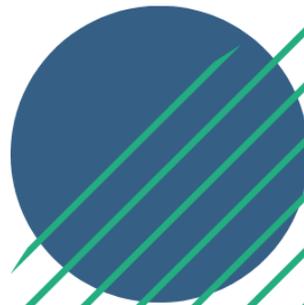




Children First
Alliance

2020 ELECTION STATEMENT





About the Children First Alliance

The ACT Children First Alliance (the Alliance) is a network of longstanding for purpose providers of children's service in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), including early learning centres (ELCs), family day care, preschool and outside school hours care.

There is a significant body of research that demonstrates the importance of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) on a child's social, emotional, educational and economic wellbeing across the lifespan. Despite this, more than one in five ACT children were developmentally vulnerable when entering school. The Alliance was established to develop and communicate a shared vision for ECEC in the ACT and to ensure that all children have access to ECEC.

The nine community ECEC providers that make up this Alliance operate 43 ELCs. Together these ELCs provide 3,491 places to children. The Alliance has nine Founding Members:

- Anglicare NSW South, NSW West & ACT
- Capital Region Community Services
- Communities@Work
- Community Services #1
- Goodstart Early Learning ACT
- MOCCA
- Woden Community Service
- YMCA Canberra
- YWCA Canberra

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Summary

- All children deserve the best start in life.
- The early years are critical for children because during these years children experience the most rapid period of growth and change across the human lifespan.¹
- Quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) contributes to the development of lifelong skills, resilience and well-being that can immunise against future disadvantage and harm.
- Benefits of the ECEC have been recognised by families across Canberra.
- The majority of families (83%) indicated that they have seen positive outcomes in social skills as a result of their child attending an early learning centre.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impact on families across Canberra.
- Access to quality ECEC has never been more important.
- Our early childhood educators have been there for families and children, while also managing the uncertainty of bushfire threats, dangerous air quality and now a public health pandemic.
- A strong qualified workforce is essential to delivering quality ECEC.
- High quality ECEC services have a significant impact on children, throughout their lives.
- Early childhood educators are some of the most vital workers in the country.
- Investing in our early childhood educators has never been more important.
- In order to support the Canberra community through COVID-19, making sure ECEC is part of the solution is essential.
- This election the Children First Alliance has identified two key steps to support families, children, and the early childhood educators in the ACT:
 1. Support all children in Canberra to access and engage in early childhood education and care
 2. Value our early childhood educators by investing in professional development opportunities



Early childhood education and care plays an important role in supporting Canberra's community during COVID-19

All children should have the best start in life. We know that the early years are critical for children because during these years children experience the most rapid period of growth and change across the human lifespan.²

Quality Early education and care (ECEC) develops lifelong skills, resilience and well-being that can immunise against future disadvantage and harm. Greater exposure to quality ECEC enhances the employment and economic prospects of children when they become adults. As the aging population doubles as a percentage of population over the next 40 years and the income producing workforce reduces, the economic importance of greater investment in education in the early years cannot be overstated. Put simply, high quality ECEC makes a significant and lasting impact on children throughout their lives, resulting in them being more likely to succeed in education, economically and socially.

The benefits of ECEC have been recognised by families across Canberra. A survey of parents with children attending Alliance members ECEC services found that the majority (83%) indicated that they have seen positive outcomes in social skills as a result of their child attending an early learning centre.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant economic impacts on the families across Canberra. As families manage these impacts it is important that access to ECEC remains accessible for children.

The vital role early education and care and its workforce has been highlighted again this year. Our early childhood educators have been there for families and children, while also managing the uncertainty of bushfire threats, dangerous air quality and now a public health pandemic.

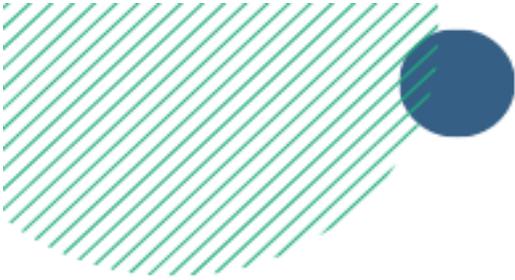
A strong qualified workforce is essential to delivering quality ECEC. High quality ECEC services have a significant impact on children, throughout their lives. A literature review on determinants of quality in child-care found that, overall, the most influential factors affecting quality, across age groups and service settings, are the education, qualifications, and training of the workforce.³

As local providers of ECEC services members have seen firsthand the economic and social consequences of COVID-19. ECEC staff have seen the immediate stress and devastation that COVID-19 has had on families across the Canberra region.

Early childhood educators are some of the most vital workers in the country. Their valuable contribution to our children lives and our communities needs to be recognised. Investing in our early childhood educators has never been more important. As a community, now is the time to be demonstrating how much we value our educators and the important work they do.

In order to support the Canberra community through COVID-19, making sure ECEC is part of the solution is essential. This election the Children First Alliance has identified two key steps to support families, children, and the early childhood educators in the ACT:

1. Support all children in Canberra to access and engage in early childhood education and care
2. Value our early childhood educators by investing in professional development opportunities



Support all children in Canberra to access and engage in early childhood education and care

Actions taken in the early years of a child's life can have lasting impacts throughout their lives. Access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) improves outcomes for children, with the impact being greater for children who are experiencing disadvantage.⁴ Several international studies have demonstrated the benefits of two years of quality preschool for lifting the outcomes of all children, particularly for children who are developmentally vulnerable.^{5 6}

The benefits to accessing ECEC for children experiencing disadvantage are most apparent for children accessing 30 hours of ECEC per week.⁷ However, children experiencing disadvantage are often less likely to access ECEC. Currently in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), more than one in five children start school developmentally vulnerable. This is concerning because children who enter school developmentally vulnerable often fail to catch up, with 10 per cent remaining behind through middle school years.⁸

Two years of preschool provides greater benefits for children experiencing disadvantage for whom one year of preschool may not be enough to close the achievement gaps.⁹

Extend the universal access to ECEC for all three-year-old children in Canberra and fund in line with the Child Care Subsidy hourly rate cap for children under school age

In July 2018 the ACT Government announced that it has “set a goal of 15 hours per week, 600 hours per year of free, universal quality early childhood education for three-year-old children as a key part of the ACT Early Childhood Strategy.” The announcement included an in-principle commitment that “progressively every three-year-old child in the ACT has access to free, high quality early childhood education.”¹⁰

In the 2019-20 ACT Budget, funding was allocated for a new *ACT Early Childhood Strategy*. The Budget papers stated that “The strategy will include a program of transitioning to free universal access for three-year-olds to quality early childhood education and care already foreshadowed by the ACT Government. This initiative will commence in 2020 targeting children experiencing vulnerability in Canberra and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander three-year olds.”¹¹

Since early 2020, Alliance members have been implementing the universal access to three-year old children, with the priority of children experiencing disadvantage. Alliance members recognise the importance of providing two years of preschool, we know that two years of preschool have the greatest impact on child outcomes.¹²

Extending this program will ensure that all children across Canberra can experience the benefits of ECEC. The majority of families attending Alliance members services also supports this with 80 per cent supporting the extension of free Government preschool to three-year-old children in the ACT.

Any extension needs to ensure that the program is funded in line with the Australian Government Child Care Subsidy (CCS) maximum hourly fee cap for children below school age.¹³ Funding the universal access to ECEC for three-year-old children at this rate will bring the program in line with other ECEC programs. This will also ensure that the program is sustainable for the ECEC sector.



COVID-19 has had significant impact on families across Canberra. Access to quality ECEC has never been more important. Ensuring the children in our community have access to ECEC through the extension of the universal access for three-year-old children will have significant outcomes for families and children across Canberra.

Invest in flexible funding models of transport so children experiencing disadvantage can access their local early learning centre

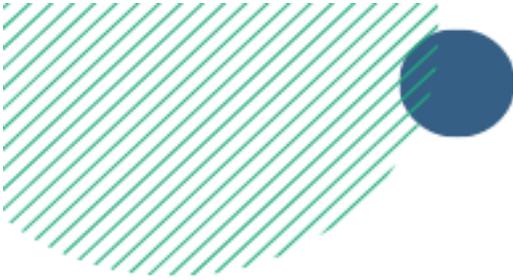
There are several barriers to children and families accessing ECEC, including challenges getting to and from centres, limited access to specialist supports for children with additional needs, complex paperwork and enrolment processes, lack of trust and access and availability.¹⁴

Early Learning Centres (ELCs) can be best placed to identify early learning or health issues, provide information on strategies to support early learning at home, build supportive relationships with families who aren't engaging with other services and connect families with other support services.¹⁵ Engaging children and families who experience disadvantage in ECEC requires ELCs to be linked in with their communities and with services that can provide additional support.

The Preschool Readiness Program (PRP) in Alice Springs is an example of a program designed to address barriers to participation in preschool for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. The PRP involved finding and connecting families with health and education providers to enhance the child's wellbeing and participation in preschool.¹⁶ The evaluation of the PRP found that it was effective in increasing the number of children participating in preschool and supported continuing attendance. Key findings from the evaluation found that the PRP was able to offer practical support such as transport and clothing for children as well as long-term, relationship-based support to help sustain ongoing participation with families.¹⁷

Accessing ECEC has been identified as a barrier to engaging in ECEC. The Regional community organisations across Canberra have identified community transport as an area that needs addressing in order to support families and children experiencing disadvantage. Providing flexible and tailored transport options to families experiencing disadvantage so they can get to and from their early learning centre within their community will provide additional support that is needed.

The investment in flexible funding models to allow organisations to tailor transport needs for each family will assist in families and children experiencing disadvantage engage in ECEC across Canberra.



Value our early childhood educators by investing in professional development opportunities

A strong qualified workforce is essential to delivering quality Early Childhood Education and Care services. High quality early childhood education and care services make a significant impact on children, throughout their lives.

Access to ongoing professional development is key to ensuring that the Early Childhood Education and Care workforce is supported. This is important to both covering the expenses of the professional development opportunity and backfilling positions so that educators and teachers can be released to access professional development.

Despite the importance of professional development, funding for professional development for ECEC professionals in Australia has lapsed, with no plan for further policy development or support. The Australian Government *Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Strategy for Australia 2012–2016* expired in 2016 and has not been renewed.¹⁸ Two Australian Government sources of funding for professional development: the *Professional Support Coordinators (PSC)* and the *Long Day Care Professional Development Program (LDCPDP)* also ceased in 2016 and 2017 respectively.

The ACT Government provides eight \$25,000 scholarships under the 2020 Early Childhood Degree Scholarship Program. This Program provides eight individuals who are working in the ACT non-government education and care sector financial assistance to gain an approved early childhood degree qualification.¹⁹ However there is no funding available for educators or teachers to access other forms of professional development or leave for study release to access professional development.

The impacts of COVID-19 has once again demonstrated that early childhood educators are some of the most vital workers in the country. Investing in professional development opportunities for early childhood educators across Canberra will demonstrate their value and contribution to the community. Access to ongoing professional development is key to ensuring that early childhood educators are supported

Invest \$800,000 a year for an ACT Early Childhood Educators Professional Development Fund to support the ongoing need for professional development in the ECEC sector.

Professional Development for educators is vital to ensuring that ECEC is high quality and results in outcomes that prepare children for school and beyond. In particular, research has drawn a direct link between the quality of teachers and educators and positive outcomes for children. Professor Edward Melhuish, a world leading expert on ECEC, indicated that an effective and efficient way to improve the quality of ECEC is to provide in-house professional development to educators.²⁰

There are currently 359 centre-based ECEC services in the ACT.²¹ A grants program for professional development and support for leave for study release should be established by the ACT Government. Funding for professional development opportunities that support children experiencing disadvantage, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and other marginalised groups should be prioritised. There is also a need for professional development for trauma-informed practice to better



support children experiencing trauma or neglect. The program could offer grants up to \$8,000 per annum per centre, reaching at least 100 services per year. This funding will support ECEC's to access the necessary skills to provide this training to their staff and to backfill positions while staff are accessing this professional development.

Provide registration under the Teacher Quality Institute (TQI) for ECTs working in ELCs in the ACT

A NSW Government literature review of *Early Childhood Education Workforce issues in Australian and international contexts* found that early childhood educators earn below the general workforce average and early childhood teachers often have substantially worse pay and conditions compared with primary school teachers.²² This is particularly the case for Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) working in an Early Learning Centre (ELCs), as they generally offer lower salaries, longer hours and fewer holidays.²³ There is a mismatch between the pay and conditions available in the sector, and the work skills and qualifications required.

In the ACT there is no requirement for ECTs working in a preschool not attached to a school to be registered under the Teacher Quality Institute (TQI). This means that ECTs working in ELCs in the ACT are unable to be professionally registered. This leaves ECTs working in the ACT at a disadvantage to their New South Wales (NSW) counterparts. In NSW registration is a requirement for ECTs working in an approved centre-based setting to be accredited under the NSW Education Standards Authority.²⁴

This lack of registration is an issue for ELCs across the ACT in attracting ECTs, as they are more inclined to work in a school-based setting in the ACT or in an ELC in NSW where registration is required.

The lack of registration will continue to put pressure on ECEC in the ACT with the National Quality Framework (NQF) requirement to have two ECTs for services with more than 60 children by 2020.²⁵ This is a concern when we know ECTs are choosing to work elsewhere. Registration for ECTs would require support from the Government to ensure ongoing professional development. Providing the opportunity for ECTs working in ELCs to be registered also demonstrates that level of value and respect we place on their work.



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