

Safer staffing action plan

for a stronger early
childhood education sector



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Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge and respect the continuing spirit, culture, and contribution of Traditional Custodians on the lands where we work, and pay respects to Elders, past and present. We extend our respects to Traditional Custodians of all the places that United Workers Union members live and work around the country.

About the United Workers' Union

United Workers Union ('UWU') is a powerful union with 150,000 workers across the country from more than 45 industries and all walks of life, standing together to make a difference. Our work reaches millions of people every single day of their lives. We feed you, educate you, provide care for you, keep your communities safe and get you the goods you need. Without us, everything stops. We are proud of the work we do— our early childhood educators are shaping the future of the nation one child at a time; supermarket logistics members pack food for your local supermarket and farms workers put food on Australian dinner tables; hospitality members serve you a drink on your night off; aged care members provide quality care for our elderly and cleaning and security members ensure the spaces you work, travel and educate yourself in are safe and clean.

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Introduction

Educators, through their union, have long been raising the alarm about systemic issues in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. For decades, they've highlighted the consequences of profit-driven business models, chronic under-resourcing, and persistent understaffing.

We want to see a sector where children are not only safe but thrive. Where families have confidence in the care their children receive, and where educators are supported to do their best work. In the current climate—amid a flurry of expert opinions and reactive proposals—it's critical that reforms are thoughtful, evidence-based, and avoid unintended consequences. Educators are the backbone of this sector. Their insights must be central to any reform agenda.

“ *There is such a high burnout educators are moving out of the Industry.* ”

Educator, New South Wales

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Children only thrive when they are in safe, supportive environments. It is necessary that:

- Ratios must be met in every room, and the “under the roof” loophole must be closed.
- Staffing waivers can only be used as a last resort and are strictly time limited.
- Every child with additional needs, whether diagnosed or not, is fully supported through additional staffing and other required resources.
- The same best practice ratios apply across all states and territories.
- There are never less than two educators with children at all times.
- Educators have the time and resources to focus on children – educators shouldn't have to undertake additional duties such as cleaning the centre or be overburdened with excessive administrative tasks.
- Training is high quality – an immediate review of training providers should take place, and substandard providers should lose their registration.
- All educators have access to ongoing high-quality training and professional development.

The urgency of addressing staffing is underscored by United Workers Union's recent survey of 3000 educators: **three-quarters reported their centres operated below minimum staffing levels at least weekly**, and many said this occurred daily. In the same survey, over 80% of early educators said that under-the-roof ratios compromise the safety and wellbeing of children. This systemic understaffing poses a far greater risk to child safety than can be resolved through any of the technological solutions currently being discussed.

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Children deserve consistent, high-quality care from familiar, trusted educators. Children thrive in environments where they are known, understood, and supported by educators who have the time, training, and stability to build meaningful relationships. That kind of trust and continuity simply cannot be built when services rely heavily on casual or agency staff who rotate frequently and may not know the children, families, or other educators well. This is especially critical for children who require additional support— for developmental, behavioural, or emotional needs (whether diagnosed or undiagnosed).

Addressing this means being serious about enforcing minimum staffing levels and committing to nationally consistent minimum staffing ratios across all states and territories to ensure every child receives the attention and care they need. It means ensuring that educators have the support, time and resources to give children the attention they deserve – there should never be less than two educators with children at all times, and educators should be able to focus on their core duties to children, not required to clean or be overburdened with excessive admin.

It also requires closing loopholes that undermine safety and quality—most notably the “under the roof” loophole, where centres calculate staff-to-child ratios across the entire service rather than room-by-room. For example, a baby room legally requiring three educators may only have two physically present, with a third counted from another room or floating elsewhere in the centre. This practice is not only misleading—it can be dangerous, especially for infants and children requiring additional support.

“ We have children under age in our classroom nearly everyday. The ratio should be counted differently in the case, but because of under-roof-ratio, it is okay. Practically, it is not okay at all.

Educator, Victoria

Achieving this requires more than just meeting minimum staffing ratios. It demands a stable, well-supported workforce that is equipped to respond to the diverse needs of children and families. When educators are paid decent wages, properly trained, and given secure employment, they are more likely to stay in the sector, build strong bonds with children and families, and contribute to a culture of safety and care. Reducing churn and casualisation is not just a workforce issue—it’s a child safety issue.

A fully funded and accessible inclusion support program (ISP) matters for child safety. When children with additional needs aren’t provided with the support they need, educators end up stretched thin, trying to do more without the resources they need. This means both children with additional needs and other children at the centre miss out on the high-level care they all deserve. The current ISP system is designed to fail. There are too many loopholes to jump through, the waiting times are too long, and even when an application is accepted, there is too little support. Without a diagnosis, it can be near impossible to receive ongoing support, and yet it can be difficult to obtain a diagnosis for a young child, and specialist waiting times sometimes stretch out more than a year. Some parents may not wish to seek a diagnosis, and others may be so overwhelmed by the process that they give up – and unless a provider is willing to fund additional support outside of the ISP, this means the additional work falls on educators. Even when

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an application is accepted, there are caps on funding for wages and staffing hours, which means children with additional needs often don't have an additional educator allocated for all their hours of attendance. In our recent survey of over 3,000 educators, almost four out of five educators said that there are more safety incidents in their service because of a lack of support educators for children with additional needs. This is both shocking and completely unacceptable - the ISP requires immediate reform.

“ *We always work with the correct ratio, but the increase of children with higher needs is making current ratios completely inappropriate.*

Educator, Western Australia

Safer staffing through empowering educators

Educators must be supported and empowered to act on safety. It is necessary to introduce:

- A Child Safety and Quality Officer in every centre, with the information and skills to support educators to raise safety concerns, and the power to hold providers accountable on staffing. Child Safety and Quality Officers must have access to training and strong protections from reprisal so they can support educators without fear. [See Appendix 1 for further detail.](#)
- Mandatory annual training for all educators on child safety and reporting obligations.
- Training for all educators to raise safety issues such as safe staffing levels. This needs to be done by a body wholly independent of any employer with proven expertise and experience.

Sadly, we know there are too many providers that are failing to ensure children's safety. It is deeply concerning that in our recent survey, over half of educators told us they did not feel comfortable raising issues of concern at their centre, and when they did raise issues, two-thirds felt unheard. Members tell us current reporting process are not working – at best the pathway is unclear, at worse, members have been discouraged from reporting by management or have reported to the regulator, have not heard back and have not seen any change.

“ *Higher stress levels for permanent educators as they look after their children AND supervise agency workers who are unfamiliar with children and routines.*

Educator, Victoria

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Transparency and accountability to ensure safer staffing

We endorse measures to increase accountability and remove poorly-performing providers from the sector, including:

- A national registration system that flags workers with serious issues.
- A strong, nationally consistent penalty regime, including powers to de-fund non-compliant services.
- No second or third chances—mandatory action must follow serious breaches.
- Timely assessment of new services, and regular reassessments at mandated intervals.

We also see as necessary reforms to ensure families and educators have access to information on:

- Any compliance or enforcement action taken against the service or provider, current or historic.
- Use of waivers, current or historic.
- Whether staffing ratios are consistently met.
- Staff turnover rates.
- Reliance on casual and agency staff.
- Percentage of trainees in the workforce.

Families and educators deserve clear, accessible information about the services they rely on. UWU supports the call for a national registration of educators, with robust reporting requirements for providers to prevent staff with serious issues from moving between centres undetected. [See Appendix 2 for further detail](#). A similar register has already been implemented in the disability support sector with minimal disruption and broad acceptance—demonstrating that such systems can be introduced smoothly and effectively.

Transparency builds trust and accountability. Yet, families currently lack access to key service data that would help them make informed decisions and understand the quality of care their children receive.

Making information publicly available and easily accessible would empower families, support educators, and drive improvements across the sector. It is a simple but powerful step toward restoring confidence and ensuring accountability.

There must also be real consequences for providers who repeatedly breach safety and quality standards. Children's wellbeing cannot be compromised by weak enforcement or leniency.

Some in the sector have recommended a national commission. We support national consistency in regulation, and a national commission may be able to assist in this, but we are also wary of putting valuable time and resources into what could be a toothless tiger. State and territory regulators already have an extensive range of compliance and enforcement powers – they must do better, and they must do more, but even in the best possible circumstances, no regulator can be in every centre, every day. Investing in training and support to give educators the confidence to raise issues in every centre in Australia is critical in ensuring a culture of safety and care, and in lifting standards across the sector.

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“ *Our company DOES NOT CARE or listen unless you are discussing occupancy and profit.*

Educator, South Australia

Put safer staffing at the heart of funding and regulation reform

In regards to the sector's funding system, it is necessary to:

- Prioritise safe and high-quality outcomes for children.
- Prioritise well paid and high-quality educator jobs, which will encourage retention and improve consistency of education and care, leading to better outcomes for children.
- Restrict profiteering off a sector intended to support children's wellbeing and development.

To achieve meaningful reform, we need a national approach to both regulation and funding. The current model allows profit to take precedence over safety and quality. Public investment must be tied to outcomes that prioritise children's safety, consistency of care through stable and familiar teams of educators, and transparency across the sector.

Recent financial disclosures from major providers raise serious concerns about how public funds and parent fees are being used. Affinity Education Group, for example, spent just 57.2% of its revenue on labour costs in 2024—well below sector expectations—while paying \$3.75 million to key management personnel. Its reported net loss was due to the acquisition of 18 services, not a lack of profitability. Meanwhile, G8 Education reported \$1 billion in revenue in 2024, and its CEO received \$1.53 million in remuneration in 2024.

ASX-listed Nido Education Ltd reported revenue of \$166.8m in 2024, and net profit after tax of \$19.5m. Embark Education Ltd, also ASX-listed, increased its revenue by 29% in 2024 to \$81.6m, and reported net profit of \$9m. The provider spent only 55% of its revenue on wages, whilst acquiring 16 services over the last 18 months. Young Academics has also recently had a minority stake of the company bought by US private equity; the investment will be used to fund its rapid expansion in Sydney.

Huge and rapid growth in Nido and YA shows how big for-profits are extracting money from the sector to fuel growth, rather than quality ECEC. There is also an increasing level of investment from private equity and other private investment in the sector, with the Australian Financial Review recently calling Australian ECEC a “*happy hunting ground*” for private equity.

These figures highlight the urgent need for a funding model that limits excessive profit-taking and ensures that public investment is directed toward quality care, educator wellbeing, and workforce stability—not executive bonuses or shareholder returns.

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“ *Raising safety and staffing issues ultimately results in hostility and bullying from management.*

Educator, South Australia

Inherent risks in not listening to educators

The decision to accelerate the rollout of CCTV across centres raises serious concerns. Surveillance is not a substitute for safe staffing, strong leadership, or a culture of accountability. Cameras may create a false sense of security while failing to address the root causes of risk—such as chronic understaffing, inadequate training, and poor oversight. It also introduces significant privacy and data security risks in environments where children are most vulnerable. UWU believes the focus should be on supporting stable employment, professional development, and safe staffing levels that ensure every child receives the care and attention they deserve.

UWU opposes proposals such as banning male educators from certain duties. These measures are discriminatory and distract from the real work of building a culture of safety and accountability.

“ *Staff are constantly walking in and out of our sector and we always have no staff so it becomes a mad rush to work out the day and no amount of planning or caring can account for not having enough staff members.*

Educator, Queensland

Conclusion

A safe, high quality, fit-for-purpose early education and care system requires funding and regulation reform, national consistency, and long-awaited fixes to systemic issues. The cost of inaction is immeasurable—families and children shattered by preventable harm and educators burned out in a system that doesn't provide the safe, supportive environments children need.

When we invest in early childhood education, we're not just funding care, we're building a safety net, nurturing development, and giving every child the foundation to thrive. Educators across Australia know that a world-class system is possible—one built on safety, quality, and a stable, familiar team of educators in every centre. Families are waiting for this change, and children need us to act now.

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Appendix 1: Safer staffing through Child Safety and Quality Officers

The role of a Child Safety and Quality Officer must be implemented in every centre through:

1. Training in safety and staffing regulations, and complaints processes.
2. Training in advocacy and support skills, by a body wholly independent of any employer with proven expertise and experience in industrial relations and representation in similar situations.
3. Strong protection from reprisal so they can support educators without fear.
4. Access to information about staffing levels, use of “under the roof” ratios, the composition of the workforce (numbers of employees who are permanent, casual, and agency casual), turnover, training, and professional development.
5. Clear enforcement mechanisms to ensure safe staffing levels are met.

We need strong regulators to safeguard children's safety and hold providers accountable. But even the best-funded regulator can't be in every service, every day – in Australia there are over 18,000 services, over 7,000 providers and almost 1,500 services that have yet to be visited. Sadly, we know there are too many providers that are failing to ensure children's safety. It is deeply concerning that in the recent survey of more than 3,000 educators, more than half told us they did not feel comfortable raising issues of concern at their centre, and when they did raise issues, two-thirds felt unheard. Members tell us current reporting processes are not working – at best the pathway is unclear, at worst, members have been discouraged from reporting by management or have reported to the regulator and have not heard back.

Educators are in these centres every day. They are the experts on the ground, and they need to be empowered with information and support to be able to act effectively on safety.

Educators are telling us that widespread understaffing and constant breaches of ratios are impacting children's safety and wellbeing. In a recent survey of over 3,000 educators:

- 77% of educators say they are operating below minimum staffing requirements at least weekly, and 42% say it is happening daily.
- 77% of educators also say there are more safety incidents in their service because of a lack of support educators for children with additional needs.

This cannot continue. Educators are uniquely placed to work with providers, regulators, and governments to provide real-time monitoring of safety issues, raise the alarm when providers fall short, and take action to help make children safer.

A Child Safety and Quality Officer in every centre, with the information and skills to support educators to raise safety concerns, and the power to hold providers accountable on staffing, is a vital next step in reforms to make every centre across Australia safer for children.

A Child Safety and Quality Officer will support other educators to act. They will not act on behalf of other educators, nor will they make judgements about the validity of complaints. This role would not supersede or replace current obligations all educators have to keep children safe.

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Appendix 2: Safer staffing through worker registration

Our proposal for an ECEC worker registration scheme is that it should:

- Be nationally consistent so safety issues don't fall through the gaps of state-by-state regulation.
- Include mandatory high quality child safety training for all educators at registration (with training to be updated on an annual basis).
- Have funding for ongoing professional development and training, including paid time to undertake the training and backfill to ensure no gaps in staffing.
- Be free or low cost, and fast - no delays, no educator should have to wait months to start work during a staffing crisis.
- Provide that pre-employment screening be conducted by a centralised body, with serious offences automatically precluding employment. Other offences should trigger a risk assessment process.
- Ensure access to natural justice - educators must be provided with a fair opportunity to respond to complaints or matters that would result in their exclusion from the sector.
- Ensure educators have an opportunity to appeal decisions, both internally and externally, at no or low cost. Educators must also have a right to be represented during the process.

The possibility of a worker registration scheme in ECEC has been discussed for many years. It has been envisaged as a recognition of the skills and key role of educators in early years education and a way to properly vet those who work in the system, beyond just those matters covered in a Working with Children Check.

This proposal has come to the forefront given the recent revelations in NSW and Victoria and there is now broad support across the sector to enact urgently.

When implementing registration, particularly so quickly, it is important to acknowledge that this could be confusing and intimidating for the workforce. We all acknowledge that having fully staffed centres with a stable workforce is key to child safety – and no one wants registration to drive workers out of the sector or discourage new entrants to the sector.

It will be important that both details of the registration (such as access to natural justice when allegations are made and the opportunity to appeal decisions) but in particular **the way it is rolled out** reassures workers and does not add to any sector flight.

We believe the success of registration will be dependent on a roll out process for existing staff which includes information about registration, what will be required, how it works and the rights of staff to representation during the process. This should be done by a body wholly independent of any employer with proven expertise and experience in industrial relations and representation in similar situations.



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