhausted, undervalued and leaving: the crisis in early education*: https://www.unitedworkers.org.au/report-shows-early-education-workforce-in-crisis/.

[29] Gabrielle Meagher and Marianne Fenech; Submission to the NSW Legislative Council Inquiry into the early childhood education and care sector in New South Wales: https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lcdocs/submissions/90644/0151%20Professor%20Emerita%20Gabrielle%20Meagher%20and%20Professor%20Marianne%20Fenech.pdf.

[30] https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childhood/report/childhood-volume2-supporting.pdf.

Teachers and educators report they have been reprimanded for not posting to Story Park (or other online programs) throughout the day to show parents what children are doing and respond to their questions, whilst employees should be supervising children. Parents may expect regular reporting in the course of a day without realising this may jeopardise the quality of education and care received by children. In all centres, but particularly for-profit centres, staff are under pressure to meet these demands.

Prevalence of breaches of employment conditions in for-profit centres

Some teachers working in for-profit centres report being underpaid and not receiving legislated superannuation payments. Contracts of employment issued by profit operators regularly breach the minimum standards in the Educational Services (Teachers) Award including termination notice, payment of overtime for work beyond 38 in a week, payment for staff meetings and attendance at mandatory training.

In 2020 it was revealed that G8 underpaid up to 27,000 teachers and educators $80,000,000[31].

Teachers on 457 VISAs report being directed to work on weekends to prepare for A&R visits, whilst being prevented from signing into the premises, which restricts access to Workers Compensation if an injury occurs, because the employer does not want to pay overtime for working on weekends. These teachers fear losing their ability to remain in Australia, compounding their reluctance to raise issues about their employer.

Employees have been directed to accrue time in lieu instead of being paid overtime for work outside normal hours (including attendance at meetings or remaining on premises if a parent is late to collect a child) for as long as four years, despite the awards clearly stating that time in lieu must be paid out at overtime rates if it is not taken within six months of accrual. Records for significant accrual of time in lieu have been "lost" by employers, leading to teachers and educators not being paid for overtime worked.

The federal government must stop incentivising large for-profit services. Childcare subsidies, for example, did not prevent for-profit providers increasing their fees and instead led to a pattern of higher out-of-pocket expenses for families.[32]

Threats of government funding cuts to improve safety standards through penalising bad providers combined with improvements to transparency that will expose criminal behaviour may have unintended consequences. Families with children attending services that are closed suddenly may not be able to find alternative care for their children, preventing them from being able to work. Because for-profit providers form 70 per cent of the industry, reforms must take place over the longer term in consultation with the sector, while being progressed in a timely manner.

[31] https://www.accr.org.au/news/g8-wage-theft-a-failure-of-governance-what-else-is-failing-in-this-childcare-system/

[32] ACCC Childcare Inquiry 2023: https://www.accc.gov.au/inquiries-and-consultations/finalised-inquiries/childcare-inquiry-2023/december-2023-final-report.

Reforms should include removing the profit motive from ECEC in the context of making larger for-profit centres ineligible for government funding in the same way that for-profit schools are ineligible for government funding.

Private schools in Australia that receive government funding are non-profit and present their mission as providing the best education for students. Australia should begin to move to a system where early learning providers are also non-profit and focused on the safety and development of children in their care instead of maximising shareholder dividends and share buybacks to prop up the share price.

Reforms should include corporate-chain childcare centres being converted to government-owned to arrive at the same model as state government-owned and run primary schools.[33] Centres could where possible be co-located with primary schools for convenience and to increasingly incorporate early learning into the school system.

The resulting professionalisation of the ECEC workforce would offer a pathway to solve workforce turnover and in turn enhance child safety and quality of care issues by substantially improving pay and conditions and providing relatively secure, well-paid employment, career development and a stable workforce.

**5. Transparency within the early childhood education and care system, including access to information and data;**

The IEU supports the collection, evaluation and publication of reliable data on ECEC services which are used to improve quality and delivery of services. We assert that data must be used responsibly, ensuring protection of rights, and must not be unfairly used against services or individual ECEC teachers and educators. In respect of current investigations, the union would be concerned that publicity in relation to unproven allegations against a named employee would be very damaging to the reputation of the employee and could interfere with an investigation. If a person has been charged with a criminal offence, the police already have power to report that to the media.

**6. The suitability and flexibility of the funding of early education and care;**

The federal government should substantially increase support for NFPs and community-based services to improve child safety in ECEC. NFP and community-based services average higher quality ratings than for large for-profits.[34] As noted, 28% of NFPs exceed the standards compared to 13% of for-profit centres. Only 7% of NFPs are working towards meeting the National Quality Standards while a larger percentage, 11%, of for-profit long daycare centres are rated at Working Towards.

[33] Australia Institute; how to fix Australia's broken childcare system so everybody wins: https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/how-to-fix-australias-broken-childcare-system-so-everybody-wins/.
[34] ACECQA; NQF Snapshot Q4 2020: https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/NQFSnapshot_Q4_2020.pdf

The NFPs better performance in areas such as responding to ECEC safety and quality challenges, meeting the NQS, and also lower staff turnover due to higher investment in staff remuneration and conditions, should make NFPs the priority sector for substantially increased funding to deliver the stable, qualified, committed workforce that is foundational for ensuring safety for children in ECEC.

Further, and specifically, state and federal funding of the sector should be rationalised and we urge the federal government to withdraw National Preschool Reform Agreement funding for for-profit ECEC. Long day care services are funded by the Federal Government and have access to the Child Care Subsidy to reduce fees for parents. Preschools are solely funded by the State Government, which receives funding from the Federal Government for universal access for 4-year olds to access 600 hours of a preschool program per year through the National Preschool Reform Agreement. Long day care services also receive $1,055 per child plus a loading of up to $528 for equity enrolments from the State Government through the National Preschool Reform Agreement. Long day care teachers and educators are eligible to receive 15% Commonwealth funded pay increases through the Early Childhood Worker Retention Grant (ECWRG) whilst preschools were explicitly excluded from this.

Teachers and educators in preschools, which cater for children aged 3 to 5 years and which operate for hours and terms approximating schools, are not eligible for the ECWRG 15% funded increases. G8 Education successfully applied for the ECWRG despite their Annual Report stating that they made a net profit of over $65 million in 2024. It is incomprehensible that taxpayers fund for-profit long day care services in the same way that not-for-profit long day care services are funded. It seems to be a reasonable expectation that a company making millions of dollars in profits can afford to pay their employees more than the award rate of pay without a taxpayer-funded handout.

Funding must be increased to ensure it is sufficient to enable the payment of wages for teachers and educators at rates that are comparable to those employed in primary schools. The significant difference in pay and conditions has resulted in early childhood teacher graduate employment in ECEC as low as 29% in 2021, whilst ECEC teacher graduates employed in schools was significantly higher at 52% in 2021.[35]

Highly qualified and experienced teachers and educators are a critical component of a quality service - *"Settings which have staff with higher qualifications, especially with good proportion of trained teachers on the staff, show higher quality indicators and their children make more educational and developmental progress".*[36]

The UK Effective Provision of Preschool Education research demonstrated the greatest factor impacting centre quality was having qualified trained early childhood teachers working with children. University qualified staff in high quality services provided

[35] ACECQA: https://snapshots.acecqa.gov.au/workforcedata/supply.html.
[36] Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P, Siraj-Blatchford, I, Taggart, B. & Elliot, K. (2003). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from the Pre-School Period: London: University of London.

children with more language and mathematics activities and were more likely to encourage children to engage in experiences that challenged them intellectually. [37]

Staffing is the highest expense in early childhood. Awards ensure that employees with higher qualifications and years of experience are paid at a higher rate than those with lesser qualifications and experience. Funding for quality should include a significant component that reflects the level of qualifications and experience of employees.

Australia's education system is one of the most privatised in the world and childcare is its most privatised sector.[38] Australian Labor governments and the Greens understand that primary and secondary education are the responsibility firstly of the state and do not support for-profit education. Yet in the case of pre-primary school children, the most at risk age group, all Australian governments (excepting Greens members of parliament in governance-sharing agreements) have over the last three decades increasingly delegated or accepted delegation of ECEC public functions and state and community responsibility to large, private business actors whose increasing market dominance also gives them greater lobbying power.[39]

The consequences of these government decisions are now unmissably evident and documented. Our union calls on the Committee to develop recommendations to government that will support expansion of the safe, high performing NFP and community based and government providers in ECEC and the permanent removal from the sector of corporate chain for-profit providers.

**7. The choice of care options available to parents and families**

The choice of early learning options for parents must be inclusive and meet the diverse needs of all children. The IEU is committed to ensuring that children with disabilities receive equitable access to high-quality ECEC services. Children with disabilities, along with their parents and carers, should experience a welcoming and supportive environment where their rights, dignity, and individual needs are respected.

To achieve these standards, the ECEC workforce must be adequately trained and resourced (including funded at a level that facilitates the employment of adequate numbers of trained teachers and educators to support and assist children with high learning support needs to fully participate and thrive in ECEC settings.

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[37] Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P, Siraj-Blatchford, I, Taggart, B. & Elliot, K. (2003). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from the Pre-School Period: London: University of London.

[38] A. Morris; “Inequality and education in Australia”; Cambridge University Press: The Economic and Labour Relations Review , Volume 35 , Issue 2 , 2024: DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/elr.2024.18.
[39] Marius R. Busemeyer and Kathleen Thelen; Institutional Sources of Business Power; Cambridge University Press 2022: https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/world-politics/article/abs/institutional-sources-of-business-power/E9D9D945CB59843C4DF8CE4835350602.

**8. Any related matters**

*The quality of teachers and the pre-service teachers that come to our services for placements, and the drop in the quality we are seeing, is really questionable… It all comes down to what they are being taught. It used to be face-to-face 4 years of training and now it's being fast-tracked, and it has really affected the safety and wellbeing that we are providing for children. (Director, Sydney Metropolitan Preschool)*

Regarding the availability and affordability of quality training institutions for early childhood education qualifications, our union's position is that affordability of quality training institutions for obtaining appropriate early childhood education qualifications is directly linked to the quality of service delivery and the achievement of positive educational outcomes for children. We are disappointed that government strategy regarding staffing shortages appears to be to encourage truncated/ condensed courses.

Diploma qualified educators receive RPL through some education providers allowing them to be recognised as early childhood teachers after 12 months of further study, compared with a 4 year degree required to work in schools. We are aware that Southern Cross University accepts graduates with a Bachelor Degree in another area (such as accounting or science) to qualify as an early childhood teacher with 12 months.

12 months of study specialising in early childhood education at university level is not adequate to prepare graduates in pedagogy and practice, child development theories, documentation and assessment of learning, child protection, classroom management, the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, the National Quality Standards, the Early Years Learning Framework,  and the Education and Care National Regulations.

Australian children and their families have a fundamental right to access safe, inclusive, and high-quality early childhood education. This essential service should be delivered by a workforce that is not only highly trained and professionally supported, but also fairly compensated for the critical role they play in shaping young lives.

The IEU strongly advocates for policies and practices that uphold the safety and wellbeing of children, while also ensuring that educators are treated with dignity and fairness. In particular, we support measures that enhance child protection and safety, provided they are implemented in a way that respects the legal and professional rights of teachers, including their entitlement to procedural fairness in all matters affecting their employment and reputation.