

Exhausted, Undervalued and Leaving:

THE CRISIS IN EARLY EDUCATION



Report: Early Education in Crisis

Introduction

“As a single mother my wage was not enough to support my family. It really limits your choices as a woman. Why would you choose to be part of an underclass?”

Educator, NSW

“It’s hard to describe the stress we are all under. It’s not just our workloads, but the fact that we are trying to care for and educate children. That means something, it’s important work. But it’s hard to do that to the best of our abilities when we have so much to do all the time. Educators at my centre, we are stressed and burnt out and not a week goes by when someone wants to throw it all in.”

Teacher, WA

“You feel so guilty when you genuinely are sick and can’t come in, and you know that there will be difficulties in replacing you. You dread answering the phone at certain times because it might be a staff member calling in sick and you don’t know how you’re going to cover them. You feel awful for having to turn down parents who ring in for an extra session for work or respite, because you can’t find enough staff.”

Educator, SA

Early educators work every day in a system which is complicated, expensive and puts profits above the wellbeing of children, educators, and families. At the centre of this failing system is an escalating and unsustainable workforce crisis.

Early educators have been holding together this messy and expensive system for years, but they have reached the end of their tether. Turnover rates in the sector are unsustainably high; recruitment is in disarray; excessive workloads are compromising quality care and education; understaffing and the misuse of ‘under-the-roof’ ratios are rampant; the pandemic has made working conditions even worse; and the long-existing elephant in the room – low pay and high stress – means the best and brightest educators are leaving in droves.

In March this year United Workers Union asked early educators their views on the unfolding crisis. Over 3800 educators participated in our nation-wide survey. This survey is the largest of its kind in Australia, attracting even more respondents than the recent ACECQA survey of the workforce.¹ Since 2010, data collected in the Federal Government’s national workforce census has become increasingly limited and while we await the 2021 results, the sector is already at breaking point. There has also been no national workforce strategy published for almost 10 years.² Our survey and this report fill a crucial gap in research on the Australian early education workforce and measures needed to fix the workforce crisis.

The message from the survey and early educators across the country is clear: they are at breaking point. There is no early childhood sector without early educators, and they simply can’t afford to stay and hold it together anymore. Educators don’t need more bureaucracy or a communications campaign. What they need is for the Federal Government to finally address the issue at the heart of this crisis: low pay.

The Federal Government is choosing to maintain a system which is clearly failing. Despite record levels of money going into subsidies, these funds are poorly targeted and insufficient. To fix the rapidly growing crisis, the Federal Government must deliver a workforce strategy that provides targeted funding to improve wages. Ultimately, we know that investment in early childhood pays for itself at least two times over. Early education is an essential part of Australia’s education infrastructure, and we need a sector that children and families can depend on, not one that is constantly in crisis.

Key findings

Turnover is at unsustainable levels and impacts children and educators alike

- 37% of educators told us that they do not intend to stay in the sector long-term and of this group, a shocking 74% intend to leave within the next three years. Over a quarter (26%) said they would be leaving in the next 12 months,
- 46% of the educators who do plan to stay in the sector long-term still think about leaving ‘all of the time’ or ‘most of the time’.
- Educators who are currently upskilling are far more likely to leave than those who aren’t: 40% of educators currently upskilling to an ECT degree and 51% of educators upskilling to a master’s degree intend to leave in the long term, compared to only 29% educators who are currently not upskilling.
- The top three reasons educators want to leave are:
 - Excessive workload and insufficient time to provide quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) (73%);
 - Low pay – I can’t afford to stay (63%); and
 - Feeling undervalued’ (47%).
- Over 75% of educators strongly agree that turnover negatively impacts how children learn and develop as well as their emotional wellbeing more broadly.

Low pay is putting severe financial stress on early educators

- 70% of educators surveyed said they ‘always’ or ‘often’ worry about their financial situation.
- 84% of educators would find it difficult to cover an unexpected, emergency \$400 expense.

Understaffing is at chronic levels and recruitment is a mess

- Understaffing is at chronic levels: a massive two thirds of educators said that their centre is understaffed and ‘often’ felt pressured to avoid taking leave because of staff shortages.
- Over 60% of educators said they have ‘often’ come to work or stayed at work sick due to staff shortages.
- 71% of directors say they have seen a significant increase in staff leaving the sector since the pandemic began and even more say there have been difficulties in attracting and recruiting staff (81%).
- Almost half of educators surveyed would not recommend ECEC as a career. This number rises to a stark 70% among those who intend to leave.

Excessive workloads, unpaid work and ‘under-the-roof ratios’ are huge problems

- Over two-thirds of educators (68%) say their workload has increased greatly in the last few years, and almost 80% say this increase means they don’t have enough time to provide quality education and care.
- 82% of current educators say that in the past month they ‘always’ or ‘often’ felt rushed when performing key caring and/or educational tasks.
- A quarter of educators surveyed say that they spend 5-10 unpaid hours a month completing their programming (26%) and a similar amount say they spend 5-10 hours competing other important tasks such as setting up rooms, cleaning, etc (24%).

- 80% of educators say that their increased workloads mean they don't have time to provide quality early learning and care of children and 90% say 'under-the-roof' ratios do the same. Even more (92%) told us 'under-the-roof' ratios compromise the safety and wellbeing of children.
- 83% of educators surveyed strongly agree that increased turnover and increased workload have resulted in higher levels of educator stress at work, and the same amount said they strongly agree that high staff turnover negatively affect staff and centre morale.

The workforce crisis is far worse in for-profit services

- More educators in for-profit services (72%) say their centre is understaffed compared to educators in not-for-profit (65%).
- More educators in for-profit services (82%) say they do not have sufficient time to provide quality ECEC to the children in the care, than those in not-for-profit centres (76%).
- 86% of current educators in for-profit services say that in the past month they 'always' or 'often' felt rushed when performing key caring and/or educational tasks. This is 82% in not-for-profit centres.

Covid has taken the workforce crisis to breaking point:

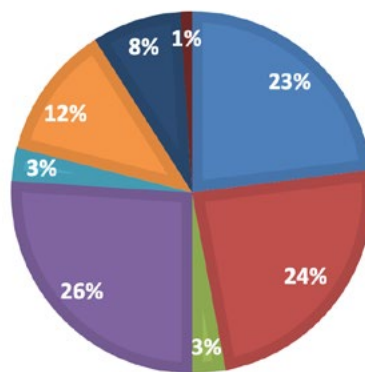
- Educators report an increase in workload since the pandemic and over the last few years. The main reason for this increased workload is 'extra time needed for cleaning duties' (85%).
- Educators have also had to deal with a more stressful and anxious working environment since the pandemic began. Not only are they themselves under more stress, but just under half (49%) of educators said they have needed more time to manage children's anxiety, and just over half (53%) said they have needed more time to manage parent anxiety.

Who responded to the survey?

- The online 20-minute survey was released on 10 July 2021 and ran for five weeks. The survey had two major pathways – one for educators who had left the sector within the last 5 years and another for current educators. Both surveys asked questions on a range of issues including retention, turnover, staffing, pay, health and safety, and collected both quantitative and qualitative data.
- A total of 3812 educators responded to the survey. 94% (3601) of respondents were current educators and 6% (211) were past educators.
- We heard from educators from every state and territory. The state-by-state breakdown of survey respondents was:

STATE DISTRIBUTION OF EDUCATORS

■ QLD ■ NSW ■ ACT ■ VIC ■ TAS ■ SA ■ WA ■ NT



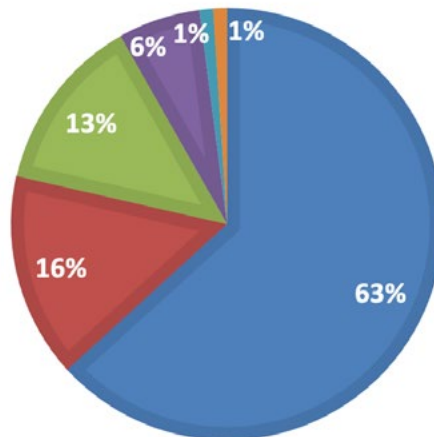
- 96% of educators surveyed were female, and 2% were male.
- The educators we surveyed reflect the diversity of the ECEC workforce.
 - The cohort of educators surveyed were from 78 countries. Most were born in Australia (77%), followed by the UK (5%), India (4%), New Zealand (2%), and the Philippines, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and China (1%).
 - The cohort of educators surveyed also spoke 64 different languages. 77% only spoke English and 23% spoke another language: Hindi (2%), Spanish (1%), Filipino (1%), Italian (1%), Punjabi (1%), Mandarin (1%) and Greek (1%).
 - 4% of educators surveyed identified as First Nations Australians.
- We also heard from educators across a wide age group; from those in the 18-24 group who told us about their hopes for their careers, to those in the 55 and above group, who reflected on their wealth of experience in the sector.

Educator Ages		
	No. of responses	Total responses
18-24 years old	180	5
25-34 years old	975	27
35-44 years old	1010	28
45-54 years old	909	25
55+ years old	511	14

- Almost half (48%) work in not-for-profit (NFP) services, and a quarter (26%) worked in for-profit services. 1% work in a government-run service and 1% worked in an independently run service.³
- The vast majority (87%) work in long day care (LDC), 9% in preschool/kindergarten, 4% in out of school hours (including vacation care) and 2% in family day care.
- Almost half of survey respondents (48%) were permanent full-time, 44% were permanent part-time, and 7% were casual. In contrast, the latest workforce census statistics on hours of work show that 56% of educators work part-time and 33% work full time.⁴
- In terms of roles, most survey respondents were educators (62%) followed by directors (15%), teachers (13%), and assistant directors (6%). Almost one third (29%) were room leaders, 14% educational leaders, and 5% both room leaders and educational leaders.

EDUCATOR ROLES

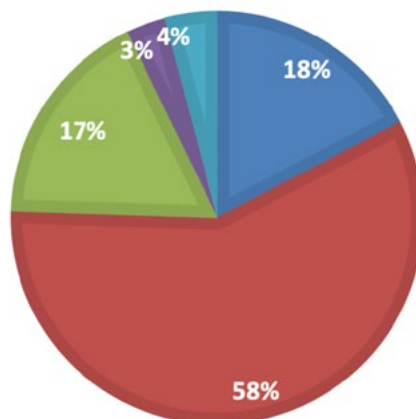
■ Educator ■ Director ■ Teacher ■ Assistant Director ■ Cook ■ Trainee



- In relation to qualifications, most respondents have a diploma (57%), followed by an Early Childhood Teaching (ECT) degree (17%) and a Certificate III (16%).

EDUCATOR QUALIFICATIONS

■ Certificate III ■ Diploma ■ ECT degree ■ Masters degree ■ Working towards a degree ■



- Over half of the respondents have been in early education and care (ECEC) for 10 or more years (58%), and almost all have been in ECEC for over 3 years (91%).
- The survey found that leadership in ECEC today is very diverse in terms of skills and qualifications:
 - Directors: 58% have a diploma while a little over a third (36%) have an ECT degree.
 - Educational leaders: Over half (54%) have a diploma, and a third (33%) have an ECT degree, while 5% have a Certificate III.
 - Room leaders: Over two-thirds of room leaders (69%) have a diploma, around one-fifth (18%) have an ECT degree, and 5% have a Certificate III.

Report Overview

The report is split into five key sections:

1. A spotlight on the three main issues in the workforce crisis: high turnover; staff shortages and recruitment; and low pay.
2. An outline of the everyday workplace issues educators face and how they are now worse than ever.
3. A case study on how every issue is worse in the for-profit sector and a spotlight report on Australia's biggest for-profit provider, G8 Education.
4. An examination of the ways in which the workforce crisis impacts children's development, educator wellbeing, parent stress and Australia's economy and future.
5. A concluding discussion of the solutions to the workforce crisis and what educators need to deliver world-class early learning.

Part one leads with a discussion of the three key survey findings and policy issues at play in the workforce crisis: high turnover; staff shortages and difficulties with recruitment; and low pay. These survey findings reinforce existing academic research. For example, the most recent research shows that 30-48% of educators leave the sector each year – rates that are double the national turnover average and triple the average rate of turnover of primary school educators.⁵ Our survey revealed strikingly similar turnover rates: 37% of educators said that they intend to leave ECEC in the near future and a shocking 73% saying they want to leave in the next three years. If this happens, the sector will reach breaking point and Australian children and families will miss out. In this section we also include data on centre directors' particular frustrations on recruitment, and what we can learn from the 200 educators who have already left the sector.

Part two reveals survey findings on why the workforce issues have hit crisis point and why the Federal Government needs to act now. The workplace issues are chronic. Understaffing; the misuse of 'under-the-roof' ratios; excessive workloads; unpaid overtime; increased cleaning duties; and the inability and/or pressures not to take personal, sick, or even annual leave are all taking their toll. Projections show that the sector needs 40,000 additional staff by 2023 to meet demand and the COVID pandemic has exacerbated this situation with a doubling of monthly job vacancies compared to pre-covid levels.⁶ High workloads are pushing more and more educators out of the sector and ECEC services are already reporting having to cap new enrolments.

Part three examines how our survey findings found that these workforce issues and their impact on early learning are far worse in the for-profit sector, with a spotlight case study on Australia's biggest for-profit provider, G8 Education.

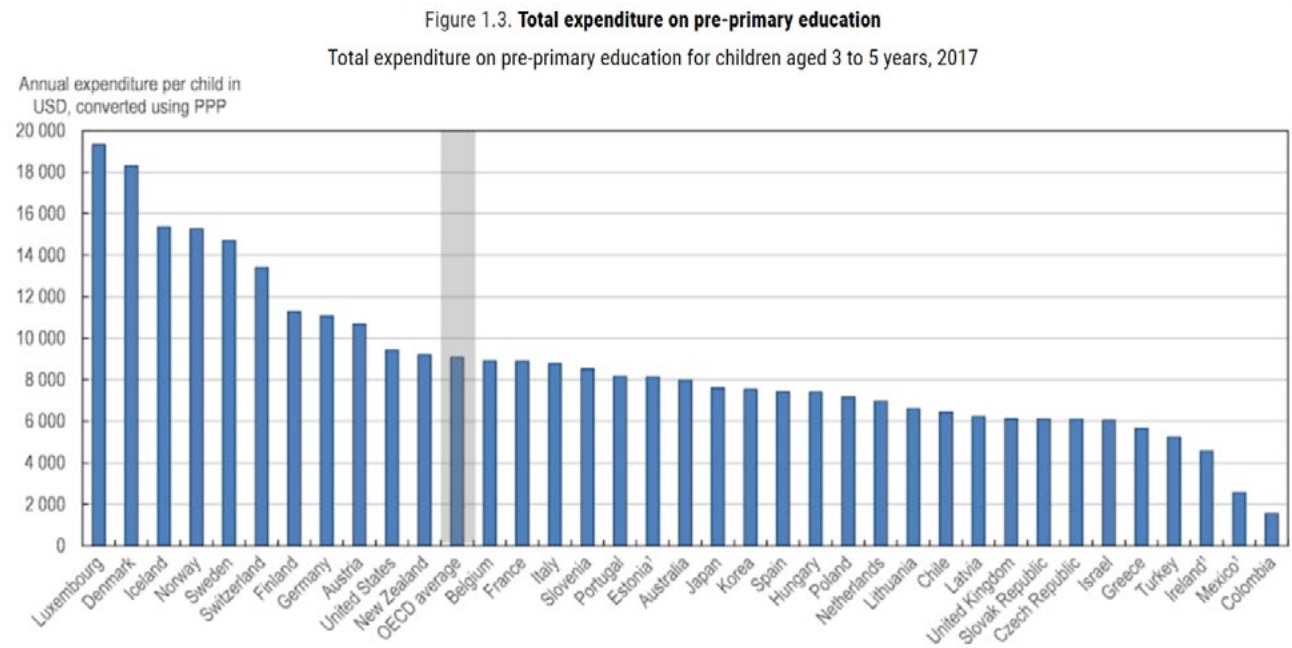
Part four details the impacts the workforce crisis is having on educator's own ability to deliver quality early learning and the impact on children's learning, educator stress and parents anxiety.

The report concludes with a call to action to the Federal Government from the 3800 educators who responded to the survey. It includes qualitative findings describing what educators love about their job, and the urgent action that needs to be taken to prevent almost three quarters of educators leaving the sector in the next three years: a workforce strategy that provides targeted government funding to improve educator wages.

PART 1: The three big workforce crisis issues

1. Turnover rates in ECEC are unsustainably high and compromise high quality early learning

As a result of decades of underfunding Australia's ECEC workforce is in crisis. A recent UNICEF report expressed concern that despite the importance of early learning to children's future outcomes, governments worldwide spend less than an estimated 2% of their budgets on early childhood programmes.⁷ Despite being one of the wealthiest nations in the world, Australia spends even less than that. Australia stands well behind the OECD average, and behind countries of similar means, such as New Zealand (fig. 1.3).⁸



This underfunding is at the heart of the current workforce crisis in ECEC. Research has consistently shown the main reason educators give for leaving the sector is inadequate compensation. Other reasons include poor working conditions; low professional status; lack of career progression; lack of support for professional development; and high stress levels caused by the physical demands and unpredictability of the job.⁹ Low pay is also consistently found to be the strongest predictor of staff turnover. Our survey findings reiterate what everyone in the sector, including advocates and academics already know: educator turnover has reached crisis point in the sector and the Government needs to act.

- Overall, almost 40% of the educators we surveyed told us that they do not plan to stay in ECEC long term. Broken down by role, more teachers, and educators (both 38%) say they intend to leave ECEC, than directors (33%) and assistant directors (26%).
- In fact, over a quarter (26%) of educators surveyed told us they plan to leave in the next 12 months, and a shocking three-quarters (73%) of these educators plan to leave within the next three years.
- The survey also found that even of those educators planning to stay, almost half (46%) think about leaving 'all the time' or 'most of the time'.
- COVID-19 has made things worse. Almost three-quarters (71%) of centre directors surveyed said they have seen a significant increase in staff leaving the sector since the pandemic began.
- Almost all educators (97%) told us that they are concerned about the high turnover in the sector.

Every time an educator leaves their position or the sector altogether, the impact is felt by dozens of children.¹⁰ Numerous studies have confirmed the centrality of continuity in establishing strong attachments between children and their educators.¹¹ Close, ongoing relationships between educators and children are crucial to their social and emotional learning because they provide children with a secure space from within which they can learn about and explore the world around them. High turnover is damaging for children and damaging for educators.¹²

Leaders in ECEC and their concerns for the sector

Directors and assistant directors play important leadership roles in ECEC. They told us their biggest concerns for the sector were high rates of turnover and understaffing.

- Almost three quarters (71%) of directors say they have seen a significant increase in staff leaving the sector since the pandemic began
- 81% say there have been difficulties in attracting and recruiting staff.

“Educators at my centre are having to come in earlier, they are missing out their programming time, rushing through their breaks, and they are staying back after hours longer just to be able to cover shifts and ratios. Educator burnout is a real problem in this sector.”

Director, NSW

“Educators’ sense of well-being is suffering, they feel like they can’t have a day off and, in reality, they can’t because we don’t have anyone to replace them. It’s come to the point where it’s about having a “bum” on a seat compared rather than providing high quality education and care.”

Assistant Director, VIC

“Every day I wake up worrying about how many educators have called in sick today that we cannot replace. There is constant stress about how we can even provide a safe environment for children, least of all any quality education and care.”

Director, VIC

“As a centre director, it worries me that experienced, qualified staff are constantly leaving the sector for better paid positions. This lack of consistency is not good for children and families, and it is not good for centre morale.”

Assistant Director, NSW

“As a director, fielding phone calls and messages all through the night and weekend of educators calling in sick and not being able to sleep at night because you know you can’t cover the shifts and your manager won’t allow you to use agency staff to meet legal ratios. This results in children being shuffled from room to room like they are pieces of furniture and having to resort to ‘under-the-roof’ which compromises children’s safety and dramatically impacts educator wellbeing and stress levels.”

Director, SA

The best and brightest are most likely to leave

Skilled and experienced educators are fundamental to building, sustaining and mentoring a qualified, highly skilled workforce. The loss of any educator from the sector is concerning, but the loss of these educators is even more problematic. Research has found consistently that they are more likely to leave.¹³ In fact, there is existing evidence to suggest that many early childhood educators are skilling up to leave the sector.¹⁴ Our survey findings reinforce this worrying trend.

- Almost half (48%) of educators who currently have a master’s degree intend to leave ECEC in the long term.
- Educators who are currently upskilling are also far more likely to leave than those who are not upskilling: 40% of educators currently upskilling to an ECT degree and 51% of educators upskilling to a master’s degree intend to leave in the long term, compared to educators who are currently not upskilling (29%).

Many educators with a degree leave for the primary-school sector, where the same degree qualifications allow them a career with more manageable workloads and better pay. Currently, a degree-qualified teacher working in Australia in ECEC is paid approximately \$11,000 per year less than an equivalently qualified teacher in the primary school sector.¹⁵

Educators on why they are leaving

“Although there are beautiful learning moments and achievements and watching how our teaching and care shapes and develops the children in our care, the constant pressures placed upon Educators both physically and mentally is intense. Our wages do not reflect our skills and our workload, we do not get enough support, ... we are just trying to survive each day rather than providing quality education.”

Educator, VIC

“The way our government sees our industry is that we are disposable, and that we are not a valuable asset to our communities and to the country. This is why we are still poorly paid, undervalued and disrespected.”

Assistant Director, QLD

“With such a high staff turnover you can barely take time off and wind up feeling guilty if for some reason you’ve caught the illness that’s been going around the centre and you have to call in sick. This leads to burn out and people questioning why they are actually working in an industry where people think they are just “babysitters” and don’t appreciate or recognise the hard work, passion and dedication that goes into this job.”

Educator, ACT

“The pay is not in line with the level qualification required. Educational leaders are not supported by the government to appropriately fulfill their role, they need fair remuneration and mandated time that is of a suitable amount to facilitate the professional growth of program and practice.”

Educator, NSW

Past educators on what needs to change in the sector

Over 200 past educators took our survey, the vast majority of whom (76%) spent more than 5 years in the sector before they left. Drawing on their experiences, they provided important insights into what is working in the sector and what needs to improve.

- 67% said they wouldn’t recommend a career in ECEC.
- Their most common reasons for leaving the sector were excessive workload impacting their ability to provide quality education and care (63%), feeling undervalued (48%), and workplace stress (45%).
- Almost three quarters (73%) said that changes to working conditions in the last few years played a role in their decision to leave the sector.
- 13% of educators left the sector to teach in primary school, while 18% simply left the job and are now unemployed.
- Of the past educators surveyed, 60% said that higher pay would have changed their mind about staying, 42% said more respect from the Government and employers, and 41% said a more manageable workload.

2. Recruitment is in disarray and skill shortages are getting worse

While high numbers of educators are leaving, fewer and fewer new educators are choosing ECEC as a profession. Recruitment is a major issue for the sector: there are thousands of job vacancies across the nation, as centres struggle to find skilled educators to fill key positions, and this means families will miss out on early learning.

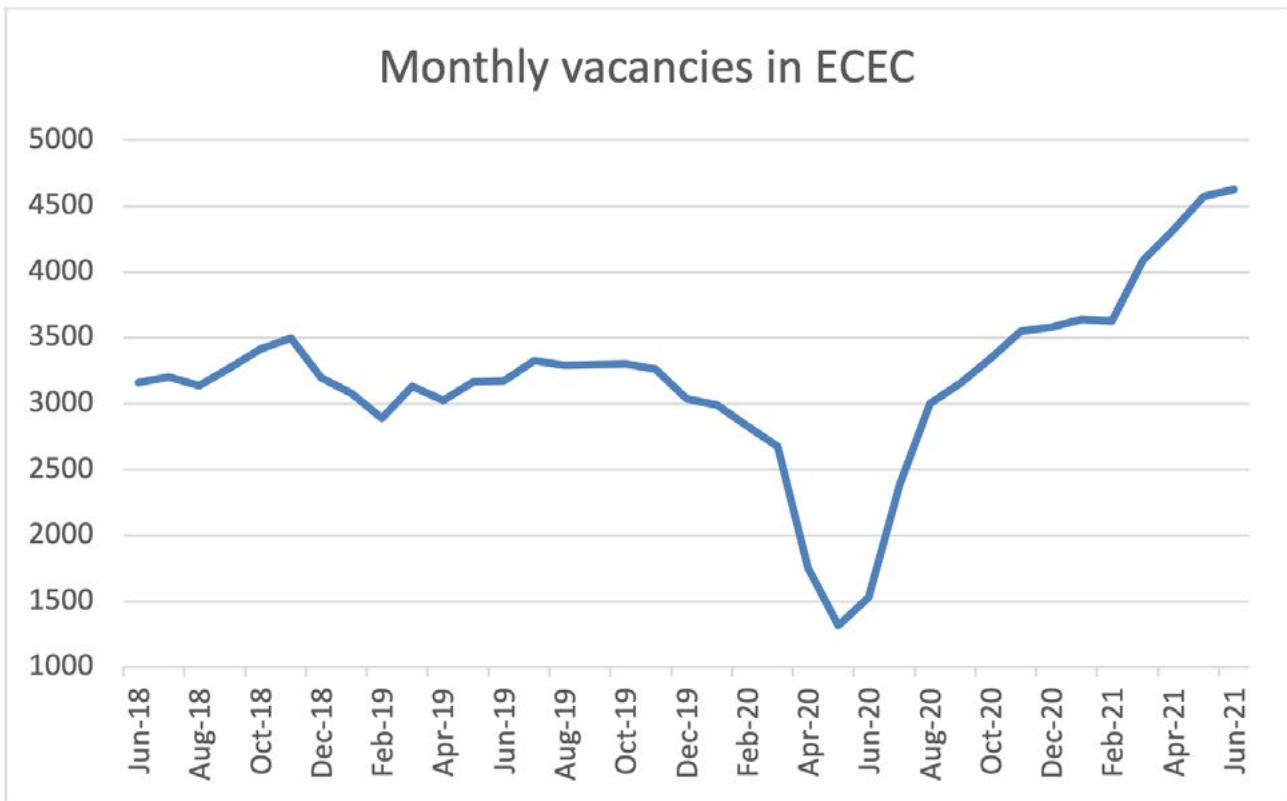
- Of the educators we surveyed, 73% confirmed that there have been ‘great’ difficulties in attracting, recruiting, and keeping staff in the last few years. This number is even higher among centre directors, of whom 81% say there have been ‘great’ difficulties in recruitment.

This crisis is only set to worsen as demand for early education increases. Since 2000, the proportion of children 0-5 enrolling in early childhood education has increased significantly from 30% to 45% and this trend is expected to continue.¹⁶ Reflecting this trend, the National Skills Commission predicts ‘very strong’ future growth for the sector over the next five years.¹⁷

By conservative estimates, the sector will need around 39,000 extra educators, including 9,000 additional ECTs, by 2023. This represents a 20% increase for the workforce over five years. This will be a significant challenge to a sector that is currently facing declining enrolments in approved qualifications. This is on top of the already high turnover over of qualified educators to the primary school sector.¹⁸

It is also worrying that, rates of commencement in early childhood teaching courses have trended downward since 2015, as have rates of completion. In fact, in its Skills Priority List released this year, the National Skills Commission (NSC) has identified shortages for early educators in all states except Queensland, and shortages of ECT trained educators across the country.¹⁹

This problem of attraction and recruitment for the sector can be seen in the NSC’s latest vacancies report, which shows a dramatic increase in the number of educator vacancies within the sector from June 2018 to June 2021.²⁰



Our qualitative data confirms these findings, with many educators telling us that staffing shortages are a huge problem for the sector and their everyday work environment.

Educators on staff shortages and difficulties with recruitment

“[Staff shortages] put a lot of stress on our team. For example, we have been searching for a qualified teacher for our 4-year-old program since November last year, but we have had no applicants to date. This means that we use a lot of agency staff, which puts extra pressure on the permanent team who have to constant supervise and guide new team members. Our team rarely gets home in time.”

Assistant Director, VIC

“I keep seeing new centres opening up, but there are not enough educators to fill the vacancies in the centres that already exist. Why is no-one listening to us?”

Director, NSW

“Our service is running at approximately 65% occupancy with a large waiting list as we cannot get staff to fill the roles needed to put these children into care. And because of these shortages, staff are being shuffled around from one room to another, so that there is little consistency of care for the children we do have in attendance.”

Teacher, VIC

3. Low pay is the elephant in the room

Low pay is the main cause of low retention in the ECEC sector.²¹ Early childhood educators are some of the lowest paid workers in Australia. An educator first entering the sector makes \$23.31 per hour which is only marginally above the national minimum award rate of \$20.33.²²

It should be no surprise, then, that recent research into the sector found that between a third and a half of educators intending to leave said dissatisfaction with pay was their primary reason for leaving.²³ Our survey results reflect this finding:

- Almost two-thirds (62%) of the educators said they intend to leave the sector because they cannot afford to stay.

Meanwhile, a three-year national ECEC workforce study found that of the educators who do remain in the sector, many could only do so because they had alternate sources of income: some educators have a second job, while others rely on income from partners or families to help them cover basic necessities such as rent and food.²⁴ Many educators without a degree qualification live either in or close to poverty.²⁵ The impact of low pay on educators is wide ranging. Research has shown a demonstrable effect on their physical and mental health, which in some cases may flow on to their ability to form strong attachments to children.²⁶ Low wages can also prevent educators (over half of whom are under 35), from obtaining a home loan or starting a family.²⁷

Our survey results show that this situation has worsened in recent years:

- Two thirds (66%) of the educators told us that they ‘always’ worry about their financial situation.
- An alarming 84% of the educators told us that it would be difficult for them to cover a \$400 unexpected, emergency expense.

Educators consistently tell researchers that their level of pay makes them feel undervalued because it does not reflect either the professionalism of their work or its immense social and emotional value.²⁸ The quotes below from our survey tell the same story.

Educators on low pay in the sector

“We play a major role in shaping the lives of young children. Yet, we and the services we provide are not valued at all. I am passionate about children, quality education and creating an environment that cares, nurtures and supports children. However, I also need to feel valued as an educator, for my skills and qualifications. We need to be paid at a level that reflects the work we put in and that will allow me to raise my own family.”

Educator, VIC

“The personal limitations that come from choosing a career in ECEC are enormous. It is unlikely that I will ever be able to purchase my own home, buy a brand-new car or go on an overseas holiday. It is difficult when we have to live pay-check to pay-check with very little opportunity to build our own savings. I regularly worry about the implications my career will have on my life when I retire and can no longer work.”

Educator, NSW

“The remuneration for the responsibility asked of educators is ridiculous. I could get more money stacking shelves at Coles. As an educator, though, I am responsible for the safety and well-being of someone’s else child. So why am I not paid accordingly?”

Director, QLD

Part 2: The everyday workplace issues educators face have never been worse

The sector is at breaking point

The sector has been in crisis for a long time, but the nation is now at a crossroads. There are large numbers of vacancies in centres across Australia, with directors struggling to fill key positions due to a lack of applicants. Educators tell us that they are having to routinely turn away enrolments due to lack of staff.

Educators on why things are now worse than ever.

“Things are worse these days. Experienced staff are underappreciated, and there is less support for educators. Procedures are ignored more and more: ‘under-the-roof’ ratios are used as an excuse to have too many children in one room. Play-based learning is not the priority anymore, money is.”

Educator, NSW

“Staff shortages were an issue before pandemic, but they have become worse since. These days when staff leave, they don’t get replaced and we are constantly understaffed.”

Educator, NSW

“The sector is getting worse. We often struggle to meet ratio due to staff shortages. The impact on children is devastating, the younger ones, especially, struggle when they see a new face every day. It is hard to spend quality time with the children, to sit and engage with them, when your workload has doubled.”

Educator, VIC

“It’s become worse in the last couple of years. We still provide care for the same number of children, but without enough staff. It’s happening every day and it’s dangerous for children and staff. Staff routinely go home crying, and then have to come to work the next day even though they are well beyond exhausted or physically unwell, for fear of making the next day worse for the rest of their work colleagues, children and families.”

Educator, VIC

“For us to do our jobs well, we need more staff so that each educator has more time and better working conditions. As educational leaders, we often work long unpaid hours during the week and the weekends to ensure each child in our care has the best possible outcomes available to them. And yet we do not get any recognition for the work that we do.”

Teacher, VIC

High turnover, understaffing, excessive workloads, and unpaid overtime are rampant, and the situation is even worse with COVID. The COVID pandemic has exacerbated a problem that was already there, with monthly job vacancies doubling compared to pre-covid levels.²⁹ High workloads due to increased understaffing are pushing educators out of the sector in droves. One of the most resounding findings of our survey is that 85% of educators told us that they are currently spending extra time every single day cleaning. Early childhood educators are skilled professionals who should be spending their time providing children with the high quality of education and care that they deserve.

Educators also told us that there has been a significant increase in their workload since the start of the pandemic:

- A troubling 82% of educators also reported higher turnover since the start of the pandemic, with 64% saying there has been a ‘big’ or ‘moderate’ increase in staff leaving, putting further strain on their time and energy as they work to fill gaps and deliver quality education and care without sufficient resources or support.
- Educators are also dealing with a more stressful and anxious working environment. Not only are they themselves under more stress, but just under half (49%) of educators said they have needed more time to manage the anxiety of children, and just over half (53%) said they have needed more time to manage the anxiety of parents.

When the pandemic began, educators took up the challenge, risking their own safety and taking on even more work and responsibility to support essential workers, children, and parents. Yet ECEC was the first sector to lose access to JobKeeper payments in 2020. We have heard from many educators in the survey that this decision left them feeling even more undervalued and disrespected by the Federal Government. As one NT ECT said: “Educators are expected to provide the highest levels of care and education, yet we are paid less than unskilled workers. The Government always talks about the economic importance of early years education in helping parents get back to work. But, how long did it take for us to be recognised as essential workers during the pandemic? We were the first to lose JobKeeper and weren’t included in the [2021] budget. Recognition for educators is long overdue.”

What are the biggest workplace issues?

High turnover and low recruitment rates in ECEC mean that the sector is lacking a stable workforce of skilled and qualified educators. This instability drives understaffing, excess workloads and unpaid overtime and high levels of stress.

Understaffing is rampant

High turnover has seen many qualified educators leave the sector, and the number of new educators entering continues to shrink because of the low pay and difficult workloads. As a result, understaffing has become a major issue.

- A concerning two-thirds (65%) of educators reported that their centre is understaffed.

Educators on understaffing

“We have had to halt enrolments because we cannot meet ratios. This is really impacting my workload and other educators’ workloads. I currently am doing 3 people’s job.”

Director, SA

“We often have to turn children away and can’t take extra bookings. Staff shortage leads to stress and burnout amongst employees, diminished creativity and exhaustion – I have seen all of these issues at my centre.”

Director, TAS

“Staff shortages often mean that I am having to compromise on my teaching ethics and values. Leaving children at the end of the day with casual educators who they are mostly unfamiliar with is less than ideal and highly detrimental, especially to vulnerable children who suffer from attachment and relationship disadvantages. It also has meant that I have needed to move children in and out of their regular rooms simply to be able to maintain ratio. Staff shortages also mean that planning and programming is being compromised. In the end we often have to take work home with us, which takes us away from our own families, leads to burn out and even more educators leaving the sector.”

Educator, NSW

“It’s very difficult not having the much-needed support of a stable team. It affects the well-being of staff and children and disrupts everyone’s ability to work effectively. In a room that is supposed to have 3 staff I often find myself working with 2 casuals who don’t know the children or the centre very well. It often feels like I’m treading water.”

Educator, QLD

“High turnover and understaffing are a really big problem in my experience. Understaffing means extra workload on existing staff who ending up burning out, taking more mental health and sick days off. Also, because we must adhere to ratios and minimum qualifications, we have to reduce the number of approved places to reflect staff availability. This impacts the service financially and families who rely on care so they can work.” Director, QLD

‘Under-the-roof ratios’ are a big problem

National regulations laying out required staff-to-children ratios for various age ranges in early education have been designed based on research and best practice - but these are explicitly intended as a minimum standard. The term ‘under-the-roof ratios’ describes a practice whereby the number of staff in ratio to the number of children is calculated by averaging across a whole centre, instead of room by room. This practice can leave educators managing large groups of children with little support and can put the safety of children and educators at risk. For example, a single educator may be left on her own in a room with ten toddlers aged 2-3, as long as, there is an additional educator working in the infants’ room, who can be counted towards the overall ratios ‘under-the-roof’.

The educators we surveyed told us that ‘under-the-roof ratios’ are undermining their ability to do their job the best they can:

- Over 3200 educators surveyed (92%) are concerned about ‘under-the-roof’ ratios, and the around the same number strongly agree that ‘under-the-roof’ ratios compromise quality ECEC for children (90%) as well as their safety and wellbeing (92%).

Educators cannot take leave when they need to

Understaffing has a major impact on educator wellbeing because it means they are often unable to take any sick leave or personal leave, to look after themselves and their families. We have had anecdotal evidence for a long time that educators have found themselves unable to take leave when they are sick.

Our survey results provide evidence to back up what educators have been saying for a long time:

- 67% of educators told us that they have ‘often’ felt pressured to avoid taking leave when they are sick because of staff shortages.
- 62% of educators told us that they have had to come to work or have had to stay at work while sick because of staff shortages.

Educators are facing excessive workloads

Staffing shortages mean that educators are doing more work, and longer hours. Many early educators report having to work long hours with staggered shifts to cover centre opening hours, often to make up staffing shortfalls.³⁰ The educators we surveyed consistently told us that turnover and understaffing has meant they are spread too thin, performing too many tasks. Our survey results provide evidence to back up what educators have been saying for a long time:

- Over 3400 (96%) say their workload has increased in the last few years, and over 2400 (68%) say their workload has increased greatly.

Too many educators are doing unpaid overtime

Overworked in understaffed centres, educators are routinely completing their uncompleted tasks outside of paid work hours. One of the major reasons for educators taking work home is that they are routinely denied their programming time. Programming time is vital to delivering quality ECEC, and to ensuring the best outcomes for children. The Children's Services Award entitles educators a minimum of two hours paid time for planning, during which they do not have contact with children, but many educators report not being provided with sufficient time to complete the work required of them.³¹

Our survey confirms these findings:

- A high proportion of educator's report having to do unpaid overtime. A quarter of those surveyed say that they spend 5-10 unpaid hours a month completing their programming (26%) and a similar amount say they spend 5-10 hours competing other important tasks such as setting up rooms, cleaning, etc (24%).

Programming and curriculum development	
No. of unpaid hours per month	% of educators
1-5 hours	55
5-10 hours	26
10 or more hours	20
Other important tasks (cleaning, setting up)	
No. of unpaid hours per month	% of educators
1-5 hours	61
5-10 hours	24
10 or more hours	15

Educators on unpaid overtime

“The pressure on educators to fill the gaps – extra paid hours, but mostly unpaid hours. Educators are regularly “invited” to “working bees” on the weekend to try to catch up on cleaning and organising jobs they can’t complete during the working week. Or told off for not having engaging programs or room set ups, whilst being given no time to achieve this. Educators often stay back unpaid to re-organise the furniture in their rooms.”

Educator, NSW

“The pay is shockingly bad for the workload and conditions. You have such an important job, looking after children and keeping them safe, but you also have the responsibility of teaching them, building their brains and helping them become the best people they can be. Then you have a mountain of checklists, programs, documentation, evaluations of learning, summative assessments, cleaning, emails, regulations, policies and procedures that you have to follow, implement and get done with next to no time to do so. All of this results in educators almost always having to take work home (unpaid) with absolutely no recognition or support.”

Educator, ACT

“Educators at my centre routinely spend so many unpaid hours doing the behind the scenes work e.g., programming, making resources, buying resources (sometimes out of our own pockets). Unpaid overtime is a huge issue for the sector. At the end of the day, all this tells me is just how little we are respected as human beings – you wouldn’t ask someone you respected to spend their own time doing work they should be paid to do.”

Educator, WA

Part 3: When profits come before education and care

Educators working for for-profit providers face all these workplace issues, but at higher rates.

Educators are constantly struggling to do the best they can while understaffed, with fewer resources, and little support. Yet many for-profit providers are paying their CEOs outrageous salaries and their shareholders millions in profits. The current system of putting profits first has failed; we need to build a new system that puts children and educators back at the centre.

- Of the educators who intend to stay in ECEC, more educators working in for-profit centres (53%) say they think about leaving ‘all’ or ‘most’ of the time, than those who work in not-for-profit services (43%).
- More educators in for-profit centres (82%) say they do not have sufficient time to provide quality ECEC to the children in the care, than those in not-for-profit centres (76%).
- Understaffing is a bigger problem in for-profit centres, than in not-for-profit centres. More educators in for-profit (72%) say their centre is understaffed compared to educators in not-for-profit (65%).
- 87% of educators in for-profit expressed concern about ‘under-the-roof’ ratios and their impact on children, compared to 80% of those in not-for-profit.
- Educators in for-profit centres are also more likely to face pressure at work due to staff shortages. 71% of educators in for-profit centres said they often felt pressure to avoid taking leave, compared to 65% in not-for-profit centres.
- Given these issues, it is unsurprising that 50% of educators in for-profits would not recommend a career in ECEC, compared to 40% in not-for-profits.
- Educators who work in for-profit centres are less likely to remain in ECEC over the long-term: 47% in for-profit said they had been in ECEC for 10+ years, compared to 61% of educators working in not-for-profit.

As one Director in NSW so rightly put it: “Early years education is becoming more and more privatised and all about the money. Children are not central to decision making as employees are under so much pressure with the excessive demands of the job. I am constantly being put in ethically compromising positions and this makes me very uncomfortable because it puts the health and safety of children at risk.”

G8 Education in the spotlight

G8 Education is the biggest for-profit LDC provider in the country with over 450 centres and is listed on the Australian Stock Exchange. In our survey a higher proportion of participants from G8 reported they had experienced issues relating to turnover, understaffing and workload compared with responses from educators employed in other services.

ECEC is dominated by for-profit services, especially in long day care and this domination exacerbates the workforce crisis. Labour costs are the highest cost in long day care and for-profit providers have a strong incentive to drive down those costs. In addition to ASX listed companies like G8, private equity plays a huge role in Australia’s early learning sector, owning other large for-profit providers like Affinity, Guardian and Only About Children. These business models don’t belong in Australia’s early learning sector as the findings in this section of the report reveal. Below we outline what 225 educators told us about working at G8 and the impact on children in their services.

Which G8 educators responded?

- 225 current educators and 11 past educators who worked at G8 responded to our survey.
- In terms of roles, most responses were from educators (62%), followed by directors (14%) and assistant directors (12%). Of these, just over one third (35%) were room leaders, 8% were educational leaders, and 7% were both.

- Most respondents have a diploma (66%), followed by an ECT degree (17%), and a Certificate III (12%). 1% have a master's degree.
- Just under half of the respondents (49%) have been in the sector for over 10 years, and 89% have been in the sector more than 3 years.

Turnover

- 41% of G8 educators who participated in the survey said they do not intend to stay in ECEC long-term, compared to 37% overall. Of those who said they plan to leave, a significantly higher percentage of G8 educators (81%) say they intend to leave within the next three years compared to educators overall (73%).
- Of the educators who said they plan to leave 85% say that changes to their working conditions in the last few years played a role in their decision to leave, compared to 80% overall.
- Of those who said they do plan to stay long-term, 58% say that they think about leaving 'all the time' or 'most of the time'. This is significantly higher than the overall average of 46%. This number is also higher than the average for all for-profit educators (53%).

Workload

- Most G8 educators who participated in the survey said they are feeling the pressure of excess workload more than the overall cohort. A shocking 90% of G8 educators say that they 'always' or 'often' feel rushed when performing key caring and/or educational tasks, compared to 82% overall. And 86% of G8 educators say they do not have sufficient time to provide quality ECEC, compared to 81% overall.
- G8 educators who participated in the survey also said they are spending more of their own unpaid time completing their ECEC work, compared to the overall cohort.
 - One third of G8 educators (32%) say that they spend 5-10 unpaid hours per month competing their educational programming, compared to 26% overall.
 - Over two-thirds (67%) of G8 educators say they spend 1-5 unpaid hours per month completing other important tasks (cleaning, setting up rooms, etc) compared to 61% overall.
 - 40% of G8 educator comments on their working conditions talk about stress and pressure at work.

Understaffing

- The survey results suggest G8 educators are more likely to report that their centres are understaffed: with (77%) saying that their centre is understaffed, compared to 65% overall and 72% among other educators working in for-profits.
- 94% of G8 educators said they are concerned about 'under-the-roof', with 90% saying that they compromise quality education and care and 91% saying that they compromise the safety and wellbeing of children.
- Almost three quarters (74%) of educators at G8 say that they have felt pressure to avoid taking leave, compared to 67% of the overall cohort.

Pay

- Over three quarters (77%) of G8 educators say they 'always' worry about their financial situation, which is significantly higher than the overall cohort (66%), and 61% say it would be 'very difficult' for them to cover a \$400 unexpected, emergency expense, compared to 54% overall.

G8 educators on their working conditions in their own words

Some of the G8 educators who participated in the survey told us about their experiences working at G8 centres.

- “We are understaffed so there is lots of pressure not to take a sick day and even staff at my centre have called in sick and are told no, you have to come in. We often do not meet ratio, it happens every week, especially in the mornings. The centre is breaking the rules and putting everyone at risk.” Educator, VIC
- “We’re overburdened. I am a director, a cook, ratio cover and lunch cover at the moment.” Director, NSW
- “Our team is breaking down. We have no staff for lunch cover, programming, WHS and educational leader time. We are overworked due to there not being enough staff to allow us to complete our work. It is not appropriate to bump children into different rooms just so we have someone to cover lunch breaks. This isn’t best practice.” Educator, NSW
- “It is a fight every day to find the educators you need to run just one room!” Assistant Director, NSW
- “I can’t take time off to spend with my own family because we don’t have any staff to cover leave.” Educator, QLD

Part 4: Impact of the workforce crisis on children’s development, educator wellbeing, family stress and Australia’s future.

Understaffing and excess workloads have a significant impact on educators

High turnover leads to understaffing, and fewer staff means more stress for educators. Educators push themselves to fill gaps, often missing out on breaks and leading to dangerous levels of fatigue. Staff shortages take an immense toll on educator health and wellbeing. Early educators consistently report working conditions that are high in stress, and detrimental to their mental health.³² Of the educators captured in statistics on staff exits within the sector, 25% say that work related stress was their primary reason for leaving.³³

Our survey findings replicate these results:

- 83% of educators surveyed strongly agree that increased turnover and increased workload have resulted in higher levels of educator stress at work, and the same amount said they strongly agree that high staff turnover negatively affect staff and centre morale.
- 67% say that they have ‘often’ felt pressured to avoid taking leave because of staff shortages, and a worrying 62% have come to or stayed at work sick for the same reason.
- A look at the qualitative data reveals that 53% of the educators who responded to our survey used the words ‘exhausted’ or ‘burnout’ when talking about their experience working in ECEC today. As one ACT educator so succinctly put it: “Before you even start your day, your stress levels start rising knowing that you will have shorter lunch breaks, and maybe no tea break cover. Breaks are important to remain motivated & positive. It’s also hard that because of the constant turnover of staff you know that you will be working with educators who don’t know the children well. It makes it more difficult to follow key educator responsibilities. Basically, it feels like crap because you can’t give the children the attention they deserve.”

The impact on children’s learning and emotional wellbeing is dire

Educators consistently told us that they are wholly committed to doing the best for the children under their care. But educators who are stressed and overworked cannot provide quality education and care, no matter how committed they are.

- 77% of educators say that because of this increased workload they do not have sufficient time to provide quality ECEC.
- 81% of educators said that in the past month they ‘always’ or ‘often’ didn’t have enough time to complete their programming, and 82% said they ‘always’ or ‘often’ felt rushed when performing key caring and/or educational tasks.
- Almost three quarters of educators strongly agreed that increased workload has compromised their ability to provide children with the emotional support they need for their wellbeing (71%) as well as their ability to provide high quality early learning (72%).
- 84% of educators say that high staff turnover leads to excessive workload, which affects children and educators alike.
- Three quarters of educators strongly agree that it negatively impacts how children learn and develop (76%), as well as their emotional wellbeing more broadly (77%).
- This is particularly concerning because 95% of educators surveyed say that children have needed more social and emotional support in the last few years, and almost half (48%) say that they have needed extra time to manage increased anxiety among the children in their care.

These are alarming findings. The OECD Starting Strong reports and other international research has consistently shown that high-quality ECEC is crucial for children’s early development in the acquisition of academic skills such as literacy and numeracy, as well their development of social and emotional skills.³⁴ Meanwhile, the Mitchell Institute singles out interactions between an educator and a child as the most important determinant of quality in ECEC.³⁵

The difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified and experienced staff poses a critical barrier to ensuring a qualified, highly skilled, and sustainable workforce in the ECEC sector. Numerous studies have confirmed the centrality of continuity in establishing strong attachments between children and their educators. Close, ongoing relationships between educators and children are crucial to their social and emotional learning.

Every time an educator leaves their position or the sector altogether, the impact is felt by dozens of children. The departure of an educator similarly affects their colleagues. Those who remain must modify their roles or take on new tasks to make up for the staffing disruption; this can disturb centre routines and cause unnecessary stress to children.

Educators on how high turnover impacts children

“Continuity of care, particularly in the first five years of their lives, is vital for children. Connection and relationships with educators are critical. These foundations build trust and allow children to have the confidence to explore and learn. They can’t build these relationships, though, if staff are constantly leaving or if staff are overburdened with work.”

Educator, NSW

“Children’s emotional well-being is dependent on being able to predict the important routines of their day. When they do not see their key educators or they are pulled away from them to swap rooms etc, children experience abandonment. They are not there to be kept alive for the day, they are there to learn, grow and flourish, through trusting relationships, mutual respect in a learning environment. They are our future; they learn what we teach them, which includes the disrespect shown to educators.”

Educator, SA

“The social and emotional wellbeing of the children suffer greatly. I’m finding that without continuity of care more and more children are falling through the cracks. Key developmental areas are not being met, which has a ripple effect onto further developmental milestones in later stages of life.”

“Children need to know there are consistent educators there to support them and their families. Families need to know that their children’s needs are being by someone who has a strong connection to them, and who can foster and support learning opportunities and emotional and social interactions.”

Cook, NSW

“Continuity of care promotes and builds important meaningful and trusting relationships, it also allows for high quality learning experiences in the same environment with the same group of children and educators. Continuity of care provides the best outcome for children’s learning, development, social/emotional wellbeing, and for their future.”

Teacher, NSW

Parents are also stressed

The increasingly high staff turnover in the sector jeopardises the ability of children to build safe and secure relationships with their educators. This has an impact not only on the relationship between children and their educators, but also on the relationship between children and their parents and families.

- Over half (53%) of all educators surveyed said that parents have been more stressed in the last couple of years.
- The same number (53%) said that they have had to spend more time managing the anxiety of the parents and families of children under their care since the pandemic began.

Educators on how high turnover impacts parents and families

“I have noticed that [because of high staff turnover] children are taking longer to settle in and this, in turn, makes parents anxious. These days I’m finding myself dealing with parental anxiety more often, having to constantly reassure them, calling them on the phone throughout the day or having them call constantly for updates.”

Director, SA

“It takes time to build relationships with children and their families. When continuity of care is interrupted because of staff turnover, it is impossible to build this type of relationship. Not only children, but also their families, end up feeling insecure and anxious because of a lack of consistency and continuity of care. As a result, their wellbeing is compromised.”

Teacher, ACT

“Children keep having to get to know new people. How can they focus on play/learning when they are appraising a new person every second week? Not to mention, many children have individual needs that are difficult to communicate when we are so rushed. Turnover is also stressful for parents, who don’t want to leave their child with new educators all the time, which makes transitions more difficult.”

Educator, WA

“Children become attached to their carers and we become their family, so staff turnover takes an emotional toll on not only children but also their parents.”

Cook, TAS

“Relationships are central to everything. The children rely on educator continuity and when it is not possible it leads to poorer learning opportunities, behavioural issues, separation anxiety and parental stress (which also impacts on children).”

Educator, NSW

Part 5 Conclusion: Targeted Government funding for pay is the solution

The educators we surveyed made it very clear what needs to change in the Australian system for them to be able to provide world-class education and care:

- 99% of educators agree with the statement: “Love is not enough – educators need higher pay and a more manageable workload”
- Over three quarters (76%) of educators surveyed say that the one thing that needs to change the most in the sector to enable educators to provide world-class education is higher pay.

Our survey findings unsurprisingly reinforce OECD advice to governments that the attrition of educators from early learning cannot be stopped unless governments pay early educators on par with educators in the primary school sector. This is the only thing that will attract new educators to the sector and make sure those currently already in the sector do not ‘qualify out’.³⁶

For more than a decade, United Workers Union members in early education have joined other advocates across the sector in a call which says: If we want a world-class early education system, the Government must fund higher wages. With the crisis in the sector at breaking point, their call is more urgent than ever. As we have seen from the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Federal Government is capable of investing in early learning when the need is perceived to be urgent enough to.

Adequately funding ECEC does not only benefit educators, and the children and families who rely on early childhood education. Economists have long shown that increasing funding to the ECEC sector would benefit the Australian economy, and recent research by the Grattan Institute argues that it could also be a key driver of post-COVID economic recovery.³⁷ It would also help women, who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID, to re-enter the workforce and recover from the setbacks of 2020 and the ongoing health and economic crisis.³⁸

The message is clear: the Federal Government needs to provide targeted funding that delivers improved pay and conditions directly to educators. The Federal Government did just this during the COVID pandemic when it provided direct funding to services to cover wages and operating costs.

Across the sector everyone agrees: the only way to fix this crisis is to fix educators wages and conditions. The Federal Government can do this right now by delivering a workforce strategy that provides targeted funding to improve wages.

COVID revealed how critical ECEC is to the wellbeing of children and families and to the functioning of our economy. The evidence is overwhelming that if wages and conditions are not fixed, over the coming years the system will degrade to the extent that growing numbers of children and families will miss out on the places they need. Unless we want a sector that only wealthy families can access with even higher fees, and an economy which shrinks because women aren’t in the workplace, we have no choice but to properly fund it.

Ultimately, we know that investment in early childhood pays for itself at least two times over. The children and families of Australia deserve an ECEC sector that they can depend on, like schools, not one that is constantly in crisis.

It is time to enact these changes so that early childhood educators have the resources, the staffing levels, and the level of pay that reflects their skill, so that they can do their job to the best of their ability. Despite the pressures they face at work, research has consistently found that early childhood educators are passionate about and committed to the role that they play in the lives of children. Most early educators describe their ECEC work as a ‘career’ or ‘profession’ rather than as a job.³⁹ Although early educators feel undervalued by the broader community, most proudly identify as professional workers who perform a valuable role in our communities.

ECEC educators on their love for their job.

“What I love most about my job is the children. What an amazing privilege it is to be invited into their world, and what an honour it is to help them grow and develop into the best little people they can be.”

Educator, QLD

“I love working in ECEC for so many reasons. I love seeing children succeed because of quality programs provided by passionate educators. I like being able to link children and families to external supports when they needed early intervention from professional health experts. And I really appreciate being able to work with other amazing and supportive educators.”

Assistant Director, QLD

“The three things that I love best about working in ECEC are: seeing children learn and grow every single day; the endless opportunities we as educators have to be creative when teaching; and being able to collaborate with parents each day to enhance their child’s learning and wellbeing.”

Teacher, QLD

“I love seeing the children’s faces when they are successful at achieving something they’ve worked really hard on. I absolutely love when I walk into a room and the children come running to hug me because they are happy to see me. It lets me know that what I am doing for them is acknowledged and accepted by the children. I enjoy working with the families to assist their children in their learning journeys.”

Educator, VIC

“I love becoming part of the child’s world while they are in our care. We live in a small town, so I am so lucky and so grateful that I get to see the children I’ve cared and educated grown into incredible humans and that I get to create life-long friendships with families. The smile the children can put on my face, even on a bad day.”

Assistant Director, VIC

“There are so many amazing things about my job: the daily interactions I get to have with children and their families, which over the years grow into meaningful relationships; the team of educators I work with, without whose moral support I couldn’t do my job as well as I would like. What I love most though is being able to engage with children, enriching their lives, and contribute to their early education to give the best start in life.”

Educator, VIC

“Working with children it gives you a sense of joy and hope. I like knowing that through my work I’m contributing to the wellbeing and education of future generation and making a difference in the lives of many children and that of our society.”

Educator, SA

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