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Dumbing down childcare won't fix fees, say childhood experts

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Director Phoebe Speranza, at the Horsley Kids Early Childhood Centre in Sydney, says lower staff ratios help children overcome insecurities. Picture: Britta Campion. Source: News Corp Australia

SCRAPPING Labor's childcare reforms, judged an expensive failure and of little benefit to children, would do nothing to bring costs down for struggling families, experts say.

Responding to a report from the Centre for Independent Studies, Early Childhood Australia chief executive Samantha Page said that it was unlikely that fees would be reduced if staff-child ratios and minimum qualification standards were relaxed.

"Factors other than quality of service delivery are having at least as much, if not more, influence on daily fees," she said. "It's highly unlikely that daily fees would be reduced if the quality reforms were relaxed. Though we agree with the report that disadvantaged children have the most to benefit from quality early learning, we dispute the argument that regulation is unnecessary.

"The CIS has not looked at the research evidence regarding the harm children experience in poor-quality programs as a result of heightened stress. If Australian families were to lose confidence in the early childhood services sector, the consequences socially and economically would be disastrous. The focus should be on continuing to build an early childhood education system that is accessible, affordable and high-quality."

The CIS report claimed the benefits of lower ratios and higher qualification standards had little educational impact yet drove up costs. Linda Harrison, a professor of early childhood education at Charles Sturt University, said that before the introduction of Labor's National Quality Framework reforms, "some state-based jurisdictions ... already had a history of achieving high levels of quality".

"The reform agenda sought to ensure that other states and jurisdictions were brought up to this level," she said.

Professor Charles Pascal from the University of Toronto, a former adviser to the Ontario government on early learning, said "good evidence needs to trump ideology ... if we are to have an adult conversation about the critical importance of the early years".

"The science regarding the social, emotional and cognitive impact of high-quality early learning and care on all children is unassailable," he said.

Phoebe Speranza, the director of Horsley Kids Early Childhood Centre in western Sydney, said higher staff-child ratios not only provided better educational outcomes, but they also reduced the workload of each carer, thereby creating time for the development of stronger relationships. "This more in-depth relationship deals better with many child insecurities," she said.

Joanne Toohey, the chief executive of the Benevolent Society, said her concern was that thousands of vulnerable children could be denied access to the one thing that could make the biggest difference to their lives.

"One in five children starting school is vulnerable in one or more areas of development," she said. "Yet we know that early childhood education and care enhances child development and makes a significant difference to children's school-readiness and performance in later life."



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