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## Policy outlook: Coalition set to slow progress in early childcare and learning

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The government is reviewing significant early learning initiatives introduced under Labor. AAP/Dave Hunt

Author



Susan Krieg

Associate Professor, Flinders University

Early childhood education reforms, started under Labor, are looking increasingly shaky under a Coalition government.

Despite a series of recent reports and mounting evidence that support the Labor reforms, the Coalition is reviewing the initiatives. Effectively this means delaying key parts of the reforms, including new staff-children ratio requirements and qualification standards for carers and educators.

Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia and South Australia have also signalled they want to continue with the new ratios and education requirements and remain supportive of the reforms.

While the new government is clearly responding to concerns within the sector about cost, how many reports do we really need that show the importance of early childhood education and its ripple effects through the rest of the school system, before we act to make it better?

### Evidence based policy

The latest report from the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) reform council stresses the importance of improving early childhood education outcomes in order to improve Australian education overall.

It cites a recent 2013 study, that shows a clear link between access to quality preschool education and higher scores later on in international tests.

There's further evidence which shows children who receive early childhood education from highly qualified teachers then go on to achieve higher NAPLAN scores than those who are educated by less-qualified teachers.

This kind of evidence showing the link between better access to quality early childhood and improved education outcomes was what spurred the former government's reforms in the first place. These began in 2009 with the National Partnership Agreement between all Australian states and the federal government. Prior to the agreement's introduction, each tier of government presented inconsistencies and confusion over the provision of early childcare.

Up until the government agreement, the Commonwealth government had been primarily concerned with childcare, while states were responsible for preschool provision. This arrangement resulted in a confusing variety of funding bodies, employment agreements, policies and lobby groups.

As part of the deal, the jointly governed National Quality Framework was established. Under the

framework, Australia received a unified system for licencing and quality assurance processes in long day care, preschools, out of hours school care and family day care.

Early childhood care and education programs are now assessed against seven standards, including for children's health and safety, learning and development, physical environment, child-to-staff ratios and qualifications, relationships with children and families and, leadership and governance arrangements.

### **Staffing arrangements**

The "staffing arrangement" standard has been the NQF's most debated requirement. It requires increased staff numbers to meet new adult-to-child ratios - one adult for every 11 children for preschool, one for every five children between 24-36 months and one for every four babies.

The NQF also requires staff who are more qualified, and thus more expensive. Currently, an Australian child carer earns AS488 per week on average - less than a bar attendant.

Upon the introduction of the framework, the for-profit early childhood sector warned that parents would bear the burden of increased costs through fee increases. Australia is one of the few developed countries in which this problem would arise. In many OECD countries, the costs are not automatically passed on to families but are absorbed in shared funding arrangements with government.

In response to these concerns, the former government instigated the Early Years Quality Fund (EYQF). The one-off pool of AS300m was intended to support an increase in wages for early childhood educators. Centres could only apply for the funding if they had an enterprise agreement in place, meaning that many centres would not receive any benefit.

The fund has become a target for reform by the Abbott government. Liberal MP Sussan Ley described it as:

*...a dodgy fund, set up in a hurry, sorted out with (their) union mates.*

She claimed the fund would have been exhausted within 12 hours of applications opening. As a result, the Coalition has frozen the fund and revoked all conditional funding offers provided by the former government.

The Coalition government has also signalled that it plans to loosen ratio requirements for family day care services that don't record any "serious incidents" after five years.

### **Review or reform?**

Ley has stated that the new government intends to minimise the paperwork and "regulatory burden" that exist under the existing requirements. While these priorities are understandable, it would be disastrous for families and young children if the Coalition winds back reforms designed to improve quality and equity.

Furthermore, Ley's claims and proposed reforms are not supported by many of the states or industry bodies.


Prior to the election, the Coalition stated that that the NQF was so expensive that some childcare centres threatened to close. However, industry body Early Childhood Australia released a statement earlier this year backing the NQF, stating:

*Recent reports that centres are facing closure are a surprise to me. The clear trend here shows that far from closing, early childhood education and care services are booming.*

Meanwhile, Wendy Lovell, Victoria's minister for children and early childhood development, has claimed that the NQF's reforms didn't go far enough to ensure the quality of early childcare and education in Australia.

Given that that the majority of providers back the quality reforms in early childhood education and care, it would be a tragedy to wind the clock back.

There is a wealth of evidence showing the long term effects of quality early childhood care and education – it cannot be ignored. The reforms, including changes in ratios and staff qualifications, must continue.

 [Education policy](#) [Early childhood education](#)