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## **Early childhood must be a focus in federal election**

With childcare set to be a key issue for families in this year's federal election Early Childhood Australia has called on both sides of politics to commit to the national quality reform agenda and ensure childcare is affordable for all families.

With 1.5 million Australian children in some form of childcare, ECA chief executive Pam Cahir said the national quality reform agenda endorsed by COAG was more important than ever.

She said more work was needed to ensure that key elements of the reforms were realised, in particular support for staff to upgrade their qualifications to the levels required by the reform agenda. Qualified staff led by qualified specialist early childhood teachers are fundamental to the achievement of the goals of this agenda.

ECA also called for a commitment from Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott to support early childhood staff who needed to upgrade their qualifications.

"We hope both sides will commit to wage maintenance and fee support for those staff already in services who are seeking to upgrade their qualifications to meet the requirement of the reform agenda.

"What we don't want is for low paid workers to be caught in a trap of not being able to afford to improve their qualifications, which will become a requirement for employment in the sector," Ms Cahir said.

"We also need to make sure that the implementation of the quality reform agenda will not adversely affect families. That's why we would like to see both sides of politics commit to raising the Child Care Benefits as the reforms take effect."

ECA said that whichever party governs it must focus effort and leadership on tackling the issue of the wages, conditions and career paths for people working in this sector. Achieving the goals of the reform agenda is dependent on doing this.

Ms Cahir also said the next government would need to crack down on those Registered Training Organisations offering inadequate training and assessment of the staff qualifications required under the early childhood reform agenda.

"Too often we hear about Registered Training Organisations selling students – and children – short by fast-tracking them through poor-quality courses with poor-quality assessments.

"There need to be a criteria for Registered Training Organisations to adhere to, so that students, children and the government are getting an appropriate return on investment."

ECA also called for further investment in efforts to bridge the gap for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

"This is a complex and difficult issue – but one thing that is clear is that efforts need to be made to encourage and support qualified staff to work in remote communities," Ms Cahir said.

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