



# Goodstart Early Learning 2025 WA State Election Platform

December 2024

**We're for children,  
not for profit!**



Goodstart Early Learning acknowledges all Traditional Custodians across Australia and recognises First Nations peoples' continued cultural and spiritual connection to the land, sky and waterways that surround us. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

# Goodstart 2025-2026 WA State Election Platform

## ABOUT GOODSTART EARLY LEARNING

### We are for children, not profit

Goodstart Early Learning (Goodstart) is Australia's largest not-for-profit social enterprise and Australia's largest provider of early childhood education and care, with 654 centres located across every state and territory, supporting more than 61,400 children from 51,500 families. We employ 15,800 employees including 2,000 teachers. In WA, Goodstart has 53 centres and provides early learning and care for 5000 children and 4,225 WA families.

As a not-for-profit social enterprise, our purpose is to ensure all Australia's children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life. It is our view that all children should be supported to participate in quality early learning and care, regardless of where they live in Australia, their family circumstances, their inclusion support needs, or their early learning setting. We believe the best way to do this is to ensure all children have access to high quality, inclusive early learning and care, no matter their location or life circumstances.

*"Identifying and addressing barriers to early learning and providing effective early intervention services to support child development has the potential to positively impact life trajectories."*

- WA Commissioner for Children and Young People, January 2024

Investing in high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is always a good idea – for children, families and the economy. But participation in early childhood education and care in Western Australia remains behind other states and territories that have made significant investments in their early years policies in recent years. Nationally 49.9% of children birth to five attend ECEC, but only two in five (41.8%) WA children attend government approved childcare services.<sup>1</sup> This includes centre-based care, family day care and out-of-hours school care.

Goodstart welcomes the Australian Government's recent commitment to increase wages for early childhood educators, following the Cheaper Childcare Package and both the ACCC Childcare Inquiry and the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care. These initiatives underscore the importance of ensuring all children, particularly those experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage, have access to high-quality early learning. They also highlight the critical role of the ECEC workforce in delivering quality and inclusivity. However, while state and federal reforms must connect meaningfully, it is also essential that Western Australia's early childhood policy and

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<sup>1</sup> Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2024.

investment progresses without delay to ensure children and families are able to fully benefit from their intended impact.

Goodstart is keen to work with the incoming Government on the effective implementation of new Commonwealth policy in the WA context once it is announced. As we work together towards the goal of universal access to high quality, inclusive and affordable early learning for every child, we believe there are a number of key actions that should be taken at state level to ensure WA can take full advantage of the short-, medium- and long-term reform agenda to maximise opportunities for the benefit of all WA children.

We therefore ask both parties to prioritise these immediate actions and investments in the lead up to the 2025 election:

**1. Strengthen leadership and governance in Early Childhood Education and Care, by:**

- 1.1 Creating an Office of Early Childhood
- 1.2 Expanding ECEC on school sites
- 1.3 Prioritising and supporting not-for-profit ECEC providers
- 1.4 Finalising the Childcare Premises Position Statement

**2. Support access to two years of affordable and high-quality preschool, for as many days as children and families need, by:**

- 2.1 Implementing access to preschool for 3-year-olds via the introduction of fee relief for families
- 2.2 Breaking down barriers to access and addressing the fragmentation of preschool education
- 2.3 Legislative reform to enable Government agencies to make direct payments to support quality ECEC provision to providers

**3. Improve inclusion in the early years, by:**

- 3.1 Funding initiatives in WA to enhance access to ECEC for children at risk.
- 3.2 Streamlining Access to the Commonwealth Inclusion Support Program
- 3.3 Strengthening developmental and health screening for WA children through ECEC partnerships

**4. Strengthen our ECEC Workforce Strategy, by:**

- 4.1 Expanding ECEC workforce pipeline initiatives
- 4.2 Supporting regional and underserved communities
- 4.3 Reducing burnout and building wellbeing

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## RECOMMENDATIONS IN DETAIL

### **Recommendation 1. Strengthen leadership and governance in Early Childhood Education and Care**

The case for governments like Western Australia to take a stronger role in sector stewardship over Early Childhood Education and Care is gaining momentum both nationally and internationally. This shift would improve the planning and delivery of ECEC services, ensuring that no matter where they are located - children can access high-quality early learning that has the dual benefit of supporting workforce participation, particularly for women.

By playing a leadership role, WA may also better leverage national reforms, ensuring federal funding is used to benefit local families and children. Stewardship would also support more seamless transitions between early childhood and school settings, improving developmental outcomes and reducing fragmented care for children.

#### **How it can be done:**

##### **1.1 Create an Office of Early Childhood**

Drawing from the recent approach of South Australia Royal Commission, Western Australia could establish and resource an Office of Early Childhood with clear powers and responsibilities for ECEC. Reporting through to the Minister for Early Childhood, this office should have the capacity to work across government portfolios and collaborate with the sector to provide strong leadership and accountability in preschool and early childhood education and care services.

##### **1.2 Expand ECEC on school sites**

Government should prioritise the establishment of high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care services on all new school sites. Retrofitting existing school sites where feasible would further increase access for families. By fostering partnerships between schools and ECEC providers, the state can ensure seamless transitions for children from early learning to formal education, reduce fragmented care, and support improved developmental outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children.

##### **1.3 Prioritise and support not-for-profit ECEC providers**

Not-for-profit ECEC providers consistently deliver higher quality services and better support vulnerable populations.<sup>2</sup> By supporting the expansion of NFP ECEC services in underserved areas, including regional communities, Western Australia can ensure that all families, regardless of geography or income, have access to affordable, high-quality care. This investment in NFP providers also helps to address inequities in early learning access and outcomes across the state.

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<sup>2</sup> Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), Childcare Inquiry: Final Report, December 2023, <https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/ACCC%20Childcare%20Inquiry-final%20report%20December%202023.pdf>.

#### **1.4 Finalise the Childcare Premises Position Statement**

The WA Planning Commission should finalise the Position Statement on Childcare Premises aiming to better match supply with demand, and ensuring new ECECs are high quality and inclusive.

The consultation period for the Draft Position Statement was 11 November 2022 - 10 February 2023, yet as at December 2024 no final Position Statement has been released by WAPC. Goodstart welcomed the Commission's intent to provide a consistent policy approach to planning for childcare premises in Western Australia and provided the following recommendations:

- The Statement should adopt the terminology “Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) premises” to emphasise and clarify the vital role that our sector plays in the education system.
- The Statement should require proponents to provide evidence of demand, in a consistent and transparent format for consideration by the community and planning authorities.
- The Statement should introduce additional principles to prioritise and encourage the development ECEC premises that are likely to be high quality, inclusive environments.
- The Statement should be subject to a 5-year review given the significant and ongoing ECEC reform agenda at state and federal levels.

#### ***Recommendation 2: Supporting access to two years of affordable and high-quality preschool for as many days as children and families need***

Research consistently shows that participation in early childhood education, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, has long-term benefits for cognitive, social, and emotional development. Offering two years of preschool, beginning at age three, helps level the playing field and provides children with the foundation they need for success in school and beyond.

In states like Victoria and New South Wales, the introduction of universal 3-year-old preschool – through partnering with ECEC providers has led to significant improvements in participation rates, particularly among children most at risk of falling behind. Western Australia can follow these models, ensuring that preschool programs are accessible to all families, regardless of their location or socioeconomic status. By investing in early childhood education, WA can support children's development while helping families balance work and care responsibilities.

#### ***How it can be done***

##### **2.1 Implement access to preschool for 3-year-olds via the introduction of fee relief for families**

Expanding access to high-quality preschool for 3-year-olds is a critical step toward improving early learning outcomes and reducing developmental vulnerability and we welcome the work to date to explore options for 3-year-olds in Western Australia. We also look forward to engaging in sector consultation as part of this process.

Experience in other states and territories over recent years has proven fee relief as a cost-effective tool for Government's to increase uptake by 3-year-olds, especially those at risk of developmental vulnerability and can have the added benefit of providing much needed cost of living relief to families with young children.

Using the Commonwealth's Preschool Reform Agreement funding for 2024-25, Goodstart is also undertaking a demonstration project to show how fee relief can be implemented in Western Australia. Western Australia can also benefit from the investments made in developing the capability of existing national Child Care Management Systems to efficiently target funding to those children and families who stand to benefit the most.

## **2.2 Breaking down barriers to access: addressing the fragmentation of preschool education**

Nationally, more research is needed to understand the developmental impacts of children attending multiple preschool settings across a week. A significant disconnect exists between state-managed preschool policies and broader early years policies aimed at supporting working families. As more women increase their workforce participation, many families are forced to stitch together different preschool options to minimise out-of-pocket costs across each week.

Our vision is for preschool to be free across all settings, with families able to choose a single preschool with consistent teachers and peer groups, providing both developmental benefits for children and greater flexibility for families. Ideally, this would lead to a transition towards a free, five-day preschool model for both 3- and 4-year-olds over time, aligning early education with the needs of working families.

In preparation for upcoming national preschool policy discussions, states like Western Australia could lead by examining the impacts of fragmented preschool attendance on child outcomes. This would involve investing in improving data collection, linkage and analysis, particularly for children attending multiple care settings. Such research should also identify and eliminate barriers to participation, ensuring that all children—especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds—can access high-quality, continuous early learning opportunities.

## **2.3 Legislative reform to enable Government agencies to make direct payments to support quality ECEC provision to providers**

For some time, the Department of Education has refused to amend legislation which prevents the Department from being able to directly pass on funding, such as the Commonwealth's preschool funding to providers delivering preschool and

ECEC to children in Western Australia. We would join call on the new Government to remove this barrier as a matter of priority, particularly given our data shows the children currently missing out are much more likely to be vulnerable.

### ***Recommendation 3: Improving inclusion in the early years***

Evidence consistently shows that the children most likely to benefit from early learning and care are those who face the largest barriers to access and are the most likely to be excluded. The case for the incoming Government to maximise access for every eligible WA child to Commonwealth funding that is currently available is compelling. The Commonwealth currently provides substantial funding for children to access inclusive ECEC via:

- The Child Care Subsidy (CCS) – with higher subsidy for lower income families who meet eligibility requirements
- the Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) – for children at risk, in grandparent care, families with temporary financial hardship and parents transitioning to work
- the Inclusion Support Program (ISP) - for children with additional needs who meet eligibility requirements.

The WA Government and service system does not currently enable WA children to take full advantage of this support - due to lack of understanding of requirements. This means vulnerable children in WA are currently missing out and could be accessing more support with positive outcomes for their wellbeing, development and readiness for school.

### ***How it can be done***

#### **3.1 Fund initiatives in WA to enhance access to ECEC for children at risk.**

Modelling on similar successful initiatives in other states and territories, Government should fund initiatives that assist WA families and services to access and maintain Federal Child Care Subsidy (CCS), Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) and Inclusion Support Program (ISP) funding for vulnerable WA children.

This will help reduce inequities in access and participation in ECEC for WA's most vulnerable children and improve child development outcomes and readiness for school.

The Goodstart Increasing Access and Participation (IAP) program currently operates across QLD, NSW, Vic and SA through a mix of Commonwealth and state funding streams. This program provides a supported referral pathway to ECEC for children at risk of abuse or neglect. The IAP Program provides a 'navigator' mechanism to help vulnerable families and foster carers enrol their child/ren in ECEC and access the Commonwealth subsidies and supports available to them. This is a cost-effective program that has demonstrated results in enhancing ECEC attendance and retention for children at risk. In 2024, WA has been granted a small amount of CCCF funding over 2 years to commence this program on a small scale.

Goodstart is seeking financial support from the incoming WA Government to bring the IAP program to WA. This will assist Goodstart to reach as many children at risk as possible and support their successful transition to, and participation in, high quality early learning.

The program costs \$140,000 per year to fund 1 FTE plus tools of trade and on costs for a Family and Community Engagement Worker to roll out IAP across the Perth metro area.

### **3.2 Streamline Access to the Commonwealth Inclusion Support Program**

The Inclusion Support Program breaks down barriers to early learning by providing tailored support and funding for children with additional needs. This includes children with:

- Disabilities or developmental delays
- Trauma-related or challenging behaviours
- Serious health or mental health conditions
- First Nations, CALD, ESL, migrant, or refugee backgrounds

However, WA children are missing out because accessing ISP funding requires evidence from health or allied health professionals, and current processes through the Department of Health (CAHS/WACHS/CAMHS) and Department of Communities (Child Protection) are slow and inconsistent. This was a recommendation of the Australian Childcare Alliance (WA) and Goodstart submission to the CDS Inquiry and was noted by the committee in the Compilation Report (April, 2024 3.159 and 3.160).

We ask the incoming government to cut red tape and ensure the Department of Health (CAHS/WACHS/CAMHS) and Department of Communities (Child Protection) collaborate with the WA Inclusion Agency (WAIA) to align paperwork and streamline practices for quicker, easier access to the ISP.

Capacity building is also required to equip health and agency staff with the knowledge they need to support access to the ISP for WA children, ensuring every child gets the help they deserve.

This approach was a key recommendation from the Australian Childcare Alliance (WA) and Goodstart's submission to Inquiry into Child Development Services, and the final Report to Parliament has already acknowledged the need for action.<sup>3</sup> Now is the time to deliver.

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<sup>3</sup> Select Committee into Child Development Services 2024, Child development services in Western Australia: Valuing our children and their needs, Hon Dr Sally Talbot MLC (Chair), April. Available at: [https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/\(Report+Lookup+by+Com+ID\)/97243864767EFE6E48258B02002A6A67/\\$file/cd.cds.240418.rpf.003.Web%20Version.pdf](https://www.parliament.wa.gov.au/Parliament/commit.nsf/(Report+Lookup+by+Com+ID)/97243864767EFE6E48258B02002A6A67/$file/cd.cds.240418.rpf.003.Web%20Version.pdf)



### **3.3 Strengthen developmental and health screening for WA children through ECEC partnerships**

Early developmental screening is crucial, yet attendance rates at universal child health checks in WA are alarmingly low—only 43% at 12 months and 30% at two years in Perth. When developmental issues are not identified early, difficulties can become worse the longer treatment is delayed. This increases the nature and extent of intervention required and may miss the opportunity for critical early intervention.

Partnering with early childhood education and care (ECEC) services to deliver health and developmental screenings offers a proven, cost-effective solution. Programs like *Ears2Learn*, a partnership between Earbus, Connecting Community for Kids and Goodstart Early Learning, demonstrate the effectiveness of integrating health services into familiar ECEC settings, improving accessibility and participation rates.<sup>4</sup> The Select Committee into Child Development Services (April 2024) has also highlighted models like *Ears2Learn* as vital tools for bridging the gap between the first 1,000 days and school entry.

Investing in such initiatives builds on WA Health's current work on a First 1,000 Days Framework and bridges the critical gap in developmental support between the first 1000 days and commencement of school. The Queensland Government was recently elected with a \$27.5m commitment to roll out developmental screening in ECEC settings, signalling its importance as a transformative investment.

Western Australia should act now to implement similar programs, ensuring a healthier, better prepared generation of Western Australian, and setting children on a strong trajectory for lifelong learning and development.

#### **Recommendation 4: Strengthening our ECEC Workforce Strategy**

A strong, sustainable early childhood workforce is essential to deliver high-quality education and care. Despite government progress to date, workforce challenges remain acute, with high vacancy rates, burnout, and difficulties in attracting and retaining educators—particularly in regional and underserved areas.

Delivering on the vision of universal access to early learning for all children depends on robust workforce planning and investment. Governments must take coordinated action to address wages in the longer term, professional recognition, regional recruitment, and workforce wellbeing to ensure enough skilled educators and teachers are available to meet current and future demand.

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<sup>4</sup> See for more information: <https://www.connecting4kids.com.au/ears2learn/>

#### **4.1 Expand ECEC workforce pipeline initiatives**

Investment is needed in initiatives that grow and sustain the ECEC workforce. This should include:

- The creation of a Workforce Development Fund to support recruitment and retention efforts
- Increasing access to scholarships for early childhood teachers
- Retaining and expanding access to fee-free TAFE for educators and career promotion in schools
- Strengthening completion rates for traineeships through mentoring programs

#### **4.2 Support for Regional and Underserved Communities**

The incoming Government must continue to prioritise targeted investment in early childhood services in regional and remote areas, particularly Aboriginal communities, to ensure all children have access to high-quality education and care.

Building on existing initiatives like Western Australia's Attraction and Retention Packages for Regional Child Care Workers, which provide grants of up to \$25,000 annually to support housing and other incentives, and Victoria's Early Childhood Teacher Incentives offering up to \$50,000 for educators relocating to high-demand areas, this approach can deliver transformative results for underserved regions. Partnering with not-for-profit providers is essential to achieving this, as they are well-placed to deliver culturally safe, community-responsive services in these areas. Generous incentives such as retention bonuses, relocation allowances, and subsidised housing must be scaled up to attract and retain qualified educators in challenging locations.

Additionally, Western Australia should continue to advocate federally to remove barriers in skilled migration pathways by expanding essential skills categories and streamlining processes.

#### **4.3 Reducing Burnout and Build Wellbeing**

A thriving early childhood workforce requires targeted measures to combat burnout and support educator wellbeing. Government should invest in tailored programs such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs) and professional supervision.

Supporting educators to understand NQF requirements and manage the regulatory burden of paperwork is also critical to reducing stress and freeing educators to focus on children. Providing practical training on implementing the National Quality Framework (NQF) will ensure educators are confident in meeting standards while prioritising quality for children. Initiatives such as these can address the specific challenges faced by early childhood educators, fostering resilience and a healthier workforce.