



Seroptimist International South East Asia Pacific

Brisbane Inc

a global voice for women

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SENATE INQUIRY ON THE QUALITY AND SAFETY OF AUSTRALIA'S EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SYSTEM

A SUBMISSION FROM SEROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL BRISBANE INC

TO: Committee Secretary
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1. INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR SYSTEM REFORM

Seroptimist International Brisbane Inc (SI Brisbane) is part of a global volunteer movement dedicated to transforming the lives of women and girls through education, empowerment, and the creation of enabling opportunities. Guided by **Seroptimist International's** principles of **advancing human rights, gender equality, and social justice**, we advocate for **systemic reform to ensure Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system is safe, high-quality, and equitable**.

ECEC is a cornerstone of social infrastructure, essential for:

- Supporting children's cognitive, emotional, and social development.
- Enabling women's participation in the workforce and securing long-term economic equality.

Yet in Brisbane, Queensland, and across Australia, the sector is under severe strain. Chronic workforce shortages, systemic safety failures, and inconsistent service standards undermine both child wellbeing and women's economic participation. This submission highlights key issues, presents local data and case studies, draws on international best practice and national reform processes, and recommends urgent reforms to secure a safe and sustainable ECEC system.

2. KEY ISSUES AND SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

Four interconnected issues compromise the safety and quality of Australian ECEC:

2.1 Chronic Workforce Shortages Compromise Child Safety

Persistent staff shortages threaten learning environments and directly endanger child safety.

- The 2024 National Workforce Census shows many educators are leaving due to low pay, high stress, and poor professional recognition (Department of Education, 2024).
- Understaffing has been linked to increased child injury incidents and declining service quality (Productivity Commission, 2025).

2.2 Systemic Safety and Compliance Failures

Oversight mechanisms are inadequate, creating unacceptable risks.

- Queensland regulatory data (2023–2025) records 147 incidents of inadequate supervision, 104 of inappropriate discipline, and 95 of unsafe premises (Queensland Department of Education, 2025a).
- Across Australia, jurisdictional inconsistencies in regulation and enforcement allow dangerous practitioners to move undetected between states and territories.

2.3 Quality Gaps and Geographic Inequity

While most services meet the National Quality Standard (NQS), significant gaps remain.

- Quality disparity: About 11% of Queensland services are rated “working towards NQS,” three times the rate in New South Wales (4%) (ACECQA, 2025a).
- Equity issues: Children in rural, Indigenous, and low-income communities face lower access and quality, highlighting systemic failures in funding and accountability.

2.4 ECEC as an Enabler for Gender Equality

Access to safe, affordable childcare is fundamental to women’s economic security.

- Prohibitive costs and limited availability disproportionately affect single mothers and women in insecure work (Grattan Institute, 2023; Soroptimist International, 2023).

3. LOCAL DATA AND CONTEXT: BRISBANE AND QUEENSLAND

Evidence from our local context clearly demonstrates the national crisis:

METRIC	CONTEXT / DATA POINT	SOURCE
Sector Capacity	As of March 2025, Queensland had 3,355 approved services and 262,896 centre-based places, struggling to meet demand.	QLD Dept. of Education (2025a)
Staffing Stress	Seventy-four per cent of Queensland services report daily staff shortages, and 68% observe an increase in child safety incidents as a direct result.	Early Childhood Australia (2024)
Workforce Demographics	Nationally, women comprise 96% of the ECEC workforce, facing low pay and limited advancement: a clear structural gender inequality.	Dept. of Education (2024)
Professional Development	While free training in Protective Behaviours offered in Queensland is welcome, it does not address systemic underinvestment in workforce development.	QLD Dept. of Education (2025b)

4. SELECTED CASE STUDIES: THE LIVED REALITY OF SYSTEM FAILURE

The following Queensland-based case studies illustrate how systemic failures in workforce capacity, supervision, and regulatory oversight result in real and harmful consequences for children, families, and educators.

Case Study 1: Logan ECEC Centre (Critical Supervision Breach)

A Logan-based centre was sanctioned after repeated breaches of mandated staff-to-child ratios. These culminated in a serious incident in which a child wandered unsupervised off the premises before being located by a member of the public.

- **Contributing Systemic Failures:** Investigations revealed excessive reliance on unqualified or minimally trained relief staff, combined with inadequate rostering and weak management oversight. These conditions reflected broader workforce stress and insufficient regulatory enforcement (Queensland Department of Education, 2025a; Early Childhood Australia, 2024).
- **Outcome:** The case demonstrates how chronic understaffing and poor workforce planning can erode the most basic safety protocols, placing children at direct risk of harm.
- **Reform Implications:** Endorses recommendations to strengthen the workforce through national pay standards, career pathways, and wellbeing support strategies (Section 6.1), and to improve safety and compliance through unannounced inspections and increased regulatory oversight (Section 6.2).

Case Study 2: Fortitude Valley Kindergarten (Unsafe Premises and Injury)

At a Fortitude Valley kindergarten, a young child sustained a serious injury requiring medical treatment due to faulty, poorly maintained playground equipment.

- **Contributing Systemic Failures:** The service failed to comply with mandated safety and maintenance schedules. The absence of proactive, routine safety audits and preventative infrastructure maintenance revealed negligence and systemic oversight gaps (Queensland Department of Education, 2025a; The Sector, 2025).
- **Outcome:** This case underscores the urgent need for better-resourced regulators capable of conducting unannounced inspections to enforce compliance with facility safety standards. Preventable hazards should not compromise children's well-being.
- **Reform Implications:** Emphasises the importance of improving safety and compliance (Section 6.2) and advancing quality and equity across jurisdictions by funding improvement programs and tying public funding to clear quality outcomes (Section 6.4).

Case Study 3: Logan Service (Chronic Understaffing and Behavioural Incidents)

Another service in Logan recorded a sharp increase in behavioural incidents and disrupted learning environments, linked to chronic staff shortages.

- **Contributing Systemic Failures:** Persistent understaffing and high turnover produced extreme stress and burnout among remaining educators. Staff were unable to provide consistent behavioural guidance or maintain secure learning environments due to a lack of familiarity and continuity with children (United Workers Union, 2024; Early Childhood Australia, 2024).

- **Outcome:** This case illustrates that workforce shortages undermine not only physical safety but also the educational and emotional quality of care. Children experience disrupted relationships and reduce developmental support, while educators' well-being deteriorates under untenable working conditions.
- **Reform Implications:** Emphasises the need to strengthen the workforce (Section 6.1), ensure fair work conditions, and incorporate wellbeing strategies, as well as prioritising leadership development to offer better supervision and support in challenging settings.

Together, these cases highlight that workforce shortages, regulatory gaps, and inadequate oversight are not isolated incidents but recurring systemic failures. They demonstrate the direct link between under-resourced services and compromised child safety, diminished educational quality, and staff wellbeing.

Addressing these structural issues is critical to ensuring a safe, equitable, and high-quality ECEC system. Each case clearly supports the suite of recommended reforms outlined in Section 6, providing concrete evidence for the urgent need for comprehensive national action.

5. INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICE AND REFORM ALIGNMENT

To achieve a high-quality, equitable, and sustainable ECEC system, Australia must align with recognised international best practice while embedding recommendations from national reform processes. Evidence demonstrates that investment in professionalisation, equity, and integrated service delivery strengthens both workforce stability and child outcomes.

PRACTICE / RECOMMENDATION	COUNTRY / INSTITUTION	LESSONS FOR AUSTRALIA AND REFORM CONSIDERATIONS
Raising qualifications, pay, and conditions	OECD countries (Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands)	Linking pay progression to qualifications and embedding mandatory in-service training has professionalised the workforce, reduced turnover, and improved pedagogy. Australia could introduce structured professional development frameworks tied directly to remuneration and career pathways.
Pay parity initiatives	New Zealand	Achieving salary parity between ECEC educators and school teachers has stabilised workforce supply and retention. Australia should prioritise parity measures to address the systemic undervaluing of ECEC roles.
Targeted equity models	Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway)	Sustained funding directed to disadvantaged and rural communities has reduced inequalities in access to quality ECEC. Australia could implement equity-focused resourcing strategies to close geographic and socio-economic gaps.
Leadership training	South Korea	National investment in leadership pathways for centre directors has strengthened governance, accountability, and innovation. Australia should expand leadership pipelines to ensure consistently high-quality centre management.
Inclusive and culturally responsive ECEC	Finland	Prioritising cultural safety for First Nations and migrant children has fostered trust, inclusion, and stronger outcomes. Australia could embed Indigenous perspectives and multicultural inclusion more explicitly in national standards and curricula.

PRACTICE / RECOMMENDATION	COUNTRY / INSTITUTION	LESSONS FOR AUSTRALIA AND REFORM CONSIDERATIONS
National Safety Standard	Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2015)	Recommended a nationally consistent framework for Working with Children Checks (WWCC) to prevent disqualified individuals from moving between jurisdictions. Implementation is now being advanced by the National Office for Child Safety (2025).
Gender analysis	OECD (2024)	Embedding gender analysis in ECEC and workforce policy addresses structural inequalities and improves women's workforce participation. Australia should adopt gender-responsive policy frameworks to achieve systemic fairness.
Fair work conditions	Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) & Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) (2024)	Highlighted the need for fair, flexible, and equitable conditions for part-time and casual staff in a female-dominated, highly casualised sector. Australia must strengthen industrial protections to ensure long-term workforce equity and sustainability.
Universal funding models	Productivity Commission (2025)	Advocates for universal, child-centred funding to reduce inequities and expand access. Australia should transition toward funding models that guarantee affordability and inclusion across all communities.
Integrated care	UNICEF and the World Health Organisation (WHO)	Recommends multi-sectoral approaches integrating health, nutrition, and safety into ECEC delivery. Australia could adopt integrated models particularly suited to First Nations and remote communities, ensuring holistic child wellbeing.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATIONAL REFORM

A future-focused ECEC system requires reforms that strengthen the workforce, safeguard children, ensure equity, and recognise early learning as essential national infrastructure. The following recommendations build on international best practice and align with recent Australian inquiries and reviews.

6.1 Strengthen the Workforce

- Establish national pay and conditions standards tied to qualifications and benchmarked against teacher salaries to address systemic undervaluation (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2025; OECD, 2024).
- Develop transparent career pathways through scholarships, leadership programs, and recognition of prior learning to attract and retain talent (South Korea model, OECD, 2019).
- Embed workforce wellbeing strategies such as manageable workloads, access to mental health services, and structured peer mentoring (WGEA & BCEC, 2024).
- Guarantee equity for part-time and casual staff, ensuring access to training, progression opportunities, and fair employment protections (WGEA & BCEC, 2024).

6.2 Enhance Safety and Compliance

- Increase regulator funding to enable more frequent and unannounced inspections (Queensland Department of Education, 2025a).
- Mandate public, real-time reporting of serious breaches to improve accountability and build public trust (Productivity Commission, 2025).
- Apply stronger penalties for repeat or severe violations to deter unsafe practices (ACECQA, 2023).
- Embed trauma-informed and culturally safe practices as a core component of mandatory training for all educators (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2015; Queensland Department of Education, 2025b).

6.3 Implement a Unified National Working with Children Check

- Create a real-time, cross-jurisdictional WWCC system aligned with the Royal Commission's recommendations (Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2015; National Office for Child Safety, 2025).
- Close existing loopholes that allow disqualified or unsafe individuals to move undetected between states and territories (Royal Commission, 2015).

6.4 Lift Quality and Equity Across Jurisdictions

- Fund targeted improvement programs for services rated "Working Towards NQS" to raise quality nationwide (ACECQA, 2025a).
- Prioritise sustained investment in rural, remote, Indigenous, and low-income communities to reduce inequities in access and outcomes (OECD, 2021; UNICEF & WHO, 2020).
- Tie public funding for for-profit providers to demonstrable quality outcomes, ensuring accountability for taxpayer investment (Productivity Commission, 2025).

6.5 Recognise ECEC as Essential National Infrastructure

- Enshrine ECEC within national policy and funding frameworks alongside health, education, and transport as a critical social and economic pillar (OECD, 2019; Productivity Commission, 2025).
- Expand subsidies and supports for vulnerable families to guarantee affordability and universal access (UNICEF & WHO, 2020).
- Support flexible work arrangements for parents while protecting families from financial penalties, enabling stronger workforce participation (OECD, 2024; Grattan Institute, 2023).

7. CONCLUSION

This Senate Inquiry represents a landmark opportunity to transform Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. Safe, high-quality childcare is not only a service but a fundamental right: essential to children's healthy development, women's workforce participation, gender equality, and the overall well-being and productivity of communities.

Soroptimist International Brisbane submits that a comprehensive reform is required. Priorities include: a unified national safety check to ensure consistent child protection; sustained investment in the ECEC workforce, including universal professional development; universal quality standards; pay parity and fair conditions for educators; strengthened leadership pathways; and targeted support for children and families in underserved, regional, and vulnerable communities.

These reforms are necessary for Australia to meet its obligations under the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** and the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**. They are also vital for addressing entrenched inequities, strengthening community resilience, and establishing a foundation for a more inclusive and gender-equal society.

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