

EARLY EDUCATION FOR COMMUNITIES, BY COMMUNITIES

THE GREENS' PLAN TO PUT CHILDREN AND COMMUNITIES FIRST



Early childhood services have been increasingly privatised over the past two decades, and they're not meeting the real needs of our communities. The Victorian Greens want to reinvest in our communities to ensure that all Victorian children have access to high quality and affordable early education and care.

Learning starts at birth. The prime time for development of emotional control, language and social skills are the first five years of life. These skills have a lifelong impact on health, future learning and life success.ⁱ Early learning can reduce poverty and inequality and improve social mobility.ⁱⁱ Despite this, Australia invests less than 0.5% of GDP in early childhood development, significantly lower than the OECD average of 0.8%.ⁱⁱⁱ

In Australia, early learning has too often been treated as childcare and a means for parents to get back to work. Private companies have spotted a huge untapped market in childcare, including provision of kindergarten programs. Successive Labor and Liberal governments have presided over the closure of government and community run preschool programs, with poorly regulated private companies stepping in to meet demand. Our early childhood educators are under-valued and underpaid, with many earning little more than the minimum wage.

We need to change the way we think about early childhood learning. All children have a right to high quality learning that is developmentally appropriate, affordable and delivered by caring and supported professionals. But a lack of planning and regulation means our early childhood sector is overly privatised, and it isn't meeting the real needs of children, families and communities.

The Victorian Greens have a plan to redress the balance, ensuring accessibility and affordability of high quality early childhood education, and a better deal for Victorian families, committing \$111 million to:

- **Invest in local communities:** We'll invest up to \$101 million to support the expansion of community childcare, with a focus on planned development and services that meet community needs.
- **Plan for the future:** Through an urgent review of the early childhood education and care sector in Victoria, we will map statewide supply and demand issues and respond to ballooning waitlists;
- **Roll out bush kinder:** We'll scale up bush kinder with an investment of \$10 million, supporting the improved health and wellbeing of hundreds of little Victorians;
- **Support staff:** The Greens will continue to support workers' advocacy for better pay and conditions. We're committed to free TAFE for early childhood educators and reducing HECS/HELP debt burdens for all university graduates; and
- **Work towards two years of free preschool:** The Victorian Greens will call on the Victorian Government and the Council of Australian Governments to develop a policy framework to provide all three and four year olds with 15 hours of free pre-school per week.

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INVESTING IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Early childhood education and care has become a huge moneymaking enterprise in Victoria and across Australia over recent decades. Private providers of early childhood care divert valuable resources out of our communities and into private companies, often based off shore. Data shows that out-of-school-hours care is generally much more affordable when run by schools, and profits are reinvested in our schools rather than disappearing into offshore bank accounts.

Community-run kinders and childcare organisations are running at capacity with limited support to expand and where needed, establish new facilities. Not only is there huge and unmet demand for community-run childcare and preschool, but there's also evidence that these organisations value and remunerate their staff particularly well.^{iv}

The Victorian Greens will support community-run services to boost supply where demand exists. Increasing availability of community run-services will ensure that profits are reinvested in our schools and communities rather than building childcare businesses.

The Victorian Greens will:

- Invest an additional \$100 million over four years to support new centres and expansion of additional centres to increase capacity;
- Prioritise community-run centres where there is demonstrated need and demand for those types of services; and
- Provide more support to schools to set up and manage out-of-school-hours care with an ongoing investment per year of \$1 million, empowering schools to run their own programs, embedded in local communities.

ROLL OUT BUSH KINDER

The forest preschool approach, which originated in Europe, is well supported by a growing research base that has identified the critical significance of play in nature for children's confidence, resilience and wellbeing.^v The Australian adaptation of the approach is

known as bush kinder, and involves children spend long and regular periods of time in unstructured play in natural forest or beach environments.

There's a growing number of preschools and childcare services operating bush kinder in Victoria – around 30 in Greater Melbourne and a further 10 spread across the state. Not only is it great for kids' health and wellbeing, but it builds an understanding and appreciation of the natural environment from a young age, equipping our next generation with the commitment and tools to protect our precious environment.^{vi}

It's time to scale this up to provide more children with access to learning in a natural environment. The Greens will invest \$10 million over the forward estimates to establish a Bush Kinder Fund, supporting the health and wellbeing of thousands of little Victorians.

UNDERSTANDING AND MEETING THE NEEDS OF OUR COMMUNITIES

Data shows that a huge number of services have waiting lists, and many families wait up to one or two years for a placement.^{vii} Some local councils have waiting lists of up to 300 families for community daycare, and families are being told to travel further or 'go private'.

The major parties are relying on market forces to meet the needs of children's early learning needs, but it's not working. Where demand exists for high quality, community-run kindergartens and childcare centres the Victorian Government and councils should be meeting this demand, not referring families on to private providers or expecting that they travel further to access community centres.

The Victorian Greens are calling for an urgent review of the sector in Victoria to map supply, present and projected demand, and current funding mechanisms to address these challenges.

The review will inform possible changes to the way kindergartens and childcare centres are currently funded. Specifically, it will look at the timing and flexibility of funding mechanisms, and how these can be improved to meet gaps between supply and demand.

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SUPPORTING STAFF

The Victorian Greens recognise the vital contribution that early childhood education workers make to our communities and to our education system. They play an important role in children's lives during a critical time in their development, and are vital to children's social development and school readiness.

The Greens want to see a reduction in HECS-HELP debt for early childhood graduates for the duration of their work in the sector. In Victoria, the Greens would add early childhood education and care courses to the Priority Courses list, which would provide free qualifications to grow our workforce. Current levels of subsidies aren't adequate, and don't reflect the value we should be placing on early childhood workers.

The Greens will continue to advocate for better pay and conditions for early childhood workers, who play such a critical role in our children's development and later success in life.

UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO TWO YEARS OF PRESCHOOL

International evidence has shown that two years of preschool can significantly reduce inequality and improve educational outcomes for children.^{viii} Early education is free for three and four year olds in the UK, New Zealand, Norway, France and Ireland, and there's no reason why Victorian children shouldn't have access to the same opportunities. Ultimately, the benefits extend our communities, and that's exactly where we should be investing.

The Victorian Greens firmly believe we should be immediately scaling up access to two years of preschool, and in the longer term building up to two years of fully funded pre-school. This should be jointly funded by the state and the Commonwealth, and scaled up as soon as possible.

ⁱ Diana Warren, Meredith O'Connor, Diana Smart and Ben Edwards, 'A critical review of the early childhood literature', Australian Institute of Family Studies, October 2016: https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/aifs_crit_review_ec_lit_final.pdf_0.pdf

ⁱⁱ 'Starting Strong: key OECD indicators on early childhood education and care', OECD 2017: https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/starting-strong-2017_9789264276116-en#page27

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Starting Strong IV: Early childhood education and care data country note on Australia', OECD 2016:

<http://www.oecd.org/education/school/ECECDCN-Australia.pdf>

^{iv} Australian Community Children's Services 'Trends in Community children's Services 2017: Fourth National Report', 2018: https://www.cccinc.org.au/docs/advocacy_ticcss-wave-4_2017-national-report-copy.pdf

^v Walker, Timothy. 'Kindergarten, Naturally', The Atlantic, 15 September 2016:

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/09/kindergarten-naturally/500138/> and Elliott, Sue and Chancellor, Barbara. From forest preschool to Bush Kinder: An inspirational approach to preschool provision in Australia [online]. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 39, No. 4, Dec 2014: 45-53.

Availability: <https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary?dn=936968775858791;res=IELAPA>

^{vi} Christina Turtle, Ian Convery, Katie Convery & Yvonne Xianhan Huang (2015) Forest Schools and environmental attitudes: A case study of children aged 8–11 years, *Cogent Education*, 2:1, DOI: [10.1080/2331186X.2015.1100103](https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2015.1100103)

^{vii} Still No Vacancies', Report by the Office of Adam Bandt: <http://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/melbourne/pages/912/attachments/original/1375057187/ChildcareinMelbourne.pdf?1375057187>; 'Come Back Next Year: Finding a Childcare Place in Federal Melbourne', Report by the Office of Adam Bandt:

https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/melbourne/pages/6880/attachments/original/1452052790/!2015_Childcare_Survey_Report.pdf?1452052790

^{viii} 'Preschool: Two Years are Better than One', The Mitchell Institute, 2016: <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Two-Years-are-Better-than-One.pdf>