

# Early childhood education for whānau, not profit

Poipoia te kākano

**A Green Government will fix ECE, putting tamariki first and making 35 hours fully free for whānau.**

Early childhood education (ECE) is a crucial support for tamariki and their whānau in the early years. However, at the moment, families in Aotearoa face some of the highest childcare costs in the world. Many families pay around \$10,000 a year per child – making childcare the biggest cost after housing.

The Green Party is committed to a public, inclusive, and universal education system in Aotearoa that nurtures our mokopuna and strengthens whānau, through upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

High-quality ECE brings lifelong benefits—educational, social, and economic—not just for individual children, but for all of us.

When we invest in early learning, we invest in a future where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.



# Corporate ECE costs us all

Right now, Aotearoa has some of the highest ECE costs in the OECD, and too many of our tamariki are missing out on the quality of care and learning they deserve.

ECE should be treated as a public good—something that benefits everyone, like the way we treat schools.

Instead, we have a corporate dominated sector, which leads to high costs and a lack of transparency. The government spends around \$2.7 billion each year on ECE, with much of this subsidising these corporate providers, who often prioritise profits over quality education and care for tamariki. Some of these profits are sent offshore, while early childhood teachers struggle with low pay. The corporate model treats children as units for profit.

Government funding is complex, with community-based centres often struggling to pay teachers a decent wage and maintain ratios that support quality care, while also keeping costs affordable for parents.

Meanwhile, large corporate centres deliberately keep wages low and ratios high to squeeze maximum profit. The current funding model has led to a significant increase in private centres, cashing the subsidies, with less accountability than community models.

## Under the current system this is how the business of ECE works:

Evolve Education group is the country's second largest ECE provider, and is owned by Australian private equity firm, Anchorage Capital Partners (which also owns David Jones, tech firms, and laundries). Evolve, which runs the Lollipops branded centres, averaged \$80m of taxpayer funding in 2021 and 2022 and made \$20m in net profits – a quarter of the value of the public funding put in. In 2024 the Education Review Office reviewed the governance of Evolve and found that it was below the threshold for quality.



Many ECE teachers, most of whom are not on national collective employment agreements, face low pay, limited job security, and stressful workloads. Our teachers' working conditions are our children's learning conditions.

Governments know the current system does not work, but have put it in the too hard basket for decades. They have tinkered around the edges—adding entitlements or regulating providers—but no one has challenged the underlying model that's failing tamariki, whānau, and educators.

Community-based centres, playcentres and kaupapa Māori providers are left struggling. This is despite the quality care they provide, and their vital role to revitalise te reo Māori and provide tamariki a strong sense of identity and belonging. Some of these services face chronic underfunding, outdated buildings, and a lack of long-term support.

## A public ECE system for Aotearoa

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We're making a bold shift towards a public and community driven model where tamariki, not profit, come first and no whānau is priced out of receiving quality care for their tamariki.

For the first time, all government funding for ECE will be focused towards public provision of quality care for our tamariki, not private profits. To be eligible for higher funding, ECE providers will need to transition to a non-profit, community based model. This means over four years ECE will become free for whānau and parents, for up to 35 hours per child per week.

The non-profit sector is how early childcare started in Aotearoa – and includes centres run by parent collectives, local government, marae, and community centres. These services will continue to be grounded in their communities, transparent with their funding, accountable to local needs, and free from profit motives. Under the model in this policy, they will be recognised for the value they provide, and funded appropriately.

### A Green Government will:

- ★ Expand community and not-for-profit provision of ECE
- ★ Cap charges at \$10 per day per child above the 20-hour free entitlement, and reduce this charge to zero cost for up to 35 hours of care from 2029
- ★ End funding for private, for-profit ECE centres by 2028
- ★ Directly fund ECE teachers with fair wages, and access to training and support
- ★ Secure long-term funding for kaupapa Māori providers and pay parity for kaiako

Current private providers will have a three-year window to transition to not-for-profit or community-run models if they wish to benefit from the new funding model. They can join established not-for-profit and community-based networks (such as Kindergarten Associations) or work with iwi, hapū, and other local organisations to create new models. Those who choose not to transition will no longer receive public funding, from 2028.

Some centres may wish to transfer to being non-profit, for example centres that are currently owner-operated. Kindergarten Associations, which are not for profit and community based, will be supported to provide regional administrative leadership for centres wanting to shift to a non-profit model, and to bring these centres under the kindergarten umbrella.

### Capping Daily Fees

As services transition to the new funding model, from 2026, publicly funded services will be allowed to charge no more than \$10 per day per child above the 20 hour free entitlement. In four years we will bring the cost to zero for whānau for up to 35 hours of care - making early learning truly free.

**From 2029, education for preschoolers will be free, five days a week - with a network of community ECE centres funded to provide 35 hours of quality early learning from 6 months to school age.**

## Good pay and conditions for teachers

Kindergarten associations are defined in the Education and Training Act and are not-for profit community organisations whose teachers are part of the public education service. Teachers in these associations have the same terms and conditions as teachers in public schools. Under this new model put in place by a Green Government, all publicly funded ECE teachers will be part of the education service, and paid directly by the Ministry of Education on nationally consistent terms and conditions.

We will move away from the current bulk funding system and toward direct public funding of services and staff, like we currently do in schools. ECE teachers will be paid like other teachers in the public school system, with access to fair wages, training, and proper support. Centres will also receive operational and property funding, and will be required to report transparently about how it is used, like public schools.

Kaupapa Māori ECE providers will also be supported to thrive, with pay parity for kaiako, and secure funding long-term. They will be fully resourced to maintain rangatiratanga over service provision, and their teachers will also be able to join the public education service.

## Piata

*35, Hairdresser, Likes Photography*

Piata went back to work when her first pēpi, Tui, was 9 months old. Tui attends puna reo close to Piata's office, and is now two and a half. She's well settled there and loves her Kaiako, but Piata is about to have another baby and can't afford for Tui to attend care while she's on maternity leave. Thanks to the Poipoia te kākano, Tui will now be able to continue going to puna reo. Piata decides that two days a week would be a good balance for their whānau, and is relieved that Piata is able to continue to attend – giving Tui some time with older kids, and giving Piata some time to bond with her new pēpi.



## Building a network that meets real needs

We'll move from a patchwork '20 hours free' system with hidden fees to a universal entitlement for high-quality early learning. Government will actively plan with communities to ensure services are available, accessible, and responsive—especially in under-served areas.

This policy recognises that there may be growing demand, particularly from parents who have been constrained in their choices under the current system. Research demonstrates that for **every \$1 spent on ECE, there is a return of \$9+ in the learning life**; the return on investment in ECE is clear, with long-term economic, social, and educational benefits.

Quality early childhood education supports whānau. When parents can access affordable, high-quality ECE, they will have more choices about how they enter work, study, and participate in their communities.

## What this means for teachers



ECE teachers will become part of the public system, just like their primary and secondary colleagues. They'll receive fair pay, professional development opportunities, and secure contracts on a national employment agreement. This will help retain passionate educators and attract more people to the sector.

## What this means for whānau



Tamariki will be in safe, nurturing, and stimulating environments, and cared for by professional, valued educators. Children will continue to be taught under the curriculum Te Whāriki, which is informed by kaupapa Māori and recognises that the mokopuna emerges from rich traditions and is linked strongly with whānau, hapū and iwi. With strong relationships, rich learning, and play-based experiences, children will grow up confident, curious, and connected.

# How we will deliver publicly-run ECE

We'll work in partnership with willing kindergarten associations, iwi, hapū, and other community organisations to grow the network of public and not-for-profit centres. Where gaps exist, new public centres will be established—especially in areas of high need. This could include piloting centres connected to current primary schools, and could also include start up funding for local government provision.

We will replace the fragmented, inconsistent system we have now, bringing better planning, transparency, and equity. We will restore the network management function, with the Ministry of Education planning for ECE provision in the way that we plan for school provision where communities need them.

## Public ownership: Investing in care, not profit

Childcare costs are a huge burden for many families, with some parents having to make difficult decisions about whether they can financially justify sending their kids at all. Even the '20 hours free' often comes with top-up fees and limited availability.

When education is treated like a business, our tamariki lose out. Parents deserve the security of knowing that every publicly funded centre is being operated for community benefit, with a fair deal for teachers, local oversight and high standards of care.

By directing government funding only to non-profit providers, we will ensure higher standards of care, learning and wellbeing. This will enable better staff-to-child ratios, safer buildings, and more responsive services.

When care is community-led and government-backed, we can guarantee quality, affordability, and fairness—no matter your postcode or income. A fully funded ECE sector means real financial relief for whānau.

## Operating Expenditure (\$m)

Initiative	25/26	26/27	27/28	28/29	Outyears
Poipoia te Kākanō	\$581.41	\$1,162.83	\$1,761.86	\$1,873.17	\$1,873.17