

Parents Deserve a Voice on the Future of Early Childhood Education

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

Every morning, thousands of New Zealand parents place their trust in someone else.

They leave their child at an early learning service believing they will be safe, cared for, educated and encouraged to learn, and supported to thrive during some of the most important years of their development.

That trust should never be taken for granted.

Parents expect their children to be nurtured by qualified teaching professionals who understand how young children learn and develop. They expect there to be enough teachers to give every child the attention they deserve. They expect a safe, caring environment where their child is known as an individual, not simply another number.

Research consistently shows that high-quality early childhood education (ECE) delivers significant benefits for children's learning, social development, wellbeing, and future educational success. Evidence also shows that some of the strongest indicators of quality are qualified and registered teachers and teacher-to-child ratios that allow meaningful relationships and individualised attention. Ratios determine how many children each teacher is responsible for. Lower ratios mean teachers have more time to give each child the individual attention, care and learning support they deserve. Children who attend high-quality ECE are more likely to develop stronger language, literacy, numeracy, self-regulation and social skills before school.

But quality doesn't happen by accident. It is shaped by the decisions governments make about how early childhood education is funded and the standards they expect services to meet.

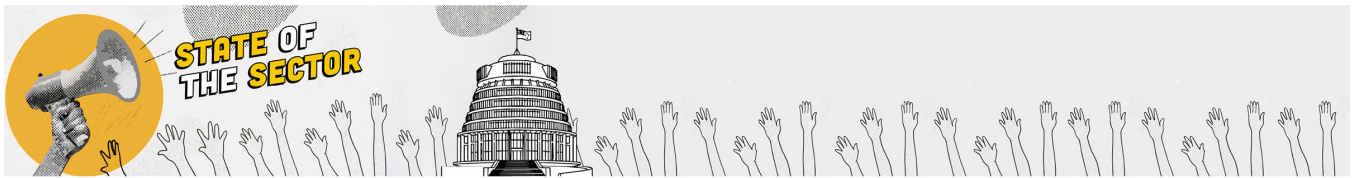
As political parties begin developing policies ahead of the next election, parents have an opportunity to help shape those decisions.

"Parents do not want the cheapest system possible, they want confidence that their child is receiving the best possible start in life," said Kathy Wolfe, Chief Executive of Te Rito Maioha.

"They want to know that the teacher greeting their child each morning is highly qualified and has a warm, trusting relationship with their child, that there are enough teachers available to give their child the attention they deserve, and that their child is learning in a safe and nurturing environment."

Recent consultation on the Government's ECE Funding Review found that parents place significant value on the quality of their children's early learning experiences. The review also recognised that structural quality factors such as the number of qualified teachers and teacher-to-child ratios, are strongly connected to positive outcomes for children.





For parents, ratios are not simply a technical policy issue.

Ratios determine whether a teacher has time to comfort a child who is upset, notice when a child is struggling, support their learning, communicate with families, and build the strong relationships that underpin quality early childhood education.

New Zealand's current ratios for young children have remained largely unchanged for decades, despite significant advances in our understanding of early childhood development. Te Rito Maioha has long advocated for improvements that would enable teachers to provide the individualised care and education that young children need.

At the same time, families across New Zealand are facing increasing financial pressures.

Parents should not be forced to choose between affordability and quality.

When funding falls short, the consequences are felt by families. Some early learning services are forced to increase fees simply to survive. Others close altogether because they can no longer remain financially viable. Teachers leave the profession because workloads grow, pay falls behind comparable sectors, and the pressure becomes unsustainable. For children, that can mean larger groups, fewer qualified teachers, less individual attention and disrupted relationships at a time when stability and secure attachments matter most.

High-quality early childhood education should be accessible to all families, regardless of income. Government investment should support affordable fees while also enabling services to employ qualified teachers, maintain appropriate staffing levels, and provide quality learning experiences without placing additional financial burden on parents.

When funding falls short, families feel the consequences through higher fees, services struggling to remain open, teachers leaving the profession, and children receiving less individual attention during the years that matter most.

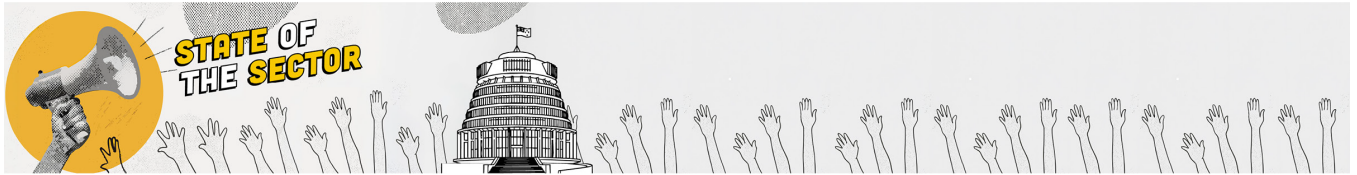
"Parents deserve a system that puts children ahead of cost-cutting," said Wolfe.

"Early childhood education is not simply childcare. It is the foundation of children's future learning, wellbeing and success."

"It also enables and empowers parents to participate in the workforce, undertake study, and contribute to their communities. Investing in quality ECE is an investment in children, families, communities and New Zealand's future."

The true test of any government's investment in early childhood education is not whether funding has increased, but whether it is sufficient to deliver the outcomes children, families and teachers need. Funding should enable services to remain financially viable, employ a 100% qualified teaching workforce, maintain safe teacher-to-child ratios, support full Pay Parity, and keep early childhood education affordable for families. If it cannot achieve all of those outcomes together, then the system remains underfunded.





Research consistently shows that qualified teachers are one of the strongest predictors of quality. Yet while regulations require only 50 percent qualified teachers, Te Rito Maioha believes that minimum should be the floor, not the aspiration. Every child deserves access to an early learning service with a 100% qualified teaching workforce, and that requires investment that matches the real cost of delivering quality.

Before you cast your vote, parents should ask every political party whether they are prepared to make that investment. They should ask some simple but important questions:

1. **Will you put children's learning, wellbeing and safety at the centre of ECE policy, including better support for children with additional learning and development needs?**
2. **Will you value ECE teachers by committing to a 100% qualified teaching workforce and full Pay Parity?**
3. **Will you make quality early childhood education affordable for families, without reducing the quality of education children receive?**
4. **Will you fix the ECE funding system by investing in ECE as a public good and ensuring funding reflects the true cost of delivering quality ECE?**
5. **Will you protect and strengthen the quality of ECE, including better teacher-to-child ratios so children receive the attention they need?**

Access matters too. Families should be able to access quality ECE where and when they need it. Affordability should not depend on sacrificing quality, and a family's circumstances or where they live should not determine the quality of education their child receives.

Delivering quality also depends on attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers. That requires funding settings that recognise the professionalism of the teaching workforce and support pay parity across the sector. Therefore, meaningful government investment in ECE should deliver three outcomes simultaneously:

- High-quality learning for children.
- A qualified and valued teaching workforce
- Affordable access for families.

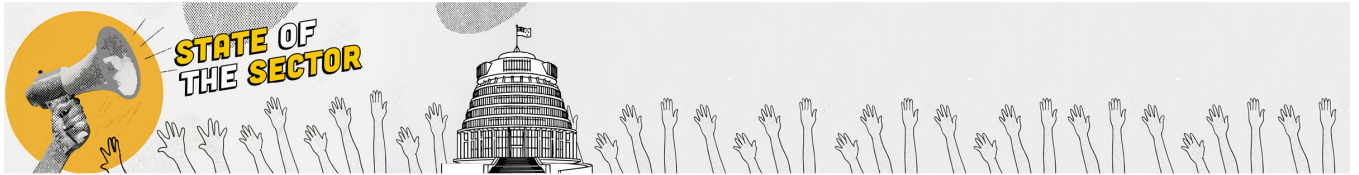
When funding fails to deliver all three, somebody pays the price, this would be children through reduced quality, teachers through lower wages, and parents through higher fees."

"The future of early childhood education will not be decided by politicians alone," said Wolfe.

"It will also be shaped by the voices of parents who understand that their child matters and therefore quality ECE matters. We encourage every parent to speak up, ask questions and make early childhood education an election issue."

"Every child deserves the very best start in life, and every parent deserves confidence that their child is receiving it."





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