



# MINISTERS' MEDIA CENTRE

## Ministers of the Education Portfolio

Transcript

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## Press Conference – Adelaide

The Hon Jason Clare MP

Minister for Education

The Hon Blair Boyer MP

SA Minister for Education, Training and Skills

Senator the Hon Dr Jess Walsh

Minister for Early Childhood Education

Minister for Youth

Ms Yvette Berry MLA

Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development

Hon Courtney Houssos MLC

**BLAIR BOYER, SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MINISTER FOR EDUCATION, TRAINING AND SKILLS:** It is my great pleasure this morning to welcome Federal Education Minister Jason Clare and Early Years Federal Minister Jess Walsh here along with my education colleagues from around Australia for what will be our first Education Ministers Meeting since the Federal Election. And it's a great thrill for me not only as South Australia's Education Minister but as the local Member in this area to welcome these Ministers to The Heights School but, more specifically, where we'll be holding our meeting just across the way at what will be South Australia's brand new technical college at The Heights.

We have a big agenda today, of course, being the first meeting post the Federal Election, a lot of things that, I think, are shared priorities for the Ministers here. We're talking about issues around child safety in the early years, bullying, preschool reform, infrastructure, a whole range of things that have been issues of priority for the Ministers here for a number of years but, of course, we're entering into what I think is now a more exciting phase given the fantastic work that was done by Jason and the Federal Government before the last Election to actually land that historic national school reform agreement, which means securing across 10 years here in South Australia an extra \$1.3 billion dollars of funding for public schools and also locking in for us the 22 per cent contribution to our non-government schools.

So South Australia is very excited to be the host today and show off some of the things that we are doing in vocational education and training. We were here just last week with the Premier to announce the Boeing partnership with us at that technical school. And I'll be

showing off some of the new equipment inside to the Ministers but also keen to sink our teeth into a really solid agenda today dealing with some of the issues that all state and territory education systems are grappling with at the moment. I'll pass over now to Jason.

**JASON CLARE, FEDERAL MINISTER FOR EDUCATION:** Thanks very much, Blair. And thank you so much, mate, for hosting us here today at the first Education Ministers meeting since the Federal Election. I think I can speak for all of my colleagues that we feel very, very fortunate that we have the best job in the world – a job where we get the opportunity and the responsibility to help children get the education that starts their life on a great track, helps them to build the life of their dreams.

All of us understand the power of education. It's the most powerful cause for good in this world to change lives, create opportunity for the youngest Australians. And we collectively have a big responsibility to make sure that we build a better and a fairer education system for children at school today but also for the young Australians that aren't even born yet.

A lot of the things that we talk about today, that we work on today are about planting seeds in a garden that will grow over time. Education is about big reform that sometimes takes time to manifest itself. But the work needs to start right now. And as I said, this is the first time we've met since the Election. It's also the first time since we signed that historic agreement to fix the funding of public schools. And I know it's something, Blair, that you're really proud of, something they're pretty proud of as well – you can hear them in the background.

It means a billion dollars of extra funding over the next 10 years for South Australian public schools, just like The Heights. It means more than \$16 billion in extra federal funding right across the nation over the next 10 years. And that funding isn't a blank cheque; that funding is tied to real, practical reforms to make sure that more kids like this finish high school and go on to TAFE and to university and get the skills they need for the future.

And so today we're going to be talking about the next big step implementing the agreement. Tying that funding to things like phonics checks when kids are in Year 1, and that's rolling out this year and next year, and numeracy checks in Year 1 as well. That's happening in South Australia next year. There'll be other states that will talk about their plans for numeracy checks as well.

That's not a test; that's a 10-minute check to identify kids that might need additional help and then it's our job as Ministers with the funding we're providing to make sure kids get that additional help to help them to catch up and keep up and ultimately meaning more kids finish high school.

We're going to talk about the most important people who work in places like this today as well – our school teachers. The most important job in the world. The work we've done over the last few years means that there are now more teachers than ever, there's fewer vacancies, there are more young people enrolling in teaching courses this year than there has been in a very, very long time, up something like 11 per cent. That's a good sign, but there's more work to do to support our teachers, and we'll talk about that today.

We'll also talk about the scourge of bullying in our schools. It's not just the push and shove in the playground or stealing someone else's lunch money; it's much more insidious than that. And sometimes it involves what happens online in the dark after school where in the most horrific of examples somebody might clip a photograph of someone else's face and put it on a naked body and use that to bully and harass other kids in the school or even teachers in the school as well. We'll talk about what we can do to help to tackle that.

And perhaps most importantly of all, we're going to talk about the safety of our youngest Australians in early education and care. As a team we've done a lot of work on that over the last three years but there is a lot more work that we need to do to make sure that our kids are safe in early education and care. And that will be one of the key things that we discuss today.

To talk about that in a bit more detail, let me hand over to the new Minister for Early Childhood Education, Jess Walsh.

**JESS WALSH, MINISTER FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION:** Thank you very much, Jason, and thank you, Blair, for having us not just in your home state but in your electorate and your fantastic school. I am the new Commonwealth Minister for Early Childhood Education and keeping children safe in our early learning settings is my number one priority. And it will be the top priority for the early education discussion at today's meeting.

The Commonwealth and State and Territory leaders have already taken strong action to keep children safe because children deserve to be safe in early learning and because parents need to know that their children are safe too. But as Minister Clare has said, there is more to do.

The Commonwealth has announced that we will take tough measures and restrict funding, cut funding to providers that put profit ahead of child safety. And as a group of Ministers we have already put into place restrictions on the use of personal devices in early learning, which is a really important protection for children. And we've also strengthened mandatory reporting requirements.

A lot of work has been done, as Minister Clare said, but there is more to do. And we look forward to doing that work today. Our work today will be informed by the work that has just been done in New South Wales. We welcome the Wheeler inquiry and we welcome the work that New South Wales has done in the area of child safety in early learning.

And to tell us more about that, I welcome Minister Houssos.

**COURTNEY HOUSSOS, NSW ACTING MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND EARLY LEARNING:** Thank you. So my name's Courtney Houssos. I'm the Acting Minister for Education and Early Learning in New South Wales. I'm here representing New South Wales and passing on the apologies of the Deputy Premier who is currently seeking treatment. And I'd just like to say thank you so for the well wishes that I've received from colleagues that I'll be conveying to Prue. We know that she's an extraordinarily strong individual. She's confronting this challenge just like she does with any other.

But it's an immense privilege to be here with my colleagues from around the country to talk about the program of reform that Prue has started across New South Wales. We're looking forward to speaking and sharing some of the things that we've been doing in New South Wales particularly in relation to the numbers check, the phonics check that was pioneered here in South Australia. We've rolled that out in our schools, but we think this is an opportunity from New South Wales to work collaboratively with colleagues.

And I just thank particularly Minister Clare and Minister Walsh for the opportunities already to start those initial discussions. Specifically, I'd just speak about the Wheeler Review that Minister Walsh referenced, which is a report that the Deputy Premier commissioned, Prue commissioned, in February this year. We released the review yesterday, and our immediate response - and that's really focused on improving transparency.

We believe parents have the right to make sure when they drop off their kids each day that they are going to be safe in a quality environment. And that is at the forefront of our minds.

So, giving parents information, giving the community information is really important for us. We are also going to be – and, again, I would say we've had some really productive early conversations, and we look forward to discussing that today and sharing the opportunity, sharing the review with our colleagues.

It's an important opportunity for us to come together, share experiences and find learnings. I'd like to really thank Minister Clare and Blair for hosting us here in this beautiful place in South Australia.

And I'll hand over to Yvette, yes.

**YVETTE BERRY, ACT MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD:** Thanks very much, everyone. My name's Yvette Berry. I'm the Minister for Education and Early Childhood in the ACT. The conversation that we're having today is broad and complex and there's a lot of work to do, as Minister Jason Clare spoke about earlier. But one of the areas that I really wanted to focus on during our conversations today is around early childhood education and care. And if we value the education and health and wellbeing of our children, then we simply must value the expertise of early childhood educators.

For years across the country, but especially in the ACT, we've been working hard to lift the profession and support early childhood educators through a range of different scholarship programs to encourage that increased qualification and expertise within our early childhood settings. We know as a community how important and vital education in those early years are to the brain development of young people. And in the early childhood space educators are the brain builders.

So valuing children means that we must value educators. One of the ways that we saw educators doing incredibly vital work in educating young people was during the COVID pandemic. Our workforce had stopped all across the country and we depended on our early childhood education sector to provide education for those young people in a time when we were most in need. They were going to work educating young people while the rest of us were staying at home safe. Often, they were going to work looking after and educating young people when their own children were at home. So, at one point in time, they were vital to our cities' education in those early years, but also the survival of a global health pandemic.

Now, we're seeing some really challenging issues in the early childhood space, particularly around the Affinity and the Genius early childhood providers. And some of the incidences that we saw scared us, and it should scare us. We're worried about our children, and we need to make sure that they're safe.

So part of the work that I want to see us doing going forward is, yes, absolutely working with our parents about making sure that our children are safe in their early childhood settings but working with the sector about what that looks like and how we can value and lift the profession through a range of different initiatives like scholarship programs, like requiring early childhood educators to be licensed the same way as we would as our teachers in our school settings.

We need to consider those early years the same way as we consider our education years from five up – everything below five just as important if not more so in developing our children's brains ready for a formal education in their later years.

So, today's conversation is an important one and we need to understand what's happening more in our sector. And I really have appreciated the work that New South Wales has done on their report, the Wheeler Report, and we've been looking at it very closely and we think a lot of

those recommendations will work for the ACT as well. So, I want to work a bit more harder and deeply in that space and work with the New South Wales Acting Minister about what is it that we in the ACT can do that works alongside the work that they've been doing in New South Wales.

Thanks again, Jason and Blair, for having us here today. And I look forward to talking more after our meeting.

**JO HERSEY, NT MINISTER FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND MINISTER FOR EARLY EDUCATION:** Jo Hersey, Minister for Early Education from the Northern Territory. It's great to be down here in Adelaide – thankfully the weather is pleasant to us today. I really look forward to working collaboratively with my counterparts right across the nation and the work that's going on in the early education space but also something that's close to my heart – the bullying, talking about that today, and having a look at the new trade training centre here, which is something that we're working towards in the Territory as well.

So, I'm looking forward to really robust conversations that will happen today and continue the work with the Federal Government throughout my time as Education Minister. Thank you.

**JOURNALIST:** You've obviously talked about bullying and AI and how that might have impacted that. The eSafety Commissioner has kind of recommended that schools report any incidences of AI deep fakes. How can the government kind of ensure that that crackdown is really happening in schools?

**CLARE:** We welcome the advice and the support of the eSafety Commissioner. She's written to all of us yesterday with a tool kit for schools, information and support for teachers and principals about what to do when this happens. Also some really practical advice about when the law is broken and when police should be involved as well.

I said a moment ago how insidious this is. This is the sort of thing that can cause teachers to quit or young people to think about not wanting to go to school or worse. That's why we're taking this as seriously as we are. That's why it's on the agenda today. That's why we're asking the team that are putting together the bullying review for us – the rapid review of bullying in schools – we're asking them to make sure that as part of that review they're looking at this. They will present their final report to us when we meet again in October. And what we'll be discussing today – I don't want to pre-empt the conversation that we're having, but I'm sure colleagues will agree – that we'll ask the eSafety Commissioner, Julie Inman Grant, to brief us at that meeting as well. About the work that she's doing, about the tool kit that she's providing for schools to help schools grapple with this difficult issue, but also to provide us with a little bit of advice about the impending changes to social media access for young people under the age of 16.

So at the end of this year the ban on access to social media for young people under the age of 16 will come into effect. That work is being led by the Communications Minister right now. And ahead of that I'm going to ask the eSafety Commissioner to brief us when we meet in October about implementation plans for that change, which I think is a crucial part of helping young people grapple with this issue.

Over the course of the last year and a half or so as a nation, as Ministers, we've banned access to mobile phones in schools. And I might just ask Blair to talk about this a little bit in a South Australian context. It was a decision that all of us have made because we thought it would have a positive impact in our school environment. And it has. A bigger impact than we ever expected in the class and in the playground.

But the fact is, when the bell rings and school finishes, the phones come back out, and if you look at the bus stop, you'll see kids doing what some people are doing at this press conference – looking at their phones. And young people get thrown back into that toxic cesspit of social media. So, what we do next in terms of banning access to social media is important. It's not the only thing that we need to do, though. And that's why the work that the eSafety Commissioner is doing is so important.

**BOYER:** Thanks, Jason. And, yes one of the first election commitments that we made before coming to Government in March of 2022 was to ban mobile phones in all public high schools. We knew that banning mobile phones would help with distraction in the classroom, and it has. We knew that banning mobile phones would help in terms of stopping the kind of bullying that Jason was just talking about that occurs through the use of a mobile phone. But there have been some other real benefits, too, that we didn't anticipate, and that is in terms of increased physical and social activity from young people at recess and lunchtime.

And I had one principal of a school not far from here who said a very powerful comment to me: he said that the school yard at lunchtime reminds him of a school yard in the 1990s, and that's the school yard I remember when I went to school where you're out kicking the footy and talking to friends. But I think such had been our gradual increasing reliance on mobile phones at schools that we had forgotten how much of that old-fashioned kind of social interaction and physical activity that had actually dissipated and gone away. So, the benefits of the mobile phone ban have been in some cases obvious but also some unexpected ones, too. And we're really pleased that the policy we put in place was for the phone to be off from the start of the day to the end of the day.

I might just add specifically in terms of deep fakes and what we're trying to do here in South Australia, we have updated what is called our Keeping Safe: Child Protection Curriculum around how young people can keep themselves safe in all sorts of different ways, to explain at a very young age around the dangers and pitfalls of deep fakes. And I think that's a conversation that needs to start early and it's one that we are starting early here in South Australia.

**JOURNALIST:** I mean, on that, I guess, a lot of children that are coming through school now won't have really known a world without AI. Do you think – I mean, do you think they have enough appreciation of the fact that generative AI can be just as impactful as a real nude photograph of someone?

**BOYER:** No, I think they don't. I think that is the big problem. I think we are now seeing generations of young people starting at schools who have grown up with this technology. This is just normal practice for them, and a lot of risks come with that. But in terms of what we've done in South Australia with AI, we made what I think was a kind of bold decision back in 2022 to instead of banning AI work with Microsoft to codesign our own version of a chatbot, called EdChat, include a whole heap of extra safety protocols in it, but we did it with the simple philosophy – I've often likened it to teaching young people how to drive. Is driving dangerous? Absolutely it is. Do we ban driving? No, we don't, we teach people how to do it safely.

And the simple truth is that young people now are going to be expected to have an understanding of how to use AI, both in a productive sense in the workplace but also safely. And I think it is incumbent on us as the people who run education systems to do that. But along with that, we need to make sure that we have those conversations around how serious things like deep fakes are in terms of the affect it can have on a student or a teacher and also actually explain, as you said, to a generation which doesn't realise it the very serious legal and

often criminal implications that can come from using social media or generative AI to create a deep fake.

**JOURNALIST:** Are there kind of concerns around generative AI, how that might be impacting people's – young people's kind of reading, comprehension, writing skills? Is that something that will be discussed today?

**CLARE:** To build on what Blair said, a bit over a year ago we had this conversation as Ministers and we recognised, a little bit like the calculator and the internet after that, that AI is going to be with us forever. And this is a tool. It's not something that we can just pretend isn't there, but we've got to make sure is used properly and ethically.

One of the things we were concerned about when we discussed this a bit over a year ago was making sure that this is not a tool that students used to cheat, sort of to get around the system, to make sure that young people are learning. And we built a framework or a protocol around that. One of the things we were also really concerned about when we built that framework was whether the information that young people put into generative AI, like an EdChat, for example, or any product you might buy off the shelf, isn't then sold off to a third party. We were very, very worried, as we should be, that personal information or any information that a child puts into generative AI at school can then be sold off to a third party and then come back as an ad that they see on social media targeting them.

This is the next step. We're now seeing AI used for another purpose – to intimidate and to threaten and to hurt other people. And that's why what Blair what said a moment ago is so important. It's about making sure that young people know how to use it properly and when using it improperly is not just wrong, but breaking the law.

**JOURNALIST:** And on the early education centres, there was a bit of discussion around potentially, people working there being treated the same as teachers in terms of registrations or things like that. How quickly can those kind of changes be put into place?

**BERRY:** We're already doing it in the ACT. So, we've started with a voluntary registration process, I guess, for early childhood teachers, the same way that we would with our teachers in primary and high school and college settings through our Teacher Quality Institute, which actually does the teaching and learning for teachers outside of their learning in university – 20 hours learning a year of professional development. And the same for our early childhood teachers.

We've started as a voluntary process, and we've found it's really popular because early childhood educators want to be recognised. They have the same qualifications, if not more, than a primary school or high school teacher under very highly regulated service. So, we know that it can be done. As I said, we've started voluntary, but it will be our plan to mandate it as we move through the voluntary process.

We're providing scholarships and the Federal Government are also doing work around recognising educators as well through the 15 per cent wage increase. And that is a really important part of recognising the expertise of these young – of these educators, particularly in a female-dominated workplace that has been underpaid and undervalued for decades. And we were just seeing a turn in that when, unfortunately, we've had these bad players in the for-profit early childhood sector which has really brought the sector down. So, we need to keep lifting them, otherwise we are going to lose the sector completely. We'll lose the expertise, and people won't want to work in early childhood education.

**CLARE:** I'll jump in just to support what Yvette said. This is not babysitting, this is early education. And what I'm at pains to do whenever I'm talking about this is not talk about child care. This is early education and care. Every minute, every moment that young people spend in early education and care helps to prepare them to get ready for school. It's not just about helping parents return to work, this helps to prepare young people be ready to start school.

We're at a high school today, but if you were at a primary school and you asked principals can you tell the children in the first year of school that have been in early education, they can pick them all out. They know the children that are starting school ready to learn. That's why this is so important. That's why collectively we do everything that we can to promote the professionalism of this extraordinary workforce, and the 15 per cent pay rise is a big part of that. So many people who work in this sector have told me that they left to go and work at Bunnings or at Woolies because they could get paid more, not because they didn't love the job. That 15 per cent pay rise is bringing people back to the sector.

Goodstart, who are the biggest not-for-profit providers in the country, told me that their application numbers are through the roof, their vacancy numbers are down. That's a good thing. That's a good turnaround. That's helping more young people get access to early education and care. But the truth is the most disadvantaged kids in the country are still missing out. The kids who need that support the most are still missing out. That's what the 3 Day Guarantee reforms that come into place next year are about – making sure that every family, every child, can get access to three days a week of guaranteed access to the Commonwealth Subsidy to make sure that all children get the support they need to get ready to start school.

There was some data that came out a couple of weeks ago that showed in large part because of the pandemic that we've seen a decline in the readiness, developmental readiness, of children to start school. And it also showed that the children that went to preschool, four-year-olds, that they were one and a half times more ready, more developed, to start school than children who haven't. That's why this is so important to get right. That's why it's so important that where we see terrible things happening with safety and quality, that we crack down. That's what we're determined to do.

**JOURNALIST:** Just finally, there was a report, I think it was in The Guardian this morning, about attendance rates kind of going down. Is that another thing that you'll be discussing? And, I guess, how do you think we can approach that and change that?

**CLARE:** You bet. It's going to be one of the things we talk about as well. I mentioned off the top the agreement that we struck over the last 12 months. One of the things in that agreement is the target that was set to get attendance rates at school back to pre-pandemic levels, back to where they were in 2019. And Tasmania is in caretaker mode at the moment, so unfortunately Jo, the Minister in Tasmania, won't be with us. But in her absence we'll lead a conversation about what are the things we want our departments to work on to help build attendance rates back in our schools.

There's great things happening in different jurisdictions across the country that we can learn from each other. I was in WA a couple of weeks ago and they're using this additional funding with different programs. I was at one school where they've increased attendance rates by 10 per cent just in the last couple of months. But the thing is there's nothing new here. We can all learn from each other. And as part of the conversation about implementing this agreement we're going to be talking about how we boost attendance rates.