

Submission:

Response to the Australian Labor Party's 'Child Care Blueprint'

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General Response

We agree that the current provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services is hampered by serious quality, accessibility and affordability problems. We welcome Labor's stated commitment to address these problems.

We feel that in many areas, the blueprint lacks detail to support Labor's proposed initiatives. With more detail, the Blueprint could engender greater confidence in, and support for, specific proposals.

We also are concerned by what we see as key omissions from Labor's Blueprint, in particular:

- A focus on early childhood education as a profession. The Blueprint appears to frame early childhood education as technocratic rather than professional work. In doing so, the Blueprint does not acknowledge or address significant barriers to quality i.e. a shortage of early childhood teachers and variable state regulations that do not value university qualified early childhood teachers
- The Blueprint emphasises 'workforce participation', but does not acknowledge the rights of children to early childhood education. Many families use early education services due to their belief in the benefits for their children and family, rather than their work commitments. Many staff and teachers believe that their work with children should be available to all children in society, and that it should not be the 'second-best' option for children whose parents have decided to return to paid work.

The recently released "Childcare: A Better Policy Framework for Australia", sponsored by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, supports both these principles.

(www.familypolicyroundtable.com.au)

The childcare shambles (pp.2-3)

We appreciate the importance a child's early years has on their future development. Nonetheless, we would like to see Labor's policy balance a positioning of children as human capital with a view to positioning them to be of value now.

We disagree with your statement on page 3 that "it's important for children to start school ready to learn". This renders the **education** in early childhood as simply preparatory, when research clearly demonstrates that social learning and education begins from birth. We may be referred to as prior to school, but not prior to learning.

We suggest that the language of 'parents' used in policy documents and public speeches be inclusive of the variety of family types and structures in.

Proposed Strategic Responses:

- Incorporate the value and rights of children now
- Balance addressing workforce participation with the rights of children to access early childhood education
- View early childhood education as a valuable experience in itself, rather than an opportunity for working parents, or as a way to 'prepare' children for schooling
- Consider the perspectives of early childhood teachers and staff
- Utilise current theory and research to underpin policy

Care for Kids: Labor's blueprint (pp.3-4)

Labor has a good understanding of the concerns parents of young children face. We again welcome Labor's intent to comprehensively address problems of quality, accessibility and affordability.

Improving childcare quality (pp. 4-7)

We were pleased to see that a significant portion of the blueprint focused on this area.

We agree that robust regulatory systems promote quality standards and that the current Quality Improvement and Accreditation System is "not good enough" (p. 4). We welcome Labor's plan to conduct a comprehensive independent review of the value and effectiveness of the current system.

However, other than this planned review, the Blueprint is vague as to how Labor will go about instigating "a better system" that will "ensure quality" (p. 4). For example, it states that "We will work with State and Territory governments to cut duplication and lift standards and quality up to the nation's best practice" (p.4) and on p.5, "we will ensure that national accreditation

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deals with the vital indicators of quality, including carer qualifications, staff turnover, educational content and opportunities for physical development”.

Questions arising from these statements are:

- Will Labor merge current state regulations and quality assurance systems into one regulatory framework?
- What does Labor see as “best practice”?
- Will Labor introduce national standards that reflect current research?

A “better system” must be based on regulations that have structural standards – in particular, teacher qualifications (with a specific focus on university qualifications), staff to child ratios, group sizes and positive, enduring relationships between children, educators and families – that are consistent with what current research clearly tells us contributes to quality care. This is currently a stark omission from Labor’s current Blueprint.

We are concerned that the ALP Blueprint devalues the importance of early childhood teachers (university qualified) and is contrary to the blueprint’s stated goal of raising the status of early childhood professionals. Furthermore, we are perplexed that the policy does not acknowledge the importance of meaningful relationships staff have with family and the local community.

The Blueprint states that Labor will “guarantee high quality” (p.4) if elected to government. It would be important to specify for whom. The current system places all responsibility and liability on early childhood educators and the system is certainly not high quality for them. Current shortages may well be linked to excessive responsibility and overregulation. We suggest that you consider not just the families you target as votes, but also early childhood professionals.

There is widespread concern and conjecture in the field that quality concerns may be linked to what is regarded as the *corporatisation of children’s services*. This issue requires a commitment to further research, with a view to reform of current policy. We would like to see Labor adopt a policy that actively develops publicly funded not-for-profit centres for children.

Proposed strategic responses:

That the ALP commits to incorporating these known contributors to quality:

- Qualified teachers
- Lower staff to child ratios and small group sizes
- Consistency of permanently employed educators to ensure best learning and teaching
- Quality programs involving far more than “finger-paint, stimulating colours and egg cartons”
- A critical curriculum that is based on social issues/social justice

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We also suggest that the ALP incorporate into its Blueprint a response to the recently released National Review of Child Care Standards.

The Social Justice In Early Childhood group is concerned by what appears to be a lack of current early childhood educational research and theory to underpin the philosophy and approach of the Blueprint. To increase the ALP's knowledge and understanding of contemporary approaches within the field, members of the Social Justice in Early Childhood Group would be willing to continue to assist the ALP refine their policy.

We agree that "Australia needs an experienced, highly motivated and well rewarded childcare workforce" (p.5) to boost quality standards. Research clearly shows that qualified teachers are an essential contributor of quality care, and yet there is a shortage of qualified teachers in Australia. Whilst Labor's waiving of TAFE fees for eligible early childhood courses is welcome, this policy needs to be extended to cover university early childhood teaching degrees. We also suggest that current staff without tertiary early childhood teaching qualifications be supported to achieve this. An email was sent to Jenny Macklin on August 6, requesting clarification as to whether the HECS relief policy might be extended to early childhood university teaching degrees. We have yet to receive a response.

We would appreciate further information on Labor's strategy to "make sure that childcare workers are properly paid" (p.6). We also request that Labor seeks to make working conditions and remuneration of early childhood teachers (who could choose to teach in primary schools) comparable to teachers working in the schools system.

We welcome Labor's intention to "raise the status of childcare professionals" (p. 6). Giving early childhood professionals secondment opportunities into early childhood policy roles sounds an interesting and potentially worthwhile initiative. We believe, however, that if the status of early childhood staff is to increase, strategies that promote the importance of early childhood teachers as significant contributors to quality standards of care, and which address teacher shortages and high turnover rates, need to be incorporated into the Blueprint.

Further, we are perplexed by the Blueprint's seeming contradiction regarding the status of early childhood teachers. The policy states that "there are few career paths beyond managing a centre, and there are many frustrations along the way" (p.5), at the same time promising to address the issue of finding good, experienced staff and recruiting them for longer. We believe that the most important positions in the early childhood field are those where people are working directly with children. In fact, it could be argued that career progression ought to involve being promoted to working in the classroom, rather than moving out of it. There are many outstanding teachers who take great pride in their classroom teaching and find early childhood education intellectually rigorous work. If the ALP aims to engineer a "smart system", the Blueprint must consider the early childhood profession as having the same status as primary school teaching.

Increasing childcare places (pp.7-9)

We are concerned that the plan to establish 260 new early childhood centres (p.7) falls well short of the ACTU's call for Federal government investment of 1,000 new early childhood services. Also, we are unclear as to how 260 new centres will translate to up to 25,000 extra places. The Blueprint does not address the problem of oversupply in some areas, and undersupply in others.

We support the idea of multifunction early childhood services in school grounds. There are many benefits apart from saving parents' time to drop off and pick up children from several places. There is existing infrastructure that, in some cases, with minimum alteration can serve as early childhood services. Additionally, schools should be a focal point of community life. Much more needs to be done, however, for early childhood services to meet demand.

We support Labor's commitment to fund local governments to develop one stop waiting lists (p. 9).

We are concerned about the relationship between corporate children's services and the plan for new places. How will Labor ensure that these places are not a new improved venture for corporate children's services? How does this fit in the "smart system"?

ALP claims that "people choose a career in childcare because they love kids". Love, however, is not enough. In the early childhood community, this kind of language is referred to as reductive of the profession of early childhood education. Consider the commitment early childhood professionals share towards social change, building community capacity and professional participation in the workforce. Consider also the implications for women and the stereotypes associated with early childhood education such as 'mothering', and consider the implications for men working in early childhood education and the stereotypes associated with it, such as the accusation of sexual abuse. Love is not enough, and we are compelled to emphasise this point.

Making child care more affordable (pp. 9-11)

We are concerned that Labor's proposals may benefit higher income earners and do little or nothing for low income earners. How will costs be contained?

As per ACOSS and the ACTU, what about a policy that provides for up to 20 hours' universal free access to child care for children in the year prior to starting school?

We agree that there should be an "investment" (p.8) in early childhood education. By regulating and deploying university educated early childhood teachers the return on investment would far outweigh the current estimations.

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Children at home

We believe that Labor could better support breastfeeding by introducing paid maternity leave.

We believe that all families deserve the right to paid parental leave including lesbian and gay families.

We agree with the opportunity to request two years paid maternity leave, but require clarification on how the relationships between Labor's IR laws relate to the following statement in the context of return to work: "The employer would be able to refuse the request on reasonable grounds for instance if it would have a detrimental effect in their business". Here the complication between 'child-care' for labour force participation and early childhood education as a right for all children is exposed. What will Labor do to explore this complexity?

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Proposed strategic responses re language use:

ALP	Our Request	Reason
Cheaper (p.11)	Less expensive/ Affordable	
Mums and dads (eg. p.13)	Parents or families	Consider lesbian and gay families, single parent, extended etc
Middle Australia	Australia	Classist
Next generation	Newest generation	They are a generation already
Kids	Children	Respect
Childcare	Early Childhood Education/ Early Childhood Services	Our work is not related to minding children
Care for Kids	Education for Children	
Childcare Sector	Early Childhood Profession	Early childhood teachers (having equal qualifications to those of primary school teachers) are constantly struggling to justify and promote their work with children as requiring a professional approach and capacity
Childcare Workers	Early Childhood Staff (Unqualified or Diploma) Early Childhood Teacher (University Qualified)	
Love children	Committed to early childhood education	Explained earlier
Playroom floor	Working directly with children	This patronises and reduces our work with children

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Family day care businesses	Family day care provisions	We prefer language which promotes 'educational provisions for children' rather than businesses
Childcare Industry	Early Childhood Profession	
Dads/Fathers	Parent in paid work	Many families do not reflect the model promoted in the Blueprint
Marriages	Partnerships/Relationships	Many families do not reflect the model promoted in the Blueprint
Child Development/ Age Appropriate Play	Interactions, Relationships, Experiences, Challenges	Further consultation about contemporary theories and approaches in early childhood education will clarify this request.

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