

Why is New Zealand Following the Same Failed Script?

By Kathy Wolfe, Chief Executive, Te Rito Maioha Early Childhood New Zealand

There is an old saying in politics: if you can't convince people you're improving something, change the language around it.

For anyone who thought the Trump administration couldn't create any more damage, they now plan to dismantle large parts of America's Head Start programme (an early childhood programme that operates in all 50 states). While that's devastating, I was struck by how familiar the arguments sounded.

The American proposal is wrapped in reassuring phrases: *reduce unnecessary administrative burden, increase local flexibility, expand access, preserve investment and deliver services more effectively.*

Who could argue with that? Yet behind those comforting words sits something very different.

The proposal would remove or weaken national standards covering teacher-to-child ratios, child safety, developmental screening, family engagement and other quality requirements that have defined America's Head Start programme for decades.

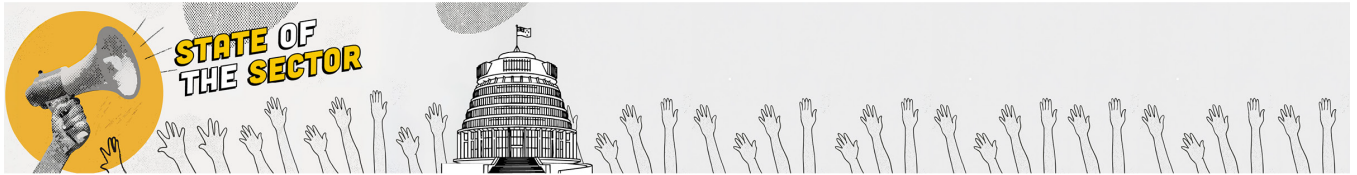
The rhetoric is about flexibility, but the reality is this is deregulation and the removal of safeguards that ensured quality within the American equivalent of Early Childhood Education.

Unfortunately, New Zealand is now hearing many of the same phrases.

Over the past year, we've repeatedly been told that ECE regulations need to be "streamlined", that unnecessary compliance should be reduced and that providers need greater flexibility. Some of that is entirely reasonable. Te Rito Maioha has long supported removing unnecessary, duplicative regulation and administrative requirements that do little to improve the safety or quality of children's education. The concern is what happens when "flexibility" becomes a justification for weakening the standards that protect children including requirements around qualified teachers, safety and educational quality. Increasingly, these arguments are being used in the United States by the Trump Administration to justify a broader rollback of regulation.

The concern in New Zealand isn't that regulation should never change, rather the issue is what disappears when "cutting red tape" and "affordability" become the primary objectives.





Quality in early childhood education isn't created by accident. It is sustained through regulations that support teacher qualifications, good staffing ratios, curriculum requirements, robust health and safety standards. These regulations don't exist because bureaucrats enjoy creating red tape, they exist because decades of research have shown these settings improve children's outcomes.

When governments remove those protections, quality doesn't automatically remain, rather it slowly erodes, and we've already seen this story play out much closer to home.

Earlier this year we wrote about [Australia's experience](#) after years of rapid expansion driven by private investment and deregulation. The promise was greater affordability, increased participation and more choice which sounds identical to the current overhaul of ECE in New Zealand.

Australia has experienced widespread concerns about declining quality, corporate consolidation, workforce pressures and regulatory failures resulting in damaging media exposés and a governmental inquiry. Now the Australian government has been forced to spend vast sums to rebuild confidence in the sector and ensure ECE is safe for Australian children again.

It is a cautionary tale, and now America appears poised to repeat parts of that experiment.

The justification sounds remarkably familiar.

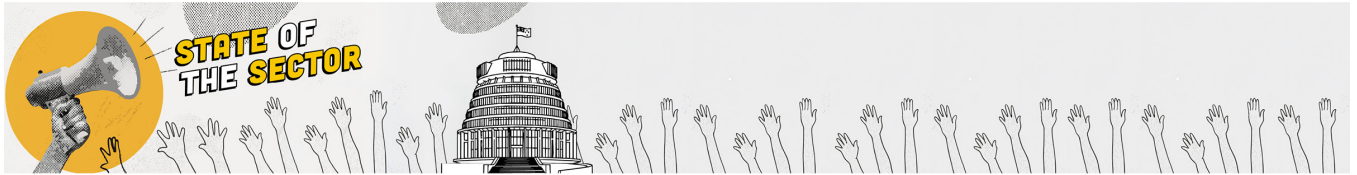
- Reduce compliance
- Increase flexibility
- Trust local providers
- Focus on participation.

If these phrases sound familiar to New Zealanders, they should. The Government's own review of early childhood funding has increasingly framed the sector through the lens of workforce participation and affordability. Those are legitimate goals. Parents need affordable access to quality early childhood education. But affordability without quality is a false argument.

An early childhood service that is cheaper because it employs fewer qualified teachers, relaxes standards, or reduces support for children with additional needs may save money today, but it creates larger costs tomorrow; in education, health, wellbeing and social services. It also has much poorer outcomes for children holistically.

America's Head Start was established to reduce poverty by investing in children before they entered school. It became internationally respected because it recognised that early learning





is about far more than supervision while parents work. It includes health checks, developmental screening, family support and high-quality teaching to set up our youngest to be successful at school.

Those aren't administrative extras, they are the programme.

As one former Head Start director warned, remove those standards and "you might have a programme that's called Head Start, but in substance it will not be."

That warning should resonate here in New Zealand.

The question for New Zealand isn't whether regulation can be improved. Rather, it is whether we are beginning to mistake quality protections for bureaucracy, while prioritising affordability and access over quality ECE which ultimately does not lead to safeguarding children's education, safety, health and wellbeing.

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