GOODSTART'S EARLY LEARNING POLICY PRIORITES FOR THE 2026 VICTORIAN STATE ELECTION

We are asking all parties contesting the 2026 Victorian election to make six commitments to help give all children the best possible start to learning and life:

1. Ensure all children have access to quality kinder in a setting that suits their families' needs

Victoria has long been the leading state for ECEC because the State invests more in providing quality kinder programs across long day care and sessional kindergarten than any other state. That funding supports qualified teachers, educators and high quality practice.

Victoria's mixed delivery mode suits families - around 44% of 4 year olds (and 65% of 3 year olds) attend kinder in long day care settings, 39% in community kinders and 17% attend both settings. Victoria's operational funding grants and fee relief are crucial to supporting this delivery mode. But operational funding for long day care programs has fallen by 11% in real terms since 2023, which, if it continues, could put considerable pressure on the ability of long day care centres in Victoria to continue to provide high quality kinder programs.

We seek a commitment that operational funding and fee relief for long day care and community kinders will be maintained in real terms over the next four years.

2. Expand funded kinder hours to 30 hours in the year before school by 2036.

More time in a consistent, high-quality kinder program can improve children's development and school readiness, while supporting families' participation in work. With long day care services operating at average vacancy rates of 70% across Victoria, there are around 150,000 vacant days for 3-5 year olds each week, with considerable latent capacity to deliver expanded hours of quality kinder with a deliberative and planned rollout.

We seek a commitment that the expansion of funded kinder to 30 hours in the year before school in line with the current rollout timetable utilising existing capacity wherever possible.

3. Provide additional support for services supporting children who are vulnerable, disadvantaged or have additional needs.

Access to quality ECEC has been found to significantly reduce the levels of developmental vulnerability in children starting school. Victoria's School Readiness Funding program is an example of a targeted program that provides support for services based on the level of need of the children in the service. This helps ensure that services have the capability necessary to support those children and their families more effectively.

Victoria's early childhood system should continue to recognise that universal access alone will not close developmental gaps – around 1 in 5 children start school developmentally vulnerable. 10 of the 15 SA3 regions with the highest levels of developmental vulnerability are in regional areas. Access to high quality ECEC can reduce developmental vulnerability, but requires an experienced, professional workforce which can be very challenging in regional areas. SRF funding, by being responsive to local community needs, combined with effective targeted workforce subsidies, can help ensure that services in regional areas have the resources they need to meet the needs of the children in their care.

We seek a commitment that funding for centres servicing disadvantaged communities will continue to receive needs-based funding such as the School Readiness Funding program.

3. Invest to ensure there is the pipeline of qualified educators and teachers across the State and that they are supported to continue to build their capability

Every educator vacancy represents 15 families that cannot find care so they can work. The next Victorian Government needs to continue to fund Free TAFE courses for Certificate III and Diploma educator courses, as well as scholarships to support educators to upgrade to

Bachelor qualifications. The Government needs to work with the Federal Government to ensure that hard to fill vacancies in regional areas are a priority for skilled migrant visas.

Workforce supply remains a challenge in some locations, particularly in the regions. A workforce strategy needs to create clear pathways, retention strategies, and capability development to ensure we maximise and retain this available workforce focus on VET graduates, trainees, and Certificate III and Diploma educators entering the sector. This could include relocation support, retention bonuses, housing assistance, and additional access to professional development, mentoring and networking.

We seek a commitment that the next Government develops a workforce strategy with the sector to ensure an adequate pipeline and support for educators across the State.

4. Provide stewardship ensuring services are built where needed and cost effectively

The Victorian Government has actively expanded access to ECEC services across the state by funding a mix of public and NFP run services, and approving hundreds of private services. While this has improved access to ECEC, many areas are now at risk of oversupply. In the last two years, while children enrolled in CBDC fell by 0.7%, approved places rose by 12.7%. Oversupply places pressure on all services and puts quality and safety of provision at risk as it spreads the limited resource of a qualified workforce thinly across underutilised services. At the same time, many children in other communities are missing out on access to ECEC.

NFP providers can typically deliver new services at a fraction of the cost of the State Government and with comparable high quality. Effective stewardship of ECEC delivery would work with quality NFP providers, councils and communities to identify areas of genuine need and the most cost-effective, community responsive solution to meet that.

We would encourage the next Government to comprehensively review its proposed builds of new ECEC services to ensure that they are in communities that genuinely need them, having regard to better utilising the unused capacity in current long day care.

6. Work with the sector to ensure that Government is effectively supporting the delivery of affordable, quality and safe ECEC

NFP providers share with the Government its aspiration that all children should have access to quality, safe and affordable ECEC. The last three years have been challenging for the ECEC sector, as workforce shortages gave way to rapidly rising costs, declining birth rates, lower occupancy levels, and heightened concerns and rapid rollout of new regulations to address child safety.

Government engagement with the sector has not always been effective or respectful, and policy can be rushed and not optimal. With the sector facing strong headwinds, a more collaborative approach is needed, rather than just 'consultation', where Government and the sector share responsibility for designing, implementing and continuously improving policies that support affordable, high-quality and safe ECEC. This should recognise the diversity of the sector and avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. This partnership could include reviewing regulatory fee increases of up to 1100%, the impact on the imposition of the failing portable long service leave scheme on NFP providers, and whether the rushed child safety reforms introduced in 2025 will improve child safety or simply add to cost of delivery.

We would encourage the next Government to partner with the sector to design policy options that deliver our aspiration of high quality ECEC for all.

Please return your response by 16 Nov. 2026 to John Cherry at advocacy@goodstart.org.au

Goodstart will share parties' responses with our families ahead of the election.