

ACCS POLICY PLATFORM FOR THE 2021 or 2022 FEDERAL ELECTION

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As the peak body advocating nationally for the right of Australia's children to access quality, not for profit, community children's services, ACCS calls on the major parties contesting the federal election to respond to our headline issues.

We will inform our members nationwide of the responses of the major parties to these proposals to guide their voting in the next federal election.

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HEADLINE ISSUES

- 1. Building a skilled and professional early and middle childhood workforce – pay equity for educators; subsidised fees for upskilling to diploma and degree early childhood qualifications; stronger controls for early childhood courses and quality assurance of providers**
- 2. Confirm on-going commitment to the National Quality Framework to continue building quality standards beyond 2020**
- 3. All children, including those of non-working parents, are eligible for subsidised high quality early childhood education and care for at least 2 days per week**
- 4. Children and families experiencing vulnerability, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, are eligible for at least two days of fully subsidised access per week without going through the Additional Child Care Subsidy processes**

ACCS also advocates for:

- All government policy to recognise that learning starts at birth, particularly noting the first 1,000 days from conception to 2 years of age as the most important period of child development
- Funded Universal Access to Early Childhood Education and Care for all 3 and 4 year old children (15 hours per week) in all settings (long day care, family day care, preschool/kindergarten)
- Universal Access funding to continue to be provided under 3 year agreements
- No children and their families in detention in Australia or off-shore
- Policy on Priority of Access to children's services to reflect all national policy frameworks including Closing the Gap, National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children and the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children
- National planning frameworks to be established to regulate growth of Early Childhood Education and Care services in light of changes to Child Care Subsidy in 2021 and expansion of Universal Access funding to all service types

EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT THE ACCS POLICY PLATFORM

ACCS has recently completed the sixth wave of the longitudinal *Trends In Community Children's Services Survey* of across Australia. This survey provides key evidence in support of the policy issues we put forward in the lead up to the next federal election.

Investing in quality early childhood education and care benefits not only the children attending these services but also their families and the communities in which they live. In addition, our nation benefits from wider social capital gains such as enhanced life course trajectories and health outcomes and from economic gains in the short, medium and longer term.

It just makes good sense to invest in quality early childhood education and care.

EVIDENCE FOR THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF OUR POLICIES

1. Building a skilled and professional early and middle childhood workforce

ACCS believes that building a workforce to meet current and future needs will require at a minimum:

- pay equity for educators – remuneration and conditions for degree qualified teachers equitable across early childhood services and school settings; wages and conditions for educators in line with roles with equivalent qualifications and skill sets
- subsidised fees for upskilling to diploma and degree early childhood qualifications
- stronger controls for early childhood courses and quality assurance of providers

ACCS welcomes the commitment of the Council of Australian Governments to the development of a national workforce strategy for the early childhood education and care sector. We are working actively with the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) in its development of the Ten Year National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2021-30). We are heartened to see that professional recognition through pay and conditions is acknowledged as a key issue that requires addressing, as is the impact of poor quality vocational training on qualifications and career pathways¹.

The Workforce Strategy must be resourced by government to enable effective resolution of these key issues.

The Evidence

Skilled and qualified teachers and educators are one of the key contributors to quality early childhood education and care.² A 2017 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development identifies that in early childhood education and care services “teachers and pedagogical staff are the most important factors that influence child well-being, development and learning”³. Similarly, a report from the Mitchell Institute notes that “effective teachers and educators who can skilfully combine explicit teaching of skills and concepts with sensitive and warm interactions, is at the core of quality early education”⁴.

ACECQA has identified the following key issues facing the workforce:

- attraction, supply and retention especially of early childhood teachers
- quality of the workforce

¹ ACECQA 2021 *Consultation on a Ten Year National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2021-30)*

² Goodfellow, J. (2007) 'Childcare provision: Whose responsibility? Who pays?' *Kids Count: Better early childhood education and care in Australia*, p. 248 and Productivity Commission (2014) *Childcare and Early Childhood Learning and Inquiry Report*, Volume 2, p.310. ; Pascoe S, Brennan D (2017) *Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions*.

³ OECD (2017), *Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264276116-en>, p. 101.

⁴ Torii K, Fox S & Cloney D (2017). Quality is key in Early Childhood Education in Australia. Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 01/2017. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne. Available from: www.mitchellinstitute.org.au, p. iii.

- declining enrolments in vocational education courses approved by the National Quality Framework
- increasing waivers from operators in regard to minimum qualifications of staff
- diversity of ownership and management models of providers

The Current Workforce

The TICCS surveys⁵ over the eight years of the implementation of the National Quality Framework (NQF) show that the community children's services sector has been successful in increasing the qualifications profile of its workforce. The proportion of educators with no qualifications has declined over the life of the NQF from 12% to only 3%. The proportion of educators with a diploma has grown from 34% to 40% and the proportion of 4 year bachelor degrees in early childhood teaching has grown from 8% to 10%. Those with a post-graduate qualification have increased from 1.7% to 4%.

The surveys also show a significant increase in educators employed in community children's services who are enrolled in a 4 year degree program in early childhood teaching - up from 20% to 35%.

However the picture is not positive across the sector. The ACECQA Quarterly Snapshot⁶ for the first quarter of 2021 shows that the proportion of services with a waiver of minimum staffing requirements hit an all time high after the final quality improvement in staffing was mandated in 2020 – the requirement for a second Early Childhood Teacher in larger services.

The proportion of services with staffing waivers bounced around between 3 and 5% for the first five years of the NQS while the first two improvements to staffing quality were introduced. The it crept up from 2018 and peaked at 7% after the final improvement was mandated. As at early 2021 it is still at 6%. The challenge of meeting the minimum staffing standards is felt most acutely in regional and remote Australia.

The community sector has demonstrated that it is possible to build a skilled and qualified workforce through specific targeted strategies including improved pay and access to professional development. Three-quarters of not-for-profit services pay higher wages and offer above-award conditions in order to attract and retain skilled and qualified staff. Nearly 90% of non-profit services pay for professional development and release staff to participate during working hours. As a result, most community services reported a majority of educators employed with them for over three years and a growing proportion employed by the same employer for six to ten years (20%) or over ten years (20%).

In contrast ACECQA reports a national average, across all ownership types, of two thirds of the workforce having worked with their current employer for less than four years.

ACECQA also recognises that pay and conditions in the ECEC sector are problematic, especially for educators and childcare centre managers. While early childhood teachers generally earn salaries close to the average for all occupations, centre managers generally earn only 87% of the average of all occupations and vocationally qualified educators earn only 65% of the average for all occupations.

An examination of recruitment websites reveals the large disparities in salaries offered for recent vacancies⁷:

⁵ Reports available at http://ausccs.org.au/?page_id=93

⁶ ACECQA NQF Snapshot Q1 2021 at <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/snapshots>

⁷ Figures taken from Jobted (<https://au.jobted.com/salary/early-childhood-teacher>) and Payscale (<https://www.payscale.com/research/AU/Country=Australia/Salary>) on 19.7.21

A university qualified Early Childhood Teacher working in an early childhood setting may earn up to \$72,000 per year whereas working in a school setting the same teacher can earn up to \$84,000. A diploma qualified early childhood educator may earn up to \$62,000 per year.

Recruitment is challenging. Trends in Community Children's Services Survey reveals that the vast majority of community services found the field of applicants for recent recruitment to be not of a high standard. Most community services reported significant difficulty in recruiting directors/coordinators and degree qualified early childhood teachers.

Difficulties in recruitment of certificate and diploma qualified educators was mostly due to a low number of applicants and poor skill levels of graduates from private registered training organisations.

These difficulties in recruitment are anticipated to be exacerbated in future by a continued growth in the need for qualified ECEC staff and a decrease in new graduates.

Future Demand

ACECQA cites the federal government's employment projections for the five years to 2024:

- an additional 30,000 educators (20% increase)
- an additional 7,000 early childhood teachers (16% increase)

These projections were calculated before the Victorian Government commenced its policy of funding kindergarten programs delivered by qualified early childhood teachers for all children aged three, creating an additional demand in Victoria for 4,000 teachers and 2,000 educators by 2029⁸.

The critical shortage of early childhood teachers has not been adequately addressed. This is already impacting the early childhood education and care sector and is being felt most acutely by providers of long day care.

An industry skills forecast in 2019 by SkillsIQ identified key challenges in the projected growth of the workforce including attraction and retention of staff and the need for on-going professional development⁹. Specific skill development anticipated included areas of high priority in broader Australian Government social policy:

- Prevention of institutional child sexual abuse
- Raised awareness and understanding of the complexity of family violence, including intersectional approaches
- Familiarity with matters of Aboriginal cultural significance
- Pedagogical leadership
- Reflective practice
- Communication with families, peers and allied health professionals

Investment in workforce skills and qualifications is essential to build these capacities so that early childhood services can actively support broader government social policy goals.

⁸ State of Victoria 2021 (Department of Education and Training) *Working together to Build Victoria's Early Childhood Education Workforce*

⁹ SkillsIQ 2019 *Children's Education and Care Industry Reference Committee Industry Skills Forecast*

Future Supply

The flow of new graduates from both vocational training and higher education is not expected to keep pace with the growth in demand due to decreases in both enrolments and completion rates for qualifications mandated by the NQF.

ACECQA cites figures from 2019 which show a 13% reduction in enrolments for vocational early education courses compared with the average for 2015-2018. Similarly, enrolments for early childhood teachers in 2018 was 4% less than the average for 2015-2017.

The completion rate for vocational qualifications approved by the NQF is higher, at 60%, than the completion rate of 52% for all vocational qualifications. However, completion rates for early childhood teachers are low – less than half (41%) complete their qualification compared with 54% of school teaching students and 55% of all higher education courses.

The growing crisis in the capacity of the early childhood sector to meet the qualifications requirements of the NQF can be averted by government policy to support pay equity for educators and strategic investment in pre-service and in-service training for educators and early childhood teachers.

2. Confirm on-going commitment to the National Quality Framework to continue building quality standards beyond 2020

The key objective of the national Early Childhood Development Strategy – Investing in the Early Years produced by COAG in 2009 was 'by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation.'¹⁰

The reform of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector under this Strategy has created for the first time a uniform quality assurance system applied across all states and territories, to all forms of early education and care (child care and preschool/kindergarten), underpinned by wise curriculum frameworks and delivered by qualified educators.

Now fully implemented, the National Quality Standards have delivered continuous improvement in the quality of ECEC throughout Australia. Understandings of the purpose and benefits of ECEC have broadened beyond supporting parents to work to include the clear lifelong benefits to the child of learning in a high quality environment and economic returns to society.

But Australia cannot rest on its laurels. Pressure continues to be asserted for a reduction in the quality standards and a return to a singular focus on supporting workforce participation for parents. The implementation of the NQF requires ongoing government support and commitment to maintaining and improving quality standards.

Current funding for Regulatory Authorities does not allow for regular assessment of all services with more frequent assessments for services with lower ratings. For example the Victorian authority reports assessing only 24% of early childhood education and care services in 2019¹¹; this suggests that services will be assessed only every four years.

ACCS calls for future National Partnership Agreements to ensure adequate funding for assessments so that all services can be assessed as follows:

- those previously assessed as Exceeding National Quality Standard – at least every 3 years
- those assessed as Meeting National Quality Standard – at least every 2 years
- those assessed as Working Towards National Quality Standard – at least annually
- all new services assessed within 12 to 18 months of opening with one spot check within the first 6 months

The Evidence

Australia has not conducted large longitudinal studies of the impact of quality standards in ECEC on outcomes for children and so must rely on international studies in similar countries. A review of international evidence¹² conducted in 2016 found strong, robust research evidence that higher quality standards in ECEC are linked to:

- Higher cognitive and socio-behavioural outcomes

¹⁰ COAG (2009) *Investing in the Early Years – a national early childhood development strategy* p.13

¹¹ Education Department Victoria *Quality Assessment and Rating Division Annual Report 2019*

¹² Siraj, I et al (2016) *Fostering Effective Learning: A review of the current international evidence considering quality in early childhood education and care programmes – in delivery, pedagogy and child outcomes* University of Wollongong

- Positive effects apparent at the end of primary school
- Higher achievements in mathematics, science and socio-behavioural outcomes at 14 and 16 years of age

Furthermore, research evidence indicates that:

- The quality of children's relationships with carers and teachers in their pre-school experiences predicts positive teacher-child relationships and children more likely to say that they enjoy attending school
- Higher quality relationships at age 2 and 3 years predicts greater task attentiveness and emotional regulation in formal schooling

The Trends in Community Children's Services Survey research shows that the National Quality Framework continues to be successful in meeting its purpose of lifting the quality of early childhood education and care for Australia's children:

- The vast majority of community children's services are meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard (43% of respondents rated by ACECQA as Exceeding and 44% rated as Meeting National Quality Standard)
- Not for profit community services operate with higher than prescribed ratios of educators to children and attract and retain skilled educators with higher than prescribed qualifications, at better than minimum wages and conditions

Highlights reported by services for the previous 12 months include educators regularly engaging in reflective practice and services continuing to respond to children and families during the COVID-19 pandemic with an increased focus on meeting children's individual needs.

The National Quality Standard assessment and rating system is driving quality improvement. Community services do, however, continue to report challenges in meeting the standards - increased paperwork, insufficient time to complete the tasks required, inability to recruit staff with the required qualifications, inadequate wages and lack of professional recognition for educators.

Quality is improving broadly across the sector as shown in the recent ACECQA quarterly snapshot of its quality assessments in the ECEC sector. *National Quality Framework Snapshot Q1 2021* shows that the vast majority of ECEC services are now meeting or exceeding the national quality standards. The highest rates of operation at a standard *exceeding* the national quality standards are in those services operated by independent schools, state/territory and local governments and not-for-profit community groups.

The highest rates of operation at a level *below* national quality standards are in services operated by state/territory government schools and private for-profit organisations.

So the first ACECQA Snapshot after completion of implementation of the Standards shows that compliance is improving. However the task is not yet completed – in the first quarter of 2021 there were still nearly 6,000 ECEC services across Australia not meeting the Standards and most concerning, nearly 100 services in need of significant improvement. This means they may not be fit for purpose.

The National Quality Framework is improving quality delivery in early childhood education and care services which flows on to improved education and life course outcomes for the children attending these services. While it is still too early to quantify these improved outcomes for children there is related indicative evidence that child outcomes are being enhanced. The Mitchell Institute has summarised these initial pieces of evidence.

- “Australian Early Childhood Development Census research snapshots show that children who attend preschool are less likely to be developmentally vulnerable children from disadvantaged backgrounds had a less than 30 per cent chance of being developmentally vulnerable if they attended preschool, compared to a 40 per cent chance if they did not (Australian Government, 2014).
- “The advantage of early education is maintained throughout schooling with the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children confirming that children who attend preschool score higher on Year 3 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy tests, even after controlling for their personal circumstances.” (Warren and Haisken-DeNew, 2013)
- “In 2012, Australian children with a year of pre-primary education scored 27 points more in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) than children who did not attend preschool. This represents an additional six months of learning (OECD, 2015).”¹³

It is vital that the next Australian government commits to consolidating the gains achieved by the National Quality Framework and to investing in new initiatives that will build on the quality of early childhood experiences. Only then will it be possible to genuinely claim that all Australian children have the best start in life.

¹³ O’Connell M, Fox S, Hinz B and Cole H (2016). ‘Quality Early Education for All: Fostering, entrepreneurial, resilient and capable leaders’, Mitchell Institute policy paper No. 01/2016. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne. Available from: www.mitchellinstitute.org.au, p. 7.

3. All children and families including those of non-working parents, are eligible for subsidised high quality early childhood education and care for at least 2 days per week

The Child Care Subsidy Work Activity Test limits access to quality ECEC for children of non-working parents. The Test is broad and should enable many families without regular paid work to use hours of related upskilling, or unpaid activities such as volunteering, to be eligible for subsidised care. Nonetheless, ACCS is deeply concerned about those families who, for many reasons, (including family and domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health issues, intergenerational unemployment and/or low/no levels of literacy), are not able to meet the work activity test and may not be eligible for Additional Child Care Subsidy.

Non-working families are often those experiencing the greatest vulnerability and disadvantage; and it is the children of these families who have the most to gain from early childhood education and care attendance – not only from immediate child protection factors and enhancement of wider child well-being, but also medium term gains in relation to school readiness and longer term gains in relation to life course satisfaction and health.

The Evidence

The leading research body Centre for Community Child Health has concluded “we are starting to appreciate how risks can escalate over time; with early adverse experiences and outcomes increasing the risk for later adverse experiences and outcomes”¹⁴.

The greatest brain development occurs in the first five years of life, with 80% of brain development occurring in the period from birth to 3 years. If a child commences school developmentally vulnerable it is challenging for these children to catch up to their peers who are not developmentally vulnerable¹⁵.

“... a poor start to life in the first 1000 days may be the start of a cascade of events that reinforce earlier neurological and biological adaptations. What is undisputed is that reversing early adverse adaptations or inheritances gets progressively harder after the first 1000 days. While it is never too late to make changes, the first and best opportunity we have to build strong foundations for optimal development is during the first 1000 days.”¹⁶

Access to quality early childhood education and care is a strong mitigating factor against disadvantage, particularly for children who are not exposed to rich home learning environments. “All children benefit from access to high-quality early education, especially in the year before school, but children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit more (Heckman, 2008; Harrison et al 2012)”¹⁷.

¹⁴ Moore, T.G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., Keyes, M. & West, S. (2017). *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper – Summary*. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, p. 1.

¹⁵ Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016), *From Best Practice to Breakthrough Impacts: A Science-based Approach a More Promising Future for Young Children and Families*. Australian Early Development Census (undated), *Brain development in children*, p. 1.

¹⁶ Moore, T.G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., Keyes, M. & West, S. (2017). *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper – Summary*. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, p. 3.

¹⁷ O’Connell M, Fox S, Hinz B and Cole H (2016). ‘Quality Early Education for All: Fostering, entrepreneurial, resilient and capable leaders’, Mitchell Institute policy paper No. 01/2016. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne. Available from: www.mitchellinstitute.org.au, p. 6.

4. Children and families experiencing vulnerability including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are eligible for at least two days per week of fully subsidised access without going through the Additional Child Care Subsidy processes

The Evidence

The Australian Early Developmental Census is a nationwide survey of children in their first year of full-time school which is conducted every three years; 2018 was the fourth wave of the survey. Teachers of children in their first year of school complete a survey for each child over five domains. These domains are:

- physical health and well-being
- social competence
- emotional maturity
- language and cognitive skills and
- communication skills and general knowledge

These domains are key predictors of effective learning and academic success, and of overall health and well-being in later years.

In 2018 one in five children commenced formal school developmentally vulnerable in one of more domains and one in ten children commenced school identified as vulnerable in two or more domains¹⁸.

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families are particularly at risk. Recent analysis of preschool attendance and developmental vulnerability for children from CALD families¹⁹ shows that twice as many of these children do not attend preschool than children from non-CALD families and they are more likely to be developmentally delayed on school entry. Attendance at preschool by children from CALD families reduces the likelihood of developmental delay (from 33% to just 20%).

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2020 includes several targets and outcomes focussed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children engaging in high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education in their early years²⁰.

The Trends in Community Children's Services Survey research shows that not for profit community children's services are working closely with the wider community and are seeing an increase the percentage of families who are experiencing vulnerability – half of the respondents reported an increase in children experiencing vulnerability in 2021. They report that the main barrier to participation by these families is fees and call for free ECEC without the onerous process of accessing Additional Child Care Subsidy so that the children can benefit from the stable and supportive environment in ECEC. Services also reported an increase in families experiencing mental health issues and family violence.

¹⁸ <https://www.aedc.gov.au/early-childhood/findings-from-the-aedc> accessed 9.7.21

¹⁹ Settlement Services International (2021) *Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures: Exploring trends in the early development of children from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia* Occasional Paper no. 3 March 2021

²⁰ <https://www.niaa.gov.au/indigenous-affairs/education/early-childhood-development> accessed 9.7.21

Return on investment

There are significant returns across a range of domains including gross domestic product both short and long term, social capital, health, justice, individual and family well-being, and future workforce preparedness from investing in quality early childhood education and care services delivered by skilled and qualified early childhood teachers and educators.

Considerable research on the economic benefits of early childhood education and care is international and shows benefit cost ratios varying from 2.62 to 17.07 for every dollar spent, with some of these benefits still impacting 20 years after the early childhood education and care participation²¹.

Australian modelling by PwC in 2014 showed that the Australian economy benefits significantly when children participate in quality early learning. The GDP impacts are:

- benefits for children receiving a quality education and care program are \$10.3 billion cumulative to 2050
- benefits of increased participation of vulnerable children whose parents are in the lowest income bracket are \$13.3 billion cumulative to 2050
- benefits of increased female workforce participation are \$6 billion cumulative to 2050

When PwC attributed the benefits and costs, modelling low and high productivity increases, the net fiscal benefit for the three impacts combined was estimated to be a saving to government of between \$1.6 billion and \$1.9 billion in net present value terms²².

The economic benefits of early childhood education and care participation cannot be viewed as a short term cost; there are medium and long term gains to be had when children attend quality early childhood education and care.

Pascoe and Brennan (2017) summarised these benefits including economic and social and emotional outcomes that accrue from this participation. These benefits are to the individual who participated, as well as to their broader community and to governments. The following table shows these accruals.

Table: Economic effects of quality early childhood education

OUTCOME	Timing of effect	Who accrues the benefit?		
		Participants	Governments	Society
Reduced child abuse and neglect	Childhood	+	+	
Improved school readiness	Adulthood	(+)	(+)	
Higher achievement tests	Adulthood	(+)	(+)	
Reduced special education use	School years		+	
Reduced grade retention	School years		+	
Increased high school graduation	Adulthood	(+)	+	
Increased higher education attainment	Adulthood	-	-	
Higher earnings and taxes paid	Adulthood	+	+	

²¹ Pascoe S, Brennan D (2017) *Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions*, p. 41.

²² PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). (2014). *Putting a value on early childhood education and care in Australia*. Australia: PwC, pgs. 4-5.

Reduced crime	Adolescence to adulthood		+	+
Reduced welfare use	Adolescence to adulthood	-	+	
Improved health and health behaviours	Adolescence to adulthood	+	+	+

Note: + denotes a favourable effect; – denotes an unfavourable effect. Parentheses indicate monetisable effect is indirect, i.e. through linkages to later outcomes.

Source: Phillips, D, et al. (2017), *Puzzling it out: The current state of scientific knowledge on pre-kindergarten effects – A consensus statement*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/puzzling-it-out-the-current-state-of-scientific-knowledge-on-pre-kindergarten-effects/> in Pascoe S, Brennan D (2017) *Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions*, p. 43.

Investing in quality early childhood education and care benefits not only the children attending these services, but also their families and the communities in which they live. In addition our nation benefits from wider social capital gains such as enhanced life course trajectories and health outcomes; and from economic gains in the short, medium and longer term.

It just makes good sense to invest in quality early childhood education and care.