

EARLY LEARNING EVERYONE BENEFITS NATIONAL ELECTION SURVEY: RESULTS

Early Learning
**EVERYONE
BENEFITS**



About the survey

In March 2019, the *Early Learning Everyone Benefits* campaign wrote to 356 candidates for the coming federal election, seeking their views on early learning. We told them about the campaign and we invited them to respond to our survey, which contained 11 questions on the provision, funding and quality of early learning in Australia. (The *Early Learning Everyone Benefits* policy priorities are on our website).

We asked the candidates questions about support for families (including the most vulnerable), the provision and funding of subsidised early learning for children, ensuring the quality of early learning services and strengthening the educator workforce. This report provides a summary of formal responses from the major parties and individual statements from candidates.

The survey responses

The Coalition, Labor and the Greens all responded centrally to the survey, either providing their candidates with answers to the questions or sending us a formal response. In addition to these centralised responses, 24 per cent of candidates who received our survey responded, and some provided personal views. Some of the most interesting responses came from candidates with **personal experience of early learning**, either as educators or parents.

Greens candidates were the most enthusiastic respondents, with 36 per cent of recipients completing the survey. **Labor came next** with a 25 per cent response rate, closely followed by independents/minor parties on 24 per cent. Most Greens and Labor candidates relied principally on the formal responses to the survey prepared by their parties and supplied centrally.

In contrast, **only 2 per cent of Coalition candidates** responded to the survey – instead of individual replies, we received an overarching written response from Coalition Campaign HQ.

This lack of individual engagement and tight messaging may stem from the absence of any Coalition election policy announcements on early childhood: with far fewer initiatives on the table, meeting the *Early Learning Everyone Benefits* campaign asks is a much tougher task for the Coalition (see below).

Individual survey responses have been collated and posted on our website.

'CHILDREN NEED SUPPORT, ENCOURAGEMENT AND CARE IRRESPECTIVE OF THEIR PARENTS' LABOUR MARKET PARTICIPATION' - ROB OAKESHOTT, INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE FOR COWPER.

The results

Responses to the survey show that, while the major parties profess to support children's early learning, the devil is in the detail – and also in broader approaches to equity and social investment.

There were some stark differences:

- The Coalition did not answer the question on whether Australia needs a cross-portfolio **Early Years Strategy**, while both Labor and the Greens were strongly supportive of the initiative.
- Labor and the Greens supported raising **educators' wages** (and Labor has since announced it will subsidise wages), while the Coalition rejected any direct intervention.

Some responses hinted at better policies to come:

- The Coalition would not support **extending preschool/kindergarten to three-year-olds**, but implied that three-year-old preschool could roll out once attendance rates for four-year-olds were higher.

Other responses claimed to meet our campaign aims, but didn't follow through:

- Labor said it supported access for all children to early learning, regardless of their parents' workforce participation – but could only point to its policy on three- and four-year-olds, for whom preschool attendance is not limited by the activity test. There was no commitment on child care access for children aged under three. (Note: Labor has since committed to a 'review' of the impact of the new child care subsidy system, including the activity test.)

A. INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES (SELECTED)

Seat	Candidate	Comment
Moncrieff (QLD)	Tracey Bell (Labor)	<p>'As an early childhood educator of over 20 years and a director of an early education centre I have seen first hand the benefits of children accessing high quality early learning the year before they start school and how this lays the foundations for learning and enables children to be capable and confident when they start their school journey.'</p> <p>'I have seen first hand the devastating effects of the pay inequity and experienced and qualified early childhood educators leaving the sector because of pay and conditions. We cannot attract and retain high quality educators with the system that is currently used now. Educators are burnt out, tired, stressed.'</p>
Cowper (NSW)	Rob Oakeshott (Independent)	<p>'Children need support, encouragement and care irrespective of their parents' labour market participation.'</p> <p>'This matters. Good luck with your campaign.'</p>
Boothby (SA)	Stef Rozitis (Greens)	<p>'As someone who has both worked with children under 5 and preparing early childhood teachers I am passionate about the need to recognise the importance of the early years and in particular the first 1000 days.'</p> <p>'There is much evidence that high quality education from the age of three leads to better outcomes for individuals and their societies. I am keen also to keep it developmentally appropriate and resist an academic push-down.'</p>



Flynn (QLD)	Sharon Lohse (Pauline Hanson's One Nation)	<p>'Education is an investment option. It is a service that is met in diverse ways. The choice to participate in any one option keeps educators sharp and cost ensures that the community values the services. Totally free services promote lazy parenting and lax educators. However the most vulnerable still need to be accommodated.'</p> <p>'Generally, I believe that the best early childhood education is provided by the parents. Parents of course need quality information and networking to provide their best for their children. Early childhood educators are high-value and important contributors to the later preschool development. Especially for those children who have not been able to receive the best from their home situation. I home-schooled all of my own children.'</p>
Canberra (ACT)	Tim Hollo (Greens)	<p>'The activity test is terrible policy and the Greens will work to abolish it.'</p>
Bonner (QLD)	Jo Briskey (Labor)	<p>'I've seen this current Government make significant changes to the child care subsidy system that has left so many families paying more for early learning and kids missing out. Children from some of the most vulnerable backgrounds, those who benefit the most from early learning, being denied the opportunity to access it. I think this is wrong.'</p>
Cowper (WA)	Mark Cooper (Greens)	<p>'Funding stability is necessary for retaining well-trained staff and maintaining stable programs.'</p>
Cunningham (NSW)	Sharon Bird (Labor)	<p>'Giving children the best start to their education and life requires quality early childhood education. I visit many local providers on a regular basis and I know Labor's policies will deliver for my local families.'</p>
Aston (VIC)	Kadira Pethiyagoda (Labor)	<p>'Early learning is important to give every child a fair go in achieving the most out of life.'</p>



Canning (WA)	Jodie Moffatt (Greens)	'Early childhood education is the first step to culture and community. Additionally, education for First Nations children must be culturally appropriate and delivered by First Nations people, preferably including First Nations languages.'
Page (NSW)	Daniel Reid (Greens)	'Early Learning has been under resourced, under utilised and under appreciated . It's time for well funded, universal and high quality education to be extended to children under school age.'
Clark (TAS)	Ben McGregor (Labor)	'Early years education and care is the most important funding any government can make in terms of education, health and development for the future.'
Bowman (QLD)	Andrew Laming (Liberal)	'The PISA evidence is very clear that three year olds in Australia show a small (8pt) benefit with an additional year of preschool, but that is almost entirely due to selection bias. SEIFA adjusted analysis shows an insignificant one point difference. That is why the focus must exclusively be on the most socio-educationally vulnerable quintile . AEDC data reveals the size of that at-risk group in each community.'
Adelaide (SA)	Barbara Pocock (Greens)	<p>'A large body of research tells us how important the early years are to the lifelong well-being of children. We need a cross-portfolio integrated strategy to get this right, one involving early childhood education and care providers, and all other relevant services that assist and support children and families.'</p> <p>'While work, education and volunteering often have very positive consequences for parents and households, I don't think a punitive regime that adds to the stress of families is the right way to go. Some families need access to ECEC while not at work, education or volunteering - sometimes for health reasons or because of other circumstances in the family. I think access should not be constrained in this way, especially given the research evidence about how beneficial access to quality ECEC is for children.'</p>

B. KEY ISSUES AND RESPONSES: A SUMMARY

1. Introducing a second year of preschool/kindergarten

Coalition: 'The Morrison Government is focussing on working with states and territories on future arrangements to lift preschool participation rates amongst four year olds, especially amongst disadvantaged and Indigenous children who have the most to gain. We want to do the work necessary to get the existing policy for four year olds right **before we roll the same policy over for three year olds.**'

Labor: 'The evidence is clear that two years of quality early learning is vital for driving better educational, social, health and economic outcomes. Labor's National Preschool and Kindy Program will expand universal access to **two years before school**. Labor's plan is the biggest single investment in early childhood education in Australian history, and it will help expand access to quality, affordable early learning for children. Around 700,000 Australian children a year will benefit each and every year.'

The Greens: 'The Greens will extend universal access to early childhood education to 24 hours a week and expand access to include **2 years before school** (general 3 and 4-year-olds).'

LABOR WILL PROVIDE SUBSIDISED ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL AND KINDY FOR 3 AND 4 YEARS OLDS FROM 2021.

2. Funding certainty for preschool/kindergarten

Coalition: 'The Coalition has funded the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education **every year** it has been in office. We are also undertaking a review of the national partnership to ensure the ongoing funding will deliver the best preschool outcomes.'

Labor: 'Labor's \$1.75 billion National Preschool and Kindy Program commits **permanent funding** to the existing universal access program for 4 year olds. We will lock the funding into the budget and provide certainty to parents, educators, and providers.'

The Greens: 'The Greens will extend the National Partnership Agreement for Universal Access to Early Childhood Education on an **ongoing basis**. Our policy has been costed by the Parliamentary Budget Office to extend the National Partnership Agreement for Universal Access to Early Childhood Education for **10 years**, i.e. funding up to 2029-30.'

3. The activity test

Coalition: 'While the new child care package is geared to support families who depend upon child care in order to work, train, study or volunteer, it includes a **number of exemptions** to ensure that vulnerable and disadvantaged children can access subsidised child care. There are also exemptions for individuals who legitimately cannot meet the activity test requirements, such as parents with disability and carers. Families earning \$66,958 or less a year are eligible for 12 hours per week of subsidised care for all their children, at the highest 85% rate of subsidy. While families only need to work, train, study or volunteer for four hours a week in order to meet the activity test, these families are exempted to ensure that their children receive two days a week of early childhood education and care.'

Labor: 'Labor's priority is to develop policy to expand access to quality early learning. Labor's National Preschools and Kindy program policy will provide subsidised access to 15 hours of preschool and kindy for 3 and 4 year olds from 2021. This will ensure every child will have access to affordable early learning in the vital two years before formal schooling starts. An important element to this policy is that it abolishes the activity test for 18 hours a week for 3 year olds so that **all 3 year olds** can access a preschool program.' (Note: Since completing the survey, Labor has announced it will review the operation of the new Child Care Subsidy, including the activity test.)

The Greens: 'The Greens will **completely abolish** the activity test and make childcare fee free for one in four, or 80 per cent, of Australian families by raising the income threshold for the child care subsidy. Child care will be fee free for families earning up to \$171,958.'

4. Strategies for children at risk of disadvantage

Coalition: 'In addition to the *Connected Beginnings* program, the Morrison Government has set aside funding in 2019-20 to examine the low attendance rates amongst vulnerable, disadvantaged and Indigenous children in the preschool year. For too long, state and territory governments have conflated enrolment with attendance. Data shows that nearly 30% of 4 year olds who are funded and entitled to 15 hours of preschool a week do not attend for the 15 hours a week. This non-attendance rate is higher when we look at vulnerable, disadvantaged (34%) and Indigenous children (41%). We recognise that those attending the least have the most to gain and we have allocated funding to develop and implement strategies to address these attendance concerns (including working with the Smith Family).'

'NEARLY 30% OF 4 YEAR OLDS DO NOT ATTEND FOR THE 15 HOURS A WEEK' - COALITION

Labor: 'The 2015 Australia Early Development Census data show that one in five (22%) children begin primary school without the foundational skills they need to be successful learners. Labor will **work in partnership with the states and territories** to improve enrolment and attendance rates, particularly for Indigenous and vulnerable children.'

The Greens: 'The Greens support the development and implementation of strategies to increase access to and participation in early learning for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition to this, to ensure access in areas of high First Nations populations and high levels of disadvantage, the Greens will **allocate a proportion of the Community Child Care Fund (CCCF)** for quality community-controlled and culturally safe integrated early years' services.'

5. Pay for early childhood educators

Coalition: 'The Morrison Government's **personal income tax** plan will encourage and reward hard work. It provides immediate tax relief to low and middle income earners. From 1 July 2019, more than 10 million workers will receive a tax offset, with around 4.5 million people receiving the full \$1,080 offset for 2018-19. By the time our personal income tax relief plan is fully rolled out in 2024-25, everyone earning more than \$40,000 will be better off under the Morrison Government when compared to Labor.'

'The **Fair Work Commission**, established by the former Labor Government, is Australia's national workplace relations tribunal, run independently of the Government. It is responsible for maintaining a safety net of minimum wages and employment conditions, governed by the *Fair Work Act 2009* and the *Fair Work Regulations 2009*. The Government respects the role of the Fair Work Commission as the independent umpire to make this decision. **Child care providers** can choose to pay staff above the minimum wage.'

Labor: 'Labor recognises that quality early education and care can only be provided by a skilled, professional and **well paid** workforce.' (Note: Since completing the survey, Labor has announced a pay rise of 20 per cent over eight years for early childhood educators.)

The Greens: 'The Greens will develop and implement a workforce strategy with the early learning sector and unions to achieve **professional pay and better working conditions** for educators and carers. The Greens support professional wages and conditions which reflect the importance of the early childhood workforce.'