



CENTRES REVEAL CRISIS IN EARLY LEARNING

NATIONAL REPORT 2023



Centres reveal crisis in early learning

National Report

In August 2023, UWU members launched a Crisis Tracker to map how the ongoing staffing crisis in the sector is affecting educators, families and children. Close to 1000 centres from across the country provided eye-opening and often shocking details about staff vacancies, workloads and pressures on staff, wait times for families and the lengths that services are being forced to go to in the face of the worst staffing crisis the sector has ever seen.

The results of the Crisis Tracker show that, in spite of millions of dollars in additional Federal Government subsidies to make early education more affordable for families, the crisis has only deepened. Educators continue to leave the sector because they simply can't afford to stay due to low wages, horrific workloads and a genuine concern that the well-being and safety of children is at risk due to the conditions in the sector.

Nationally, the Crisis Tracker has shown clear and shocking trends across every State and Territory.

Staff Shortages

- 95% of centres have had staff leave in the past 12 months and, of those, 78% have had more than 3 educators leave.
- 91% have current staff vacancies and, of those, 50% have 3 or more current vacancies.
- 80% have had staff vacancies open for longer than 3 months, and 35% have had vacancies open for 12 months or longer.
- 40% reported having to cap child enrolments, meaning that they are unable to accept the number of children they are licensed for, due to staffing constraints.
- 24% of centres reported that in order to meet legal minimum ratios they were using agency staff daily, and a further 13% on a weekly basis.
- Conversely, respondents from centres in regional or rural areas reported a lack of access to agency staff.
- When agency staff are not available, centres are forced to take other measures, such as closing early, turning children away, partially closing their centre or combining different ages groups or "shuffling children around the rooms" in an attempt to meet supervision requirements and ratios.

Waitlists for parents

- 88% of centres have waitlists for new families hoping to enrol and, of those, 40% are longer than 12 months.
- At 79% of centres, even after families secure an enrolment, they can't access the full number of days that they need, and 29% of centres say their wait time to pick up existing days is 12 months or more.
- Part of the Government's new support package for families included new higher subsidies for families with more than one child, but Crisis Tracker reports that families often can't take advantage of this – with 71% of centres reporting waitlists for siblings of existing enrolments to get a place - and of those 28% the wait list is 12 months or more.

Impacts for Children: Safety

In some of the most worrying results, centres reported a range of concerns about the impact of the staffing crisis on the well-being and safety of children.

- 64% agree that staff shortages in the past 12 months have impacted the well-being or safety of children.

“Inconsistency of staffing and sometimes working on bare minimum ratios with over 50% agency/casual staffing means quality has been impacted”.

- Federal electorate of Barton, NSW

“Children have been more visibly upset coming to care as their educators have left”.

- Federal electorate of Greenway, NSW

“Can’t provide good quality care, only the essentials”.

- Federal electorate of Lingiari, NT

An alarming 23% of those reporting impacts for children stated specifically that they believed the safety of children was at risk. Respondents described a lack of adequate supervision, a higher number of incidents resulting in injuries between children, more errors made by staff due to exhaustion and workload, and the constant turnover meaning that sometimes staff are unfamiliar with important medical information for children.

“Inconsistent staffing leads to new or agency staff not knowing children’s routines, allergies, policies and procedures. This can lead to supervision incidents and safety concerns around meal times, rituals and routines”

- Federal electorate of Fremantle, WA

“Children with allergies being given the wrong food. Luckily permanent staff fixed it without an incident that day”.

- Federal electorate of Hunter, NSW

“Because staff are so burnt out and tired, staff are making mistakes that they wouldn’t normally make”.

- Federal electorate of Dawson, QLD

Impacts for Children: Educational Outcomes

- 75% of centres reported concerns for children’s educational outcomes.

“Children have been moved into other rooms or [age groups] combined together meaning programs and children learning goals are missed for that day as there are too many other things going on”.

- Federal electorate of Flinders, VIC

“Constant staff changes lead to very disrupted educational programs, how can children feel comfortable enough to learn when they are constantly having to get to know new educators every few months.”

- Federal electorate of Franklin, TAS

“Our focus is mostly on children’s safety and supervision and having different casual educators all the time impacts children’s collaborations, engagement and learning”

- Federal electorate of Hume, NSW

Impacts on Educators

Early childhood educators are historically some of the most underpaid and undervalued professionals in the Australia workforce. Educators continue to do the work because they are dedicated and passionate about delivering high quality early education and care. However, the Crisis Tracker results show in harrowing detail why so many educators simply cannot afford to stay in the sector – either financially or for their own well-being.

- 87% agree that staff shortages in the past 12 months have impacted the wellbeing or safety of educators.

“We are constantly asking the team to start early and stay late and using inexperienced casuals, cert or educators who are “working towards” their quals. [As the Director] I am doing up to 60hrs/ week to fill staffing gaps”

- Federal electorate of Calare, NSW

“All the permanent staff are tired and burnt out. Our mental health has been severely affected and we are made to feel guilty for having a sick day and told to come to work even if we have a medical certificate”

- Federal electorate of Richmond, NSW

“Around 9 or 10 staff have resigned or dropped their permanent role to become casual in an attempt to manage the stress, educators working unpaid overtime, taking work home, coming in on weekends to do extra jobs, no support available to be given as everyone is burnt out and struggling to keep up with everything, personally very close to needing to resign or take an extended mental health break”.

- Federal electorate of Robertson, NSW

“Then we get parent complaints when we physically can’t do our job because we aren’t staffed enough to do so. I have gone home in tears and required mental health intervention several times because of the abuse I have dealt with several times.”

- Federal electorate of Dobell, NSW

Educators are clear on the solution:

The solution to the crisis described in horrifying detail by early educators is clear: get wages moving to retain the staff we have and attract people back to the sector.

In September 2023, the Fair Work Commission handed down a landmark decision, granting early educators in United Workers Union the first ever supported bargaining authorisation. For the first time, unions and 67 employers from across the country are authorised to bargain together for a new national standard covering more than 500 centres and 12,000 educators. All parties have a key goal – get wages moving.

Educators are ready to sit down with employers and the government, as the funder of the sector, and put their claim for a 25% wage increase and a stronger representative voice, because they see every day how the staffing crisis is affecting their workmates, children and families.

“We appreciate the push for renewed workforce through training initiatives, however retention is a huge issue. Until we solve the problem of poor wages and conditions, we will have exceptional educators leave the profession in order to find work that better supports their families, which I have seen time and time again. We drastically need better funded wages for existing educators, not just new ones!”

- Federal electorate of Adelaide, SA

“We need better pay and conditions to attract people to our sector and it needs to be funded. We are losing staff to department of education preschool sites, as well as educators who are training to work in aged care and disability because they simply can’t afford to stay in the early childhood sector and the demands are immense. The amount of responsibility on the shoulders of educators is, at times, overwhelming and we deserve better recognition.”

- Federal electorate of Kingston, SA

“Take the educators job seriously and pay them more so as to keep them in the [sector]. Educators deserve better pay and treatment, we are doing one of the most important jobs for the nation, which is raising the leaders for the next generation”.

- Federal electorate of Canberra, ACT