

ECE: a public good

Kindergartens Aotearoa manifesto - election 2026

Our tamariki have the right to participate in high-quality early childhood education (ECE).

Underpinned by our nation's founding document Te Tiriti o Waitangi, our curriculum Te Whāriki - unique in Aotearoa and celebrated globally - upholds the mana of our tamariki. ECE is a cornerstone of our education system in Aotearoa. It is a public good - in the same way schooling is a public good: the life-long benefits to tamariki and whānau are well documented as are the wider benefits to society.

Our aspiration is the provision of high-quality, accessible, affordable, inclusive ECE in every community. We want to see tamariki and whānau thrive, rich in their language, identity and culture and empowered to care for people, place and planet: Aotearoa's future depends on it.

We call on political parties to commit to ECE and adopt three key principles to underpin government decision-making, policy settings and investment.

- Access: ECE services in every community
- Affordability: universally funded ECE services for all tamariki
- Quality: high-quality teaching and learning in every ECE service

Principle #1 Access: ECE services in every community **Policy setting**

- Strengthen community-based services: plan, support and grow the provision of services

Principle #2 Affordability: universally funded ECE services for all tamariki **Policy settings**

- Legislate a universal entitlement for all tamariki to high-quality ECE at the completion of paid parental leave
- Increase funding to services for teaching and learning and ensure it keeps pace with inflation
- Extend the 20 hours 'free' entitlement to 30 hours a week for all tamariki
- Cap the level of fees paid by whānau
- Strengthen accountability for the use of public funding

Principle #3 Quality: high-quality teaching and learning in every ECE service **Policy settings**

- Ensure 100% ECE qualified (degree or equivalent) teaching workforce in teacher-led, centre-based services by 2030
- Establish a national employment agreement for qualified and certificated teachers in ECE, based on pay parity rates with primary teachers
- Improve access to specialist support for tamariki with additional learning needs
- Strengthen the teaching profession by reinstating elected members to the Teaching Council

ECE is a public good: why that matters

‘... all children have rights to protection and promotion of their health and wellbeing, to equitable access to learning opportunities, to recognition of their language, culture and identity and, increasingly, to agency in their own lives.’¹

There is a significant body of work both here in Aotearoa and internationally that sets out the benefits to tamariki at the time they are participating in high-quality ECE and as they progress through the education system and through to adulthood.²

High-quality teaching and learning matters. Multiple studies clearly show the benefits of young children and whānau participating in ECE.³ The research evidence shows:

- links to better social outcomes for children when they are older such as higher earning, reduced reliance on welfare programmes and lower crime rates;
- better education and vocational gains and a reduction in social inequalities in academic performance in adulthood;
- for children with low socio-economic backgrounds better social interactions, emotional maturity, and better learning abilities;
- better social and emotional skills before starting school and children performing better in maths, reading, communication and logical problem solving during their primary and adolescent years.

The OECD recognises ECE as a cost-effective way of closing achievement gaps before they widen and become entrenched. The benefits of high-quality ECE are well-known and relate directly to the outcomes this government is looking to achieve across the education system.

Government chooses where it invests public funds. Realising the benefits of high-quality ECE directly relates to the policy and regulatory settings introduced over time to create and support the necessary conditions to achieve those benefits for tamariki, whānau, communities and society.

‘Public good’ expresses ECE’s positive contribution to individuals as citizens, to our society and to our democracy.

¹ Ministry of Education (2017) *Te Whāriki. He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa. Early Childhood Curriculum*

² Mitchell, L., Wylie, C., & Carr, M. (2008). *Outcomes of early childhood education: Literature review. Report to Ministry of Education.* <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications>

³ Te Tāhuhu o te Mātaranga (May 2024) Education Counts. Education Indicator, Early Learning Participation <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz>

Access: ECE services in every community

Policy setting

1 Strengthen community-based services: plan, support and grow the provision of services

- Community-based services spend whānau fees and contributions and public funding to those services, on teaching and learning. Private education and care services provide 69% of the licensed places in the ECE sector⁴ and corporate providers make up a significant portion of services.
- An unequal patchwork of ECE provision in Aotearoa favours higher income communities and inequitable participation has been a longstanding issue.⁵ Accessibility issues are not experienced equally across population groups: research highlights that it is disproportionately Māori and Pasifika families who do not access ECE because of cost and availability.⁶
- Prior to 2024, ECE services were part of a managed network to ensure high-quality, diverse and sustainable provision⁷ - the same approach to schooling. Strategic priorities for the establishment of ECE services related to services meeting the needs of Māori, of Pacific communities, migrant and refugee communities, services providing wrap around services to whānau, and services supporting children with learning needs. The majority of services supporting these communities are community-based, not-for-profit services.
- The majority of ECE services in rural and isolated areas are community-based. Strengthening partnerships with Playcentre, Kohanga Reo and Puna Reo, and A'oga Amata and offering models such as ECE services on school sites and mobile ECE would support and increase access for children and families.
- Funding rural and isolated services on the basis of a 'notional roll,' funding to support the ongoing sustainability of community-based services, grants and loans for new services, affordable lease arrangements, and provision of property or public land, are some of the mechanisms government could employ to strengthen community-based services.
- Supporting community-based ECE services guarantees public funding is used for its intended purpose to realise the educational outcomes and long-term benefits of high-quality ECE for every child.

⁴ Ministry of Education, Education Counts

⁵ May, H. & Mitchell, L. (2009) *Strengthening community-based early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand: Report of the Quality Public Early Childhood Education Project*. Wellington, New Zealand: NZEI Te Riu Roa

⁶ Sin, I. (2021). Access to Childcare Interim Report 1: Who has difficulty accessing affordable childcare? Motu Economic and Public Policy Research

⁷ Education (Early Childhood Services Network Approval) Regulations 2022

Affordability: universally funded ECE services for all tamariki

Policy settings

- 2 Legislate a universal entitlement for all tamariki to high-quality ECE at the completion of paid parental leave**
 - Aotearoa has been identified as having one of the highest net costs of childcare for families within the OECD.⁸ High and rising fees have made ECE prohibitive for many to access services.
 - The OECD's 2006 reviews of ECE show that direct public funding of services brings 'more effective control, advantages of scale, better national quality, more effective training for educators and a higher degree of equity in access and participation than consumer subsidy models.'⁹
 - There are multiple entitlements available to whānau to support participation and provide fee relief. However, these are often administratively costly, complex, time-consuming and inequitable to families with no or low tax liabilities such as Family Boost.
 - Around 65,000 families could receive subsidies, and fewer than half of those eligible for Family Boost have applied. This funding is already tagged in appropriations but has not been used: it could be redirected to increase funding to services.
 - The most efficient and effective way to improve affordability is to ensure whānau have a right to access universally funded and provided high-quality ECE at the completion of paid parental leave.
- 3 Increase funding to services for teaching and learning and ensure it keeps pace with inflation**
 - Government funding to ECE services is not keeping pace with inflation, lagging by up to 13.5%¹⁰ as costs to services increase and whānau ability to pay higher fees has come under extreme pressure.
 - Unlike schools, all funding goes directly to ECE services. Funding is not 'tagged' for specific purposes such as teachers' salaries or to retain qualified staff, and service providers can charge whānau whatever fee they choose.
 - Public funding to ECE needs to be indexed to CPI as a baseline minimum to ensure it meets costs, parent and caregiver fees remain affordable, and services remain viable. Funding must also be tagged to ensure public funding is used to support high-quality teaching and learning.
- 4 Cap the level of fees paid by whānau**
 - Although public funding to ECE services has increased incrementally, it has not kept pace with inflation, and whānau are still required to pay the highest fee in the OECD.

⁸ OECD, (2018). *Net childcare costs*. <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/net-childcare-costs.html>

⁹ Mitchell, L. & Gallagher, A. (2026) *Principles and approaches to funding ECE services*. January

¹⁰ NZEI Te Riu Roa (2026) *Budget 2026: Below-inflation funding adjustments fail ECE and primary schools*. Media release May

- There is no requirement or expectation that fees will be a certain level: service providers can charge whānau whatever they please. In areas where demand is high and provision is limited, parents and caregivers have no choice but to meet the fee.
- Fee caps have been an effective mechanism used internationally¹¹ to ensure ongoing affordability and access to services. Government also uses fee caps to keep costs affordable for students in tertiary education and in local government.

5 Extend the 20 hours ‘free’ entitlement to 30 hours a week for all tamariki

- Increasing the entitlement from 20 hours ‘free’ for some children to 30 hours for all children over time, would better meet parent and caregiver expectations and government aspirations to support participation in paid employment or training for example. It would immediately reduce the costs of ECE to all families with two-year-olds attending a service and eventually to all households when their children turned two.
- It would provide stability and certainty for parents and caregivers, and for services; reduce the need for other policy settings and mechanisms to be in place to support participation such as subsidies; reduce complexities of applying for/administering subsidies and tax rebates for whānau, services and the government; and bolster accountability for the receipt and expenditure of tax-payer funding.

6 Strengthen accountability for the use of public funding

- Large corporate ECE providers receive significant amounts of public funding and post considerable profits. Arguably there are hundreds of millions of dollars being diverted to company profits or individual gain at the expense of whānau, tamariki, and high-quality ECE provision.
- In 2023, six private companies received a quarter of the total government funding which grew by 28% between 2020 and 2023.¹² The increased funding would have been as a result of some services taking more children: the rules allow up to 150 over two-year-olds in one group.
- A UK report on the activities of services owned by equity investors in ECE¹³ argued that the financial imperatives may ultimately undermine the social and educational outcomes we aspire to for children, families and government investment.
- The Ministry of Education applies a different reporting standard to community-based services than to private or for-profit services. It is entirely reasonable to expect all ECE services provide the same information as a condition of the receipt of public funding.
- Placing conditions on ECE service providers for the receipt of public funding would increase accountability for the use of that funding. Services would need to demonstrate they use funding to employ, support and appropriately remunerate qualified teachers, to ensure parents and caregiver fees remain affordable, and to maintain age-appropriate group size for example. The intent of public funding should always be to ensure high-quality teaching and learning rather than to make it ‘easier to do business’ or provide a return to shareholders.

¹¹ Ireland, Canada and Sweden for example.

¹² Meier, C (2024) *Daycare dollars who’s winning and losing*. Business Desk, NZ Herald. July

¹³ Sin, I. (2021). Access to Childcare Interim Report 1: Who has difficulty accessing affordable childcare? Motu Economic and Public Policy Research

Quality: high-quality teaching and learning in every ECE service

Policy settings

7 100% qualified teaching workforce in teacher-led, centre-based services by 2030

- 100% qualified teaching workforce in teacher-led, centre-based services has been the sector's aim for almost 40 years. Two strategic plans in 2002 and 2019¹⁴ proposed steps be taken to achieve that aim firstly by 2012, then by 2029.
- Teachers currently hold a degree (or equivalent) - the same as teachers in schools. As the qualification is specifically for teachers in ECE, teachers are knowledgeable about the curriculum Te Whāriki, know and understand how children learn and how to assess and progress children's learning. They provide rich learning environments to challenge and extend learning. They know what tamariki need to experience and progress their learning in age appropriate ways that recognise who they are and that make sense in their world.
- Teachers know that the experiences young children engage in, shape their well-being and learning throughout the schooling years and beyond. Brain development and the rapid progress made in the early years is well documented.¹⁵ Focusing and concentrating, being flexible and patient, working with and alongside others are examples of the skills children develop at an early age: skills that last a lifetime and directly relate to the confidence children experience in their school years.
- Teachers maintain high ethical and professional standards. They are legally required to maintain currency of teaching knowledge and practice. Although ECE teachers teach younger children, it is not any less important or influential than later in a child's life - the evidence speaks for itself.
- Two thirds of staff in education and care services are qualified teachers. Incentives can be put place to support the remaining one third of staff to become qualified teachers - as was the case in 1990s.¹⁶ A fully qualified teaching workforce is attainable by 2030.
- Over 174,000 children attend a teacher-led centre every day. Qualified teachers are essential to the provision of high-quality teaching and learning to ensure the maximum benefits of investing in ECE are realised.

8 Establish a national employment agreement for qualified and certificated ECE teachers based on pay parity rates with primary teachers - negotiated and administered centrally by the Ministry of Education

- Kindergarten teachers are the only teachers in ECE services to be covered by a national employment agreement negotiated by the Ministry of Education. In 2002, they achieved pay parity with their primary colleagues which was implemented over subsequent years.

¹⁴ Ngā Huarahi Arataki: Pathways to the Future 2002 - 2012 and He Taonga te Tamaiti: Early Learning Action Plan 2019 - 2029

¹⁵ <https://tewhariki.tahurangi.education.govt.nz/te-w-hi-ki-ng-roro-i-te-ako-learning-and-the-brai>

¹⁶ Ngā Huarahi Arataki set targets, provided higher levels of funding to services with higher proportions of registered teachers and offered incentives aimed at increasing the percentage of registered teachers staffing teacher-led services. Incentives included grants to enable existing staff to study, scholarships for teacher education courses, relocation grants, allowances for teachers to return to teaching and a resource kit to support teacher registration. A Ministry of Education-funded policy evaluation carried out over 2004, 2006, and 2009 found a significant lift in qualification levels from 37% in 2004 to 64% in 2009.

- Teachers in other ECE services hold the same qualifications as their kindergarten and primary colleagues and should be equally recognised: ‘a teacher is a teacher is a teacher.’ Pay and conditions are important drivers of teacher recruitment, retention and quality.
- Although ECE services can opt into a pay parity scheme, it is underfunded. It is not part of an employment agreement so the rules can change without warning or negotiation.¹⁷
- A national approach removes complexity and confusion for employers and employees and reduces the amount of administration required. It recognises performance against professional teaching standards and the different roles and responsibilities of teachers within an ECE service. It provides stability and certainty for services and for the government by improving recruitment and retention and providing clarity around costs.
- It is fair and reasonable that qualified and certificated teachers employed in ECE services are recognised as valued members of the teaching profession and receive the same pay and conditions as their colleagues in the compulsory sector.

9 Improve access to specialist support for tamariki with additional learning needs

- Inadequate implementation of the ministry’s learning support strategy has resulted in education support worker hours being reduced and the focus of early intervention shifted to support specialist services in schools.
- Learning support provided at the earliest opportunity shapes ongoing support for tamariki into their schooling years. Ensuring a clear pathway is key. A coherent and planned approach to prioritise learning support in the ECE sector would make effective use of resources and establish early connections and trusting relationships with tamariki and whānau.

10 Strengthen the teaching profession by reinstating elected members to the Teaching Council

- Elected teacher representation to their professional body was removed in 2026¹⁸ undermining its autonomy and independence and silencing the expertise of some 110,000 plus qualified teachers and professional leaders who work with tamariki, rangitahi and whānau in our communities every day.
- Research sets out the benefits for tamariki and rangitahi and for teachers, of an independent professional body. Effective practice is not only about robust certification, registration and competency functions, but also about strong leadership development and progressive professional and ethical standards. It is about understanding teaching and maintaining currency of teaching practice.
- Teachers like doctors, engineers and lawyers - know and understand their profession. Being part of a profession requires its members to hold each other to account for their professional practice. The profession is its own strongest critic, acutely aware of its obligations to ākonga, to their whānau and to our community.
- Decisions about professional and ethical standards must be made by those who understand and have experience and knowledge of the complexities of teaching and learning, independent from political influence and sustained beyond a three-year political cycle.

¹⁷ In 2023, the government determined pay parity rates remain static at 2023 levels. In 2024, relieving teachers were removed from the scheme. In 2025, the starting salary was no longer determined by qualifications and pay parity steps, and a moratorium was placed on teachers progressing up the steps.

¹⁸ Education and Training (System Reform) Amendment Bill