



All fours

The preschool education plan is a policy breakthrough, but needs careful attention to the detail. **Anna McAlister** reports.

Briefly

- The government has allocated funds to make good its promise that all four-year-olds will be getting a year of preschool education by 2013.
- The plan involves building more facilities and providing incentives to attract more early childhood teachers.
- A new Office of Early Childhood Education and Childcare will oversee the government's plans.

The AEU has welcomed the federal government's pledge of \$533 million over five years to fund early childhood education (ECE). But it will also keep a careful watch on how the associated promises will be fulfilled and what they will mean for teachers and public provision.

At the core of the Rudd government's policy is a promise to provide every four-year-old in Australia with 15 hours of ECE a week by fully qualified teachers. It says this will be offered in public, private and community-based preschools. An estimated 87.5 per cent of four-year-olds accessed ECE in 2005-06, with most attending 11-13 hours a week. The government aims to

raise the access rate to 100 per cent by 2013 with what will be the first injection of funding by a Commonwealth government for preschool education in a quarter of a century.

"In the lead-up to successive federal elections, the AEU has consistently lobbied the major parties for ECE funding. Now we just have to help [the government] get it right," says Howard Spreadbury, early childhood organiser at the AEU's South Australian branch and early childhood education representative to the AEU federal executive.

After Labor's election win last year, the Council of Australian Governments formed a partnership with the

Commonwealth and state and territory governments to reform ECE. Rolling out such a large-scale national strategy is a challenge, particularly given the disparities between states and territories on issues such as the employment conditions of teachers and delivery of services. The Rudd government has created the Office of Early Childhood Education and Childcare and a new parliamentary secretary to oversee the reform.

Trial phase

The overall plan, which includes a national workforce strategy to manage the increased demand, is in a consultation and trial phase. One of several pilot projects provides 15 hours a week for



children at nine preschools in disadvantaged areas of South Australia. “We will be monitoring any impact on our members’ work as a result of the increased allocation,” says Spreadbury.

Part of the workforce strategy is to fund additional places in

“We will be monitoring any impact on our members’ work...”

tertiary early childhood education courses each year from 2009, increasing to 1500 by 2011. It also includes 50 per cent HECS-HELP remission to graduates who choose to work in disadvantaged areas and remote Indigenous communities.

But in some states, early childhood teachers’ wages and industrial conditions will need to improve significantly to attract new recruits. In Victoria, for example, preschool and primary teachers graduate with a qualification allowing them to work in both settings, but the entry-level salary for primary teachers is \$5000 a year more. Also, all preschool teachers in Victoria and Queensland, and most in NSW, are employed at

private sector or community-based long day care centres, or by parent committees at community preschools. These teachers lack job security and miss out on large-system supports such as being able to change jobs without losing long service leave and other entitlements.

Teachers at for-profit day care centres are the most likely to suffer employment terms that don’t measure up to the industry standard, says Shayne Quinn, vice-president early childhood at the Victorian AEU. “The more the employer pays and the better the working conditions, the less the profit. So there’s a conflict.”

However, child care based early childhood education programs offer flexibility which makes

them the best solution for many families. "Parents want integrated day care and preschool programs, and the AEU supports being able to co-locate long day care, preschools and public schools," she says.

The Victorian government recently created the new Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, placing early childhood education within the education department, rather than within human services. Quinn says this has elevated the status of the work done in the sector, and the next step is for Victorian preschool teachers to become government employees.

Queensland has also taken a major step towards alignment with other states by introducing a preparatory year of schooling. It replaces a sessional preschool program provided at most state school sites.

Contact hours capped

Under-employment is already an issue for early childhood teachers, and Quinn warns that the 15 hours per week could exacerbate this. About two-thirds of the Victorian teachers work part-time, often not by choice. While 15 hours is not a full-time load for an early childhood teacher, 30 hours is too much. The AEU is looking at alternative workload solutions which could include two teachers sharing three groups of students.

How workload is managed is likely to be one of the key industrial issues that needs to be worked through as the funding of four-year-olds is implemented.

The extended hours for four-year-olds will also require more

Budget breakdown



How the \$533 million will be spent over five years:

- \$10 million for the 2007-08 trials to find out how best to allocate the money. One trial involves \$2 million to provide access to preschool for Indigenous families across 35 NSW preschools. Another \$1.1 million is for a pilot focusing on nine South Australian preschools in areas of disadvantage.
- Initial money is allocated to each state and territory in proportion to its number of four-year-old children. For example, \$250,000 each to NSW and Queensland and \$180,000 to Victoria.
- Looking ahead, the 2008-09 budget invests \$114.5 million over four years to build the first 38 additional early learning and care centres, which will include six autism-specific centres.
- The money will be rolled out in greater sums each year as the government builds the remaining 222 centres and begins to fund HECS fees for ECE graduates: 2008-09, \$40 million; 2009-10, \$80 million; 2010-11, \$100 million; and 2011-12, \$300 million.

“Now we just have to help [the government] get it right.”

facilities. The government is planning up to 260 new early learning and care centres located, where possible, on existing community sites such as TAFEs and schools. The AEU favours co-location with public schools because of its logistical benefits and smoother transition for children starting school.

As well as the need to solve space and industrial issues, training new teachers will delay full implementation of the policy before 2013.

"It's important that the integrity of the four-year early childhood teaching qualification is not undermined in the haste to have enough teachers to meet the increased demand," says Quinn, who sees this as being especially the case with childcare professionals who upgrade their training. "While supporting these pathways, we need to ensure there's appropriate recognition of prior learning so people aren't fast-tracked into being teachers."

Special attention

With Indigenous children and children from disadvantaged areas being under-represented in ECE attendance, the situation has drawn special attention under the government's new policy. Only about half of Indigenous children attend a year of ECE.

As part of his apology to the Stolen Generation, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd specifically promised to provide ECE for all four-year-olds in remote Indigenous communities within five years. Meeting this goal will mean government assistance to reduce impediments to attendance such as fees and transport and clothing costs. The AEU believes that a

comprehensive sequence of Indigenous studies must be offered to early childhood education teachers and care workers in both pre-service and in-service training.

The AEU is calling for proactive measures to attract Indigenous people to ECE teaching.

The workforce strategy recognises the logistical challenges in employing more teachers in remote areas. The AEU says such teachers will need adequate housing and allowances for relocation, living and travel, and Indigenous teachers working in their home communities must be entitled to the same benefits.

Is one year enough?

The whole policy raises one further question: is one year of 15 hours a week really enough?

“The AEU position is that there should be two years of preschool education prior to school entry,” says Spreadbury. “Ultimately the

AEU would like an additional year for all three-year-olds, and 20 hours would be the next step for four-year-olds.”

Quinn says Victorian AEU members seem enthusiastic about the proposed reforms and the importance they attribute to ECE. But they are also wary of whether

...is one year of 15 hours a week really enough?

the changes can be implemented without eroding their working conditions. “The process of consultation has been really fast. The opportunities for members to have their say have been less than ideal and they’re concerned about the pace of change.”

She says one of the most encouraging aspects of the new policy is the respect it shows for ECE. “In the past, some people have thought early childhood teaching was a middle-class

service and anybody who worked in it was only doing it for pin money. Some people were surprised that you needed a degree to teach.

“Now when I open policy documents, the first thing I see is a section on the importance of ECE and what is critical to it. That’s affirming for teachers.” •

Anna McAlister is a freelance journalist.

Resources

- **AEU report: Early Childhood Education 2007 Update:** <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/Govserupdate2007.pdf>
- **Australian government’s agenda for early childhood education and care:** http://www.oceccc.gov.au/new_agenda.htm

atc | **australian**
teachers
chronicle

TO ORDER | T 03 9532 1399 | www.atc.com.au

In 2009, control your time with Planning and Record solutions from ATC



Planners available for both
Primary and Secondary Schools.
In Dated and Undated styles.
In Daily and Weekly formats.

A complete written record of your teaching program and classroom activities in one book.

Try our new electronic version. ETC is an easy to use, innovative, professional, record-keeping computer package. Download a free demo at www.atc.com.au

Australian Teachers Chronicle | made in **AUSTRALIA** | developed by **AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS** | for **AUSTRALIAN TEACHERS** | for over **40 YEARS**