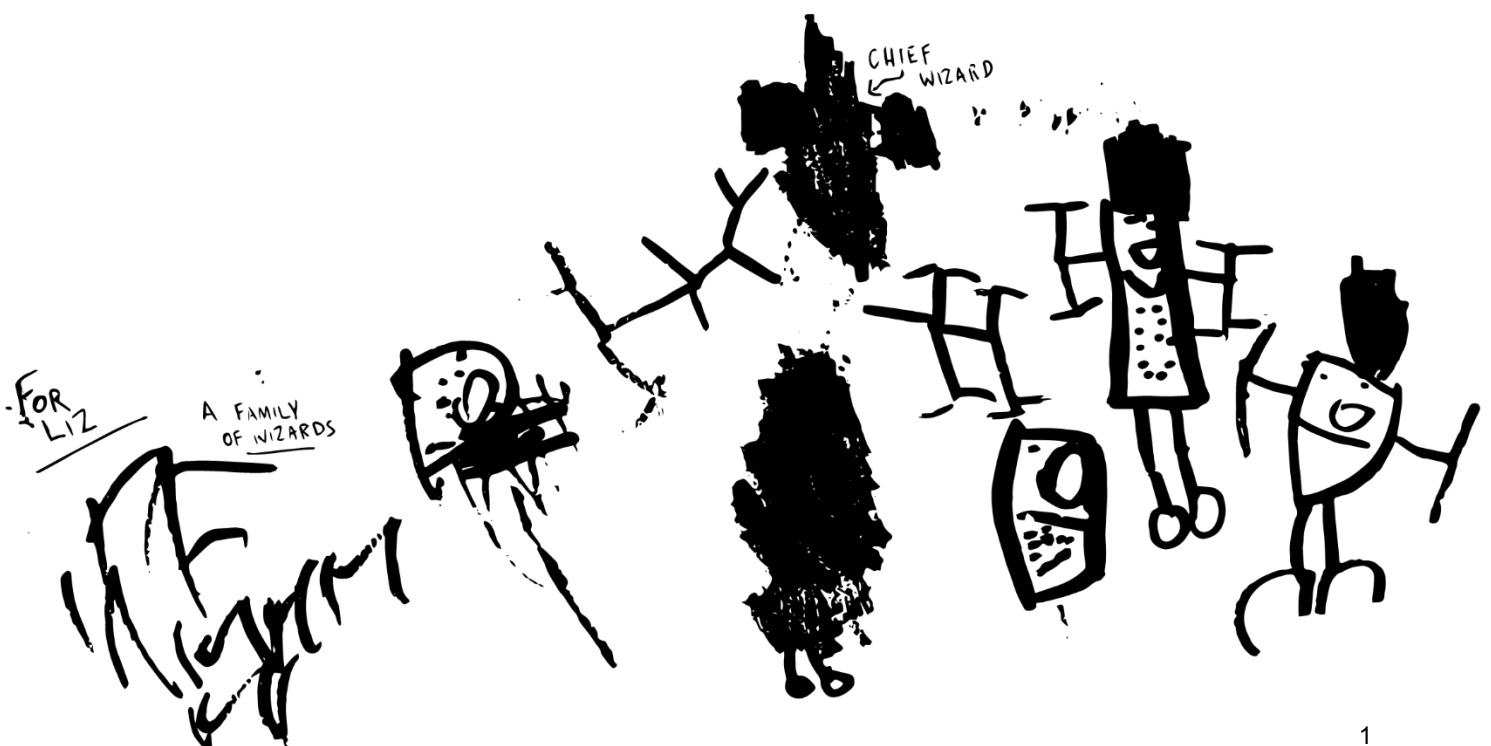




Australian Education Union (SA)

Submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Re. 3 year-olds in preschool



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“A child’s postcode or cultural background should not dictate their level of developmental support – however, this is the case.”¹

The Australian Education Union (SA) represents more than 12,000 members working in South Australian public schools, TAFE and early childhood education/preschools. The AEU emphasises that investment in quality public education, particularly in early childhood, is fundamental to be provided the ‘very best start in life’.² This submission does not focus on advocating for the extension of early childhood education for 3-year-olds but focuses on how this should be executed and matters that must be resolved prior to the proposed introduction of this framework in 2026. Universal access to 2 years of preschool must aspire to meet the needs of every child in South Australia, and should be accessible at their local public preschool, regardless of the site being school based, a centre or a stand-alone preschool.

Universal accessibility means that measures must be implemented to ensure our most vulnerable children are able to access their public preschool with ease.³ Access means that these children should be able to freely and equitably access their right to education by alleviating any costs. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with disabilities or children with special needs, they should be prioritised in the phasing of universal access to two years of preschool education. The privatisation of preschool education will only further place barriers of access and widen the gap between advantaged and vulnerable children, thus capacity to pay must not be a barrier to access preschool education. Any reliance on parental or community fundraising for basic resources must be eliminated. These measures will ensure that universal accessibility is equitable for all children, though it is not the only factor to assure quality in universal preschool programs.

The workforce behind preschool education needs to be one of quality and security. In a time where there is a teacher shortage crisis both state-wide and nationally, considerations must be made about the furthered pressure onto existing (and decreasing) preschool education and early childhood workers by adding a mass cohort of younger children. In an existing teacher shortage, there needs to be more focus on providing quality, free education and upskilling to entice new people to the workforce. With a growing workforce begs the question of retention. The AEU’s position stands that a significant aspect to staff retention is the industrial and support mechanisms that govern their working conditions and salary. There needs to be pathways for progression in employment, and open discussion with existing and new educators with the Government, Department for Education and the AEU on what needs to change, and what more can be done to improve this difficult issue for the sector.

The AEU submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care is based on various consultations with members working in early childhood education and preschools, existing policies from the AEU Federal branch, research and literature. The members who were consulted were from the following areas: Lower Southeast, Metropolitan Adelaide, Adelaide Hills, Murraylands, Port Lincoln, Whyalla, Port Augusta and Port Pirie. There was also an online consultation for members from all parts of South Australia to provide their input. These consultations provided a forum for

¹ The Front Report, *Supporting All Children to Thrive* (Report, 4 May 2022) 4.

² Australian Education Union, *Early Childhood Education Policy* (Policy, 2015) 1.

³ Ibid Cl. 5.1-5.2.

members to discuss issues and considerations, based on their working experience, about opening universal preschool programs to 3-year-olds.

These consultations raised matters that were not unforeseeable to the AEU. At the point of writing this submission, there are still ongoing issues regarding the teacher shortage crisis – one that extends to early education and preschool staff, funding to the public education sector and the foreseeable strain that this proposed rollout will have on an already-thinning workforce. There are also growing concerns about professional development of new and existing staff, and the possibility of leaving the workforce due to the amounting pressure of educating and caring for a younger cohort.

This submission will focus on access to all children, the early childhood workforce and discuss the potential systemic implications of rolling out universal 3-year-old preschool by 2026 by analysing the Victorian Government's rollout of '3-year-old kinder'.

BEST START, BEST LIFE: A RECAP OF THE VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT'S 3-YEAR-OLD KINDERGARTEN ROLLOUT

The Victorian Government reviewed its early education programs and released the *Lifting Our Game* report in 2017.⁴ This report was crucial in the planning and identification of various shortfalls and areas of improvement for the Government prior to the rollout of 3-year-old preschool. The South Australian Government should consider doing the same internal review of its own practices regarding workforce, the state of early childhood education and accountability measures for better education policy-making practices.⁵ This report and analysis on the system provided part of the pathway for the Victorian Government to develop its meticulous 3-year-old preschool rollout. In 2018, the Dan Andrews Labor Government was committed and succeeded in investing almost \$5 billion into the rollout program – the funding was incentivised to fund the growing and existing workforce and the infrastructure that was required to house the new young learners. This was recognised as being crucial to ensuring the program was as seamless as possible, and it is recognised that a well-resourced public education system has the potential to develop highly literate, numerate, actively engaged, resilient and connected members of the wider community.⁶

The program (*'Best Start, Best Life'*) began rollout in 2020, with the prioritisation of rollout being focused on 6 Local Government Areas in rural and regional Victoria, as it was determined through a state-wide survey that these facilities would be more likely to meet the needs of local families.⁷ Further, that these areas were identified as locations where children were more likely to have "less access to educational opportunities".⁸ Another 15 Local Government Areas were funded to rollout the program in 2021, and since 2022, the rest of Victoria has slowly been rolling out the program. The next page shows a map that demonstrates this rollout. All locations will slowly grow to full 15-hour programs for 3-year-old preschool until 2029 and will be fully funded and supported to do so.⁹

⁴ Susan Pascoe and Deborah Brennan, Victorian Government, 'Lifting Our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools Through Early Childhood Interventions' (2017).

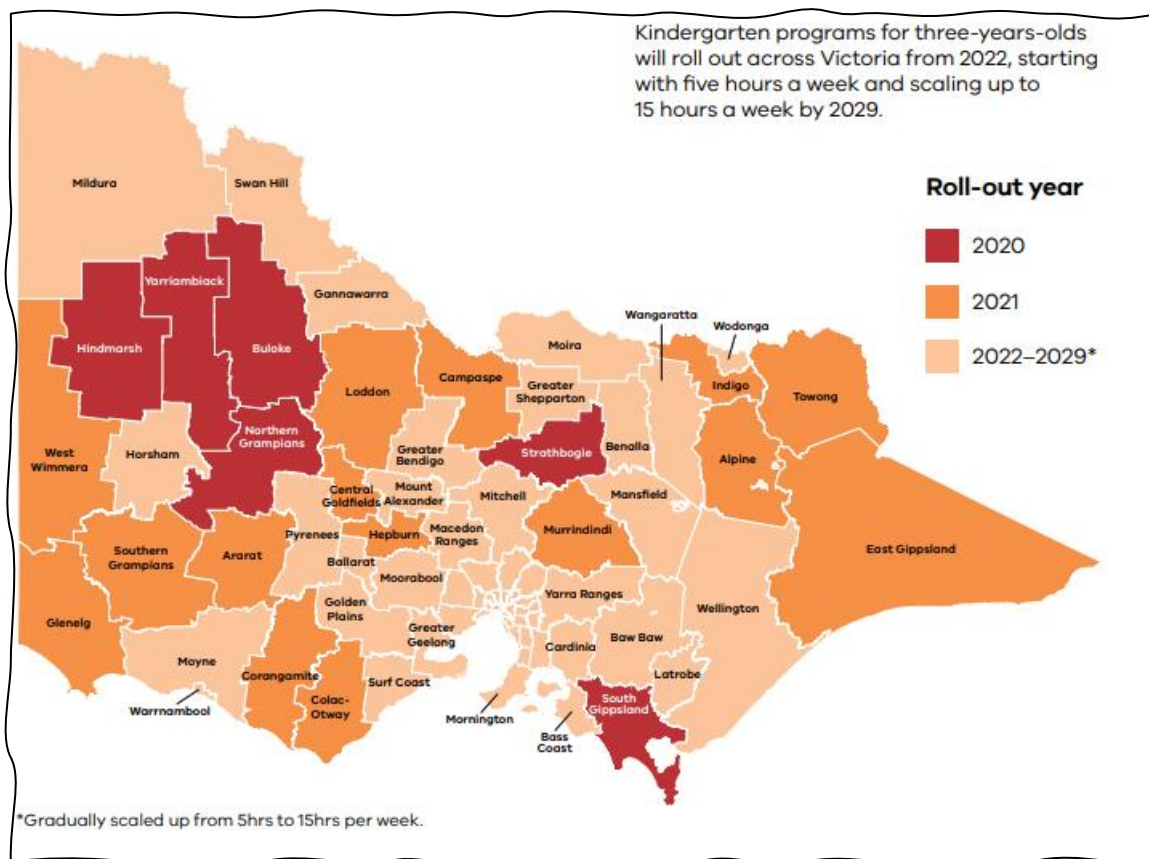
⁵ These are direct recommendations that the *Lifting the Game* report makes for the Victorian Government.

⁶ Australian Education Union, Submission No 45 to House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, Parliament of Australia, *Inquiry into Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Problem-Solving Skills in Australia* (5 March 2021) 12.

⁷ Department of Education (Vic), *Kindergarten for Every Three-Year-Old*, Guide (2020) 2; The survey process is not discussed in the Guide but was from discussion with Cara Nightingale from the AEU Victoria branch.

⁸ Department of Education (Vic), *Three-Year-Old Kindergarten*, Information Sheet (n.d.) 2.

⁹ Ibid.



¹⁰ Figure 1: Map of Victorian Government's rollout of 3-year-old preschool (Department of Education and Training, Victorian Government, 2019).

This 10-year rollout allows for infrastructure to continue building, the workforce to be trained and grow and prioritises the young learners who need the most support with access to education. It also allows for the public system to slowly adapt and not be overwhelmed by an abrupt initiative, with the consistent, ongoing funding ensuring that this rollout is consistent, mitigating any risk to furthering the 'school-readiness' gap of young learners.

On a systematic and governance level, there were various reforms made that have been attributed to the successful rollout. There was strong emphasis on communicating with every 'stakeholder' in the rollout – the workforce, directors of stand-alone preschool sites, local government groups,¹¹ building authorities, the Victorian division of the Australian Education Union,¹² parents and other relevant individuals. This level of communication allowed for better, informed decisions – not ones that were made by individuals who hadn't worked in the system or had limited knowledge of feasibility of infrastructure requirements. There was also strong dissemination of information for nervous parents who were concerned about their two-going-on-3-year-olds beginning preschool, which lowered some

¹⁰ Department of Education (Vic), *Kinder now starts at 3*, Information Sheet (n.d.) 4.

¹¹ Communication would have to be made with partnerships, site leaders and governing councils about governance rather than local government areas in South Australia. See: Department for Education (SA), 'What governing councils do', *Department for Education* (Webpage, 14 October 2022) < <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/working-us/governing-councils/about-governing-councils/what-governing-councils-do>>.

¹² The Victorian branch also represents parts of the private early education and care sector, however in South Australia, consultation would be required with both the Australian Education Union and Independent Education Union.

anxiety about the rollout. The Victorian Government has also provided various information sheets for parents, educators, and stakeholders to ensure that throughout this long-term, complex rollout, all parties are well-informed to the process.

Upon discussion with Cara Nightingale, Deputy Secretary of the Australian Education Union's Victoria Branch, it was flagged that throughout the policy-making process and implementation, it has always been imperative to ensure that the equality of universal early childhood education is not compromised. This includes education for those already in preschools prior to the rollout. It was also mentioned that the thorough communication and consultative process, the ongoing management groups that continue to discuss any foreseeable issues to troubleshoot, and mass support for providers and the workforce have contributed to a well-oiled rollout that will continue to benefit all children across Victoria.

Reviewing a successful rollout that has its own safety net of communication to attempt to mitigate any foreseeable issues demonstrates that the Victorian Government's model is one that South Australia should follow. It demonstrates that secure funding, ongoing workforce support and training, focus on accessibility to education and consistent communication (Union inclusive) are key focal points that any trialling program should implement. Thus begs the question – how can South Australia learn from Victoria's rollout to ensure a universal quality public early education program for 3-year-olds that can be accessible, affordable and alleviate strain from an incredibly strained workforce by 2026?

UNIVERSAL IMPLEMENTATION MEANS UNIVERSAL ACCESS

“Education plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians...”¹³

Children, whether three-years-old or in secondary school, have a right to education on the basis of equal opportunity.¹⁴ However, more than 20% of our nation's 4-5 year-olds are unable to access any high-quality early childhood education (and care), with a lot of barriers to access being more focused in lower socioeconomic areas.¹⁵ If the system is already struggling to cater to children who are eligible to go to preschool, this gap will only increase once universal 3-year-old preschool is introduced. This gap is likely to contribute to the ongoing discrepancy of knowledge, education and development in our young learners that will flow through to the rest of their educational careers.¹⁶

The Australian Early Development Census measures developmental vulnerability in children every 3 years by examining the following domains: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication and general knowledge.¹⁷ A recent study by The Front Project determined that children who were unable to access early childhood education and care were more prone to developmental vulnerability – that is, demonstrating 'red flags' or issues in one or more of the five aforementioned domains. The benefits of two-year preschool program are shown in trends of lower risks of developmental vulnerability in young learners

¹³ Department of Education, Skills and Employment (Cth), *The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, Declaration (18 February 2020) 2.

¹⁴ *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, opened for signature 20 November 1989, 1577 UNTS 3 (entered into force 2 September 1990), Art. 28(1).

¹⁵ The Front Project (n 1) 4.

¹⁶ Australian Education Union (n 6) 11.

¹⁷ The Front Project (n 1) 5; Department of Education, Skills and Employment (Cth), 'Australian Early Development Census', *Department of Education* (Webpage, 17 May 2022) < <https://www.education.gov.au/child-care-package/early-childhood-data-and-reports/australian-early-development-census-aedc>>.

compared to those in one-year programs.¹⁸ There is not only a concern for stunted or difficulty in development during their educational careers, but for the lifelong impact that lack of access to early childhood education can have. For our youngest learners to ‘achieve excellence’,¹⁹ the queries of universal accessibility and affordability of universal quality public early education must be addressed.

ACCESSIBILITY AND EQUITY

Children’s needs have grown more complex and ultimately leaving them ‘not school ready’ when they leave preschool to commence primary school.²⁰ This growing need only becomes more complicated when considering children with special needs, children with complex learning needs, children with disabilities, children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds,²¹ and Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander children. Another layer of this is socioeconomic background and locality – both factors often intersect with the aforementioned groups of children, which only further perpetuates developmental vulnerability. However, having access to universal quality early education has been correlated with significant benefits for vulnerable children, with some studies demonstrating the benefits into adulthood.²² Thus, a fundamental aspect of accessibility needs to ensure that there is equity for all children – not just children in the metropolitan areas or children who are able-bodied with English as a primary dialect – to access these programs.

At the time of writing this submission, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children in care are already able to start preschool at 3 years of age.²³ This is a good policy from the Department. During a ‘rollout’ process where regions are still prioritised based on socioeconomic status, accessibility to the nearest public quality education site, this exception should continue until all regions of South Australia can successfully roll out universal quality 3-year-old preschool. The AEU believes that the 12 hours set out in the policy should be extended to 15 in the intermediate,²⁴ and this exception should be extended to children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds and children from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

As noted, the Victorian Government model introduced their first rollout of the three-year old preschool program in more regional and rural areas – those that had facilities but needed more support with structure and funding to enable further access for young learners. Statistically, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are located more in rural and regional areas compared to metropolitan.²⁵ Notably, these children also face significant disadvantage when accessing early childhood education. There is evidence that demonstrates that our most vulnerable children benefit significantly more from having access to quality two-year preschool programs.²⁶ The benefits of two-year preschool are not in dispute in this submission.

¹⁸ Stacey Fox and Myra Geddes, *Preschool – Two Years are Better than One* (Report No 03/2016, October 2016) 10.

¹⁹ Department of Education, Skills and Employment (Cth) (n 13) 2.

²⁰ Alessia Pivato, Kobie Boshoff and Sarah Seekamp, ‘Exploring South Australian trends in Pre-schoolers’ Development and School Readiness from Preschool Directors’ Perspectives’ (2022) 3(2) *The Allied Health Scholar* 24, 29.

²¹ This includes children who are hard of hearing who use Auslan or other variations of sign language appropriate to their native language.

²² Anthony Shomos, ‘Links Between Literacy and Numeracy Skills and Labour Market Outcomes’ (Working Paper, Productivity Commission, Commonwealth of Australia, August 2010) 4.

²³ Department for Education (SA), *School and preschool enrolment policy* (January 2023) 3, 4.

²⁴ As a maximum, but 12 if the full 15 cannot be met due to staffing concerns or low density of young learners.

²⁵ Sophia Lin et al, ‘Quantifying low English Literacy in Australian Aboriginal communities: a correlational study’ (2021) 48 *The Australian Educational Researcher* 267; Australian Education Union (n 6) 16; The Front Project (n 1) 5.

²⁶ Thomas van Huizen and Janneke Plantenga, ‘Do children benefit from universal early childhood education and care? A meta-analysis of evidence from natural experiments’ (2018) 66(C) *Economics of Education Review* 206.

However, this submission implores that the Royal Commission focuses on ensuring equity among all children, regardless of their residential area, what languages they may speak, what cultural background they are and to remember our children with disabilities when formulating any program or infrastructure. All children should have the opportunity to get the most support possible to get the best start for the rest of their lives.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Prioritisation of providing universal quality pre-school programs for three-year-olds for our most vulnerable learners in the initial rollout is fundamental to ensure the gap between vulnerable and 'least' vulnerable children begins to close, regardless of postcode.

At various consultations, members raised concern about a rigid and tightly structured universal 3-year-old preschool program. As will be discussed later, members raised that they had pre-existing programs for their 4-year-olds that they felt worked well, and wanted that to remain, concerned that a new cohort of 3-year-olds would uproot their progress after years of initiatives and enrolment changes. Some members liked their maintained session times, others expressed that their site that already had three- and 4-year-olds had separate programs and sessions, and that should be consistent with the rollout. A general concern was how 3-year-olds would handle 15 hours of play-based learning a week, thus considerations should be made towards adaptable programs and curriculum to cater to age-based needs.

As noted throughout the submission, universal quality early childhood education in the public sector needs to be equitable and accessible for all children. Sites, educators and support staff will have differing views of what is required in a program based on their community needs and experience from being on the ground every day – far more than what we could recommend, and feedback that a governing body would need to understand. Thus, educators and carers who work at sites should have key roles in formulating programs that work in their site's context. In a system where educators are feeling more powerless and less heard by paternalistic measures, it is vital to ensure that workers in early education – one major pathway into a child's development – are included in decision-making.

For example, in our rural and regional sites, there are circumstances where the preschool site is the only site that can care for children (while supervised for preschool), and based on their community needs, will run 'rural care' to prevent parents from driving to the next town over for childcare. This care is extended for children younger than 3. This is staffed by Early Childhood Workers, not teachers, with ratios in class varying with the quantity of children per age group. Requiring a compulsory, full-load of 3-year-olds without consideration to infrastructure and staffing, particularly for rural and regional areas that are often forgotten in planning of these programs will continue to further the education gap between our rural and metropolitan learners.²⁷ If a rigid program is in place, it would require community-based, grassroots programs to discontinue, requiring educators, carers, working parents, guardians and other relevant parties to disrupt their usual routine to make way for a new one. A key part of accessibility is to ensure that everyone, not just our children, have a chance to be part of a working, quality system.

Rigid programs will only continue to place strained sites in difficult situations, as they would need to change whatever programs they have successfully maintained to fit whatever uniform scheme may be set out. Thus, it is fundamental that whatever program for universal quality 3-year-old preschool is

²⁷ Helen Stokes, John Stafford and Roger Holdsworth, *Rural and Remote School Education: A Survey for the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission* (Report, 1999) 59.

developed, there must be flexibility for each individual site to contextualise and maintain its own needs. Any paternalistic approach to programs should be avoided.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Any rollout strategy for universal quality three-year-old public preschool must be rigid in its objectives, but flexible so that each site is able to contextualise the strategy to best suit the community's needs, desires and wants.

Regarding infrastructure and equity, a crucial aspect of this rollout is to ensure that there is sufficient space that is fit-for-purpose to facilitate and cater to needs of both three-and-4-year-olds. When members discussed 'fit-for-purpose', they emphasised that it was not only to ensure that there was enough space to house two cohorts of children, but to cater to the needs of a younger learner. This included facilities to change nappies, toilet training, increased areas for play which catered to 3-year-old learning and general amenities.

For children with disabilities or additional/complex needs, the AEU understands that the policy is that they can attend preschool earlier "if there are places available", at the discretion of the principal (school-based) or director (stand-alone).²⁸ Depending on criteria, children may also be eligible for additional support.²⁹ The Department for Education provides a list of sites that are able to specialise for particular complex needs and disabilities of young learners, which can be useful for caregivers and parents who require more information of their options.³⁰ As will be discussed in the 'workforce' section, the AEU understands the difficulty for preschool providers to be part of early intervention for developmental delays or learning difficulties, catering to all different types of disabilities while also providing non-specialised programs. The workforce is strained, and there is difficulty in finding specialist staff in the public sector.

Nonetheless, the AEU implores that more is done to provide more accessible (i.e., more sites across the state) locations for families to reduce geographical disadvantage for programs that can help these young learners develop. This exceeds merely linking providers to pre-existing long-day-care sites, there needs to be more development to provide more stand-alone preschools and preschools linked with public schools – whichever provides more space and accessibility for young learners and the workforce.

RECOMMENDATION 3

That audits of every site in South Australia are conducted well in advance to assess each site's needs, what infrastructure is in place, and how all infrastructure (existing and future) can comfortably handle new capacities, age-appropriate for both cohorts and the entire space is fit-for-purpose for all children.

²⁸ Department for Education (SA), 'When your child can start preschool', *Department for Education* (Webpage, 25 January 2023) < <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/parents-and-families/enrol-school-or-preschool/preschool-and-kindergarten-enrolment/when-your-child-can-start-preschool>>.

²⁹ Ibid; Department for Education (SA), 'Disability support at preschool and kindergarten' (Webpage, 22 November 2022) < <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/parents-and-families/health-and-disability-support/disability-support-preschool-and-kindergarten>>.

³⁰ Ibid.

For our nervous parents of 3-year-olds who will start preschool in 2026, there needs to be a substantive, ongoing dissemination of information that can be accessible for all families (to the best of the Government’s ability) through various modes of communication. Members raised concern that yet another change to the preschool program would continue the growing distrust between family, Department and early education provider. The appropriate way to address and action this concern is to provide accessible and consistently updated materials to provide for families and caregivers to understand the phasing-in of 3-year-old preschool, as well as updates on the program as it commences. It should be distributed online and via paper, to increase access for those without stable internet or technology. As 19% of South Australian households speak languages other than English,³¹ these materials should be distributed in various languages to maximise understanding and accessibility – this will provide confidence for families and caregivers of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse children.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Dissemination of information for parents of three-year-old learners regarding the universal quality preschool program is done as soon as feasibly possible. Ensuring that parents are consistently in the loop with information about rollouts and programs will increase confidence in sending their children to quality public education sites. This information must be translated to as many different languages as possible to maximise accessibility.

AFFORDABILITY AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The AEU expresses concern of the growing interest in allowing the private sector to engulf a major proportion of funding to continue their ongoing programs. That is not to state that they should not be able to provide any early childhood learning or care, but that they should not be the pilot for the new program for all children. A State Government’s objective should be to provide the most pristine public services as feasibly possible, and delegating any responsibility for the private sector to develop would only allow for our strained public system to continue to lose its quality. This subsequently impacts young learners in the public system, who are unable to attain the amount of funding they deserve compared to their for-profit peers.³² The true pathway to accessibility, as this submission has emphasised, is quality, free (or low-cost) quality public preschool. Children’s education should not be an incentivisation for profit – it should be for their development and wellbeing. Thus, the Government should be responsible for paying for 3-year-old preschool (as well as 4-year-old), or heavily subsidise costs so that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are not disadvantaged by a paywall.

“Education is an investment for the rest of the child’s life. The benefit of return of investing in early learning and care is incredibly strong”.³³

The consequences of failing to sufficiently fund the public education sector have been demonstrated – a teacher shortage crisis, strained resources, insufficient funding to support students of all ages with growing complex needs. These consequences have also flowed through to early learning/education.

³¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Quick Stats – South Australia 2021 Census All Persons’, *Australian Bureau of Statistics* (Webpage, 2021) < <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/4>>.

³² Conor Duffy, ‘Australia is an outlier on private schools – but that’s the way many parents like it’, *Australian Broadcasting Corporation News* (Opinion Piece, 30 June 2021) < <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-30/independent-school-parents-satisfied-child-education-austalks/100252260>>.

³³ Amanda Rishworth, ‘The Economic Case for Increased Investment in Early Learning and Care’ (Speech, The McKell Institute, 8 November 2021).

The AEU believes that for-profit sites, inclusive of long day-cares, stand-alone sites and preschools attached to private/independent schools should not receive funding that exceeds the 15-hour allowance. If funding were to be provided to the private sector, transparency reports must be published to demonstrate where funding has gone, to publish how much profit was earned at private sector preschool/early education sites and what proportion went to preschool, and what proportion has gone to care or other services.

The *Preschool Reform Funding Agreement* will still be in effect, up until 30 June 2026, when the proposed rollout is to take place.³⁴ It provides a good pathway to preschool funding, with flexibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs. The AEU calls on the Federal Government to provide more support and funding for states and territories as more rollouts continue for universal quality preschool programs and sites. To cater to building or updating existing infrastructure, training and ongoing development of the workforce and increasing accessibility, there must be ongoing, sufficient funding for the public early education sector for two years of preschool.

RECOMMENDATION 5

The State Government guarantees permanent, secure and reoccurring (annual) funding for public preschool education that will enable for a more comfortable workforce and well-resourced early learning sector that is accessible to all families. This funding must be indexed.

³⁴ Department of Education, Skills and Employment (Cth), *Preschool Reform Agreement – Federal Funding Agreement – Education and Skills*, Schedule (2022).

THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION WORKFORCE

“There are so many shortages now [...] we need to ensure kids don’t fall through the cracks.”

- Member from Acacia Preschool (Mount Gambier)

As noted, the AEU SA Branch held various consultative sessions across various regions of South Australia to consult with both members and non-members about their early childhood learning sites. The members were asked the following questions:

1. What’s working really well in your preschool that you want to maintain if 3-year-old preschool is adopted in South Australia?
2. What are your concerns should South Australia adopt a policy of 3-year-olds in preschool? and
3. What would be needed to address these concerns and make it successful?

Below are some comments of what members across South Australia identified as strengths of the current South Australian government administrative arrangements for the 4-year-old preschool program:

- The play-based curriculum
- The current ratios for educators, carers and children
- Playgroups running concurrently with preschool
- Early enrolment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with disabilities, children with complex needs and children in care
- Integrity of the current 4-year-olds program

It should be noted that though members were satisfied with these ‘strengths’, there was consistent emphasis on *more* development needed with these arrangements to reach their full potential. The most common solution was more sufficient and secure funding across the public sector. Other members expressed concern that this would be another temporary ‘trial initiative’ that would strain the understaffed early childhood workforce. It must exceed a mere ‘political exercise’ – the rollout must surpass any change of governmental hands in order to instil confidence in the early childhood workforce.³⁵

The AEU prides itself in representing its members and being able to be the industrial voice that enables progression and change in workplace conditions and culture. We are also advocates for our members – and the entire public education sector. As noted, our members have raised various concerns, often struggling to find solutions given the complex nature of the system, about the rollout. The most consistent point that was made at our consultations was: **How are we going to find the workforce to fill these hours when we can hardly do that as the system is right now, and how are we going to support them when we feel unsupported?**

THE NEED TO SUPPORT, ATTRACT AND RETAIN, AND MAINTAIN QUALITY STAFF

There is a nation-wide teacher shortage crisis that has been the consequence of ‘underbaked’ undergraduates being unprepared for the underfunded, overworked public education sector, inclusive of the early education division. This shortage is one that did not form overnight, but over a decade of underfunding, increasing administrative tasks, increased child complexity and a salary that does not indicate nor appreciate the work educators do. Though the *Preschool Reform Funding Agreement* has

³⁵ Zsuzsa Millei and Jannelle Gallagher, ‘Ad-hoc numbers forming provision and policy: round and round of universal access in an Australian preschool’ (2017) 187(10) *Early Child Development and Care* 1528, 1539.

provided a stepping stone in preschool funding, as recommended, more funding needs to be ongoing, increased and consistent in order for public early education providers to retain their staff. The early education workforce, 88.86% of whom identify as female,³⁶ need to be assured that they can attain permanency in the public system, and without guaranteed indexed and consistent funding, not only can quality education not be provided, but to retain them and not lose our existing workforce.³⁷

The Department for Education's *Preschool Position Statement* discusses the means to provide quality preschool for our young learners. For teachers and educators, the statement specifically states:

“Knowledgeable, skilled and supported teachers and educators ensure each child progresses in their learning and development.”³⁸

If this statement rings true, then we are failing children, as our members voiced that they feel unsupported – both professionally and financially – while navigating countless new initiatives, trying to obtain funding for children with disabilities or complex learning needs, curriculum management and staffing shortages. A qualified and skilled workforce is key to delivering quality preschool programs. A strong workforce strategy which includes secure employment, staff qualifications, educator-to-child ratios, preschool resourcing, group size and educational curriculum are important considerations along with workforce recruitment and retention to provide a sustainable profession for early childhood teachers and educators.

The Victorian Government's model to address this workforce shortage concern was to increase education, training and development funding for those already in the education sector, or anticipatory early education workers and teachers. This included providing free TAFE courses for early education workers,³⁹ increased mentor support for early career educators, and delivering accelerated courses for tertiary courses.⁴⁰ Further, allowing more waivers for final-year tertiary education students to work in early education sites if all other methods of hiring staff were exhausted. In South Australia, all early childhood teachers must be registered with the Teachers' Registration Board of South Australia or have special authorisation.⁴¹

Members have expressed concern with needing fully qualified staff to enter the workplace, and that having a mass influx of special authorisation staff may influence quality in preschools. Special authorisation staff would be supervised by a qualified early learning educator, and having experience would ease them into the system. Consistent professional development and mentoring is non-negotiable to train these special authorisation staff. However, this cannot be a catch-all solution. This is to cater to the short-term demand for early learning educators. Special authorisation must not be

³⁶ Department of Education, Skills and Employment (Cth), *2021 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census report* (Report, 17 August 2022) 61.

³⁷ Australian Education Union, 'High hopes for action on shortages' (Web page, 4 October 2022) <<https://www.aeufederal.org.au/news-media/news/2022/high-hopes-action-shortages>>.

³⁸ Department for Education (SA), *Preschool Position Statement: All young children thriving and learning* (Report, 2022) 8.

³⁹ Which South Australia has already made fee-free as part of the Fee Free TAFE initiative, subject to criteria. See:

TAFE SA, 'Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care', *Government of South Australia* (Webpage, n.d.) <https://www.tafesa.edu.au/xml/course/aw/aw_TP01330.aspx?gclid=CjwKCAiAr4GgBhBFEiwAgwORRdxmXuBpnfJepSIA24L6T56B6ZORGo0YBLwFpu9qYa1Z2qHMqgqBoClp8QAvD_BwE>.

TAFE SA, 'Fee Free TAFE', *Government of South Australia* (Webpage, n.d.) <<https://www.tafesa.edu.au/apply-enrol/admissions-criteria/fee-free>>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Teachers Registration Board of South Australia, 'Special Authority – Early Childhood Teachers' (Webpage, n.d.) <[https://www.trb.sa.edu.au/early-childhood-teachers#:~:text=Early%20Childhood%20Teacher%20Supporting%20Information,to%20practice%20as%20a%20teacher.](https://www.trb.sa.edu.au/early-childhood-teachers#:~:text=Early%20Childhood%20Teacher%20Supporting%20Information,to%20practice%20as%20a%20teacher.;)>; *Teachers Registration and Standards Act 2009* (SA) s 20(1)-(2). S 30(1) of the *Teachers Registration and Standards Act* allows for special authority of non-qualified staff.

used to repair the teacher shortage crisis. The Government must be committed to improving workplace conditions, ongoing indexed funding, support mechanisms, training and professional development. Though an expensive route, it is what is necessary to repair a neglected system.

The Department for Education's *Workforce Strategy*, with focus on Educational Leaders and Teachers, has outlined initiatives and programs to maintain the quality of the existing workforce, and provide confidence and upskilling newly graduated educators. The *Strategy* identified that ongoing professional development, mentorship with leaders and developing a pre-service teacher program would be beneficial for new educators.⁴² However, our members believe that these programs are insufficient, and that programs set out by the Department often are unable to come to fruition due to the pressures placed on existing staff. As discussed, the Government must be committed to providing ongoing support through professional development focusing on 3-year-olds, and long-term preparation for the rollout of 3-year-old preschool in 2026. This is even more important given the re-introduction of mid-year intake for preschools taking effect. Qualification exceeds a testamur or Certificate, it requires ongoing support and training opportunities for the workforce to feel confident as the system adapts and complexities continue.

There has also been growing concern about the lack of career pathways in early education due to lack of funding to maintain permanent contracts. The AEU believes that additional funding into early education, as Recommendation 5 sets out, can provide more opportunities for permanency, career development, and opportunities for leadership in early childhood.

Members have also expressed concern about exceeding educator to child ratios, as they believed that they were one of the successful aspects of the current state of the early education sector. There are concerns that with a fully registered preschool, insufficient staff and space may result in practical issues of ratio and staff burnout. This becomes more prevalent in rural areas, where Rural Care programs may be at risk due to scheduling issues, which also places Early Childhood Workers at a disadvantage. This matter still ties into the teacher (and workforce) shortage crisis; thus, the AEU refers to its previous recommendations of audits providing substantive infrastructure, flexible programs for community-based needs and the points outlined in Recommendation 6.

RECOMMENDATION 6

To address issues in workforce, the Government should be committed to:

- *Subsidising costs of education for tertiary degrees to assist and entice university students;*
- *Focus on developing substantive, ongoing support measures for early career teachers and special authorisation staff;*
- *Provide additional non-instruction time for preschool educators and workers to complete administrative tasks and planning as thousands of new children enter the system;*
- *Substantially improving the workplace and pay conditions of early childhood educators, workers and support staff; and*
- *Supporting the rest of the early education workforce to address the urgent issue of staff retention and turnover rates.*

⁴² Department for Education (SA), *Workforce Strategy 2021 – 2031 – Chapter 2: Educational Leaders and Teachers Workforce Plan*, Strategy Handbook (2022) 13, 15.

EARLY INTERVENTION AND SPECIALISTS ALLEVIATE RISKS OF DEVELOPMENTAL VULNERABILITY

Early childhood education is the best opportunity for early intervention for children, and to identify any complex learning disabilities or needs before going to school. The AEU believes that early intervention is fundamental for accessibility for young learners, given that 23.8% of South Australian children are classified as developmentally vulnerable.⁴³ Through member consultation, it is the AEU's understanding that any 3-year-olds currently accessing early enrolment in preschools are not accessed and supported by the Department's support services due to lack of resources and time restraints. Members also raised that there are few specialists in the public education system who can aid with early intervention and identification of complex learning needs, stating that 4-year-olds would most likely be prioritised as they would leave for school the following year. It is believed that this is due to 'less enticing' work and pay conditions compared to the private sector.

A study conducted by the University of South Australia found that 82% of the preschool directors who participated believed that children with signs of developmental delay are at risk of not being 'school-ready' in comparison to children from 10 years ago.⁴⁴ Further, that "a lot of children nowadays lack the basic skills for a successful school transition".⁴⁵ This becomes more concerning as data since 2009 has illustrated that South Australian children are showing an increase of developmental vulnerability.⁴⁶ With children who enter the school system 'less prepared', the growing demand and strain on educators in the school system will continue to grow unless this systemic issue is addressed. The AEU declares that children with special needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds must be provided with equitable access to high quality, properly resourced early childhood education – and this includes the dire need for *more* intervention programs that are properly developed, and more quality specialist staff.

For Culturally and Linguistically Diverse children and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, there are various linguistic barriers to learning due to a lack of bilingual services and funding to support bilingual children. Children who study in their first spoken language at home are shown to learn better than children studying in a second language,⁴⁷ and there have been correlations made with increased self-esteem, classroom participation and overall wellbeing.⁴⁸ The AEU supports the maintenance and revitalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, and the reaffirmation of cultural knowledge of children from culturally diverse backgrounds.

⁴³ Australian Early Development Census, 'Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) for schools and early childhood services', *Department for Education* (Webpage, 8 November 2022) <<https://www.education.sa.gov.au/department/research-and-statistics/statistics-and-data/australian-early-development-census/australian-early-development-census-aedc-schools-and-early-childhood-services>>.

⁴⁴ Pivato et al (n 20) 31.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Child Development Council (SA), *Policy Brief 1: South Australia's surprising downward spiral trend in AEDC results*, Policy Brief (August 2020) 1.

⁴⁷ Telke M Woldemikael, 'Language, Education and Public Policy in Eritrea' (2003) 46(1) *African Studies Review* 117; Mila Schwartz, 'The Impact of the *First Language First* model on vocabulary development among preschool bilingual children' (2013) 27 *Reading and Writing* 709; Living First Language Platform, 'The Importance of first languages in early childhood education'

⁴⁸ Hassana Alidou et al, 'Optimizing Learning and Education in Africa – the Language Factor' (Working Document B-3.1, Association for the Development of Education in Africa, 2006) 89.

RECOMMENDATION 7

More funding is provided towards early intervention programs, and that they are as accessible as feasibly possible for all families who require these programs. There must also be a focus to incentivise more specialists to retain positions in the public education sector to minimise developmental discrepancies between the children who can afford assessment, and the children who are waitlisted.

INVOLVING THE WORKFORCE IN CONSULTATIONS AND POLICY-MAKING DECISIONS

During the policy-developing process of the 3-year-old preschool rollout in Victoria, there was strong consultative ties between the Government and stakeholders, which included educators at sites and the Union to provide a collective voice for members' concerns. As discussed, this rollout cannot be a paternalistic approach. This Royal Commission provides a platform for various stakeholders and concerned groups by providing submissions, but the AEU believes that consistent and ongoing forums between parents and caregivers, and consultations with stakeholders are what will enable a streamlined, successful rollout of 3-year-old preschool.

Upon discussion with the AEU Victoria Branch, this pre-rollout consultative group has now changed to a management group that is able to mitigate any growing concerns in the system that have been raised. Consistent communication between policymaker, enforcer, employer and employee provides a beneficial, holistic platform that enables consistently optimal solutions and outcomes for the early education system. The AEU believes that providing this platform for ongoing input, discussion and issue-spotting is crucial to a public early education system that is solidified and united, which prevents children from falling into gaps merely on their postcode and access to government support.

RECOMMENDATION 8

That there is a consultative committee or 'group' formed with key stakeholders including the Australian Education Union, educators, support staff, early education workers and preschool directors, to thoroughly discuss how the preschool rollout will be executed. Failing to include the voice of the workforce may result in paternalistic policy that cannot be executed in sites.

This committee must continue to convene after the rollout of the program to focus on continuous planning, mitigating potential issues in policy and enforcement, and maintain a line of communication between educators and policymakers.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of universal quality preschool programs for three- and 4-year-olds is exciting and provides various opportunities for children to have more time to learn, grow and have those benefits from extra learning integrated into the rest of their developmental stages. Being able to actively provide services that can enable **all** children – regardless of postcode, culture or linguistic background, disability or otherwise – is something that is fundamental to our values at the Australian Education Union. There cannot be any shortcuts to get to quality. Following the pathway of the Victorian Government rollout, there needs to be thorough surveying, auditing and consultations from every region in South Australia. Voices of the workforce need to be heard, considered and enacted in policy. Our educators and early childhood workers must be supported to attract and retain them. Any failure to do so will perpetuate the state of our public education system, and continue to widen the gap between our most vulnerable and least vulnerable young learners. Quality government action, quality policy, quality funding, quality workforce and prioritisation of accessibility and affordability are what will form an equitable, South Australian universal quality public preschool sector.