

A Great Start for Every Child

The questions every parent should ask this election

Early childhood education (ECE) is education. It is where children continue developing the relationships, language, confidence, curiosity, independence and learning dispositions that provide the foundations for their future. It is also an essential part of the infrastructure that enables parents and caregivers to work, study and participate in their communities.

Aotearoa New Zealand needs an ECE system that delivers both: a great start for children and affordable access for families and that requires investment.

Te Rito Maioha believes the next Government must protect and strengthen the quality of early childhood education, value the teachers who make quality possible, ensure families can access affordable ECE, and build a funding system that is sustainable for the future.

- This is not a choice between children and families.
- It is not a choice between quality and affordability.

The Government must invest sufficiently to deliver both and currently it is not.

Across Aotearoa New Zealand, ECE teachers and services are telling us that rising costs, staffing pressures, increasing numbers of children needing additional support, and inadequate funding are making it harder to provide the quality education children deserve. At the same time, families are under financial pressure.

Making ECE more affordable by reducing quality is not a solution. It is a false economy with a range of serious risks.

Every parent wants the best for their child and this election, parents have an opportunity to ask every political party and candidate a simple question: **what will you do to ensure every child has access to high-quality, affordable early childhood education?**

When you leave your child at an ECE centre, you want to know they are safe, cared for and happy. You want teachers who know your child, understand how they learn and have the time to give them the attention they need for their education. You want your child to develop confidence, independence, language, friendships and a love of learning. And you want to know that you can afford to give them that start.

Parents should never have to choose between quality and affordability because ECE is a public good.

The question for this election is whether we are prepared to invest in an ECE system that delivers the best for children, supports families and values the teachers who make quality learning possible. Teacher told us:

Five ECE priorities for the next Government

1. Better ratios

So every child gets the attention they need.

2. A qualified, valued workforce

With a pathway to 100% qualified teachers and full Pay Parity.

3. Affordable quality ECE

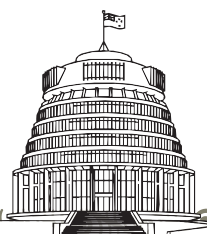
So parents don't have to choose between affordability and quality.

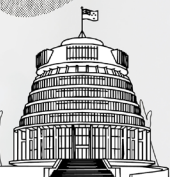
4. A funding system fit for the future

Investing in ECE as a public good, not simply subsidising attendance.

5. Protect and strengthen quality

Keep children, learning, wellbeing, Te Whāriki and Te Tiriti o Waitangi at the heart of ECE.





Priority 1. Give children the attention they deserve

Better ratios and better support for children with additional needs

Ratios are not simply a technical policy issue. They determine whether a teacher has time to notice when something isn't right, comfort a child when they are upset, support their learning, talk with whānau about their day and build the strong relationships that help children thrive. Our members see the consequences of current ratios every day.



“There is such a disconnect between the set ratios and quality of care and education.”

“Even 1 to 4 can be challenging with a 2 to 8 ratio.”

Aotearoa New Zealand's minimum ECE ratios have their origins in regulations introduced in the 1960s and have never been fundamentally reset to reflect what we now know about children's learning, development and wellbeing. Te Rito Maioha has long argued that better ratios are one of the foundations of quality ECE. Current minimum staffing requirements still allow one teacher to be responsible for five children under two, or two teachers for up to 20 children aged two and over.

These ratios do not reflect what we now know about children's learning, development and wellbeing. The challenge is even greater for children requiring additional learning support. ECE teacher report children identified as needing additional support, but that support is not always arriving when they need it. Teachers have reported waiting times of up to six months, limited specialist capacity and support that can amount to only an hour or two a day.

One teacher described a child with additional needs receiving just four hours of support while attending full-time ECE, leaving the centre to employ additional teacher itself.

This is exactly what ECE should be doing: identifying needs early, working alongside whānau and bringing in the right support before difficulties become bigger problems.

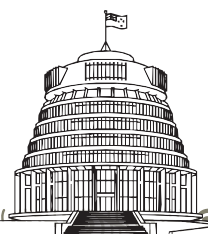


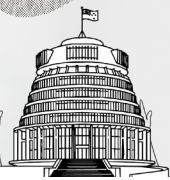
“The waiting list for the support... is so long that the children go to school without getting the help needed.”

Political parties need to:

- Improve teacher-to-child ratios, beginning with our youngest and most vulnerable children.
- Ensure funding enables services to operate with better ratios.
- Make sure children with additional learning needs receive the support they require by:
 - Establishing a funded inclusion support entitlement for children with additional learning needs.
 - Increasing specialist capacity.
 - Reducing waiting times for early intervention.
 - Providing more consistent support throughout the ECE day.

Because every child deserves enough teacher attention to learn, be safe, known and supported.





Priority 2. Put qualified teachers at the heart of ECE

Build and value our ECE workforce

The person teaching your child matters.

ECE teachers are degree education professionals. They understand child development, learning, pedagogy, relationships and how to respond to the individual needs of tamariki. They observe, assess and plan. They recognise emerging speech and language difficulties and developmental concerns. They help children learn to regulate their emotions, communicate, cooperate and become independent.



“ECE is pivotal in early detection of speech and language challenges and neurodiversity.”

“We observe, assess, plan for, support and build relationships, we identify developmental concerns and create inclusive environments where every child is celebrated and can thrive.”

This is skilled professional work. Qualified teachers make an important contribution to children's learning and development, helping establish the foundations on which future learning is built.

They support children's curiosity about their world, their developing sense of identity and belonging, their language and communication, their relationships with others and their growing independence.

Early childhood education is the first part of a child's education journey. The quality of teaching in these early years matters. New Zealand should not respond to teacher shortages by lowering expectations or qualification requirements. We should invest in getting more qualified teachers into ECE and keeping them there.

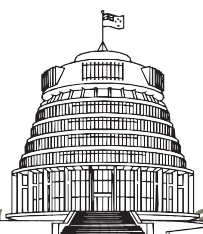
Political parties need to:

- Develop a long-term Teacher Workforce Strategy and Action Plan.
- Invest in initial teacher education.
- Make becoming an ECE teacher more financially accessible including paid study similar to the Police force.
- Attract and retain experienced teacher.
- Support mentoring and professional learning.
- Recognise the professionalism of ECE teachers through fair pay and Pay Parity.
- Commit to achieving a 100% qualified ECE teaching workforce.



“Our tamariki... need our guidance, awhi, and stability. This reminds me why I started this journey. It makes me more determined to finish my degree and uphold my responsibilities as a teacher.”

A qualified and supported ECE workforce is an investment in children's learning and in Aotearoa New Zealand's future.



Priority 3. Make quality ECE affordable for families

Don't make ECE cheaper by making it worse

Families are under financial pressure, and our members are seeing the effects directly. The cost of ECE is one of many pressures families are managing alongside food, housing, transport and other essentials.

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“We have had families disenroll their child due to travel cost, affordability and no food for lunches.”

“We try to keep parental fees lower as many of our whānau can't afford a lot.”

“Our board have had to increase parent fees by 8%.”

These are not simply numbers on a spreadsheet. They represent families making difficult decisions about accessing ECE.

At the same time, services are facing higher costs for wages, food, power, resources and rent, forcing them to make difficult choices about what they can continue to provide and whether they can afford to keep fees down.

But making ECE more affordable by reducing quality is not a solution. Qualified teachers, appropriate staffing levels, strong relationships and quality learning experiences are not extras that can simply be removed when money gets tight. They are what make ECE education.

ECE and workforce participation

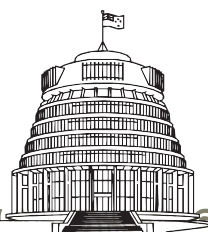
ECE also has an important role in enabling parents and caregivers to participate in the workforce. If we want parents to work, study and participate in their communities, we need an ECE system that is available, affordable and trusted to provide quality education and care for their children. But workforce participation must not come at the expense of children's learning and wellbeing.

The answer is not to lower the quality of ECE. It is to ensure families can access affordable, high-quality early learning. The choice should therefore never be between quality and affordability. The choice is whether we are prepared to invest enough public money to deliver both.

Political parties need to:

- Increase government investment to make high-quality ECE affordable for families.
- Ensure funding enables services to employ qualified teachers and maintain appropriate staffing levels.
- Ensure parents are not forced to carry the cost of government under-investment through higher fees.
- Give families clear and transparent information about fees and the quality of services available to them.
- Support families facing financial hardship to access quality ECE.

Affordable does not mean cheap. It means an ECE system that families can afford without sacrificing the quality their children deserve.



Priority 4. Fix the funding system

Invest in ECE - don't just subsidise attendance

Aotearoa New Zealand needs to stop treating ECE primarily as an attendance subsidy and start treating it as a long-term national investment. ECE is an essential part of Aotearoa New Zealand's education system and a public good.

Te Rito Maioha is calling for a ECE Investment Strategy and a new ECE Investment Framework that provides sustainable funding for services, teachers and the workforce, day-to-day operations, equity and additional needs, and innovation and quality.

Aotearoa New Zealand's ECE funding system is no longer fit for purpose. Government funding has failed to keep pace with the real cost of delivering high-quality ECE, putting increasing pressure on services and whānau. Between the first quarter of 2015 and the first quarter of 2026, CPI increased by 37.4%, while total ECE funding increased by just 28.7%, leaving funding around 9% behind inflation before taking account of the other pressures facing the sector.

The consequences are being felt in services and by families. When funding does not cover the true cost of providing quality ECE, services face difficult choices: increase fees, reduce staffing, rely more heavily on relievers, defer professional learning or absorb rising costs themselves.

That is not a sustainable way to fund an essential part of Aotearoa New Zealand's education system. The deeper problem is the way we think about ECE funding. The current model is largely an attendance-based subsidy. Te Rito Maioha believes ECE should instead be treated as a strategic national investment in children's learning and development, whānau, communities and the workforce.

That means moving away from a system where quality, affordability and workforce sustainability are forced to compete for a limited pool of funding. We should not ask ECE services to deliver more with less, or expect parents to make up the difference through higher fees.

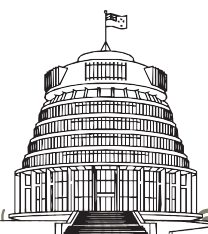
Te Rito Maioha's proposal is for a new ECE Investment Framework, with separate investment for teachers and the workforce, day-to-day operations, equity and additional needs, and innovation and quality. This would recognise that teacher salaries are not simply another operating cost, and that investment in the ECE workforce is an investment in Aotearoa New Zealand's future capability.

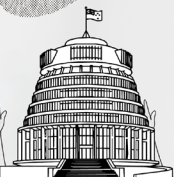
A 10-year strategy would also give Government a clearer way to plan for the future, with goals for children's outcomes, workforce participation, equity, inclusion, Māori and Pasifika success, workforce supply and service sustainability.

Political parties need to:

- Replace the current subsidy model with a long-term ECE Investment Framework.
- Develop a 10-year ECE Investment Strategy to provide certainty and guide future investment.
- Ensure funding reflects the true cost of delivering high-quality ECE.
- Separate investment in teachers and the workforce from day-to-day operational funding.
- Protect and strengthen funding for qualified teachers, workforce development and full Pay Parity.
- Maintain strong universal funding while targeting additional investment to children, whānau and communities facing greater barriers.
- Ensure funding reform does not shift more of the cost of ECE onto parents.

ECE is not a cost to be managed. It is a public good and a strategic national investment.





Priority 5. Protect what makes New Zealand ECE good

Don't lower the bar. Raise it.

Aotearoa New Zealand has an ECE system worth protecting. Te Whāriki, our world-renowned early childhood curriculum, alongside qualified teacher and a strong focus on relationships, belonging, wellbeing and learning, contributes to an ECE system that puts children at the centre. Our bicultural foundations also recognise the importance of te ao Māori, te reo Māori, identity and culture. These strengths are not accidental. They are the result of years of investment, professional knowledge and commitment from teacher, whānau and communities. As one member told us:



“The huge knowledge base teacher have to support all of the above... [and] how important the relationships are between teacher, tamariki and whānau to support the best possible learning outcomes for tamariki.”

- ECE teacher, Te Rito Maioha member

We should build on these strengths, not trade them away in the name of cost savings.

Protecting the educational purpose of ECE

ECE has an important role in enabling parents and caregivers to participate in the workforce. But workforce participation must not come at the expense of children's learning and wellbeing. The answer is not to lower the quality of ECE, but to ensure families have access to affordable, high-quality early learning for children that enables parents to work.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi

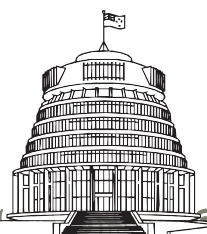
The future of ECE must also reflect Aotearoa's commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Our ECE system must continue to recognise the importance of te ao Māori, te reo Māori, tikanga, identity and culture. It must also support Māori and Pasifika children and whānau to thrive and ensure that the education system reflects the diverse communities it serves.

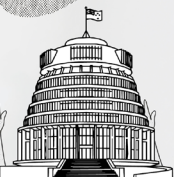
Political parties need to:

- Protect and incentivise the requirement for qualified ECE teachers.
- Maintain strong standards for children's learning, wellbeing and safety.
- Protect the educational purpose of ECE.
- Strengthen effective and proportionate regulation.
- Reduce unnecessary administrative burden on teachers and services.
- Protect the bicultural foundations of Aotearoa New Zealand's early childhood curriculum and uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
- Ensure childrens' needs remain at the centre of every decision.



“Our tamariki... need our guidance, awhi, and stability.”





Don't wait for a crisis

Quality can be lost - one decision at a time

Australia provides an important warning. Its experience has shown how weaknesses in staffing, qualifications, supervision and regulatory oversight can undermine quality, and Australia is now working to strengthen its ECE system and increase the number of qualified teachers.

The lesson for Aotearoa New Zealand is not that our system is the same. It is that quality can be lost gradually, when qualifications are treated as an optional extra, ratios are seen simply as a cost, regulation becomes too weak, and affordability is treated as more important than quality. It can also happen when ECE becomes primarily about providing somewhere for children to be while their parents work, rather than recognising its essential educational role, or where the profit motif becomes more important than the educational component.

Our State of the Sector analysis has highlighted this danger. Policy changes rarely transform an ECE system overnight. Instead, a series of apparently small decisions can gradually change what the system is designed to achieve.

We should not wait for a crisis before deciding that quality matters.



“Early childhood education is a highly demanding profession, and the stress of the job is most definitely smothering the joy of teaching.”

What does this mean for children and whānau?

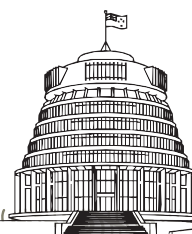
A quality ECE system should give families confidence that their child is safe, valued and learning every day.

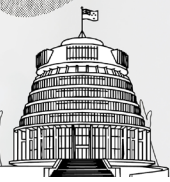
It should provide enough qualified teachers to give each child the attention they need, recognise and respond to their individual strengths and needs, and support their culture, identity and language. And it should not matter what a family earns or where they live.

Every child should have access to high-quality foundations for learning, wellbeing and a successful future.

A quality ECE system should mean:

- Your child is safe.
- Your child is known.
- Your child is learning.
- Your child has enough teacher attention.
- Your child's teachers are qualified and supported.
- Your child's individual needs are recognised.
- Your family's circumstances don't determine the quality of education your child receives.
- Your child's culture, identity and language are valued.
- Your child gets the best possible start in life.





Five questions to ask before you vote

ECE is not just an issue for families who currently have children in centres.

It affects whether parents can work, the pressure on household budgets, children's development and wellbeing, our future workforce and ultimately the kind of society we build.

So before you vote, ask every political party and every candidate five simple questions:

1. Will you put children's learning, wellbeing and safety at the centre of ECE policy?
2. Will you protect the quality of ECE rather than reduce costs and standards?
3. Will you value ECE teachers by committing to full Pay Parity and a 100% qualified workforce?
4. Will you improve teacher-to-child ratios so children receive the attention they need?
5. Will you make quality ECE affordable for every family by increasing funding?

A great start for every child

The choices we make about ECE are choices about more than childcare. They are choices about children, education, whānau, teachers, communities and the future of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Quality ECE is an investment in children. It is an investment in whānau. It is an investment in communities. And it is an investment in our country's future.

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“I love my job and I hope [our centre] can continue operating because it is a beautiful space for tamariki and teacher.”

The question for this election is not simply:

How cheaply can we provide ECE?

It is:

**WHAT KIND OF START ARE WE PREPARED
TO GIVE EVERY CHILD?**

A Great Start for Every Child.

