

**Best Start**

**Best Life**

# Workforce Strategy:

**Continuing to value and  
grow the kindergarten  
workforce**





## Acknowledgement of Country

The department proudly acknowledges Victoria's Aboriginal communities and their rich culture and pays respect to their Elders past and present.

We acknowledge Aboriginal people as Australia's first peoples and as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and water on which we rely.

We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of Aboriginal people and communities to Victorian life and how this enriches us.

We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards the equality of outcomes and ensuring an equal voice.

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**'Respecting Connections' (2023)** by Nakia Cadd, a Gunditjmara, Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung, Bunitj, Boon Wurrung, Taungurung woman who grew up in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne.

'When thinking about acknowledging Country, it's about respecting those many different connections; to the land, sky, waters, animals, people and stories.'

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Hon Lizzie Blandthorn MP  
Minister for Children



## Minister's message

Early childhood teachers, educators and education leaders hold some of the most important jobs for Victoria's future. Their skilled work helps to lay the foundations for lifelong learning and sets children up for happy, healthy lives. Early years education is life-changing for children and supports a bright future for our communities and makes our state a fairer place for all Victorians.

Five years ago, the Victorian Government announced the staged implementation of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten to give Victorian children the opportunity to benefit from 2 years of play-based learning in the crucial years before school.

The roll-out so far has been a success, thanks to record investment and support, and the efforts of our sector partners. This has been further underpinned by the skill, professionalism and dedication of our early childhood workforce.

As we move towards the next stage of the \$14 billion *Best Start, Best Life* reforms with the introduction of Free Kinder and the transition of four-year-old kindergarten to Pre-Prep over the next decade, we know that continuing to grow our kindergarten workforce while supporting and retaining our existing highly skilled teachers and educators will be critical.

The insights that have been shared by early childhood teachers and educators, together with service providers, peak bodies, unions and tertiary education providers, have shaped this next stage of our workforce strategy.

A consistent theme from the *Best Start, Best Life* consultations is the importance of valuing and supporting teachers and educators regardless of the setting in which they are delivering a kindergarten program. We heard that pay and conditions is a key part of this and that differences in arrangements across the early childhood sector is a challenge.

The *Best Start, Best Life* Workforce Strategy is the third phase in our collaborative approach to attracting and retaining our kindergarten workforce. It builds on the 2021 Next Steps in Victoria's Kindergarten Workforce Strategy paper, setting out new initiatives that respond to what we have heard and building on the range of programs we have in place as part of our \$370 million kindergarten workforce package.

I know this is a time of significant change in early childhood education, not only in Victoria but across Australia. We welcome the opportunities arising from the Commonwealth's renewed focus on early childhood and support the Commonwealth taking a greater role on national workforce challenges linked to wages and conditions, given their responsibility for the broader early childhood education and care sector. We will continue to work with the Commonwealth as they implement policies to support workforce attraction and retention across the country.

Implementing the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms will be complex, but we have time on our side and a highly skilled and engaged workforce. Our workforce initiatives build on the sector's own efforts to support the kindergarten workforce and will continue to evolve over the life of the reforms.

An Early Childhood Education Workforce Reference Group of teachers and educators will be established to enable me to hear from our kindergarten workforce on the implementation of the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms. This will ensure that the deep knowledge and expertise of Victoria's skilled teachers and educators continue to inform our collective work to value and grow our kindergarten workforce.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "L. Blandthorn".

Hon Lizzie Blandthorn MP  
Minister for Children

# Introduction

## A national challenge

Demand for highly skilled early childhood professionals across Australia continues to rise as policy settings create more accessible and affordable early childhood education, and more children can benefit from quality kindergarten programs.

At the same time, workforce shortages are putting pressure on early childhood teachers, educators and early childhood education and care services across the country.

Early childhood workforce supply and quality is a national challenge which requires national solutions, together with strong collaboration and well-coordinated action across the system and in partnership with all stakeholders.

While Victoria is not immune from these challenges, we are leading the nation in supporting our kindergarten workforce.

Our efforts, in collaboration with Victorian service providers, sector bodies, tertiary partners, unions, local government and other stakeholders, are making a difference. Victoria has been able to expand its workforce considerably over the last few years, while maintaining a lower proportion of staffing waivers compared with other jurisdictions.

## Building from a strong base

Since the introduction of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten in 2019, early childhood teacher and educator roles delivering funded kindergarten programs in Victoria have grown by more than 50 per cent.

This has been supported by strong uptake in Victoria's attraction programs, including early childhood teaching scholarships and initiatives to upskill Diploma-qualified educators to become early childhood teachers, along with increased access to vocational education and training and supported traineeships.

While we are starting from a strong base, the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms are also driving significant additional demand for teachers and educators across the system.

We know that supporting continued growth in the number of skilled teacher and educator graduates entering the workforce helps to support Victoria's experienced early childhood professionals to deliver quality kindergarten programs and lead early childhood services that meet the needs of children and families.

We know too that the reforms bring change for our existing kindergarten workforce. The strong uptake of the Victorian Government's professional learning, mentoring and coaching programs is evidence of the sector's continued focus on practice quality during this time of reform. This includes the flagship Three-Year-Old Kindergarten Teaching Toolkit, local Early Years Learning Networks and Early Learning Leadership Forums and the inaugural *Best Start, Best Life* Educational Leaders Conference.

The focus of this workforce strategy is on the role the Victorian Government plays, in partnership with the sector, to support best practice and drive long-term change for the workforce.

We know many parts of the sector are adopting innovative strategies to grow and support their workforces now and into the future. We look forward to working together to develop new ways to harness this expertise and better support the kindergarten workforce, raise the profile and status of the profession, and attract more people from across the community into the sector.

## What we've achieved so far

Early childhood teacher and educator roles in funded kindergarten programs **have grown by more than**

**50%**

since the start of Three Year Old Kindergarten in 2019

Over

**4,000**

scholarships have been awarded to remove financial barriers and support more people to become early childhood teachers

Up to

**1,700**

educators are being supported to upskill to become teachers through the Innovative Initial Teacher Education initiative

Over

**200**

students have been supported through the Early Childhood Educator Traineeships program to work in the sector while completing their qualification

Almost

**1,000**

teachers have participated in the End-to-End Workforce Supports program, including coaching, for early career professionals

Almost

**2,000**

grants have been awarded to assist teachers progress to full registration

Over

**4,000**

professionals have engaged with the Three-Year-Old Teaching Toolkit to support evidence-informed practice

Over

**1,200**

experienced teachers have participated in the Effective Mentoring Program, to ensure that their knowledge and expertise is shared with early career teachers

## Continuing our partnership approach

The *Best Start, Best Life Workforce Strategy* builds on our previous kindergarten workforce strategies and sets out our priorities to value and grow the kindergarten workforce to support the delivery of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten and the transition to Pre-Prep. These priorities complement the range of sector-led initiatives in place to attract, retain and develop a skilled workforce.

The foundation of our workforce strategy continues to be informed by what the workforce, the sector and stakeholders have been telling us about challenges and opportunities, as well as ways we can collaborate.

Through the extensive *Best Start, Best Life* consultation process, we heard directly from early childhood teachers and educators, both highly experienced and those new to the sector, those in sessional kindergartens and in long day care services, working in small services and for large providers, and across metropolitan and regional Victoria.

The workforce recognises the Victorian Government's commitment to early childhood education and want to be influential in the implementation of the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms. We heard about the practical experience of reform and what helps the workforce to feel supported and confident to deliver quality kindergarten programs in new ways.

We heard that as the workforce expands it is important that the existing workforce continues to be supported and their expertise respected. Professional learning, career development and supports need to target the breadth of the workforce – teachers, educators and service leaders; those early in their career right through to the sector's most experienced professionals.

We also heard the importance of valuing all teachers and educators delivering early childhood education, whether it is in kindergarten or long day care services, and that wages and conditions are key factors in this.

There was recognition of the additional funding the Victorian Government provides to those services that are signatories to the *Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Educators Agreement 2020* or the *Early Education Employees Agreement 2020* to support them to meet wages and conditions under those and analogue agreements. There was also recognition of the critical role the Commonwealth has to play as the primary funder of the broader early childhood education and care sector, given many teachers and educators are delivering kindergarten programs in long day care services.

The Victorian Government will continue to work with Commonwealth, State and Territory governments to support the delivery of the *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy 2022-2031*. The Victorian Government will also continue to encourage the Commonwealth to lead on policies and funding to support the workforce across the country, including the broader range of policy levers that the Commonwealth holds – from child care subsidy settings to funded higher education places and migration policy – to maintain and lift the attraction, retention and quality of the early childhood workforce.



## Refreshing our comprehensive kindergarten workforce strategy

In April 2021 we released a paper, *Working Together to build Victoria’s early childhood education workforce*, to support the state-wide roll out of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten. This policy paper was designed as both a resource for stakeholders and a conversation starter to facilitate discussions about roles and responsibilities, new partnerships and innovation across the sector.

This was followed in December 2021 by *Next Steps in Victoria’s Kindergarten Workforce Strategy*, which provided an update on the work of the strategy and an outline of the feedback arising from the consultations undertaken on the *Working Together to build Victoria’s early childhood education workforce* paper.

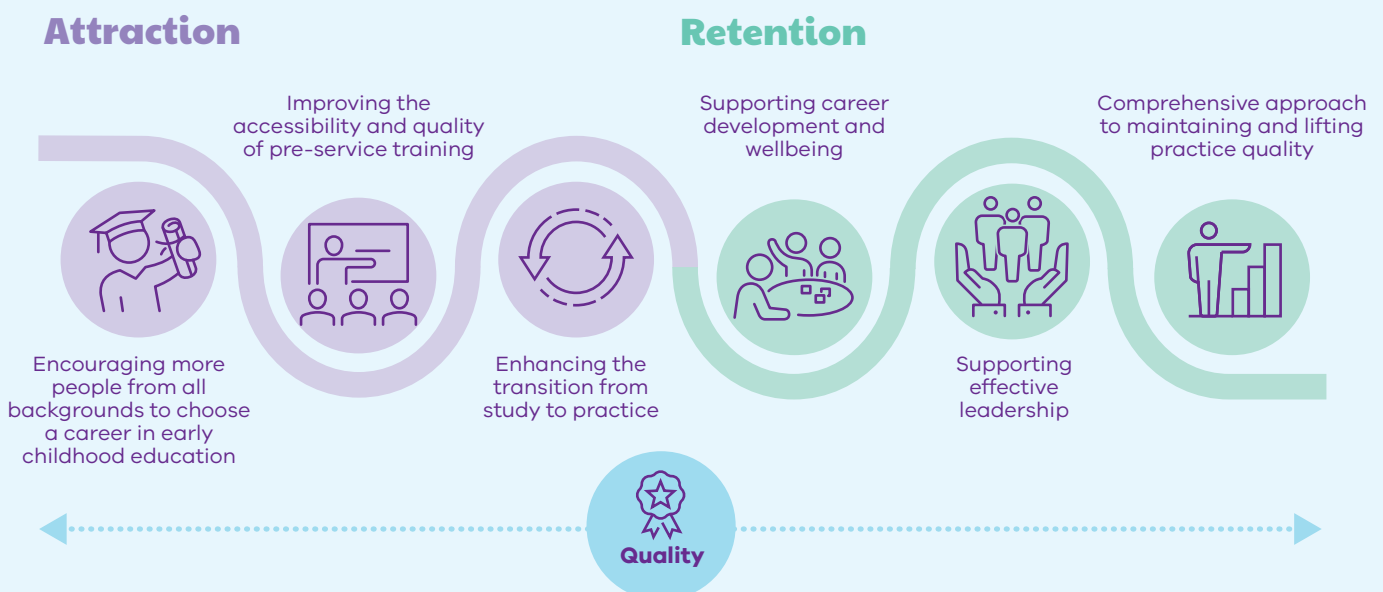
The *Best Start, Best Life Workforce Strategy* is the next instalment and builds on the Victorian Government’s comprehensive approach to supporting the kindergarten workforce.

The extensive *Best Start, Best Life* consultation process has confirmed the continuing importance of the three guiding themes of **attraction, retention** and **quality** which have underpinned the first two stages of this work.

The *Best Start, Best Life Workforce Strategy* sets out **six areas for action** under these themes, informed by this consultation process and relevant research, and which span the career journey of both early childhood teachers and educators:

- Encouraging more people from all backgrounds to choose a career in early childhood education
- Improving the accessibility and quality of pre-service training
- Enhancing the transition from study to practice
- Supporting career development and wellbeing
- Supporting effective leadership
- Comprehensive approach to maintaining and lifting practice quality

The *Best Start, Best Life Workforce Strategy* responds to what we have heard from the workforce and other stakeholders, building on the range of initiatives already in place and setting out additional measures to support and grow Victoria’s kindergarten workforce.





# 1

## Encouraging more people from all backgrounds to choose a career in early childhood education

### What we heard

Early childhood teachers and educators told us that playing such a critical role in helping young children learn and develop is what they find most rewarding and fulfilling about working in early childhood education.

But there is more work to be done to raise the profile of early childhood education as a respected and professional career that is truly valued by the community, and for more people from all backgrounds to see it as a potential career path for them.

We heard that a crucial time for awareness is at secondary school when students are guided by careers advisors and their families about their career choices. Making early childhood education a well-understood choice means young adults can consider the multiple pathways available to becoming a part of the future kindergarten workforce.

Teachers and educators also told us about the importance of improving workplace diversity. We need to do more to ensure Victorians from all walks of life are aware that early childhood education is a viable career path and that they are welcomed and supported to join and stay in the sector. In particular, we heard the benefits to children and families, and to services themselves, when more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities are employed in early childhood education.

### What we are doing

Changing community perceptions and raising the sector's profile is an important long-term goal, which is why we need to continue to promote the value and opportunity of a career in early childhood education.

Since the release of the 2021 strategy, we have continued our community-wide *Best Start, Best Life* communications campaign to drive awareness about the reforms and the importance of early childhood education. This campaign activity promotes Victorian early childhood education as a great place to work, highlighting the job opportunities, study options and supports available. It also aims to attract school leavers and career changers to consider becoming an early childhood teacher or educator and targets qualified early childhood professionals working outside the sector to re-enter the profession.

Through our collective efforts we have had success in growing the number of teacher and educator roles delivering funded kindergarten programs by more than 50 per cent since the introduction of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten.

But there is more that we can do to improve understanding of early childhood careers, particularly for secondary students, and to support workforce diversity.

## Building on our existing work, we will:

- Improve **workforce diversity** by identifying effective strategies to support people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities to take up tertiary education opportunities and join the early childhood workforce. Research to build our understanding of barriers to workforce diversity is also expected to provide insights into how to develop culturally safe practices across services.
- Lift the number of **Aboriginal teachers and educators** delivering kindergarten programs and improve the cultural safety of early childhood services including by working in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc (VAEAI). This will build on the existing Aboriginal Pathways Scholarship program, which provides financial assistance to help students obtain early childhood education qualifications.
- Attract more young people to choose early childhood careers by developing targeted support for **careers advisors**, informed by research and up-to-date labour market information, on pathways and careers in early childhood education. This will support careers advisors and people influencing student choices to help give young people and their families knowledge of the benefits of a career in early childhood education and the VET and traineeship pathways available during senior secondary school.
- Prioritise **work experience opportunities** in early childhood as part of the Victorian Government's commitment to significantly expand work experience for students in years 9 and 10. This will include both local and state-wide approaches to securing meaningful work experience placements within early childhood settings to spark student interest in, and support decision making about, careers in the sector.

### Attracting secondary school students to study early childhood

The Department of Education's Early Childhood Improvement Branch in the Inner East has joined forces with the department's Jobs, Skills and Pathway team to raise awareness among secondary school students of the study pathways and career opportunities in early childhood education.

A school industry roundtable in 2022 brought together early childhood teachers, providers and other stakeholders to discuss the barriers to students choosing to study early childhood education, including misunderstandings from students, families and career advisors of career options in early childhood. This led to the development of an early childhood 'taster day'.

Interested secondary school students in Years 10, 11 and 12 from schools within the local government areas of Monash, Manningham, Whitehorse and Boroondara were invited to participate. The students attended four early childhood services, engaging in 'A Day in the life' experience at each service, before touring the local TAFE and hearing a presentation on career pathways.

Participants then heard from students currently studying an early childhood qualification across each of the career pathways and had the opportunity to ask questions about their experience.

The event was a great success. Most students said that their perception of early childhood education had changed since attending the day and many were considering working in the sector in the future.

## A Head Start on a career path in early childhood education

Ty McMahon used work experience to trial several different professions before coming back to early childhood education and applying for a traineeship through the Head Start program while completing secondary school at Lowanna College in the Latrobe Valley.

Head Start allows students to complete their senior secondary schooling alongside paid on-the-job training to achieve both a vocational and school-based education.

Trainees receive education from an early learning training specialist to help them gain a Certificate III qualification.

The best part of the experience for Ty was seeing the connection educators can make with young children and noticing how much families appreciated the work of educators. He believes the job is hard at times but also very rewarding and realised the potential of a future career in the sector.

For other students considering this pathway Ty offers this advice



If you haven't considered early childhood education before, maybe you should just try a few days' work experience to see if you like it or not, you might be surprised".



## 2

# Improving the accessibility and quality of pre-service training

## What we heard

We heard quality pre-service training is vital to teachers and educators graduating with the skills and knowledge necessary to confidently begin their careers and help to strengthen the current workforce.

This includes placements that provide the valuable practical experience needed to prepare graduates to create safe and positive play-based learning for all children.

The workforce told us that tertiary education providers need to be adaptive in their course offerings and delivery models in response to sector changes. This includes ensuring that graduates have the practical skills and knowledge needed to plan and deliver longer kindergarten programs.

We also heard that the time and financial commitment required to successfully complete training can be a barrier to accessing early childhood qualifications. This is particularly the case for educators seeking to upskill from a Certificate III qualification to a Diploma. Recent changes to the National Training Package which require educators holding a pre-2013 Certificate III to update their qualification before commencing a Diploma was also identified as a barrier.

## What we are doing

Reducing barriers to accessing quality pre-service training and supporting students to undertake initial training or to upskill remain key priorities to meet the workforce needs arising from the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms, which in turn will support the existing workforce.

To date, over 4,000 early childhood teaching scholarships have been awarded and up to 1,700 diploma-qualified educators are being supported to upskill to become early childhood teachers through the Innovative Initial Teacher Education initiative.

Since the release of the 2021 strategy, we have delivered the Early Childhood Educator Traineeships program, a partnership between the Department of Education, Jobs Victoria and Chisholm Institute, which has supported over 200 students to work in an early childhood education service while completing their educator qualification.

With changes introduced in January 2023 to Free TAFE, we have also made early childhood educator training more accessible to more people. Under the changes, Victorians can access Free TAFE regardless of previous qualifications at the same or higher level. If they have already undertaken a Free TAFE course to complete the Certificate level qualification, they can also access Free TAFE to complete their Diploma level qualification in Early Childhood Education and Care.

While we have had success in increasing the uptake of pre-service training in early childhood education, we need to continue to grow the number of well-trained and job-ready teachers and educators across Victoria.

## Building on our existing financial supports and partnerships, we will:

- Support more students, including from diverse backgrounds, to overcome barriers to study and experience a smooth transition into the workforce through a new **Early Childhood Tertiary Partnerships** program. Up to 2,000 students will be supported to undertake Certificate III, Diploma and Early Childhood Teacher qualifications across 11 pre-service training programs. Prospective students will be able to access a range of tailored supports, depending on their program, including financial assistance, academic and placement mentoring, relocation supports for regional placement blocks, culturally-responsive professional resources, and employment matching.
- Support educators working in funded kindergarten programs to upskill to a Diploma qualification through a new **Certificate III Upskill Support** program. This will provide up to 400 certificate-qualified educators with the financial support they need to complete a Diploma in early childhood education. Eligible students will be able to access \$7,000 in financial support, split across three milestone payments.
- Provide greater financial support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students upskilling from a Certificate III to Diploma qualification by increasing the value of the **Aboriginal Pathways Diploma scholarship** to \$9,000.
- Support educators holding a pre-2013 Certificate III to undertake a Diploma by implementing a **Recognition of Prior Learning and Skills Gap Pilot** project, in response to changes to the National Training Package. Chisholm Institute's pilot will test a toolkit that will streamline assessment of Recognition of Prior Learning applications. The toolkit will be made available to all TAFEs at completion of the project. Chisholm will also deliver flexible training to address skills gaps between the old and new Certificate III qualification and test the effectiveness of this approach in encouraging educators to upskill.
- Work with teachers and educators, including through the Early Childhood Education Workforce Reference Group, tertiary providers and sector bodies to design the next phase of the Early Childhood Professional Practice Partnership program. This will support a continued focus on lifting the **quality of placements** for both educators and teachers, and supporting partnerships between tertiary providers and early childhood education services.

### Building local partnerships in Wimmera South West

For more than two years, organisations in Victoria's Wimmera South West region have been collaborating to inspire local people to start careers in early childhood education.

First highlighted in our 2021 *Next Steps in Victoria's Kindergarten Workforce Strategy*, this ongoing partnership project, led by the Department of Education's Early Childhood Improvement Branch, has since resulted in significantly increased interest in training opportunities.

This has been credited to the partnership's ethos of making the most of every single connection, and of every available opportunity.

Small across-the-board changes have had significant benefits. For example, instead of talking about "childcare jobs", stakeholders have "raised their language" to remind people of the benefits to children of high-quality early childhood education, and the professionalism and opportunities of careers in the sector.

Short videos profiling local people at the beginning of their careers have generated strong interest, as has a video series showing the real-life benefits of work with local providers.

In Horsham, a new 5-week pre-accredited course attracts significant enrolments. Almost everyone who completed the first course has gone on to study for their Certificate III.

WDEA Works is now piloting an online version of its Certificate III training program to meet demand in more remote towns in the region. Using innovative 'Swivel' technology, trainers are simultaneously working live and remotely with early childhood students across the district.

Meanwhile, Wimmera South West Partnership stakeholders are this year focusing on refining the student placement system. As with previous initiatives, it is anticipated that the cumulative impact of small changes in practice will make a big difference to the quality of placements.

## Putting Aboriginal perspectives and engagement at the centre

It was a Facebook ad that prompted Tiffany Stute to apply for one of the Victorian Government's Early Childhood Aboriginal Pathways Scholarships.

Tiffany had found university stressful the first time around, when combined with the burden of work. This opportunity not only gave her financial breathing room, it allowed her to 'scratch a career itch'.



I had started doing a bit of work as a library assistant and realised I was really loving working with the kids," Tiffany says. "[The financial support] meant I could give myself the space to really dive into studying."

Tiffany finished her studies amid the COVID-19 lockdowns — even finding the time to complete additional short courses, including on bringing Indigenous culture into the classroom.

She now has two years' experience as a teacher and is devoted to ensuring Aboriginal perspectives and engagement are embedded in the play-based learning approach at her kinder service.

"I want to make sure I get that balance, doing the right protocols, finding the right people, understanding what I can teach the kids," Tiffany says.

As part of the local community, she knows many of the families and parents that attend her centre. "It can be daunting... but it's really exciting and uplifting to be able to go, okay, I can anticipate their needs, or I know how to support them in the best way possible."

## Helping educators 'earn and learn'

Chelsea McGinty was inspired by her mothers' work in early childhood education and learned a lot from her mum about how to give children the best opportunities to learn.

When an Indigenous employment agency noted that Chelsea had already completed a lot of volunteering in early childhood education, they recommended she apply for the Early Childhood Educator Traineeships Program, a joint initiative between the Department of Education, Jobs Victoria and Chisholm Institute.

Successful applicants undertake a paid traineeship, while also completing a Certificate III or Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care through the Free TAFE program.

Chelsea found the 'earn and learn' aspect of the traineeship program valuable.



Being able to work full time and then study has been really helpful. What I learn in the centre I can go and apply in class, and it goes both ways," she says.

While some services have already been using traineeships to 'grow their own' educator workforce, we know from feedback that they can be tricky to resource and run. The program offers comprehensive support for trainees and services. Employers receive funding to deliver wrap-around supports, including mentoring, and benefit from job-ready employees with first-hand knowledge of their service and its needs.

Chelsea is currently working towards her qualification and is loving working in the Windsor Community Children's Centre where she says the staff all support each other.

The traineeship program has focused on providing opportunities for people who may be facing multiple barriers to employment including Aboriginal Victorians, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and long-term unemployed people.

## 3

## Enhancing the transition from study to practice

### What we heard

The transition from studying early childhood education to securing a role and becoming proficient on the job is a critical time for teachers and educators to consolidate their professional identity and practice.

We heard that it can be a challenging period and involves significant dedication from new graduates and those that support them.

New graduates told us they can be overwhelmed by the requirements of the role, and the experienced workforce reported feeling the pressure to provide support, particularly as the kindergarten workforce expands. When early career professionals have access to broader supports across the sector, including connections to their peers, the weight of supporting their development is not placed on a single service or single experienced teacher or educator.

We heard that mentor teachers are a highly valued resource for new graduates and placement students at all levels, but they are under increasing demand and can sometimes be hard to find. Mentors share their expertise, and support new graduates to become fully registered teachers and to apply theory to practice. We heard the importance of recognising the benefits that this support provides, not only to the new graduate but across the workforce.

### What we are doing

Expanding the supply of new graduates needs to be matched with support for early career professionals in the workforce, which is why we continue to invest in mentoring support, grants and professional development to assist early childhood teachers to progress to full teacher registration.

This includes the Effective Mentoring Program which is designed to enhance the mentoring skills of experienced teachers so they can support graduate and returning teachers to achieve full registration. Over 1,200 experienced early childhood teachers have participated in the two-day program. Almost 2,000 grants have also been awarded to support provisionally registered early childhood teachers to progress to full registration with the Victorian Institute of Teaching.

Since the release of the 2021 strategy, individual coaching has been made available for all first-year teachers and upskilling educators delivering a funded kindergarten program. An Early Childhood Beginning Teacher Conference series has also been introduced to support, prepare and inspire early career professionals as they embark on their early childhood education career, and over 800 provisionally registered teachers have participated.

As the sector grows, there is more we can do to support new teacher and educator graduates to transition into the workforce, so they have the skills and resources they need for success.

## Building on our existing supports, we will:

- Provide tools and resources to improve the experience of graduate teachers and educators as they transition into the profession through the creation of a new **state-wide induction supports** program. Across the diversity of early childhood education services and geographic locations, these supports will provide new teachers and educators with access to high-quality induction to begin their careers. Additional tools and resources will also be developed to support service leaders, experienced teachers and educators to support professional skills gaps identified in consultation with the workforce.
- Provide mentoring to an additional 200 provisionally registered teachers across 2023 and 2024 to support them to gain full registration by expanding the **Provisionally Registered Teachers mentoring program**.

### Confident and inspired thanks to mentor support

On behalf of the Department of Education, Gowrie Victoria has been providing free mentor support for early childhood provisionally registered teachers (PRTs) to move to full teacher registration with the Victorian Institute of Teaching. Priority is given to PRTs who have been unable to access a mentor and who live regionally.

Feedback on the program has been overwhelmingly positive, with early-career teachers full of praise for their Gowrie Victoria mentors.



My mentor, Louise, was there for me the whole time through the registration process," says Hira, who obtained her Bachelor degree after gaining experience in working with children in her role as a school tutor in Pakistan. "She really helped me look more deeply at some aspects of my practice and helped me reflect on ways to improve."

Jessica, who graduated with an honours degree, also highlighted appreciation for her mentor, Lisa, "I got so much out of the program – she taught me so much ... I really feel I now have confidence in what I'm doing," she says.

The level and type of support mentors provide is tailored for each PRT, and may include face-to-face, video conference, telephone and email support.

Deeply impressed by the mentor process, Hira says she hopes to support new early childhood workers at her centre, and eventually take on a mentoring role herself. "I love the idea of working with other teachers and supporting them in their practice."





## Specialised training to build workplace skills of educators

High-quality training courses are being developed through the Skilling an Adaptable Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce (SAEW) project, to support new early childhood educators to apply skills and training in the workplace that meets the learning and development needs of children.

The Victorian Government has allocated funding over two years for Early Learning Association of Australia (ELAA) to lead this project and work in partnership with Gowrie Victoria, the Y Ballarat and other early childhood education employers.

The training aims to support new Certificate III entrants to develop their practice and be work ready. A needs analysis will help employers and educators identify specific areas for development to ensure the training can fill these gaps. Where possible, the training will be mapped to existing qualifications to complement and reinforce new graduates' prior knowledge.

A Community of Practice will also be established as part of the project to support new early childhood educators to complete the training, develop peer networks and access best practice tools and other resources.



"We want to give every new educator the opportunity to build their knowledge and skills, so they can be more confident in their practice and more likely to stay in the sector," says Sage Michaels, Chair of the SAEW Project Group, ELAA.

# 4

## Supporting career development and workforce wellbeing

### What we heard

We heard that access to professional learning and opportunities to network and share knowledge with other teachers and educators is highly valued, but it can be difficult to find the time or the backfill.

The challenges that arise during a day on the floor, such as how to incorporate effective inclusion and support children with a range of learning needs, are best overcome with on-the-job supports and additional career development opportunities.

Teachers and educators told us a wealth of skills and knowledge exists within the kindergarten workforce, and professionals with many years' experience are a critical source of support and expertise for their colleagues. It is important for these experienced professionals to be supported to extend their own practice and we heard career development supports are often not targeted to this group.

We heard that being recognised, valued and supported in the contribution individuals make to delivering high quality kindergarten programs is important to maintaining wellbeing. We also heard that supporting workforce wellbeing and preventing burnout is an important factor in retaining staff.

### What we are doing

Well-targeted career supports, wellbeing initiatives and professional development opportunities support the delivery of quality kindergarten programs, bolster confidence and job satisfaction and contribute to retention.

It is important that we continue to work with the sector to provide these supports for the workforce as it grows and assist services to implement local solutions to improve retention.

We have seen strong uptake in a range of department-led professional development and career supports. Almost 1,000 early childhood teachers have participated in the End-to-End Workforce Supports program, which includes coaching, communities of practice and an alumni conference, since its launch in 2021. More than 4,000 early childhood professionals have also engaged in the Three-Year-Old Teaching Toolkit professional learning package. Peer learning is also being supported through the 65 Early Years Learning Networks which have been established across Victoria.

Since the release of the 2021 strategy, we have extended our suite of career supports with the introduction of a new Early Childhood Coach and Mentor Training program which provides an important career development opportunity for experienced teachers and educators to develop their coaching and mentoring capabilities. In addition, we have expanded the Victorian Early Years Awards to broaden the recognition of our highly skilled early childhood professionals. Two new categories were introduced in 2023 to recognise Aboriginal inclusion and perspectives in services and highlight the achievements of educators.

At this time of significant change, there is more we can do in partnership with the sector to support teachers and educators throughout their career and assist services in their efforts to lift workforce wellbeing and retention.

## Building on our existing supports, we will:

- Work with teachers and educators to design new ways to expand the career pathways of our experienced kindergarten workforce. This will include the development of a new **Experienced Teacher Mentoring project** to utilise the expertise of experienced teachers in sustainable ways to build the skills of the broader workforce.
- Support **experienced teachers and educators** to continue to build their skills by expanding professional development offerings that are tailored to their needs and interests. These new professional learning opportunities will be co-designed with the workforce, including the Early Childhood Education Workforce Reference Group.
- Strengthen the process for accessing support for children with disability, complex medical needs and developmental delay through the **Kindergarten Inclusion Support** program. The **Preschool Field Officer program** will also be boosted in growth areas of the state, to provide targeted advice about how teachers and educators can develop their programs and practice to be more inclusive and responsive to children with additional needs.
- Increase awareness across the sector of **best practice workforce retention strategies** through the development of an evidence-informed guide. This guide will highlight the effective strategies and practices being implemented by services to support workforce wellbeing and successfully retain their staff.
- Encourage service providers to develop and implement innovative place-based solutions to retain educators, as well as early career teachers, by expanding the successful **Innovation Grants program**.

### Innovative ‘scenario-based’ tool for new teachers

Every day is different in early childhood education, with teachers encountering situations that are as varied as the children themselves. This can be overwhelming for early career teachers and educators.

In response, the experienced team from Monash Vale and Bridge Road Early Learning Centres created the ‘EMPOWER’ tool. A dynamic online coaching and networking tool, EMPOWER can support early career teachers through myriad everyday scenarios. It was co-created with teachers, using funding from the Victorian Government’s Innovation Grants Program.

“There is so much you can’t really learn until you’re out there on the floor,” says Karen Turner, centre pedagogical leader. “It might be to do with the support needs of children, or the practicalities of setting up a classroom ... The tool will give you professional advice, ideas and feedback on a wide range of specific scenarios.”

“We had already mapped the various skills, challenges and needs of our own staff, so we could support them in a really targeted way,” says Anna Moutzouris, centre director and an industry veteran of more than 30 years. “The grant has allowed us to extend this thinking to help others.”

Scenarios are grouped under seven themes: transition to work, professional skills, teaching and curricula, relationships with children, engagement with families, teamwork, and mentoring and support.



For each scenario, there’s an avatar – all relatable people, from a variety of backgrounds,” says educational leader Shanika Dantanarayana, who drew on research to develop the avatars and their responses. “It will be a virtual toolkit, right there at your fingertips.”

The team are now establishing EMPOWER’s day-to-day management and operation, before launching it online, to ensure its long-term success.

# 5

## Supporting effective leadership

### What we heard

We heard that both new and experienced early childhood professionals need to be able to trust the capability of the leadership of their service in facilitating their work in educating young children and building relationships with families.

They highlighted the importance of their employers valuing their teaching expertise, allowing them autonomy to make decisions and drawing on their experience as services continue to innovate and adapt.

We heard teachers and educators value a leader who can effectively support staff to deliver a high-quality early learning program. Workforce wellbeing and service culture is affected when workloads are too high and when staff don't feel that their experiences and insights are recognised. Effective governance and well managed services were highlighted as important factors for staff retention.

Staff in leadership roles identified a desire for support to implement the reforms in their services, and opportunities to connect and share with others. Even those with years of experience recognise that they will encounter challenges during this period of transformation.

### What we are doing

Effective leaders are central to building quality kindergarten programs, supporting teachers and educators, and improving services.

This is why we need to continue to work in partnership with the sector to lift leadership capabilities, facilitate the sharing of knowledge and best practice, and to plan ahead.

This includes providing avenues for early childhood education leaders to share best practice and to build a collective understanding of early childhood reforms. For example, our 17 area-based Early Learning Leadership Forums are supporting leaders to connect and collaborate, and to share their insights.

Since the release of the 2021 strategy, we have held the inaugural *Best Start, Best Life* Educational Leaders Conference, which brought together pedagogical leaders and practitioners from across the state to learn from each other and other experts in the field. We have also made available new grants to support the sector in their strategic workforce planning and to identify practical strategies to address local workforce needs.

Given the diversity of early childhood services and the scale of the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms, we know there is more to do to support effective leadership practices across the sector.



## Building on our existing efforts, we will:

- Support experienced professionals in educational leadership positions to develop and deepen their pedagogical and practice knowledge and capabilities to best meet the learning needs of staff and children, through the development of a new **educational leaders' professional development** program.
- Build and strengthen the knowledge and capabilities of professionals in service leadership positions to meet operational needs, to improve culture and support staff health and wellbeing, through the introduction of **professional development for operational leaders**.
- Provide leaders with an ongoing opportunity to gain valuable professional development and to share best practice and emerging evidence by continuing to hold the successful **Best Start, Best Life Educational Leaders Conference** at key points in the reform journey.
- Support services to manage change by providing **practical tools and resources** that are developed in partnership with the sector. These tools will promote the importance of service leaders consulting with their staff as they operationalise service changes. Resources will include a change management toolkit, Twilight Forums focused on change management topics, sharing case studies and identifying 'local change champions'.

## Grants support local solutions to workforce planning

Early Years Managers (EYMs) and many local governments know from experience that high-quality early learning depends on robust strategic planning. Many of these employers have already been using their expertise and partnerships to build the workforce they need.

To further this, the Victorian Government has provided interested EYMs and local governments with grants of up to \$200,000 to develop tailored five-year workforce plans.

The five-year plans will analyse current and anticipated staffing gaps then set out solutions. These will respond closely to the particular needs and circumstances of employers, as well as those of their communities, helping local people find work close to home.

The Workforce Planning Grants, while not obligatory, are allowing local governments and EYMs to enhance their ongoing capacity to plan for the workforce needed to deliver their strategic goals. This is both a requirement of EYM Funding and a component of the EYM Improvement Framework.

In developing their five-year plans, EYMs and local governments are not only extending their own expertise but can use their influence as partners and leaders to inspire and inform best practice for workforce planning across the sector.

As part of this initiative, the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association (VAEA) is also being funded to deliver supports specifically focused on boosting the number of Aboriginal teachers and educators delivering kindergarten programs.

# 6

## Comprehensive approach to maintaining and lifting practice quality

### What we heard

Teachers and educators are focused on ensuring the quality of play-based learning is maintained, particularly as the workforce grows and changes are made to the way kindergarten programs are structured as a result of the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms.

The workforce told us that the additional hours will enable teachers and educators to enhance their knowledge of children’s learning needs and increase learning opportunities. But to navigate these changes effectively, and maintain the quality of programs, the workforce needs to be better supported. There is an opportunity to develop a more coherent approach, shared between the sector, experts and the department, to improving the quality of programs and maximising the learning and development outcomes of children.

We also heard that professional learning to support practice quality is important and should be geared to areas of need that are identified by the workforce. This includes support to develop team teaching skills, which can help to reduce workloads and will become a more common way of working across some settings, as well as improving capabilities to support inclusive practice.

### What we are doing

We know that the quality of child-staff interactions, and how teachers and educators structure children’s activities, are the primary ways early childhood education benefits children.

This is why we have continued to invest in quality initiatives such as the Kindergarten Quality Improvement Program and School Readiness Funding.

Since the release of the 2021 strategy, rollout of the online observation-based Early Years Assessment and Learning Tool has commenced. Teachers and educators in selected services are using this new Tool to support assessment of children’s strengths, interests and abilities, and target teaching strategies accordingly.

A new coaching program has also been implemented to support teachers and educators returning to, or joining, the Victorian early childhood workforce. Through a partnership with Gowrie Victoria, the Returning Teachers and Educators Coaching Program provides tailored wraparound supports and helps teaching staff to align their kindergarten programs to current curriculum, national quality standards, practice and reforms.

As the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms roll out we will keep working with all parts of the sector to support the continued delivery of high-quality kindergarten programs.

## Building on our existing efforts, we will:

- Revise the **Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)** to align with recent revisions to the national Early Years Learning Framework and ensure it continues to best meet the needs of children and their educators through this period of reform. This revision will be led by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, in partnership with the Department of Education and other stakeholders, and will be undertaken concurrently with revision of the F–10 curriculum, offering an unprecedented opportunity to strengthen continuity of learning between early childhood and school.
- Work with the sector to focus our collective attention on factors that will make the biggest difference to lifting children’s outcomes through the development of more holistic supports for Kindergarten and Pre-Prep quality, underpinned by the revised VEYLDF.
- Support new and existing early childhood teachers respond to changing kindergarten teaching environments by establishing **professional development on effective team teaching**. While common in some primary school settings, team teaching is less common in kindergarten services and professional development will support teachers to implement this effectively.
- Guide teachers and educators on ways to best welcome all children and families in kindergarten programs, through the development of new **professional learning on equity and diversity**.
- Assist teachers and educators to embed quality practice across the increased hours through the creation of new **supports to drive quality teaching**. These supports will cover key aspects of kindergarten practice, including resources to guide intentional and impactful teaching, reflective practice, and a deeper understanding of children’s learning progression pathways.

### New online tool boosts everyday practice

Victoria’s new Early Years Assessment and Learning Tool is already supporting services across the state. The Tool provides teaching teams with a consistent, evidence-based approach to observing, understanding and responding to children’s unique strengths, interests and abilities.



“It gives that opportunity to observe the child and have a really good look at where the child is at,” says experienced early childhood teacher Emily Fotiou. “It’s given me a better understanding of children’s learning and development ... How are they progressing? Where to next? How can we extend their learning?”

The Tool is not an interview or test. Rather, it supports teaching teams to undertake, for each child, ongoing cycles of observation, assessment, analysis, planning, implementation and reflection.

“It strengthens teachers’ understanding of children’s learning progressions,” says Dr Jane Page of the Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEaCh) Centre. “It generates evidence to support discussions with other professionals. And it improves observations and assessment of young children to support intentional teaching practices in the everyday.”

The Tool is part of the Victorian Government’s investment to support quality practice. It was developed over three years by the Assessment Research Centre in partnership with the REEaCh Centre at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne.

The development process included gathering evidence from more than 300 early childhood teachers and co-educators, who made over 5,000 observations of children across more than 150 services.

## Next steps

It is the work of our highly skilled early childhood professionals to deliver quality early learning that has a deep impact on the trajectory of children's lives.

We acknowledge the ongoing commitment that teachers and educators have made to the implementation of the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms to date and thank the sector for its engagement in shaping this next instalment in Victoria's kindergarten workforce strategy.

We will continue to work in partnership with the sector, tertiary providers, unions, local government, and other stakeholders to strengthen our collective efforts to grow and value the kindergarten workforce, now and into the future.

The Early Childhood Education Workforce Reference Group and other consultation avenues will provide early childhood teachers and educators with ongoing opportunities to share their knowledge and expertise, and provide feedback to ensure the *Best Start, Best Life Workforce Strategy* remains dynamic and adapts as these once-in-a-generation reforms progress.





# Directory of programs

This directory includes a brief description of current workforce programs across the six areas for action set out in this strategy. Further information can be accessed via the relevant link.

## 1. Encouraging more people from all backgrounds to choose a career in early childhood education

**Best Start, Best Life communications campaign**, with resources that can be printed and shared across your communities and services.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/kinder>

## 2. Improving the accessibility and quality of pre-service training

**Early Childhood Scholarships** to support people to study or upskill to become early childhood teachers.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/financial-support-study-and-work-early-childhood#scholarships>

**Certificate III Upskill Support program** to provide financial support for Certificate III qualified educators working in funded kindergarten programs to upskill to a Diploma.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/financial-support-study-and-work-early-childhood>

**Aboriginal Pathway Scholarships** to support people to study to become early childhood educators or teachers.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/financial-support-study-and-work-early-childhood#scholarships>

**Innovative Initial Teacher Education** allows Diploma-level qualified staff to upskill to become qualified early childhood teachers with support, while they continue to work.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/innovative-early-childhood-teaching-courses>

**Early Childhood Tertiary Partnerships Program** to provide a range of tailored supports to help students complete their early childhood educator and teacher qualifications and join the workforce.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/become-early-childhood-teacher-educator>

**Free TAFE for a Certificate III or a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care**, with students who've undertaken the Certificate III as Free TAFE also eligible to undertake the Diploma.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/free-tafe>

**Early Childhood Educator Traineeships** which support students to work in an early childhood education service while completing their educator qualification.

<https://www.chisholm.edu.au/Free-TAFE-for-Priority-Courses/Jobs-Victoria-Early-Childhood-Educators-Traineeship-program>

## 3. Enhancing the transition from study to practice

**Financial incentives** for early childhood teachers and educators to join or re-join the sector, or to take up a position in a kindergarten program at selected hard-to-staff locations and services

<https://www.vic.gov.au/financial-support-study-and-work-early-childhood#teacher-incentives>

**Early Childhood Jobs**, a free website that connects early childhood education professionals with employers seeking to fill vacancies across Victoria

<https://jobs.earlychildhood.education.vic.gov.au>

**Recruitment supports** provided by a panel of specialist recruitment agencies to support eligible services and providers to employ teachers and educators, and to boost the overall workforce supply by attracting early childhood professionals from outside the sector, interstate and overseas.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/recruiting-new-teachers-and-educators-three-year-old-kinder#support-from-recruitment-agencies-to-help-fill-vacancies>

**Provisionally Registered Teacher (PRT) Grants Program** provides funding to early childhood services supporting PRTs to progress from provisional to full registration with the Victorian Institute of Teaching.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/funding-support-provisionally-registered-early-childhood-teachers>

**Mentor support** to help provisionally registered teachers move to full teacher registration through Gowrie Victoria.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/how-find-early-childhood-education-mentor#early-childhood-provisionally-registered-teacher-mentor-program>

**Beginning Teacher Conferences** for teachers in the beginning stages of their careers.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/early-childhood-update-april-2023/beginning-teacher-conferences-and-career-supports>

#### 4. Supporting career development and workforce wellbeing

**Career supports for teachers** in their first 5 years of teaching including Communities of Practice, webinars, and an online community platform.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/supports-early-career-early-childhood-teachers>

**Innovation Grants**, available to support new and emerging retention initiatives to support the retention of the early career teachers and educators needed for the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/innovation-grants-program>

**Coaching Support** for teachers and educators returning to the Victorian early childhood workforce.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/early-childhood-update-april-2023/coaching-support-returning-early-childhood-professionals>

**Early Years Learning Networks** offer opportunities for local collaboration and professional connection for early childhood teachers and educational leaders.

Contact your local Early Childhood Improvement Branch for more information:

<https://www.vic.gov.au/contact-early-childhood-improvement-branch>

#### 5. Supporting effective leadership

**Capability Assessment Guide** to support teachers and providers undertaking career progression capability assessments.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/early-childhood-teacher-professional-standards-and-supports>

**Effective Mentoring Program** for experienced teachers to enhance their mentoring knowledge and skills to support graduate and returning teachers achieve full registration.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/effective-mentoring-program>

**Coach and Mentor Training** for experienced teachers and educators to develop coaching and mentoring skills.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/coach-and-mentor-training>

**Early Learning Leadership Forums** are delivered twice a year in central locations across Victoria, to bring together early childhood leaders to network and connect, engage with the department, and build shared understanding of early childhood reforms.

Contact your local Early Childhood Improvement Branch for more information:

<https://www.vic.gov.au/contact-early-childhood-improvement-branch>

#### 6. Comprehensive approach to maintaining and lifting practice quality

**Early Years Assessment and Learning Tool** enables early childhood teachers and co-educators to make consistent observations and assessments of children's learning.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/early-years-assessment-and-learning-tool>

**School Readiness Funding** supports 3-year-old and 4-year-old children in early childhood education and care services delivering funded kindergarten programs in Victoria.

<https://www.vic.gov.au/school-readiness-funding>



# Best Start Best Life

