

What Western Australian parents want What our children need

**An election manifesto
presented by the**



#BestStartInLife

December 2020

Contents

What WA parents want. What our children need.....	3
Foreword	3
Policy recommendation #1	5
Resolving WA’s ECEC critical workforce shortages	5
Attracting and retaining educators.....	5
The issue	5
Reducing the cost of WA ECEC qualifications	6
Allowing more time to find and train candidates	7
Benefit to WA children and families.....	8
Benefit to WA taxpayers.....	8
Policy recommendation #2.....	9
Balancing supply with demand.....	9
Putting parents ahead of property developers.....	9
The benefit to families and taxpayers	10
The benefit to government.....	10
Policy Recommendation #3.....	11
Creating vital fiscal headroom to place downward pressure on costs for families & employ more educators.....	11
Benefit to WA families	12
Benefit to WA taxpayers.....	12
Policy recommendation #4.....	13
Extend Universal Funding for the next five years	13
Directing Commonwealth funds as intended – to all WA children attending kindergarten..	13
Benefit to WA families	15
Benefit to WA taxpayers.....	15
Policy recommendation #5.....	15
Benefit to WA children.....	16
Benefit to WA taxpayers.....	17
Conclusion.....	17

What WA parents want. What our children need

Foreword

Right now, Western Australian parents are worried. They are worried about the health and wellbeing of their children and themselves. Whilst the WA economy has been largely protected from the harshest impacts of the worst national recession in a generation, all WA parents remain laser focused on ensuring their children can be assured of the #beststartinlife.

We share that focus and this policy manifesto aims to harness the support, from all parties, and demonstrate to our families, that they are as committed, as we are, on delivering on these very clear expectations.

All through the pandemic, our member services did not miss a beat. They kept the 185,000 children in their education and care, safe and calm whilst they continue to learn and develop. Unlike those in schools, our many educators could not work remotely.

ACA WA led the campaign for the Federal Government's \$1.6b childcare rescue package when 30% of our ECEC services were on the brink of collapse. We helped engineer the stable return to the Child Care Subsidy (CCS), with additional safety nets put in place for our most vulnerable families.

Working WA parents need our early learning (childcare) services to remain strong and sustainable. The state economy depends on them.

There is a very good reason why nationally, 63% of families chose a centre-based kindergarten (the year before school) program for their children.¹

Working parents need the choice of a quality ECEC service. They want their children to be in the care of our amazing educators. WA mothers also want the flexibility - that long day early learning (childcare) offers - to enable them to return to the workforce.

Yet consider this; right now, the proportion of WA children attending kindy for more than 15 hours per week is 14.5%, compared to 28.2% nationally.^[6] WA remains behind the national average for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.^[7] And only two-thirds of children, in our most disadvantaged areas are attending kindy for the 15 hours, compared to 85% nationally.^[8]

In turn, WA women with young children, that work part time are most likely to work between 10 to 19 hours a week, whereas in other jurisdictions, they are most likely to work 20 to 29 hours a week.

We need to turn this around and fast. The next WA Government needs to better support WA parents, so they can go to work or study, whilst their child accesses the best education and care.

WA families now need all parties to commit to policies that support that choice.

Our election manifesto looks beyond the current crisis to build a stronger future for our families, the communities in which they live and the economy of the state.

¹ Source: Australian Government Department of Education (unpublished); tables 3A.9-10.

^[6] Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre, *The Early Years: Investing in our Future*, 2020.

^[7] Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre, *The Early Years: Investing in our Future*, 2020.

^[8] Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre, *The Early Years: Investing in our Future*, 2020.

For many vulnerable and disadvantaged WA children, early learning (childcare) services will always provide a vitally important nurturing environment to protect them and help them to thrive. Never before has this been more important.

Our policy manifesto is aimed at giving WA families hope. Hope that regardless of what happens with COVID-19, their children can continue to access our world-class early learning (childcare) services. Hope that the Government will empower parents to choose which quality early learning (childcare) service they want their child to attend.

Affordable and equitable access to high quality early learning (childcare) is the cornerstone of this policy manifesto. The pandemic has triggered a global health crisis, collapsed economies, fractured communities and disconnected families. But it has also pulled back the curtain on how safe and secure our early learning (childcare) services are and how the continuity of early learning is the absolute bedrock of the Western Australian economy.

Our families want to prioritise the educational needs of their children and to remind you that the early years are the most critically important.

We know they want to see the Commonwealth Government's funding - for universal access for kindergarten (a year before school) - to follow the child so if the families choose an ECEC service, they can be supported in that choice - the same way families are in every other state.

But we also need to ensure we have enough educators in our ECEC sector to care for our children. Right now, we have a workforce shortage with about 1,000 educators in demand right now. Without educators, some children may miss out on places, as services must reduce their offering to meet their legislated educator-child ratio requirements.

There are other policy recommendations, that if adopted by the next WA government, will lead to downward pressure on costs for families and will create the vital headroom service providers need to attract, train, and retain more educators. These include putting parents ahead of property developers with proper planning laws and permanently waiving payroll tax for ECEC service providers.

WA parents want their child to have the best start in life. We know these policies will deliver on that.

On their behalf, we commit **What WA parents want. What our children need** to be adopted as a pre-election commitment.

Warm regards

Ann Marie Chemello
President



Policy recommendation #1

Resolving WA's ECEC critical workforce shortages

Attracting and retaining educators

WA's ECEC sector is facing a recruitment crisis. There is a critical shortage of 1,000 qualified, competent educators and support staff and early learning (childcare) services need your help to fill these roles.

Long-term labour shortages make it harder for those WA parents willing and able to work to find care for their children. When a centre cannot fill job vacancies, this can limit the number of childcare spaces that can be offered.

ACA WA is asking for a commitment, from all parties, to properly fund the recruitment and training costs of potential and existing educators to boost supply:

1. ensure that all courses are adequately resourced to meet the sector's training requirements;
2. create pathways to sector employment by incentivising Australians on JobSeeker to enrol in Cert III and/or Diploma courses; and
3. provide a pathway for existing Cert III and diploma-qualified employees to upskill.

The issue

Even in this era of record high unemployment, the WA early learning sector is struggling to find appropriately qualified candidates – this is despite financial incentives and professional development opportunities being offered by almost every ECEC service.

The challenges are further amplified:

- by the growing issue of random new centre builds, particularly in geographic areas that are already experiencing low occupancy and struggling to find appropriately qualified, job-ready staff;
- by the current COVID-19 climate - many experienced older educators have opted to leave due to concerns over their health risks;
- limited time (three months) to sign an employee up to a qualification;
- current rules that require a full roster of educators to cover lunch breaks; and
- in rural and remote areas, where distance and population size is an additional barrier to finding suitable candidates.
- The requirement of a second ECT in services 60+ places

Right now, close to a 100% of our members have vacancies, and well over 1,000 jobs that need filling immediately. These jobs range from full time educators, to part time and casual roles.

Survey respondents report that the hardest jobs to fill are those requiring a Diploma Qualification, followed closely by those requiring a CHC30113 Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care.

Our members, surveyed, identified that the most effective lever to counter the critical labour shortages were for them to offer:

- 'affordable cost of courses'.
- 'government supported programs'; and
- 'ECT course for Diploma educators to upskill to.

Reducing the cost of WA ECEC qualifications

The two relevant vocational training qualifications in the early learning sector are the CHC30113 Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care and CHC50113 Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care.

Early learning services generally employ a team of staff which includes early childhood educators (Cert III and/or Diploma-qualified) and Early Childhood Teachers (degree-qualified).

Across the board in WA, there is a critical shortage of Cert III, diploma and degree-qualified ECT candidates

We believe the provision of additional WA Government funding for traineeships will make these courses more affordable and accessible, encouraging more students to complete the qualifications.

WA educators wanting to upskill face exorbitant costs and significantly more than their counterparts in other states.

A WA educator, with a Certificate III, must pay between \$6,800-\$10,000 if they want to upskill to a Diploma via a traineeship.

We want both parties to commit to 'heavily subsidise this course expense for new entrants and existing educators.

The following table outlines the upskilling costs absorbed by other state governments:

State	Educator training costs
Victoria	New entrant educators and existing educators: fully funded by the state government
ACT	New entrant and existing educators: only pay an enrolment fee of \$350.00
South Australia	New entrant and existing educators: Materials fee between \$350.00 - \$2,700
New South Wales	New entrants: no cost Existing educators: Cert III = \$3,000 Diploma = \$5,000
Queensland	New entrants & existing educators: Cert III = \$1,500.80 non-concessional or \$600.32 concessional New entrant and existing educators: Diploma = \$3,180.80 non-concessional or \$1,272.32 concessional

Allowing more time to find and train candidates

Right now, in the face of our workforce labour shortages and inability to attract suitable candidates; we also have the additional and problematic demands of meeting a strict three-month deadline to sign an employee up to a qualification. We need to extend this window to six months.

This will also alleviate the risk to families of facing reduced places as providers will have more time to find, and train, the right candidates to meet the educator-child ratio demands.

This not only gives the employer an appropriate time to assess if this candidate is the correct fit for the profession, it also gives the potential employee time to assess if it is also the profession that they would like to continue in. This would make the sector more appealing to those who are considering it as a career.

Adjusting rosters

We would like to revisit, through a pilot program, an initiative that relaxes child to staff ratios over the quiet period of the day, when the majority of attending children are resting or sleeping. This will free up a large number of educators that are currently required to cover lunches and inject a large number of qualified and experienced educators into the workforce. (Previous regulation 374A)

Ensuring adequate volume of vocational graduates

To immediately address this urgent problem, ACA WA is asking both parties to commit to funding the training and upskilling of educators across the state.

In order to continue to be eligible for JobKeeper/JobSeeker, suitable WA candidates would complete 5 specific units of the CHC30113 Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care through a WA Registered Training Organisation (RTO).

Paired with a host employer, they would also complete five days of work experience on-site. If successful, they would then be offered a traineeship (Certificate III) or (Diploma), with the units already completed being recognised as part of their course.

Employers would be eligible for trainee wage subsidies and incentives, and the cost of the course would be subsidised to candidates.

The WA Government would create or silo 1,000 funded trainee wage subsidy places for the program.

Employers would be eligible for trainee wage subsidies and incentives in the form of JobMaker (or a similar program), and the cost of the course would be free to candidates.

ACA WA also calls on both parties to commit to a government-funded advertising recruitment campaign, highlighting the benefits of working in the sector, outlining the career path, and providing a clear call to action for jobseekers to find a local trainee position.

ENSURING HIGH-QUALITY WA GRADUATES

ACA WA believes that traineeships are the best model to ensure that WA entry-level graduates are job-ready and understand the practical elements of the role as an early childhood educator, as they offer far greater on-the-job experience than standard voluntary placement hours, allowing

students to put their learning into practice while in paid employment for the duration of the course. This model also provides appropriate incentives for employers, through the Australian Apprenticeships Incentives Program (AAIP)².

The government funding of RTO's to deliver early childhood vocational education is **insufficient** to support quality outcomes required against the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA), WA regulatory requirements and training package requirements.

WA ECEC services need funding to meet the requirements of the mandated course load, which is substantially higher than most other certificate and diploma level courses.

Benefit to WA children and families

Families would benefit through:

- The ongoing provision of high-quality early learning services in their local area, resulting from the pool of skilled ECEC sector job candidates.
- Access to the best educators the ECEC sector can attract, train and retain.
- A long term, stable sector with ample capacity to educate all WA children and support families.

Benefit to WA taxpayers

Short term

- Funding support for ECEC vocational education would mobilise the underutilised workforce while the WA economy continues to recover.

Long term

Funding support for ECEC vocational education would:

- Produce a stable, reliable source of high-quality, appropriately qualified candidates for the early learning sector - the bedrock of Australia's economy.
- Stimulate the tertiary education sector with an ongoing supply of incoming students.

² January 2021, it will be known as the Incentives for Australian Apprenticeships (IAA).

Policy recommendation #2

Balancing supply with demand

Aligning early learning service locations to support demonstrable need

Putting parents ahead of property developers

Australia's early learning sector provides an essential service to Australian families with young children with both parents participating in the workforce, whilst at the same time providing our youngest generation with the best start in life.

Whilst the sector, regulated by the National Quality Framework, plays a pivotal role in supporting families as well as the Australian economy, the location and availability of services is not regulated or managed under a long-term strategic plan.

This means that there is no guarantee of availability of high-quality early learning services for each family, regardless of where they live in Australia. Instead, affordable access comes down to geographical luck.

ACA WA seeks a commitment by both parties to implementing a planning framework similar to the residential aged care sector.

Both sectors receive government funding via an accreditation process, with services required to meet a set of quality standards. But the childcare sector requires a process of due diligence to ensure that there is a real demand before any new service can be built.

The Issue

Across WA, in particular, in our regional and rural areas, there are areas that are in dire need of a local, quality early learning service, yet is snubbed by property developers.

Conversely, in areas close to Perth and other high-density regions; property developers disrespect the clear fact that the suburb is already well serviced by a number of high-quality early learning services. These centres are already operating under their licenced capacity.

Oversupply is a crippling, and entirely avoidable, financial landmine for WA's early learning sector.

ECEC services are already struggling with the funding inequities created by the State Government redirecting Commonwealth funds to the state school sector and the ongoing impacts and potential risks of the pandemic on the WA economy.

With few barriers to entry, the saturation of early learning services in certain geographic areas has led to many services experiencing lower occupancy rates.

This will place upwards pressure on fees and downwards pressure on quality, therefore impacting the level of quality provided and the affordability to families.

This data illustrates the connection between oversupply of services, quality of care and affordability.

A 2018 report³ jointly commissioned by the Australian Childcare Alliance (ACA), the Early Learning and Care Council of Australia (ELACCA) and Australian Community Children's Services (ACCS) revealed that the net increase in long day care centres in 2017 was roughly 2-3 times the estimated number of new centres needed per annum to meet future demand.

This is an alarming statistic - if the same growth continues in the coming years, there is likely to be an enormous impact on the quality and viability of WA ECEC services (private, community, government and Not for Profit).

This situation is compounded by the deceleration of immigration to Australia due to border closures⁴ and a marginally lower birth rate in 2020 (a 1.25% decline from 2019)⁵, which may contribute to a drop in demand for ECEC places.

ACA WA seeks a commitment from all parties that early learning services should only be made available where absolutely needed. This should be part of effective local community planning to allow for better access at a price that facilitates participation by all families, strengthens the local community and allows for sustainable high-quality services.

Building a more reliable & stable early learning sector

ACA believes the lack of planning in the early learning sector could be addressed at the government level by implementing a framework similar to the residential aged care sector. Aged care, like the early learning sector, receives government funding via an accreditation process, with services required to meet a set of quality standards.

Allocated places are determined annually, through the Aged Care Approvals Round (ACAR), which takes into account the number of available places, the identified needs of a particular planning region and the applications' merits.

A similar system could work well for the early learning sector to disincentivise the ongoing construction of new early learning services without undertaking due diligence to ensure that there is a real demand for the new service location.

The Federal Department of Education receives vacancy reports weekly from all service providers and this data could prove highly valuable for informing the market as to areas of need, to ensure responsible and targeted new developments.

The benefit to families and taxpayers

- Families would benefit through the ongoing viability, high quality and affordability of early learning services in their local area.
- Downward pressure on costs.

The benefit to government

- The ongoing viability, high quality and affordability of early learning services Australia-wide would ultimately prevent further Government over spend on developing unnecessary infrastructure in certain geographic areas.

³ Occupancy and Performance Appraisal: Early Childhood Education and Care Sector Report, <https://childcarealliance.org.au/aca-surveys/occupancy-report>

⁴ The Guardian article - Migration to Australia has fallen off a cliff - will it take the economy with it? - <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/aug/02/migration-australia-cliff-economy-international-students-covid-19-coronavirus>

⁵ Macrotrends data - <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/AUS/australia/birth-rate#:~:text=The%20current%20birth%20rate%20for,a%200.77%25%20decline%20from%202017.>

- Australian Government is not spending on CCS-approved places in areas of unnecessary over-supply.

Policy Recommendation #3

Permanent payroll tax relief

Creating vital fiscal headroom to place downward pressure on costs for families & employ more educators.

The WA Government is to be congratulated for waiving payroll tax and offering one off grants to offset the cost of wages for small to medium businesses to help them weather the worst economic impacts of COVID-19.

More than any other business, the Early Childhood Education and Care is regulated to have a high level of employees due to the legislated educator-child ratios. Workforce costs generally represent approximately 70% of the services' overall costs and the payroll tax hit is 5% of our bottom line.

With a critical workforce shortage, we now need that additional 5% to spend on attracting and retaining high quality educators and to keep downward pressure on costs for our families.

ACA WA is calling on all parties to commit to removing payroll tax permanently on all education facilities, which includes Early Education & Care services (Centre based care).

The Issue

In Western Australia, community, and not-for-profit early learning (childcare) services do not attract payroll taxes, regardless of their fee structures. Yet privately owned and operated services in WA, who mirror these educational services, are obliged to contribute payroll.

The biggest impact is on providers with more than one centre due to compounding effect of the tax.

This adds to the existing inequitable treatment of the WA ECEC sector, mostly run by family-owned, small-to-medium sized businesses.

This measure will create universal consistency and fairness across all of the centre-based community, private and not-for-profit services. This was recognized by the NSW Government in its 2020-21 state budget. It has now virtually eliminated all payroll tax imposed on the ECEC services.⁶

The savings for WA ECEC services will create the fiscal headroom to:

- place downward pressure on fees.
- increase educational resources for children; and
- offer greater financial incentives to attract and retain the highest possible educator workforce.

⁶ <https://nsw.childcarealliance.org.au/news/988-nsw-state-budget-2020-2021>

Benefit to WA families

Families in WA are already doing it tough.:

- Providing equity of relief to all ECEC providers will allow more educators to be engaged.
- In regional WA, where attracting and retaining high-quality educators is very challenging, greater financial incentives can be offered to lure potential candidates.
- All children – particularly those most vulnerable and from disadvantaged areas – will have the same access to high-quality ECEC services and educators, as those in more affluent regions

Benefit to WA taxpayers

- Payroll tax is an impost on small businesses and in the ECEC sector, unfairly targets the private sector.
- It can be redirected to create more jobs in a sector that has already demonstrated how valuable it is to underpinning the WA economy.
- For a service provider of multiple centres, the savings captured is the equivalent of more qualified educators.
- That is a demonstrable contribution to the WA workforce, the economy and to the long-term benefit of WA children.

Policy recommendation #4

Ensure Universal Funding follows the child to allow parents the choice of all early learning (centre based, long day care) services

Extend Universal Funding for the next five years

Whilst ACA WA applauds the State Government's recognition of the importance of quality early learning for four-year-olds (one year before compulsory school); all WA children must be treated equally, regardless of where they live, what their socioeconomic circumstances are and what type of early childhood education and care (ECEC) service meets the needs of their family.

On behalf of our families and members, we ask all parties to re-direct Commonwealth funding as it is intended, for all children to attend kindergarten for 15 hours a week. This will end the discrimination against working parents who need the longer hours and flexibility offered by long day early learning services.

We believe this will overcome the startling fact that WA children are less likely - than in other jurisdictions - to attend kindergarten, in any setting, for more than fifteen hours a week.^[1]

This means that only around 70% of children enrolled in the year before full-time school were attending preschool for the prescribed 15 hours per week in Western Australia, compared to the national average of 83%.

Further, coupled with that commitment to end the discrimination against working parents; all WA parties must commit to extend the Universal Access (UA) funding for the next five years. Right now, the Commonwealth has only extended it until the end of 2021.

The issue

Early learning (centre based, long day care) should be recognised by the next WA Government as a key provider of early childhood education in the year before school.

This is because:

- WA early learning (centre based, long day care) services offer the ideal learning environment for 0-5-year olds.
- We deliver age/developmentally appropriate, tailored and culturally appropriate, physical early learning environments where children can also be bathed, have nappies changed, often provided with nutritious meals and rest/sleep.
- Early learning (centre based, long day care) is highly regulated. It is delivered under the National Quality Framework and the Early Learning Years Framework.
- Early learning (centre based, long day care) offers trained and qualified educators, both from the nurturing and education aspect.
- Our educators are professionally trained, often with degree qualified teacher(s) participating in the program and education of these children.

Directing Commonwealth funds as intended – to all WA children attending kindergarten

Under the Universal Access National Partnership (UANP) Agreement, the Australian Government provides funding to all states and territories to allow all Australian children access to 15 hours per

^[1] Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre, *The Early Years: Investing in our Future*, 2020.

week of a quality preschool (kindergarten) program in the year before school. In 2020, this funding was \$4.2 billion.⁷

That funding is also intended to support the children of working parents, those who need the flexibility of a long day ECEC service. This is against the spirit of the UANP agreement, not in the interests of the child and is against all independent and authoritative advice.

The recent Nour report, (commissioned by the Council of Australian Governments, into the effectiveness of its Universal Funding) recommended that:

*“Consideration could be given to incorporating measures that promote more equitable funding across States and Territories (e.g., setting expectations of a minimum level of investment, or to expanding CCS eligibility so that it can be used more broadly to subsidise child care that ‘wraps around’ preschool hours in jurisdictions with school-based and standalone preschool systems”.*⁸

In addition to the funding dedicated to this initiative in previous financial years, the Australian Government has committed \$452.3 million to extend the UANP until the end of 2021.

In WA, our children and their families do not see any benefit of this vital government funding because they chose the long day ECEC sector over the overwhelmed public school system.

We need to ensure this discrimination and funding distortion ends. We need to ensure the UA funding follows the child.

Our parents also want to see a long-term commitment to this funding, to ensure ongoing stability for WA families and their children in accessing high-quality kindergarten programs in the year before school.

The findings of the UANP Review: Final Review Report⁹ have reinforced ACA WA's views that a long-term funding model is vital for the ongoing success of WA's early learning program but only so long as the funding follows the child.

“Governments should enter into a new five-year National Partnership from 2021 to 2025, and transition to a National Agreement from 2026 onwards.

The uncertainty associated with short-term agreements and performance-based payments has compromised the ability to plan and invest for the long term.” – UANP Review recommendation #6.

Supporting all WA children

A great deal of WA children aged 0-3 years attend a centre-based ECEC service but then when it comes to staying within the ECEC service they love, and their parents need - as they enter the critical kindergarten years - there is a funding cliff for that service.

⁷ <https://www.education.gov.au/national-partnership-agreements>

⁸ NOUS UANP Review Final Review Report.pdf

⁹ UANP Review: Final Review Report - <http://www.educationcouncil.edu.au/EC-Reports-and-Publications.aspx>

This re-direction of Commonwealth funds, away from WA's high quality ECEC sector (community, Not for Profit and private), discriminates against working WA parents who need the flexibility and extended time of care and education, only a quality long day ECEC service can offer.

Despite the UANP funding being intended for all four-year-olds in kindergarten; WA children are corralled into the state school system. This poses risks to the children (that did not and would not exist in a safe ECEC service) and is very difficult for mothers, in particular, to return to the workforce, at a time when the WA economy needs them most.

Many WA ECEC services are family businesses, struggling to cope with the economic shocks, delivered by COVID-19. Now is the time for policy levers that support our families, and the services their children attend, rather than add further unnecessary stress to the sector and barriers to mothers trying to re-enter the workforce.

On behalf of our parents, we ask both parties to commit to having Commonwealth funding follow the child and also to commit to extending the Universal Funding for children in kindergarten (the year before school) for the next five years.

Benefit to WA families

- All WA children will have consistent and affordable access to the same early childhood teachers and educators without disruptive change to their daily routines.
- Reduced disruption to the families' work or study commitments, therefore increasing workforce participation, particularly for mothers.
- Four-year-olds can remain in an established early learning (centre based, long day care) service, that is relevant to their specific and customised developmental needs and will prevent them from coming into contact with much older children, including teenagers.
- It will allow working parents and WA mothers, in particular, to return to the workforce, knowing their child is in the safe and caring protection of educators they know and love.

Benefit to WA taxpayers

- The social and cognitive development of the children themselves. How's this a benefit to taxpayers? Should we elaborate?
- The scope for both parents to take on as much work as suits their circumstances during the childcare years, and the increased career-long productivity of those parents from having had the ability to strengthen their engagement with the workplace and with professional development opportunities during the childcare years.
- There are also non-financial factors including availability, flexibility and quality that influence a family's decision on whether to access additional childcare services in order for a parent to be able to take on work opportunities.

Policy recommendation #5

Empowering parents to decide when their child is ready for school

Families asking for national consistency on a school starting age is not a new ask

But in WA, parents are completely disempowered, by having no voice in determining when is best for their child to enter the formal school system.

We know that starting school before a child is ready can create stress and anxiety patterns that can also last for life. More importantly, there are some things that children simply cannot learn until they are ready.¹⁰

We also know that up to one in five children starting school experience emotional difficulties, which are likely to get worse as they get older and make it harder for children to learn.¹¹

ACA WA supports the campaign by parenting author and resilience specialist, Ms Maggie Dent and leading children's advocates to ensure that existing legislation gives parents the flexibility to send their kids to school when they are ready and to delay their child's formal school start by six or 12 months if needs be.

We call for a commitment from all parties to enforce the legislative rights of parents to choose when their child is ready (within a 12-month period of the due starting date).

The Issue

Despite there being a clear process to choose this flexibility, principals are still vetoing requests made by parents and health professionals.

Right now, the system is failing children with developmental vulnerabilities and putting them at long-term risk. Our more sensitive kids just need a little longer to develop the social and emotional competence needed to transition into a formalised learning environment.

Benefit to WA children

Children who need to delay (within 12 months) attendance until their parents deem, they are ready emotionally, mentally, and physically, benefit by:

- Physical Health and Wellbeing – being equipped with the fine motor skills they need to grip a pencil, turn pages in a book, build with blocks, able to toilet themselves, feed themselves, dress themselves, some degree of focus to task.
- Improved Social Competence – primary need is to be able to get along with other children, cope with stress of new situation and new learning tasks, have healthy assertiveness, ability to play solo and with other children, have pro-social behaviour.
- Emotional Maturity – some ability to self-manage their emotions, be able to cope with minimal adult contact in large groups, develop friendships, able to separate from parents...even if gradually.
- Language and Cognitive Skills – basic counting, follow basic instructions, basic thinking skills.
- Communication Skills and General Knowledge – basic conversation skills, manners, ability to communicate needs, understanding of the wider world.
- Independence – to undertake personal hygiene tasks.

¹⁰ <https://www.maggiedent.com/blog/your-child-ready-school/>

¹¹ (O'Connor, Quach and Goldfield 2020; Shay and Wang 2018). Productivity Commission into Mental Health 2020

Benefit to WA taxpayers

- Children that start school, when their parents deem them emotionally ready (within 12 months of turning 5) are less likely to suffer anxiety and other learning and coping difficulties.
- Improving the ability of the education system to support the wellbeing of children (because they start at the appropriate time) is also very likely to reduce long term mental ill health in the community and reduce the burden on mental health on the taxpayer.
- Children who thrive as they transition into pre-primary rather than struggle have much higher levels of school success.
<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/transitionliteraturereview.pdf>

Conclusion

WA families want a sustainable and viable ECEC sector. Working parents, and mothers in particular, want their children to be cared for and educated by our members, so they can participate in the workforce – to the benefit of the WA economy.

We need to be able to have certainty of long-term funding for our educators and our services. We need to be able to care for all children equally. We must stop indigenous and disadvantaged children fall through the cracks in our system.

ACA WA has worked tirelessly throughout this global health and economic crisis to ensure the 185,000 children in our care remain safe, reassured and can continue the early education that is so critical to their long-term future. We have proved to be the bedrock of the WA economy, allowing parents to stay in the workforce, where they can.

As we have done before and during this pandemic; we will always stand shoulder to shoulder with our families and our educators.

We are committed to being their voice during this critically difficult time, and we want them to be afforded the respect they deserve during, and beyond, this election year.

We seek your written commitment to adopt all of our policy recommendations ahead of the coming election. And whilst we will remain vigilantly non-partisan, we will share your response with our parents and our educators.

We are respectfully requesting that you listen to them.