

Best Start Best Life

Transforming early childhood education together:

What we heard
What we're doing





Acknowledgement of Country

The department proudly acknowledges Victoria's Aboriginal communities and their rich culture and pays respect to their Elders past and present.

We acknowledge Aboriginal people as Australia's first peoples and as the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and water on which we rely.

We recognise and value the ongoing contribution of Aboriginal people and communities to Victorian life and how this enriches us.

We embrace the spirit of reconciliation, working towards the equality of outcomes and ensuring an equal voice.

'Respecting Connections' (2023) by Nakia Cadd, a Gunditjmara, Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja Wurrung, Bunitj, Boon Wurrung, Taungurung woman who grew up in the Northern suburbs of Melbourne.

'When thinking about acknowledging Country, it's about respecting those many different connections; to the land, sky, waters, animals, people and stories.'

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Premier's message



Children start learning from the moment they're born, and what they learn and experience in their first five years can shape the rest of their lives.

The growing evidence about the importance of the early years shows how critical it is we get it right. Parents and early childhood education professionals have long understood that the kindergarten years are a great opportunity for high quality, affordable and accessible early learning to set children up to live happy, healthy, and fulfilling lives. And families have told us that better access to childcare will support more parents, particularly women, to make choices based on what works for their children and families rather than being limited by the options available to them.

A whole of government focus on child development and wellbeing is essential to support children and families. It's one of the Victorian Government's major policy priorities. Providing early childhood education is not only one of the most powerful things we can do for Victorian kids—it also benefits families, communities, and the economy.

That's why the Victorian Government is investing \$14 billion in the Best Start, Best Life reforms over the next decade, in what will be the greatest transformation of early childhood education in a generation.

We've been listening to families, our workforce, services, local governments, and peak bodies as we embark on this reform.

The launch of Free Kinder this year is already supporting up to 140,000 children and families. Three-Year-Old Kindergarten is now available for up to 15 hours across the state, giving Victorian children access to two years of kindergarten before school. This rollout will continue between now and 2029, when all Three-Year-Old Kindergarten programs will reach 15 hours.

From 2025, Pre-Prep starts to roll out in stages, and by 2032 will provide 4-year-olds across Victoria with 30 hours of quality, play-based learning. The first of the 50 government operated childcare centres will also open in 2025 in areas with the greatest need.

The difference these reforms will make to Victoria is profound. Our children and families will be better off, and our state will be stronger and fairer.

We know that what we are doing here in Victoria is being considered closely across the nation. Our hope is that we can reach a new national consensus on the importance of early learning, to benefit Australian kids.

Hon Jacinta Allan MP

Premier of Victoria

Minister's message



The Best Start, Best Life reforms are critically important for children.

The evidence behind the reforms is clear—2 years of quality early childhood education and expanded hours in the year before school can improve children's life outcomes.

For all children, accessing quality early childhood education is an irreplaceable opportunity to help them thrive while they are young and develop the skills they need to succeed later in school and life. This is true for all children and especially those needing additional support.

We are committed to working with the sector as we embark on this ten-year journey, which is why we have consulted with early childhood education professionals, unions, early childhood experts, service providers, local governments and parents and carers about how best to deliver the reforms. The reforms will be stronger because of the many voices we have heard and learnt from, and the many partners working together to make them a reality.

We heard strong endorsement of our vision for high quality education that supports all children to thrive.

We also heard that by making it easier for parents to work or study, the reforms will support families' financial security and women's financial independence, which will in turn benefit children.

There is a shared desire to make it easier for all families and children to access and meaningfully participate in kindergarten programs. We are committed to working with Aboriginal stakeholders and communities to advance self-determination in the implementation of the reforms. We are prioritising the inclusion of children with additional needs in the design of the reforms, and supporting families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to engage in early childhood education.

As well as providing benefits for families and children, the reforms are highlighting the enormous capability of our teachers and educators. I want to thank Victoria's existing early childhood workforce for their skill and professionalism, and warmly welcome the new teachers and educators joining the sector.

I look forward to continuing to work together as we deliver the best possible outcomes for Victorian children.

Hon Lizzie Blandthorn MP

Minister for Children

Best Start, Best Life: Early learning for all children

Victoria is the first Australian state or territory to give children universal access to 2 years of funded kindergarten programs before they start school. The \$14 billion *Best Start, Best Life* reforms include:

- **Free Kinder:** Free Kinder is now available for Victorian 3- and 4-year-old children at participating standalone kindergartens and long day care centres—a saving of up to \$2,500 per child, every year.
- **Pre-Prep:** over the next decade, Four-Year-Old Kindergarten will transition to 'Pre-Prep'—increasing to a universal 30-hour a week program of play-based learning for 4-year-old children in Victoria by 2032.
- **Early Learning and Childcare Centres:** the establishment of 50 Victorian government-owned and operated Early Learning and Childcare Centres. These centres will be built in areas with the greatest need and will make it easier for families to access childcare and kindergarten places. The first of the centres will be available in 2025.
- **Three-Year-Old Kindergarten:** the continued roll out of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten, with programs across the state increasing to 15 hours per week by 2029.



These reforms are about opportunities for families to access quality education, regardless of income barriers.”

– Member of the early childhood education workforce





We are starting from a strong base

The Victorian Government actively supports quality kindergarten in the 2 years before school, in partnership with local government, providers, the workforce and other stakeholders. There has never been more funding available for the kindergarten sector in Victoria - for workforce, service delivery and infrastructure.

Funded kindergarten programs improve learning and development outcomes for Victorian children, provide savings for families, and help parents to make choices about work and study that are best for them and their family.

Depending on their family's needs, children can attend funded kindergarten programs in either long day care, or sessional or "standalone" kindergarten services. These programs are led by a qualified teacher and comply with government guidelines and the National Quality Framework, and can be identified by the Kinder Tick.

Families can visit the Find a Kinder website or contact their local council to find a service near them.

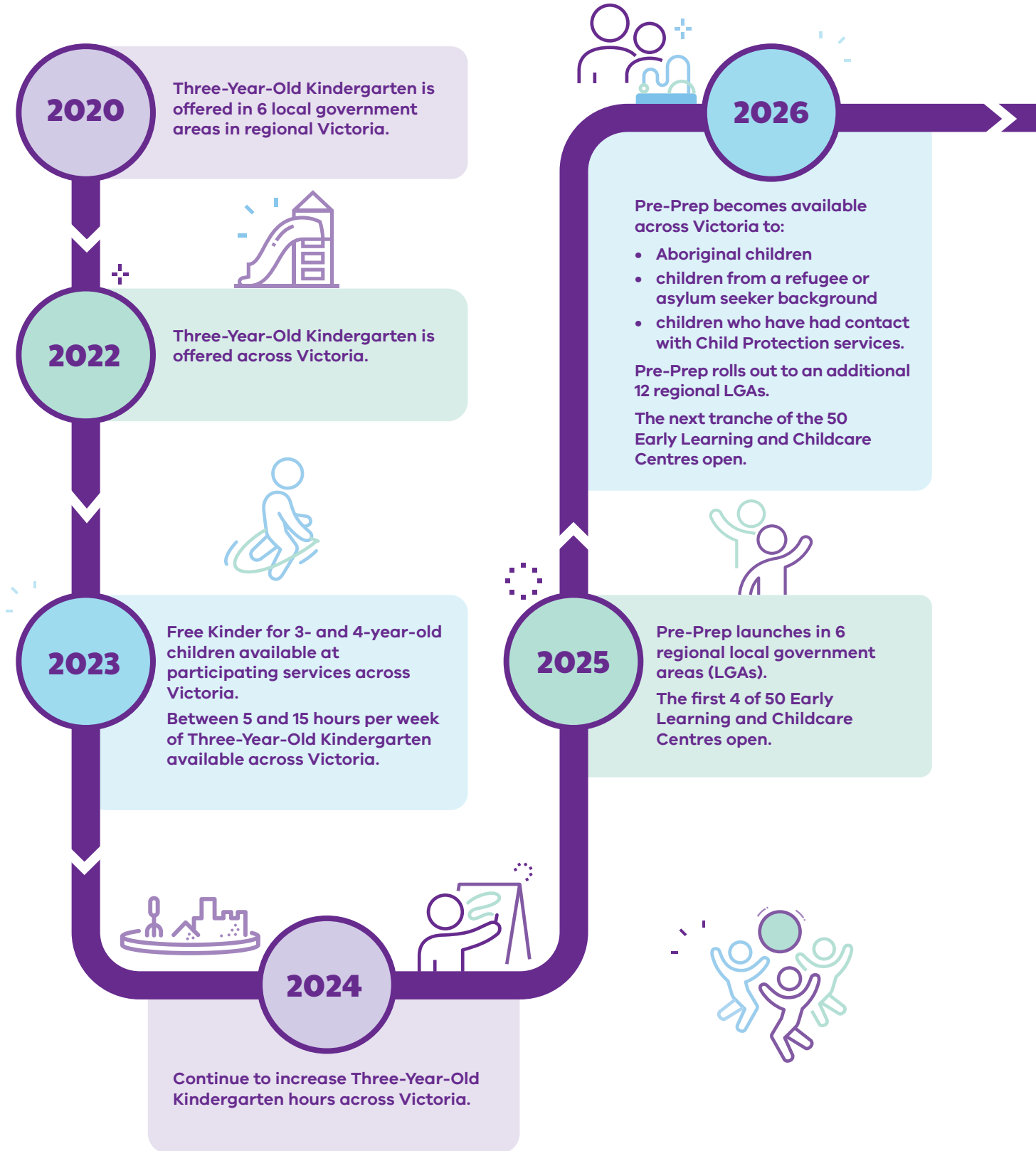
No matter where a child attends a kindergarten program, they'll be learning through play with qualified early childhood teachers and educators, which is the best way to help young children learn, develop and prepare to thrive at school and beyond.

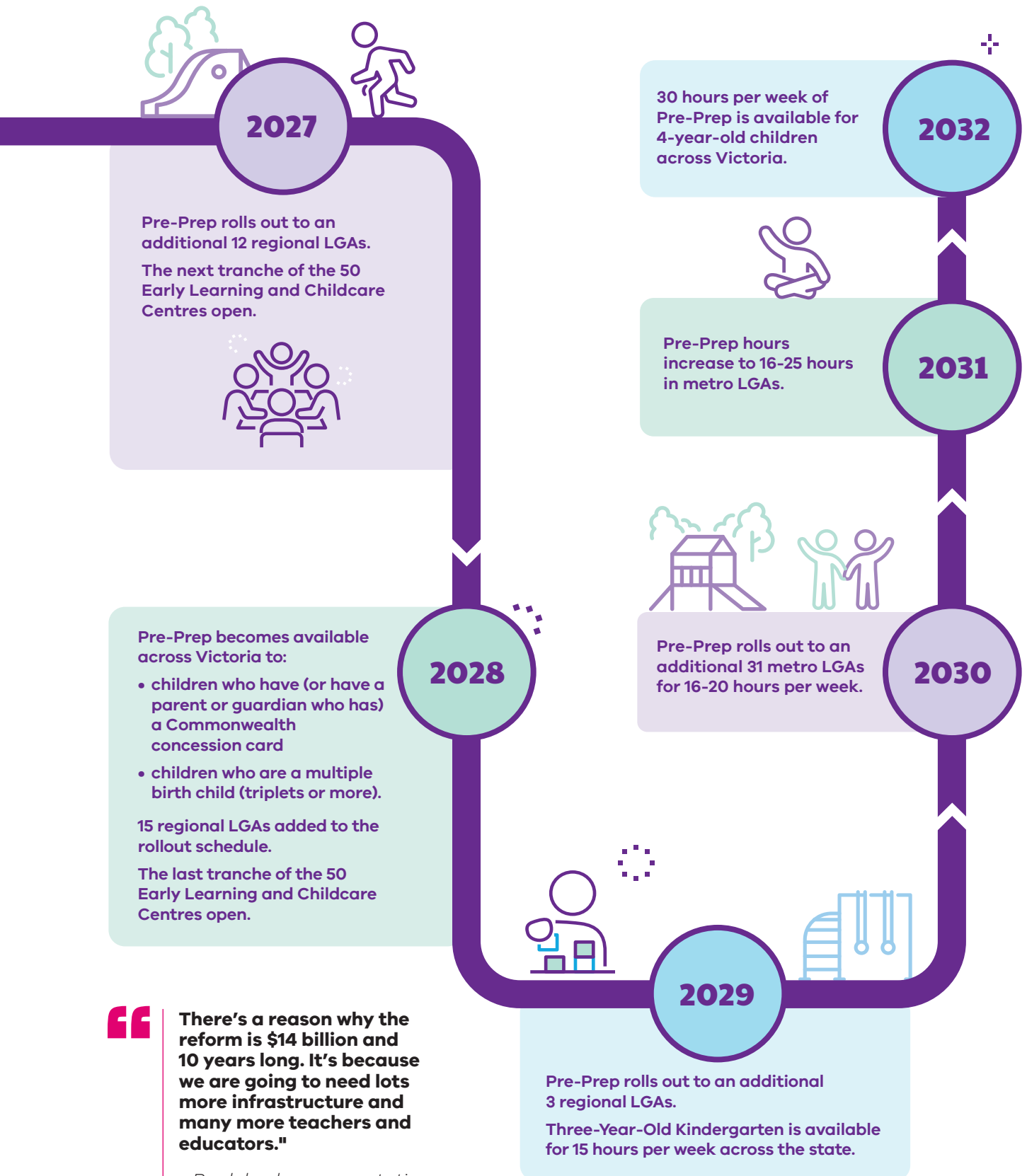


Children will gain better outcomes, more time to play and learn, more access for vulnerable children and access to support, consistency and continuity of relationships for children."

– Member of the early childhood education workforce

Best Start, Best Life: Reform rollout





There's a reason why the reform is \$14 billion and 10 years long. It's because we are going to need lots more infrastructure and many more teachers and educators."

- Peak body representative

Best Start, Best Life implementation

Our investment

We have already made significant progress in delivering the Best Start, Best Life reforms with a total investment to date of \$6.2 billion. This includes:

- **\$1.6 billion** to roll out Three-Year-Old Kindergarten and increase capacity by building new kindergarten facilities
- **\$1.4 billion** for Free Kinder to give Victorian parents—especially mums—the choice to return to work if they want to and provide savings to families each year, up to \$2,500 in 2023
- **\$1.3 billion** to build around 100 new kindergartens, with the majority to be located at or nearby government schools to help avoid the double drop off
- **\$921 million** to deliver 35 new government-owned and operated Early Learning and Childcare Centres by 2027
- **\$303 million** for around 35 new early learning facilities at low-fee non-government schools, and to expand early learning facilities on local government sites
- **\$48 million** to support existing kinders and toy libraries to purchase equipment, provide additional Bush Kinder programs, and continue existing and create 10 new bilingual kindergartens
- **\$6 million** for Aboriginal cultural safety and inclusion
- **\$18 million** to strengthen and modernise existing inclusion support for children with disability and additional needs
- **\$10 million** for local governments and eligible providers to improve local kindergarten facilities

Our reform approach

There are enough kinder places now for children across Victoria to receive a funded place in the 2 years before school, but many more will need to be created as participation, program hours and population increase.

That's why the reforms are rolling out over a decade – this will allow time for **hundreds of new services** to be built or expanded, **thousands more teachers and educators** to enter the workforce, and **thousands of existing services** to adapt their programs.

Existing services will continue to be an important part of the Victorian kindergarten system – including single room and other sessional services, and integrated long day care kindergarten programs.

Over time, existing and new services will generally enrol **fewer children for more funded hours**. To make this possible, by 2032, they will be joined by many new and expanded services across the state.

During the rollout period, there will be a flexible approach to the number of hours offered by services. This allows services to grow at a pace that suits them and their community. Services will **prioritise offering a child a place** over receiving more hours, if a choice between these options needs to be made.



Our achievements



Meeting the needs of children, families and communities

- In 2023, Free Kinder is available at 97% of services and has benefitted approximately 140,000 families; and 5 to 15 hours per week of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten is available across Victoria
- Families in participating long day care services save up to \$2,000 per year on their kinder program – as much as a family who were paying an average fee in a sessional service
- 🏠 Increased participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, working in partnership with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association (VAEAI)
- 👥 22 CALD Outreach workers supported increased enrolments from culturally and linguistically diverse families, including children from refugee or asylum seeker background
- Find a Kinder Program website, the Kinder Tick and central enrolment schemes made it easier for families to find a kinder place in a sessional or long day care service
- Kinder Kits given to children enrolled in Three-Year-Old Kindergarten in 2022 and 2023
- 👥 Support for children experiencing vulnerability through the LOOKOUT program, the Early Childhood Agreement for Children in Out of Home Care, and the Early Years Compact



Valuing and growing our workforce

- 50% increase in workforce since 2019
- More than 4,000 teaching scholarships awarded
- 👥 Incentives of \$9,000-50,000 to recruit staff to priority locations
- 200 traineeships supported, in partnership with Jobs Victoria and Chisholm Institute
- 👥 Approximately 1,000 teachers benefited from coaching and support



Supporting the sector through change

- Pre-Prep rollout schedule released
- Pre-Prep starts in the first 6 Local Government Areas from 2025
- The average sessional service receives 30-40% more funding from Free Kinder compared to parent fees in 2022
- 65 Early Years Networks each term
- 34 Leadership Forums each year
- 👥 17 Early Childhood Improvement Branches giving services direct support from the Department of Education
- 👥 Supporting Three-Year-Old Kindergarten roll-out with tools and resources, in partnership with peak bodies



Making spaces for learning

- \$2.7 billion funding allocated for infrastructure
- 400 new services opened and another 50 services expanded since 2019
- 👥 11 Building Blocks Partnerships agreed with local governments, delivering an additional 5,185 licensed places by 2029
- 119 kindergarten infrastructure projects complete and 168 underway
- 5,200 additional licensed places created and 10,000 more on the way
- 👥 29 kindergartens on school sites delivered, with another 28 announced
- Kindergarten Infrastructure Services Plans (KISPs) developed in partnership with all 79 local governments

Why two years and more time?

Victoria's expansion of Three- and Four-Year-Old Kindergarten gives children the 'gift of time' in an early childhood education program during a period of rapid brain development.

As a result of these reforms, Victorian children will have access to 2 years of quality play-based learning programs designed and led by teachers and educators, guided by the *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework*. In 2019, most Victorian children had access to 600 hours of funded kindergarten in the year before school. In 2032, all Victorian children will have access to 1,800 hours of funded kindergarten before school, comprising 600 hours of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten and 1,200 hours of Pre-Prep.

Starting a quality kindergarten program at an earlier age leads to positive effects on child development. Kindergarten is a safe place for children to build skills, independence and concentration while forming positive relationships and making friends.

Providing a longer program in the year before school gives more time for children of all backgrounds and abilities to deepen their learning and development, and for services to deepen their relationships with families. Along with the introduction of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten, Pre-Prep also provides a greater opportunity for different types of early years services to work together to address the needs of all children.

A 2-year early learning program, including more hours in the year before school, is supported by evidence from Australia and around the world:

- The early years are critical for establishing self-esteem, resilience, healthy growth and capacity to learn - what a child experiences between the ages of 3 and 5 can make a big difference to their future.¹
- Children who need extra support benefit the most from spending more time at kindergarten as it provides more time to participate in rich learning experiences that contribute to positive developmental trajectories.²
- Children who attend kindergarten for two years have better development in language, pre-reading, early number concepts, independence, concentration, and social skills when starting school.³
- 15 year-olds who attend a quality play-based early learning program in the year before school tend to perform better than those who do not in the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).⁴
- A 30-hour per week program of play-based, teacher-led early learning increases children's early literacy and numeracy, as well as self-regulation skills.⁵
- Low or no cost 30-hour per week play-based early learning programs lead to positive outcomes in self-regulation, social-emotional skills, literacy and numeracy and are linked to smaller gaps in learning and development due to socio-economic background.⁶



Why play-based learning?

Play-based learning is supported by many decades of research on how children best learn and grow.

Through play, children engage with the people, places and objects around them to build an understanding of their world. Positive attitudes towards learning, such as persistence, curiosity, and imagination, are all developed during play, setting children up for a life-long love of learning.

In early learning environments, qualified teachers and educators design and set up purposeful play-based programs that provide children with opportunities to explore, experiment, question and discover new concepts about the world in playful ways. Teachers and educators play and explore together with children, extending their learning through warm and engaging interactions.

Children learn through play in many ways:



Physical play such as building with blocks and climbing helps children build confidence and patience as they develop problem-solving skills, core strength, perseverance, resilience and gross and fine motor skills.

Dramatic play such as role playing or dressing up provides opportunities for children to develop emotional regulation, social skills and expressive language as they negotiate and co-create narratives with other children.



Sensory play with materials such as sand and water encourages children to experiment with texture, matter and form, and develops their understanding of concepts such as weight, volume and gravity.

Nature/outdoor play helps children feel safe, strong and connected to the natural world, developing empathy and extending their vocabulary as they look to the world beyond themselves, while also exploring concepts such as quantity, growth, and changes in matter.



Creative play such as art, music and dance allows children to express themselves and respond to the world around them, while also developing imagination, communication skills, planning and fine motor skills as they use different methods of expressing their thoughts and ideas.

We have been listening

Through our consultation, more than 5,000 people generously shared their ideas about what is most important to them about the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms.



Government needs to support genuine consultation with the sector on delivery models, and family and community consultation to make sure the reforms meet their needs."

- Member of the early childhood education workforce

What we heard:

<p>Outcomes for children and their families at the heart of the reforms</p>	<p>Children have a right to a quality early education that supports them to thrive, regardless of their circumstances. They will also benefit from increased workforce participation of their parents and carers, which will support women's financial independence and improve the financial security of their families. The wider community will benefit from the improved social and economic outcomes that will flow from improving outcomes for children and increasing workforce participation.</p>
<p>Cross-cutting principles across all elements of the reform</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Advancing Aboriginal self-determination and cultural safety.  Maintaining and lifting the quality of kindergarten programs.  Prioritising equity and inclusion in both access and outcomes for all children and their families.  Delivering in partnership with local governments, the early childhood sector, members of the workforce, and families and their communities.
<p>Meeting the needs of children, families and communities</p>	<p>Families have different needs and preferences when choosing a kindergarten program for their child. A variety of supports are needed to enable families to enrol, participate and stay engaged in early childhood education.</p>
<p>Valuing and growing our workforce</p>	<p>Attracting, retaining and recognising the early childhood professionals on the front line of the reforms is critical. A highly skilled workforce is vital to the quality of the early learning at the heart of these reforms.</p>
<p>Supporting the sector through change</p>	<p>Reforms of this size and complexity need substantial supports to manage and communicate the changes. Practical tools and resources will be needed, alongside tailored support for some services.</p>
<p>Making spaces for learning</p>	<p>New and expanded infrastructure is needed to accommodate the additional hours of Pre-Prep and the continued roll out of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten. During this growth, it is important that learning spaces continue to nurture the development of all children and are flexible and adaptable.</p>



Victorian reform in the national context

Victoria is leading the nation with 2 years of early learning before school, delivered through Three-Year-old Kindergarten and Pre-Prep programs.

Beyond the Victorian Government’s reforms, we also heard that people are hopeful that the Commonwealth Government will follow through on its promise to deliver a truly universal early education system – one that is affordable, accessible, high quality and equitable for all children across Australia. Many called for a national entitlement to two years and expanded hours of preschool.

We also heard of the importance of better national support for teacher and educator pay and conditions, funding to drive equity, quality and supply in the right places, and better support for First Nations’ integrated services and for inclusion of children with additional needs.



We acknowledge the systems stewardship approach that Victoria has taken – this puts Victoria well ahead of other jurisdictions.”

– Early childhood education advocate



Meeting the needs of children, families and the community










What we heard

A variety of high-quality, accessible early learning options are needed, so that families can find a kinder that suits their child and family's needs

Some families and children need extra support to make the most of 2 years of kindergarten.

When children spend more time at kindergarten, there will be more opportunities for teachers and educators to identify children's needs and work in partnership with other services.

What we're doing

- Supporting all kindergarten service and provider types to plan for and deliver the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms.
-  Partnering with Aboriginal communities to advance self-determination and cultural safety in early learning, and increasing the number of Aboriginal educators and teachers working in kindergarten services.
- Providing more local and targeted communications to families to help them find the best kindergarten for their child.
-  Building 50 government-owned and operated Early Learning and Childcare Centres across Victoria in communities that have the greatest need for more childcare and kindergarten places.
-  Expanding diverse kindergarten programs such as Bush Kinder and the Early Childhood Language Program (including 10 new Bilingual Kindergartens).
-  Providing \$18 million to strengthen and modernise existing inclusion support for children with disability or additional needs.
-  Helping culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families to find, enrol in and attend early childhood services in their local area, and supporting people from CALD communities to join the early childhood workforce.
-  Developing new professional learning on equity and diversity so children and families feel welcomed and accepted by their teachers and educators.
-  Strengthening our collective focus on enrolment and attendance of children experiencing vulnerability, through stronger partnerships, clearer guidance on best practice, attendance data, and early rollout of Pre-Prep to this cohort.
-  Working with other departments, local governments, peak bodies and early years services to strengthen the functioning of the early years system in Victoria to improve outcomes for children in their first 2,000 days.
-  Improving coordination of supports provided through NDIS services to improve access and strengthen participation for children with additional needs.



It's a group of people working together to support my child and help them grow — socially, academically, and mentally."

– Parent





Valuing and growing the workforce

What we heard

Many more teachers and educators will be needed to deliver the reforms.

High levels of professionalism and skill in the workforce need to be retained, maintained and lifted.

The early childhood workforce deserves to be valued and supported regardless of the setting in which they are delivering kindergarten programs.

What we're doing

- Encouraging and supporting more people from all backgrounds to choose a career in early childhood education.
- 🎓 Delivering accessible and innovative educator and teacher training programs and working with tertiary providers, services and students to lift the quality of placements.
- Supporting new graduates in the workplace with mentoring and induction programs.

- 🎓 Supporting career development for experienced teachers by providing mentor training and tailored professional development.
- Encouraging employers to create supportive work environments by providing best practice guidance and supporting innovative local retention approaches.
- 🎓 Maintaining and lifting high-quality practice by:
 - revising the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)
 - working with the sector to develop more holistic supports for Kindergarten and Pre-Prep quality to focus efforts on lifting children's learning and development outcomes
 - providing additional professional development to support the workforce to stay up to date with best practice teaching strategies.

- Delivering professional development, including for operational and educational leaders.
- 🤝 Promoting the importance of employers consulting with their staff on any proposed changes to their services.
- 🤝 Working with the Commonwealth Government to support the delivery of the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy 2022-31.
- 🎓 Making the Best Start, Best Life Educational Leaders Conference a regular event at key points in the reform journey.
- Establishing an Early Childhood Education Workforce Reference Group so that teachers and educators have an ongoing opportunity to provide advice about the implementation of the reforms to government.



A quality workforce is fundamental to the success of the reforms."

– Member of the early childhood education workforce





Supporting the sector through change

What we heard

Kindergarten providers and staff want support to communicate with families about the reforms.


Kindergarten providers of all kinds need technical information and tailored support to implement the reforms in their services.

The sector needs clear and frequent communication about policy and funding settings so that adjustments and improvements can be made as the reforms are implemented.

What we're doing

- Giving kindergarten staff advice and resources to help them talk to families about the benefits of teacher-led play-based learning and 30 hours of Pre-Prep, to complement public information through media channels.
- Delivering 'Twilight Forum' information sessions to support teachers, educators and other service staff to understand and communicate the reforms with their families and communities.

- Providing resources, tools, and support from local departmental staff to assist services to adapt their operational models to deliver Pre-Prep and consult with their workforces about proposed changes.
- Providing tailored resources and local supports to services that need it, for example Committees of Management and single-room services.

 Working with sector peak bodies and other key partners to support the implementation of the reforms.

- Providing timely operational policy and funding advice at each stage of the rollout through direct communications to service providers.
-  Providing communications to sector partners on operational policy and funding settings and engaging directly with peak bodies, unions and other partners wherever needed to reinforce or clarify arrangements.



We need to have strong, focused support from the Department of Education, peaks and other stakeholders to ensure we grow and provide the best for our community.”

– Kindergarten service provider





Making spaces for learning


What we heard

Our partners need support to plan for delivering the reforms, including up-to-date information on where and when more kindergarten capacity is needed.



Our partners need more support to deliver and maintain the number of kindergarten facilities our communities need.

Significant investment in new and expanded infrastructure is an opportunity to make learning spaces that are fit-for-purpose and also adaptable for diverse needs, including options to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

What we're doing

- Updating Kindergarten Infrastructure and Services Plans with local governments to reflect Pre-Prep demand and local data.
-  Supporting the sector to prepare for more infrastructure projects with planning grants to local governments and service providers.

- Significantly increasing the funding rates for grants to build or expand facilities to create more kindergarten places.
- Continuing to agree pipelines of projects with more local governments and other partners through Building Blocks Partnerships.
- Directly delivering more government-owned kindergarten infrastructure including Kindergartens on School Sites.
- Increasing Building Blocks Improvement grants to upgrade existing facilities.

-  Continuing with our range of Building Blocks grants to expand and upgrade buildings to be higher quality and more inclusive, including:
 - building and playground grants to make kindergarten activities safer, more inclusive and accessible
 - equipment grants for moveable inclusive education resources such as mobility stools and sensory equipment
 - grants to existing kindergartens for renovating learning environments, refurbishing buildings and improving IT equipment
-  Consulting with the sector on further improvements to designing high quality learning spaces.



It's great to have the money set aside for these centres, particularly in growth corridors."

– Peak body representative



Next steps: Transforming early childhood education together

We heard that the *Best Start, Best Life* reforms will be most successful if they are delivered through ongoing collaborative and trusting partnerships between government, the early childhood education sector, teachers, educators, and families.



Every part of the sector took part in Three-Year-Old Kindergarten delivery, and we need to do it again."

– *Peak body representative*

We are committed to working together with all our partners to steward the delivery of the reforms by:

- Continuing to work in partnership with the Best Start, Best Life Taskforce Advisory Group, which is chaired by the Minister for Children and includes senior representatives of stakeholder groups
- Conducting further targeted consultation with the sector at key stages of the rollout
- Providing information about policy and operational settings to the sector and families in relevant rollout areas in a timely manner
- Monitoring implementation of the reforms and adjusting and adapting as needed.



Further information

Information for Early Childhood Education professionals

- Find information to support children's learning and development, access policy and funding advice, and recruitment and career support: vic.gov.au/early-childhood-education-information-professionals

Information for parents and carers

- Information on Free Kinder, the Pre-Prep roll-out, Kinder Kits, and translated information: vic.gov.au/kinder
- Find a kindergarten in your area: <https://findakinder.educationapps.vic.gov.au/>
- Please contact services or local councils directly to enquire about enrolment and register your interest.
- The Three-Year-Old Kindergarten Enquiry Line is available Mon to Fri between, 9am to 5pm on 1800 338 663 if you are experiencing difficulties accessing a kindergarten program enrolment for your child.
Email: 3YO.kindergarten@education.vic.gov.au

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