Early education done properly gives best start

When the team led by Dr Carmen Lawrence developed *Facing the Facts*, the findings on developmental readiness for school were sobering. Research through the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) found there had been a significant drop in cognitive and language skills between 2015 and 2021.

After looking at the research, *Facing the Facts* found that “an increasing proportion of children are not developmentally ready for school and more of these children are from disadvantaged backgrounds.”

The report also made three recommendations:

- Federal and state governments should ensure universal access to affordable, quality early learning opportunities.
- Federal and state governments should develop policies to support the successful learning of children from disadvantaged backgrounds through play-based education in small groups conducted by qualified educators.
- Federal and state governments should develop coherent policies to reduce family and child poverty and reduce educational disadvantage.

The latest AEDC data for Western Australia in the same domain of cognitive and language skills, shows a further decline in the percentage of children who are developmentally on track. In fact, a decline across all five domains has been seen in the 2024 data.

The state government announcement of free full-time, school-based kindy, may help in the process of addressing readiness for school issues, but we need to make sure this is an initiative that is designed to deliver educational results, not just an impact on the cost of living

With funding confirmed in the state budget, the trial of free full-time kindy is set to begin in 10 pilot locations. The program will fall under the newly established Office of Early Childhood, which the government said: “will lead the development of the WA Play Strategy, recognising the important role play has in supporting children’s cognitive and physical development, along with their social, emotional and language skills.”

The SSTUWA cautiously welcomes this new initiative but with important reservations.

There must be a clear pedagogy, focused on play, delivered by fully trained and qualified teachers. Educational outcomes must be the focus, not the easing of financial burdens on families.

The SSTUWA would welcome the opportunity to work with the Department of Education to develop the details of the trial.

Kindy is an important step in preparing children for school, with a curriculum that integrates play delivered by specialist teachers, which studies have shown lays the foundation for positive social, physical, emotional and cognitive development in later years.

There are, however, reasons to be optimistic. The Minister for Education and for Early Childhood, Sabine Winton, has publicly stated her advocacy of learning through play.

Indeed, at an event hosted by the Play Matters Collective on the International Day of Play, Minister Winton reaffirmed her support, saying “Play based learning is a sophisticated craft that teachers bring to their classrooms” and adding “what happens in the early years influences their educational journey for life.”

Given the extensive efforts the SSTUWA has undertaken to support play-based learning, these are encouraging sentiments.

We are aware that some SSTUWA members will be wary of how this initiative develops. The union shares those concerns and is working with the state government to try to ensure that a range of issues are taken into consideration both before and after the initial pilot period across the 10 sites.

I can assure you that the SSTUWA will be making the case for proper facilities and the right pedagogy to ensure that any

expansion of kindy hours is about education and what is best for our teachers, our school leaders and of course, our students.

Whilst we can never offer guarantees about outcomes, we are encouraged by the way the state government has responded to our lobbying prior to the state election where major investment in general infrastructure was successful.

Full-time kindy can be a force for improvement in educational preparedness and give young children the best start to their learning journey. But it needs to be done properly, with the right pedagogy and in a way that offers these opportunities to all.



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