

Public preschool education

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The provision of free public preschool education in NSW is one of the worst of any state or territory in Australia. Of all early childhood education service types available in NSW, government preschools account for only 5 per cent. Enrolment share follows a similar pattern.

In this context, the impact of the inadequate provision of free public schooling on vulnerable, disadvantaged and Aboriginal children is concerning.

The 2016 NSW Auditor-General's Report to Parliament on Early Childhood Education revealed that, while 99 per cent of children were enrolled in an early childhood program of some sort, in the 12 months prior to kindergarten, only 68 per cent attended the set target of 600 hours in that year.

Federation has a long history of advocating for the provision and expansion of public preschool education. Such provision must be free and accessible to all children for the two years prior to Kindergarten and located within public schools. This includes the provision of targeted early intervention support.



The effective provision of public preschool education is critical to addressing educational and social disadvantage for children from poorer families. Professor of economics and Nobel Prize winner James Heckman recognises the importance of investing in early childhood education to further human development:

"Gaps in knowledge and ability between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers open up long before kindergarten, tend to persist throughout life, and are difficult and costly to close," he said.

"Taking a proactive approach to cognitive and social skill development through investments in quality early childhood programs is more effective and economically efficient than trying to close the gap later on."

In addition to preparing children for kindergarten, building the confidence of parents and carers, and ensuring a strong relationship between parents and school staff, public preschooling provides the means for teachers to identify any developmental and learning issues, child abuse/neglect issues to facilitate necessary diagnoses, organise appropriate medical/therapeutic interventions and access to interagency support and services.

Governments have a responsibility to provide free preschooling as part of the broader public provision of primary and secondary education and Federation maintains its opposition to enrolment fees in NSW public preschools. By a range of measures, successive NSW governments have failed in their obligations to meet the educational entitlement and needs of preschool children.

Nationally, the Federal Government is condemned for refusing to guarantee ongoing funding for preschools by only extending early childhood education funding for 2019, and only for four-year-old children.

Federal Labor recently announced an additional \$1.75 billion over four years to extend preschool provision to include three-year-olds. Should they be elected at the next federal election, Labor's National Preschool and Kindy Program aims to guarantee every three- and four-year-old access to "quality education they need for the best start in school and life" totalling an overall investment of \$9.8 billion over a decade. Federal Labor's announcement paves the way for the expansion of public preschools in NSW.

The provision of free public preschooling in every community must be the demand of every public school and TAFE teacher. The benefits of public preschooling reach throughout the entire life of a child and the work of primary, secondary and post-school teachers. The consequences of inadequate provision of free public schooling are dire for young people, particularly our most disadvantaged.

Henry Rajendra, Senior Vice President