

Implementing Large-scale
Social Policy Reform

Three-year-old kindergarten roll-out in Victoria



About the Front Project

The Front Project is an independent, not-for-profit national organisation that works with children and families, the early learning sector, government, and business leaders to develop evidence-based, meaningful, and pragmatic policy solutions, to ensure the early learning system supports all Australian families and gives all children the best possible start to life.

We believe improving the quality of our nation's early childhood education system will give all children the opportunity to thrive, regardless of the challenges they face.

To realise our vision of addressing disadvantage by improving quality and access in Australia's early childhood education system, the Front Project applies a Systems Change approach to our work. The intent of working systematically is to create deep, sustained, and long-term change for greater impact.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The Front Project respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and learn, and pay respect to Elders, past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It **always was** and **always will be, Aboriginal land.**

The Front Project

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Acknowledgements

This case study was developed as part of the Educational and Developmental Gains in Early Childhood (EDGE) study. EDGE is an independent evaluation of the development and roll out of three-year-old kindergarten in Victoria. It is a collaboration between the University of Melbourne and The Front Project and is funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation and the Ian Potter Foundation.

This case is informed by interviews with 36 stakeholders, including public servants/senior officials, political advisers, senior political stakeholders and leaders in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector and analysis of key documents. Interviewees contributed to the development of the reform at various times in their respective roles.

Ethical approval and process

Ethical approval for this case study, including all data collection, was provided by University of Melbourne Central Human Research Ethics Committee, Ethics ID Number: 21949. This approval requires that no individual participant is identified. Therefore, participants have been grouped into their general contributory roles, and some quotes paraphrased to deidentify.

Implementing Large-scale Social Policy Reform

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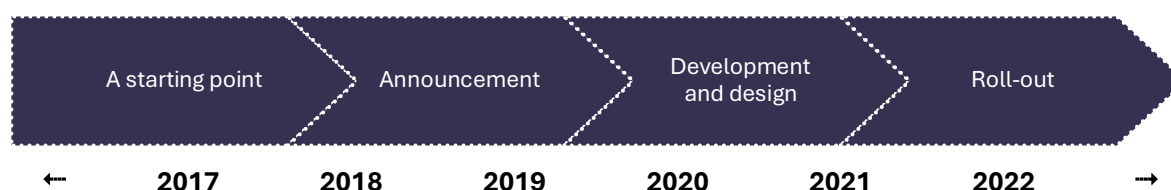
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Implementing Large-scale Social Policy Reform

Executive summary

Long term policy reform is complex and requires significant effort over time. This case study uses the Victorian Government example of implementing three-year-old kindergarten and, through interviews with 36 stakeholders along with document analysis, tracks it from inception through to implementation.



The starting point for this case study is 2017, when the Victorian Government formulated its election commitment of providing subsidised kindergarten to all three-year-old children. The preconditions of previous policy development, a well-established evidence base and advocacy efforts that supported this starting point provided a critical foundation that enabled subsequent reforms.

Insights

The case study focusses on three key areas that illuminated critical learnings important for progressing complex policy reform: developing stages of reform, policy processes and levers and application of evidence in progressing reform.

Analysis of the various stakeholder interests and relationships involved in each stage of reform shows the ways that they vary and intersect. This case study highlights tensions and sensitivities that emerged in progressing complex reform. This required actors to take up different roles at different times. While some such sensitivities are difficult to avoid, others can be ameliorated by, for instance, maintaining reciprocal information sharing channels, being flexible with respect to expectations and demands, and acknowledging the implications of how reform will impact communities and stakeholders at different levels of scale.

Examining policy processes taken up and levers deployed throughout these stages reveals the complexity involved in designing and implementing complex policy. Processes of developing policy proposals are often uncertain and politically sensitive, meaning that there is limited scope to consult broadly. Similarly, policy design is often treated as an internal government department process and draws on cross-government expertise to develop the processes, modelling and instruments required. At the same time, advocacy efforts from outside government can play an important role in prosecuting a case for change and mobilising its supporters. Such consultative processes were evident in this case study, incorporated throughout the roll-out of three-year-old kindergarten in Victoria. These were both planned and deployed in response to challenges and issues identified. Interviews with participants involved in the case study noted the benefits that came from sector engagement and consultation

processes, ensuring the policy's roll-out was an iterative endeavour, drawing on an emerging and evolving evidence base that included the lived experience and expertise of local communities.

Evidence plays a critical part in reform. This work demonstrated the ways that a variety of evidence was utilised at different stages to reform. For example, international research was utilised to present the case for reform in its early stages, whereas evidence of implementation experience was used in the later stages of modelling and design. Evidence of public interest was also an area that was influential in decision making processes. This revealed that some forms of evidence were more powerful than others at certain times, relative to the interests of key actors at different stages of the reform.

Implications and learnings

Reform of this scale requires considerable resources that, in this case, drew on infrastructure, knowledge and resources from within and across government, from across the sector, and that spanned content and knowledge areas. The policy environment sought to coordinate these resources, however this required infrastructure and formal communication and accountability processes to be developed to enable it. Investing in this infrastructure was critical to enable implementation to be scaled.

This work found that consultation was considered as critical to the success of this set of reforms and its implementation. It was, however, noted that some consultation was initiated after decisions had been made, or challenges were encountered before the consultations occurred. An implication for policymaking is considering processes that enable maximum consultation and public engagement with policy development and design at the earliest stages of the roll-out.

One of the key lessons from this case study is that large-scale reforms require carefully calibrated components that bring together a long-term vision, strong evidence, public service capability combined with political will, an engaged sector and persistence. Previous stages of reform and policy development (including the development of a strong evidence base) were foundational, acting both as checkpoints and guiderails for latter policy development work. Configuring the components relative to the stage of reform was critical for progress but rested on the effort of many actors in and outside of government over time.

This analysis reveals that it requires many champions to progress policy change over a long period of time, and the outcomes of this complex reform will benefit Victoria's children into the future.

Implementing Large-scale Social Policy Reform

Introduction

The roll-out of three-year-old kindergarten is underway. More children in Victoria can access 15 hours of quality provision. Through interviews with 36 stakeholders involved in developing and implementing three-year-old kindergarten and document analysis, this report provides an overarching view of the actors in this reform; their intentions and the impacts they had on the early stages of roll-out, from costing the policy, to implementation design, and managing the roll-out. Through this lens, the report explores how evidence formed the foundation between policy development and implementation, and where emerging challenges had to be managed to ensure a smooth reform. The interviews captured for this report shed light on where that approach created opportunities, where gaps emerged, and how each actor collaborated with each other and the reform process.

In recent years, more integrated approaches are gaining traction where policy design and service delivery are increasingly aligned to respond to a wider range of stakeholder needs. Such approaches are valuable as they allow implementation and service delivery needs to be captured in real time to inform policy development.

This insight into implementation arises from the Educational and Developmental Gains in Early Childhood (EDGE) study that is being carried out by the University of Melbourne in partnership with The Front Project and working closely with the Victorian Department of Education to evaluate the roll-out of three-year old kindergarten across Victoria.¹

With ECEC policy firmly on the agenda across Australia², the learning derived from this work is valuable for those working on ECEC, complex reform in other social services areas and those promoting equity.

Background, context, and timeframe of reforms

This report focusses on the inception, development and implementation of large-scale social policy reform using the example of the Victorian Government's implementation of three-year-old kindergarten. In the lead-up to the 2018 election, the incumbent Victorian Government committed to providing subsidised kindergarten to all three-year-old children, thereby extending pre-school education by an additional year.

This composite case study combines findings from a total of 36 interviews with policymakers, service providers, parents and key stakeholders and documentary analysis. This report analyses the policy inception and intent from announcement in 2018 through to its early stages of implementation in early 2022.

¹ For more information on EDGE see Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood Centre (2020)

² As evidenced by Federal Government holding an early years strategy and national summit in Feb 2023 (<https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/9711>), the joint NSW-Vic Best Start, Best Life commitment (<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/best-start-best-life-early-childhood-education-works>) and South Australia's Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education & Care being led by former PM Julia Gillard (<https://www.royalcommissionecec.sa.gov.au/>) among other changes in the system.

This paper steps out the stages of policy inception, development, and implementation, highlighting the complexities within and across interest groups involved with progressing major social reform. The aim of the case study is to understand how the policy and evidence on early years and child development is transforming into the reality of universal access to three-year-old kindergarten in Victoria.

This includes how a major proposed policy change in a complex, well-established mixed market of long day care and sessional kindergarten within a multi-tiered funding system involving local, state and commonwealth governments, and parent fees/contributions was realised, in the face of traditionally higher profile, competing priorities. Key aspects addressed include:

- how the need for policy change was identified
- how underpinning objectives were identified and articulated
- which key government and political actors played a role in driving policy change.

Key elements that contributed to this policy being realised include:

- building and communicating a strong evidence-base supporting the value of early childhood education for immediate and long term-outcomes
- developing and crafting a business case to Treasury through multiple iterations of refinement and improvement of funding estimates
- a progressive government with an appetite for social reform
- strong, long-term commitment from public servants

This case study also explores how three major components of implementation were navigated:

- workforce challenges and opportunities to scale-up.
- infrastructure and capacity required for delivery.
- change management to support services and others involved in delivery.

The report illustrates how the reform was navigated, detailing how different actors including the federal, state and local governments, service providers including not-for-profit, community-based, local government, and for-profit providers, and grassroots union movements played a role.

Successful implementation of three-year-old kindergarten in Victoria has the potential to transform the life chances for current and future generations of children through high quality and accessible provision.

The idea

Under the Universal Access National Partnership (UANP), the Australian Government provides funding to the states and territories to support provision of 15 hours per week of kindergarten for all children in the year before school, referred to in Victoria as four-year-old kindergarten or pre-prep. Internationally there was growing evidence that pre-school education had significant benefits for even younger children³. An additional year of early learning, often referred to as three-year-old kindergarten, was available to some Victorian children. However, three-year-old kindergarten was expensive, limiting access to those who could afford it, or those who met the criteria related to experiencing disadvantage. This case report focuses on the Victorian Government's commitment to deliver a second year of kindergarten to all three-year-old children.

³ See references: Mustard, 1996; Heckman, 2000; Barnett, 2016; Ishimine et al., 2010; Tayler, 2016; Tayler et al., 2013; Melhuish, 2016; Shonkoff, 2006; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000

The challenge

Many in the Victorian public service and government, particularly in the Department of Education (DE), viewed early childhood education as a critical contributor to improving Australia's standing on several key socio-economic indicators. However, primary and secondary school education had a much higher profile and attracted substantially more investment and resourcing. For instance, in the 2009-10 Victorian budget, schools received \$5.4 billion while early childhood services received \$375 million (Lenders, 2010). Nationally, in 2015, preschool and early childhood received 9% of education-based funding; primary and secondary schools received 27% and 28%, respectively (Rice et al., 2019).

Given this context, the problem was: how do you take a minor policy area (early childhood), considered a 'pimple on a pumpkin' (where school education is the pumpkin), and get a government to commit to multi-billion-dollar, complex reform over a decade? Although many in government acknowledged the contribution early childhood education could make to Australia, some were unconvinced of the benefits of reform during the early stages of the policy's development. Other obstacles, such as funding, also had to be overcome.

In addition to being under-resourced, interviewees perceived the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector at the time as chronically fragmented. This resulted in the lack of a coherent voice from the sector and no unified push for reform. Pockets of resistance within the sector compounded this weakness: some ECEC professionals working in sessional kindergarten settings were concerned about different skills and pedagogical approaches required to teach younger children and were uncertain about how such a reform could be delivered logistically.

Timing & Gaps

The roll-out of three-year-old kindergarten is currently underway, greatly expanding access to 15 hours of quality provision for children in Victoria.

Our analysis shows that despite significant and detailed policy design, some of the anticipated gaps were amplified during the roll-out. Participants reinforced the importance of change management throughout the implementation stages, particularly in fundamental areas such as workforce, infrastructure and collaboration with stakeholders.

Critical challenges identified through this work were limitations stemming from the timing of processes of 'behind the scenes' policy design with that undertaken in consultation with experts and the sector. Processes that prioritised collaboration between policymakers and politicians ensured that there was certainty in what was being announced. Processes undertaken in consultation with experts and the sector, those implementing the reforms, provided opportunities to address complex implementation issues. For example, those with implementation expertise in key areas were called on intermittently through the policy development process – prior to the announcement in 2018 – responding to questions of design, costing or delivery as needed.

Informants noted that the certainty and authority that came through announcements was critical for progress. They also noted the benefits of consultation with broader experts and the sector in designing and staging implementation processes and remarked that earlier consultation could have contributed to a smoother roll-out.

The Victorian experience points to the importance of having meaningful consultative approaches that are aligned to material policy implementation issues. This learning is significant in the context of broader ECEC reforms occurring nationally and across jurisdictions, which are facing similar challenges: recruiting and retaining a high-quality and fairly paid

workforce; creating the spaces for children to learn and play; and building the relationships between providers, governments (local, state, national), policy experts and parents.

The wider success of three-year old kindergarten and other ECEC reform rests on having both evidence-based policy and delivery expertise. It will contribute to the ambition of ensuring all children reach their potential now and in the future.

Methods

The development of this case study drew from two distinct methods, interviews and document analysis. In total, 36 key stakeholders involved in developing and implementing three-year-old kindergarten shared their experiences of the early stages of this significant reform. Interviewees included:

- politicians and political advisors;
- public servants primarily across the Victorian Government Departments of Education (DE) and Premier and Cabinet (DPC);
- senior stakeholders in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector, including union representations and sector leaders;
- Local Government Authority (LGA) representatives; and
- Parents.

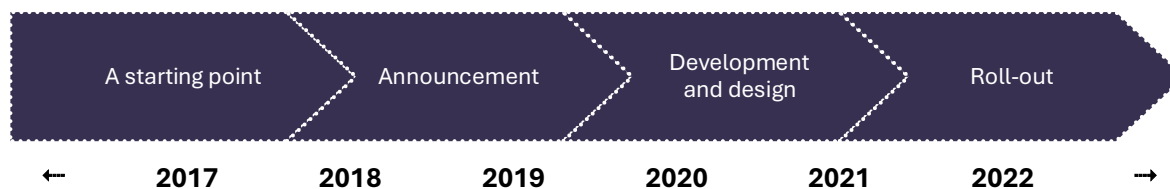
Key policy development and implementation documents were also reviewed and synthesised, analysing the most salient points and raising other relevant insights.

This case study report explores how the policy intent developed and how the evidence on early years and child development transformed into the reality of universal access to three-year-old kindergarten in Victoria.

In this report, the reform timeline is broken into four sections: A Starting Point, covering the gathering of evidence and forming the 'pitch' of reform; Announcement, which looks at the initial roll-out plan as laid out by government; Development and Design, which outlines the process of gathering information from initial service implementation and designing and refining policy; and the final stage of Roll-out, which looks at the broader implementation process across the state. Through each section a range of key actors who played a critical role in the design and implementation of reforms are introduced and discussed, with a particular focus on how they interacted with each other.

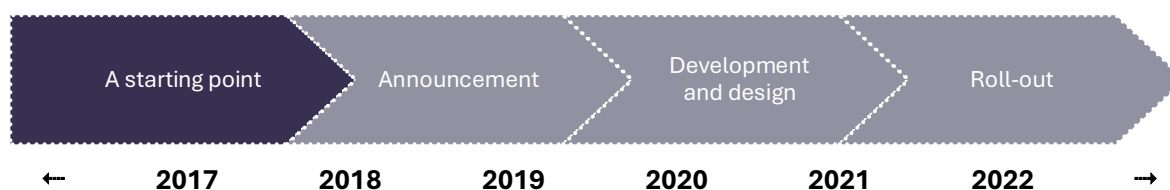
Stages of Reform

This section identifies some of the key stages of reform between 2017 (as a starting point for this analysis) and 2022 (a significant implementation milestone for three-year-old kindergarten in Victoria), establishing a timeline for this analysis.



The purpose of describing these stages is to group key activities; to consider their impact, the actors and interest groups involved, and the processes through which the policy development progressed. Understandably, there are boundaries between the stages to reflect the ways in which activities span, intersect, and overlap with a range of policy initiatives, interests, and forces. This allows analysis of the stages as moments in time, exploring connections between activities throughout the reform process.

A starting point



The starting point for this case study is an examination of the state of play in 2017, the year before the Victorian Government announced its intention to roll out 15 hours of subsidised three-year-old kindergarten for every child progressively over a decade. This announcement marks a pivotal moment in the case, laying the policy foundations that enabled actors to progress reforms through a range of policy processes and levers.

The Actors

Department of Education

Interests: Accountability, centring evidence in policy, raising the profile of ECEC

Government departments play a significant role in executing and administering the policies of government. They are accountable to the government minister with portfolio responsibility and to the public for ensuring that decisions comply with legal and ethical frameworks.

Public servants are employed independently of election cycles and play a role in supporting continuity through reform processes and changes in government.

In relation to the three-year-old kindergarten reforms, DE had an interest in centring a significant body of evidence in the design of policy over time and throughout reform processes. This involved providing policy analysis, advice and the proposal. Over time, DE played an important role in testing, demonstrating and defending the case for investment in

three-year-old kindergarten. Exploring the starting point also revealed an ongoing project of raising the profile of ECEC within the broader education department.

Ministers

Interests: Education – including ECEC as a policy platform

Ministers play a role in setting the agenda for and authorising policy and reform. A government’s policy platform articulates priority areas, which it has an interest in delivering. These platforms feature within election campaigns and commitments when governments seek re-election.

Local Government Areas

Interests: being able to deliver programs, representing local issues and priorities

LGAs are essential in the delivery of reform and are often kindergarten providers or are responsible for coordinating and planning the delivery of kindergarten. LGAs are ultimately responsible for ensuring their community is adequately serviced. The needs and expectations of different LGAs vary considerably.

ECEC sector

Interests: Providers of ECEC services, quality, workforce, commercial and competitive interests

ECEC providers (sessional kindergarten and long day care), are critical to providing three-year-old kindergarten and in some cases advocating for it. Each provider and service type experiences different sets of issues, meaning their role and interest in the reform are similarly diverse.

Advocacy Bodies

Non-government organisations, associations, and unions were consistent actors in developing the case for reforms (the foundation on which our starting point rests) and throughout all stages of the subsequent reform. These groups did not always share advocacy interests. However, they contributed (together and separately) to demonstrate the case for three-year-old kindergarten. While advocacy groups may have represented the needs of children, families, and the ECEC workforce in their work, there was not a strong parent voice in advocating for three-year-old kindergarten.

Authorities

Several federal and state-level authorities were established before the announcement of three-year-old kindergarten reform that either impacted the context in which it was developed or who supported early proposals and policy thinking. These actors include:

- Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), who oversee the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care and associated National Quality Standard
- Victorian Department of Education, Early Childhood Improvement Branches (ECIBs), responsible for supporting the implementation of School Readiness Funding (SRF) (Department of Education and Training (DET, 2023)
- Victorian Schools Building Authority (VSBA), created in 2016, was already funding expansion of kindergarten infrastructure.

The importance of evidence

Three-year-old kindergarten reform in Victoria was over a decade in the making and is built on a foundation of international research and policy development. In the early 2000s, there was growing international interest in early years education. The former UK Labour Government's flagship Sure Start program (Eisenstadt, 2011) aimed to offer every child 'the best start in life' by combining funding and services that included childcare, early years education provision, health services, community and outreach activities. Universal kindergarten was introduced for four-year-olds in 1998 and by 2010 all three- and four-year-olds were eligible for 15 hours of kindergarten a week (Ben-Galim et al., 2014; Department for Education, 2012).

In Australia, multiple stakeholders within state and federal governments were interested in this emerging evidence on the value of ECEC. For instance, government departments responsible for early childhood in Victoria and South Australia, and several key personnel in the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet, began to engage with, curate and disseminate evidence on the benefits of early childhood education. This involvement with evidence dissemination by government departments was uncommon, showing the particular interest in ECEC early on and the drive to create reform from within government and departments. Key researchers and emerging evidence supporting ECEC reform included:

- Evidence highlighting the benefits of supporting healthy child development, providing a foundation for advocacy for beneficial policy and practice change (Mustard, 1996).
- Early childhood programs showing favourable financial returns on investment (Heckman, 2000) and cost-benefit analysis outcomes (Barnett, 2016).
- Compelling evidence of the benefits of early childhood programs on brain development (Shonkoff, 2006; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000) and favourable long-term outcomes (Barnett, 2016).
- Emerging evidence about the impact of quality in ECEC service delivery (Ishimine et al., 2010; Tayler, 2016; Tayler et al., 2013)
- Evidence-based reform to early childhood education policy occurring in several countries and regions, including the UK, the EU and Asia-Pacific (Melhuish, 2016).

Many of the leading international researchers and policy reformers cited above, including Sure Start leaders from the UK, visited Australia between 2006 and 2016. Dr Fraser Mustard became Thinker in Residence in South Australia and Shonkoff presented to Victorian Cabinet; a rare occurrence for an external visitor. This engagement in Australia with key early childhood researchers and policy influencers highlighted the growing evidence base, governments' recognition of the importance of early childhood education and its potential public value, thus building the initial momentum for reform.

Australia's report card

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, Australia's performance on the world stage was weakening on several indicators. The Australian Early Development Census, taken in 2009, showed that 23.4% of Australia's children were experiencing vulnerability on at least one of five developmental domains at school commencement (AEDC 2022). Australia's results from the Programme for International Student Assessment⁴ were declining in the early 2000s and into

⁴ PISA is an international assessment administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that aims to assess how well 15-year-old students can apply the knowledge and skills they have learned at school to real-life problems and situations (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022a).

the 2010s, along with Australia's ranking compared to other OECD countries; NAPLAN⁵ results were also falling (OECD, 2019; Riddle, 2021). Countries such as Canada and Switzerland were outperforming Australia on indicators of educational attainment and school performance (OECD, 2006). Australia's productivity had also begun to decline in the early 2000s (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Economics, 2010). These conditions fuelled growing awareness within government circles that Australia's ECEC system was not supporting the country as well as it could and provided the impetus for policy reform.

Interest in ECEC from the Federal Government was also driven by a desire to improve human capital as Australia lagged behind other OECD countries on education and skills indicators. At the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) meeting in February 2006, a paper presented by then Victorian Premier Steve Bracks MP noted that 'the most significant influence on human capital, and life chances, is education and training' (Bracks, 2005, p. 35). The paper also stated that it was critical that people engaged in learning from early childhood, not just through the formal schooling years, and proposed that investing in individual skills would yield national productivity gains. ECEC was an essential part of the equation.

Existing policy and practice foundations

Subsidised three-year-old kindergarten was layered on existing policy and practice foundations creating opportunities to develop and evolve existing good practice and revealing challenges or barriers to delivery. In 2008, following agreement from all jurisdictions, the Federal Government announced the Universal Access to Early Childhood Education National Partnership (UANP) which funded the universal provision of 15 hours of four-year-old kindergarten per week. Implementation began in 2013 (DESE 2020, DESE 2022).

Foundational building blocks included universal access to four-year-old kindergarten (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022b)⁶, the National Quality Framework (NQF) (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 2019)⁷ and School Readiness Funding (SRF) (Department of Education and Training (DET), 2023).⁸

Early Childhood Improvement Branches (ECIBs) were already established across Victoria to support the implementation of School Readiness Funding. This provided a structure that could be expanded to support the roll-out of three-year-old kindergarten reforms while mirroring the way kindergarten providers already worked with their local ECIB. The ECIBs and kindergartens worked together to develop a SRF plan, which involved assessing community needs and highlighting funding priorities to support children's learning, development and wellbeing (DET, 2023). The proximity enabled ECIBs to gain understanding of local needs, which was supported by existing relationships.

The introduction of the National Quality Standards (NQS) (ACECQA, ND), incorporated in the NQF, in 2012 is another example that set the foundation for three-year-old kindergarten. The

⁵ NAPLAN is an annual assessment of reading, writing, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and numeracy for all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in Australian schools (National Assessment Program, 2022).

⁶ Announced in 2008, the implementation of Commonwealth-funded universal provision of 15 hours of four-year-old kindergarten began in 2013.

⁷ The National Quality Framework (NQF) was established in 2012, combining regulation for early childhood care and education quality within one framework.

⁸ School Readiness Funding supports 3-year-old and 4-year-old children in all ECEC being delivered in state-funded Victorian kindergarten programs to support children to be ready for school.

introduction of quality standards meant that less focus needed to be placed on describing and defining quality because it was already covered by existing policy and practice.

Existing policy and practices combined with institutions such as the Victorian Schools Building Authority (VSBA), created in 2016, already funded expansion of kindergarten infrastructure.

A mixed market

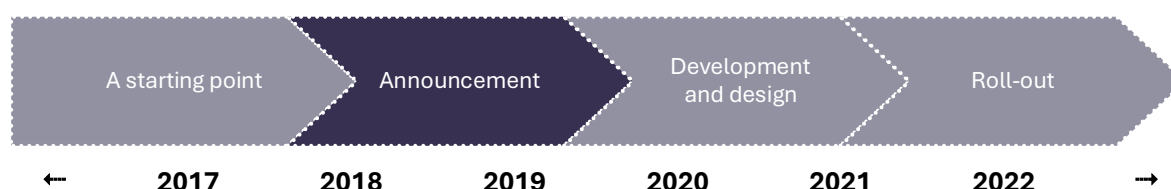
ECEC is not a public service sector like healthcare or education: it is a mixed market and this manifests in different ways. Authority over the sector, for example, is diffused between federal, state and territory governments resulting in a diverse and sometimes disparate sector that can be challenging to navigate.

This mixed provision also creates tensions. For instance, different parts of the sector compete for funding, enrolments, and staff. There are different industrial instruments for workers in different ECEC settings, particularly between sessional kindergarten and long day care staff, meaning that teachers delivering kindergarten programs in different settings do so under materially different conditions. Historically there have been stronger relationships between providers delivering sessional kindergarten and the state government than with long day care providers. There has also been a persistent perception within communities that sessional kindergarten provides quality education, while long day care is more akin to babysitting. Inclusion of for-profit providers further complicates delivery, especially when they are in receipt of government funding.

Aligning ECEC with Education in Departmental Structures

Structural change within and across the departments was also significant in progressing ECEC reforms by aligning them with education. While currently led by the Victorian Department of Education, early years development and education had previously been separated between departmental portfolios. Early inceptions of current policy commenced within the Department of Human Services (DHS), moving to the Office of Children in 2005, before moving to the Department of Education, which became the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) in 2007. Merging early childhood and school-based education within one department reflected the growing prominence of early childhood development and the role of ECEC settings in providing education and additional services. This also represented a shift from targeted interventions to universal service provision – a crucial foundation on which three-year-old kindergarten was built. While aligning ECEC with education from a departmental perspective was an enabler, it also highlighted the disparity between the ways in which early childhood and school-based education were recognised, valued and funded. Raising the profile and importance of early childhood became critical in gaining political and funding support.

Announcement



The announcement signalled the authorisation of these reforms, initiating a range of new relationships and interests for different actors.

The Election Promise

In 2018, in a pre-election statement the Victorian Labor leader Daniel Andrews MP, announced the government's commitment to implement 15 hours of funded, subsidised three-year-old kindergarten. This would include a phased roll out from 2020 pending their re-election.

In an Australian first, every Victorian child born under a re-elected Andrews Labor Government will start kindergarten a year earlier. Labor will invest almost \$5 billion over the next decade to deliver a full 15 hours of three-year old kindergarten, with the roll-out beginning in 2020 (Andrews, 2018).

The roll-out would commence with six regional LGAs in 2020, expanding to an additional 15 LGAs in 2021. By 2022, all three-year-old children in Victoria were offered a minimum of five hours of subsidised kindergarten as part of a longer-term commitment to 15 hours weekly. By 2029, every Victorian three-year-old child is expected to have access to 15 hours of subsidised kindergarten.

The Actors

Government – Premier and Cabinet Ministers

Interests: Policy platform, campaign content

The announcement of the reforms was led by the government. From the pre-election promise of universal three-year-old kindergarten in 2018, to phased roll-out from 2020, to the commitment for every Victorian three-year-old to have access to 15 hours of kindergarten by 2029. This announcement was informed by the ministers' department's research and evidence garnered.

Department

Interest: Laying the ground for success, locking down policy commitments, assessing the impacts

DE's role changed significantly following the announcement of the three-year-old kindergarten reforms. DE very quickly moved into a planning stage which sought to blend the evidence supporting the reforms, learning from the experiences of implementing 15 hours of four-year-old kindergarten and the stated intention of the reforms. The phased implementation of the reforms was an approach adopted to balance these factors.

LGAs

Interests: clarity as a provider, being heard and consulted

Local government did not play a lead role in the announcement of reforms, which created dissatisfaction in relation to the level of information and communication they had received in the lead up to the announcement. As providers, some LGAs expressed concern about the impacts of the reforms in relation to funding, supply and demand, which reflected their interest in and knowledge of the local issues.

ECEC sector

Interests: clarity as a provider, concern about scope and increasing demands

Similar to local government, the sector did not have a lead role at the announcement stage but held a strong interest as providers of kindergarten. Some ECEC professionals working in sessional kindergarten settings were concerned about different skills and pedagogical approaches required to teach younger children and were uncertain about how such a reform

could be delivered logistically. Previous reforms moving to 15 hours of four-year-old kindergarten had resulted in significant shifts and increased demands on the sector. In addition, the implementation of the reforms coincided with significant workforce pressures as a result of responding to the global COVID-19 pandemic and significant lockdowns experienced in Victoria.

Families/Community

Interests: Benefit for their children, juggling return to work and caring obligations, cost of ECEC.

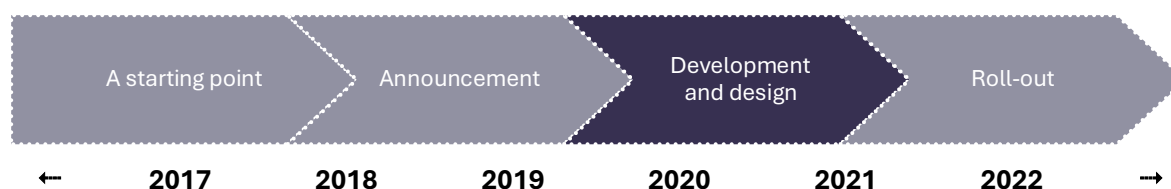
A reform of this nature requires a cultural change in the community to help them understand the benefits of three-year-old kindergarten, and to understand what parents expect from this service. While there were diverse interests amongst families significant drivers for parents relate to what they want for their children and what is practical for them.

Authority

From the announcement, the regional DE ECIB offices were the first port-of-call for LGAs and services. With the impending roll-out of three-year-old kindergarten, ECIBs were able to expand their role, offering support during the roll-out of the reform. One ECIB manager described this architecture as creating ‘a strong footprint in each area’ that filled a capacity gap.

This announcement, as a point in time, reflects the culmination of work spanning previous decades and a tipping point that set the agenda for decades to come. The Victorian Labor party were returned to government in November 2018, signalling the commencement of the development and design stage of the roll-out.

Development and Design



The announcement (and subsequent election) commenced the official process of policy design and roll-out. The first tranche of six local government areas would begin in 2020, expanding to a further fifteen LGAs in 2021. These LGAs would offer between five to fifteen hours of kindergarten by 2022. In 2019, the Department, authorities, LGAs, and services would come together to ensure all facets of reform were considered and accounted for as best as possible.

Authority and flexibility

The hub-and-spoke model of governance, developed within the department, became a central feature that senior public servants relied on to coordinate the increase in infrastructure, workforce, and cultural shifts to deliver the reform. While promising, parties experienced significant challenges adapting and tailoring to the local contexts with the right balance between accountability and flexibility.

The ‘spoke’ authorities that helped the transferral of information between DE and communities were integral to the design of the reform and aided the first LGAs to trial three-year-old kindergarten.

Getting this balance and parameters of change right is dynamic. One of the ways that DE did this at the beginning was to triage services. Services were classified as to whether they could adapt to the additional three-year-old service easily, or whether their change would be complex. If it was complex, then the ECIB would target their efforts to services and LGAs that needed it most. ECIB offered a range of services based on their assessment of need – this ranged from identifying and building the capacity with their own and central DE resources, to intensive support where blockages were identified.

As enablers, funders and providers, the role of LGAs is essential and can be diverse. Developing a joint assessment tool with DE and the DE ECIBs like a Kindergarten Infrastructure and Services Plan (KISP) meant that there was a common framework with shared data and information from which to make decisions. KISPs also provide an opportunity to open and develop strong relationships between local governments and DE teams. KISPs were an important dimension of both the infrastructure and change management pillars particularly in facilitating conversations between different tiers of government.

The Actors

Department

Interests: finding solutions, navigating influence in new relationships

DE took an active role assessing capacity to find solutions to enable the delivery of the reforms. DE understood there to be greater spare capacity in long day care than in sessional kindergartens in some areas. This provided an opportunity to harness excess long day care capacity to deliver sessional kindergarten. However, differences in funding models between sessional kindergarten and long day care proved challenging and unintended consequences began to emerge.

Public servants working in central DE valued local relationships, acknowledging their importance and sought to ensure communication channels were created between different actors in the reform. As the ‘governance overhead’ in the hub-and-spoke model of delivery, the DE prioritised working with fostering relationships with organisations and individuals who work directly in ECEC.

Authorities

Interests: Alignment of processes with policy outcomes, accountability, ensuring clear processes and procedures

Authorities took up a more active role in this stage of the reforms. The hub-and-spoke model was a central feature that senior public servants relied on to coordinate the increase in infrastructure, workforce, and cultural shift to deliver the reform. Adapting and tailoring to the local contexts with the right balance between accountability and flexibility remains a significant challenge.

The ‘spoke’ authorities that helped the transferral of information between DE and communities were integral to the design of the reform and aided the first LGAs to trial three-year-old kindergarten.

ECIB-led KISPs were an important dimension of both the infrastructure and change management pillars particularly in facilitating conversations between different tiers of government. This provided a framework through which actor interests could be aligned.

VSBA took a lead role in responding to the challenges of providing physical spaces for three-year-old kindergarten. Government adopted a much more open approach to proposals – from councils and/or ECEC providers to set up a kindergarten next door to a school. This opportunity started to be actively encouraged. The VSBA also responded to feedback altering the planning process. What used to be a rigid application process where an LGA would have to submit an almost fully formed bid to a pre-determined timeline is now staged and more collaborative between LGAs and the VSBA. Capital funding through Building Blocks: Three-Year-Old Kindergarten Infrastructure Strategy (DE, 2023) is one example of how programs evolved to better reflect the relationship between LGAs and the VSBA.

Altering the planning process to respond to LGAs' needs has strengthened the relationship between the Victorian Government – in this case the VSBA – and LGAs. It is a good example of an iterative process adapting as needs evolve.

LGAs

Interests: role in provision and planning, competing demands – finite or scarce resources, protective of scope, ensuring equity

Infrastructure and workforce were two critical areas for LGAs.

Infrastructure

The phased roll-out helped to accommodate areas that had existing infrastructure capacity while providing time for others to increase their capacity. Within this roll-out timetable, there were also opportunities to flex infrastructure plans in growth areas where plans to increase capacity already existed. This included planning, approval and building new or expanded services. It was easier to capitalise in growth areas where there was already planning work underway. This was a leverage point through which progress on LGAs and DE interests could be made. While this was a good fit for growing areas it was not generalisable for more established suburbs with higher land costs. While co-contribution models existed between LGAs, who own most of the infrastructure (land and buildings), and state government, who were implementing the policy reform, tensions emerged – some LGAs argued that the state government should fund additional capacity required to deliver on their reform initiatives.

Each LGA had to develop a KISP with DE – this joint assessment fostered collaboration and shared understandings between these institutions and that shared understanding would lead to better outcomes. KISPs are published by DE and used to make joint funding decisions. Designed to foster collaboration, KISPs relied on trust and collaboration between LGAs and DE. Where trust and collaboration were low the process could be seen as an administrative burden. One LGA described undertaking their own scoping and modelling, which they shared with stakeholders prior to being provided with information from central DE.

LGAs' interest and role in ensuring equity is another consideration when assessing and releasing capacity. For example, one LGA reflected that as it is their responsibility to ensure that there is equal access to a consistent offer of 15 hours, they will not roll out the full offer until they can deliver fully across all their ECEC services, otherwise they risk vulnerable families missing out.

Workforce

To overcome recruitment challenges, some rural areas opted to develop their own local workforce strategies focused on building a sustainable workforce. One LGA described a partnership they have recently started with a major university to deliver an accelerated transition from diploma to a bachelor's degree. Another engaged in continuous recruitment

through an open campaign and have a comprehensive program of upskilling their current staff.

ECEC sector

Interests: recruitment and retention, providing a quality service, remaining commercially viable, workforce are equipped and supported to undertake the work

Recruitment and retention were significant issues for the ECEC sector. Some participants were concerned that disproportionate attention was being allocated to recruitment when retaining staff was in itself a challenge. Anecdotally, this played out in some pilot areas who were observing high staff turnover. As well as ensuring workforce supply, interest in retention from the ECEC sector involved recognition of the need to address the risk of burnout and loss of skills and experience from the sector.

In the lead up to and initial roll-out of reform, some of the workforce felt that three-year-olds were not always ready for kindergarten due to the additional physical and emotional support some children may need. Some of these early concerns resurfaced under workforce pressures. Concerns included a desire for additional educators to better support the children, building confidence of educators who were used to working with four-year-olds to work with three-year-olds, and delivering combined provision for three and four-year olds. A frontline worker recounted that there was a massive amount of stress and burden on educators, especially those who worked with three-year-olds throughout the pandemic. For the first several months of three-year-old kindergarten, they provided an additional educator above the standard ratio into the room to ensure the support the children needed was available.

To alleviate this stress and to open communication channels within the sector, early learning networks were created to allow long day care and sessional kindergarten staff to discuss their experiences in supporting three-year-olds. The department, along with local government and the sector worked together to communicate their experiences and learnt from each other. A public servant noted that once the roll-outs happened in 2022, there has been less resistance from teachers.

Families/Community

Interests: Largely families were considered an interest of the design rather than having a clear interest in the design.

Consulting with community and families after the announcement allowed for integration of other services into the ECEC reform – School Readiness Funding enabled a broader focus on children’s social and emotional development and introduced a broader resource network.

The Hub and Spoke Model

From the announcement in late 2018, the first tranche of six local government areas would begin in 2020, expanding to a further 15 LGAs in 2021. These LGAs would offer between five to fifteen hours of kindergarten by 2022. In 2019, the department, authorities, LGAs, and services would come together to ensure all facets of reform were considered and accounted for as best as possible. A more intrinsic facet is also necessary at the beginning of reform – instigating the cultural change and educating the community and parents about the reforms to early childhood education and the benefits of enrolling their three-year-old children into kindergarten.

Three-year-old kindergarten reform was focused on three pillars – workforce, infrastructure and change management. Each of these pillars are closely connected and often interdependent. These pillars were designed to maximise impact, sitting within a ‘hub and spoke’ delivery model surrounded by strong governance and accountability structures.

In this hub and spoke model, central policy and reform teams form the central hub. The spokes are defined authorities such as legal, communications, regional teams and the VSBA, along with unions, families, LGAs and services. Crucially, there are strong relationships that have been developed over time between the central policy team in the central ‘hub’ and expertise held by the ‘spokes’. It was emphasised by public servants that although often overlooked, it would have been impossible to deliver this scale of systemic reform without the ‘governance overhead’.

Ensuring all ‘spokes’ are heard and onboard is primarily the job of the department. This reform also required collaboration between groups that are not usually in contact, such as private childcare services collaborating with the department, or LGAs liaising directly with TAFE. The communication channels and management of multiple relationships is a testament to this reform.

Rearranging relationships

The DE identified additional capacity in long day care compared to sessional kindergartens in some areas. While this provided an opportunity to harness excess long day care capacity to deliver kindergarten, differences in funding models between sessional kindergarten and long day care proved to be challenging. As implementation proceeded, unintended consequences began to emerge.

For example, ECIB managers reflected on a squeeze on long day care particularly in rural areas where sessional kindergarten and long day care often operate from the same facility and sometimes by the same provider. With more children eligible for free kindergarten, but no significant changes to the workforce, there has been a noticeable reduction in the number of long day care spaces available, which in turn may impact a parent’s ability to work. A senior sector leader described that initially there was not much departmental support available for long day care expansion because of the federal and state division of funding responsibilities. In many co-located services, long day care was helping to cross-subsidise sessional kindergarten and so DE needed to grapple with the reality of how this mixed market operates.

Much of the success of the reform was predicated on building relationships. Public servants working in central DE ‘hub’ valued local relationships and early on acknowledged their importance, as reflected by one interviewee that change management can go wrong when it is *perceived* that the organisations and individuals who work directly in ECEC are not fully consulted and new relationships fostered.

The relationship building approach that was adopted signalled DE acknowledgement that only through consultation and collaboration would they be able to deliver three-year-old kindergarten.

Planning and infrastructure

Providing physical spaces for three-year-old kindergarten is a significant and long-term challenge. Fifty new childcare centres have been promised as part of the Victorian Government’s \$9 billion funding package (Victorian School Building Authority, 2023a, 2023b). Even with this funding commitment, building and sustaining the infrastructure to deliver the universal offer remains ambitious.

As three-year-old kindergarten was gaining momentum and looked more likely that it would become policy, there were efforts to pre-empt some of the infrastructure challenges. As such, the government adopted a more open approach to proposals from councils and/or ECEC providers to set up a kindergarten next to a school. This opportunity started to be actively encouraged and a co-location model became embedded in policy with the VSBA taking responsibility for it.

The VSBA also responded to feedback altering the planning process. What used to be a rigid application process, where an LGA would have to submit an almost fully formed bid to a pre-determined timeline, is now more flexible and collaborative between LGAs and the VSBA. Capital funding through Building Blocks: Three-Year-Old Kindergarten Infrastructure Strategy (DE, 2023) is one example of how programs evolved to better reflect the relationship between LGAs and the VSBA.

Altering the planning process to respond to LGAs’ needs has strengthened the relationship between the Victorian Government – in this case the VSBA – and LGAs, and demonstrates an iterative process – adapting as needs evolve.

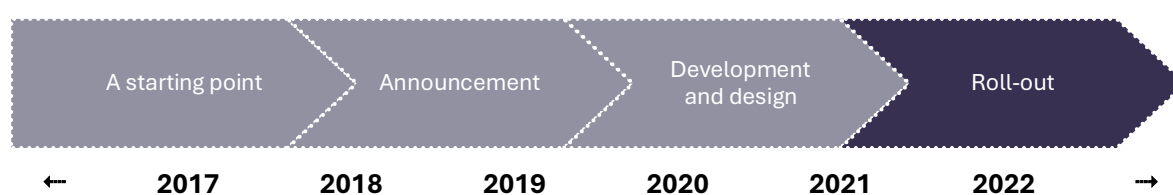
Responding to workforce needs

To overcome recruitment challenges, some rural areas opted to develop their own local workforce strategies focused on building a sustainable workforce. In this way, LGAs were responding to their local communities’ needs.

One LGA described a partnership with a major university where the aim is to ‘upskill your own’ so that the new educators are more likely to stay in the area. The program offered an accelerated transition from diploma to a bachelor’s degree, where students complete the degree in two rather than the usual four years. The LGA reflected that an accelerated degree would likely be attractive to potential students.

Representatives from another LGA shared that they continuously recruit through an open campaign and have a comprehensive program of upskilling their current staff. They reported that these actions are working well enough to ensure a stable workforce. Recruitment will remain the most significant challenge for years to come as the ECEC offer is extended.

Roll-out



The roll-out stage of the reform overlaps to a large degree with the earlier stage of development and design – particularly as it relates to early stages of roll out to six LGAs in 2020 and a further 15 in 2021. The initial roll out to regional LGAs acted as an evaluation of the early policy that informed the wider roll out. In 2022, the reforms were scaled-up to ensure that all areas were offering at least five hours of three-year-old kindergarten. This drew on learnings from earlier stages of the roll out including adapting to governance models and relationships, responding to identified issues, and approaches to change management and communication. Communities were also emerging from a period of disruption due to lockdowns and COVID-19 restrictions.

The Actors

Department

Interests: Ensuring success, responding to issues, policy learning

The roll out increased the load on providers and the workforce. At times the number of changes occurring made it difficult to streamline the work to make it manageable, and work had to be put in to align the pace and scale of change with the demand on those responsible for delivering it. This has been noted as a point to focus on in future policy change work.

LGAs

Interests: managing demand and supply

Identifying some of the unintended consequences of integrating long day care in the three-year-old kinder reform in the first phase of roll out has meant that ECIBs have been able to adapt this knowledge to providers in other roll-out areas. However, this has not always progressed smoothly. As one sector leader discussed, some communities have higher demand for long day care than they do for sessional kindergarten. This local knowledge provides valuable insight for planning.

ECEC sector

Interests: Shortages in the workforce, pay and conditions, role demands

Despite significant work and initiatives currently underway (DE, 2022) there were not enough qualified professionals coming through the system.

Tensions across the sector exist due to differences in pay and conditions, making reform with implications for different settings complex. Despite the Victorian Government funding and promoting multiple initiatives and partnerships, demonstrating a significant commitment on its part to recruitment and retention of the ECEC workforce. There remains a gap between the ambition to deliver universal three-year-old kindergarten and having the skilled workforce in place at the various milestones of implementation. This strain on workforce has been further exacerbated by the commitment to extend universal four-year-old kindergarten to 30-hour provision, up from 15-hours.

Keeping educators focused on education also emerged as a barrier to retention. Getting the balance right between teaching time, planning and administration is a perennial challenge. And there is a sense that there is too much process and administration – especially from the top – that detracts from the time available to teach.

Families/Community

Having the opportunity to invest in relationships – between children and educators, between providers and parents – is at the centre of local success, especially for families who may have been tentative or unaware of the benefits kindergarten can offer.

Families continue to grapple with balancing the personal benefits, benefits for their children and the practicalities of accessing three-year-old kindergarten relative to attending paid employment. While for some this roll-out is providing the right level of ECEC, for others it becomes a challenge when balancing work commitments.

Applying models of governance

The DE approached the roll-out as an adaptive project – an iterative process informed by emerging learnings. Consistent with the hub-and-spoke model, a central framework was provided to support local flexibility. This adaptive approach meant that the DE had to set expectations that things may change, explaining that priorities may have to shift depending on the need of this complex policy implementation. Generally this process has served the reform well. DE prioritised developing quality relationships across the sector as core to being able to deliver this reform. This required seeking balance between producing and rolling out policy and supporting the cultural change. Further, DE appeared to be intentional about embedding flexibility and their ability to respond to stakeholders, evidence, insights and information.

As a governance function for the hub-and-spoke model, it was the DE's role to facilitate communication channels between providers, workforce, and other 'spokes' who had questions and concerns about the reform. One response to this adopted early in the reform process was to bring providers together in information sessions to raise their queries and seek clarity on reform processes. While there was not a great level of detail early in the process, accommodating provider questions helped to identify potential issues and inform policy development.

Managing change

Facilitating stakeholder engagement between different groups (DE and LGAs, or LGAs and parents) addressed uncertainty associated with the reforms. This also led to developing more effective communication with families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Sector representatives noticed some communications needed to be focussed on CALD families and they approached DE for funding outreach with CALD families. The strategies required to manage the change varied between councils, and councils needed to be supported.

Central enrolment was another significant outcome that resulted from this type of engagement around change management. DE now invests in a system that provides more equitable access for families, and ease for providers. This was noted as especially beneficial for families from CALD backgrounds with three-year-old children. Others reflected that the central enrolment system has been the most integral part of making three-year old kindergarten happen. However, this system was not available in the early stages, which meant that many LGAs implementing the reform in the first tranche of the roll-out had to manage their own enrolments, adding to their burden through the change management process.

This central enrolment system formed through the 'hub-and-spoke' model of delivery has provided a more granular understanding of services, places, number of rooms, and matched to local demographics. This insight supported planning, however, some services were concerned central processes would negatively impact their enrolments numbers and processes.

Building and nurturing relationships

Investing in relationships across services in a particular area has helped to overcome resistance or suspicion. For example, one public servant summed up how the introduction of early learning networks were effective to overcome the resistance from service providers hesitant to work with three-year-old children. Long day care workers who had experience working with three-year-old children had the opportunity to share their experience with sessional teachers, who had some reservations about extending kindergarten. To support teachers from sessional teams who did not have experience supporting younger children, the department, along with local government and the sector worked together to acknowledge their

experiences and learn from each other. Resistance from teachers has decreased as the roll-out made progress.

Work remains on-going to support and nurture those relationships.

Engaging parents

The importance around engaging parents was a strong theme from providers, local government and from parents themselves. The views captured here are a representation of the diversity that providers need to engage with and address. For example, one provider spoke of parents’ resistance to 15 hours of ECEC for three-year-olds who favoured fewer hours. For others, fewer hours presented limitations to workforce participation, and demand from these parents for 15 hours of kindergarten (or more) grew.

The diversity in perspectives is a reminder that all communities are different, and that adaptative and responsive parental engagement is also important.

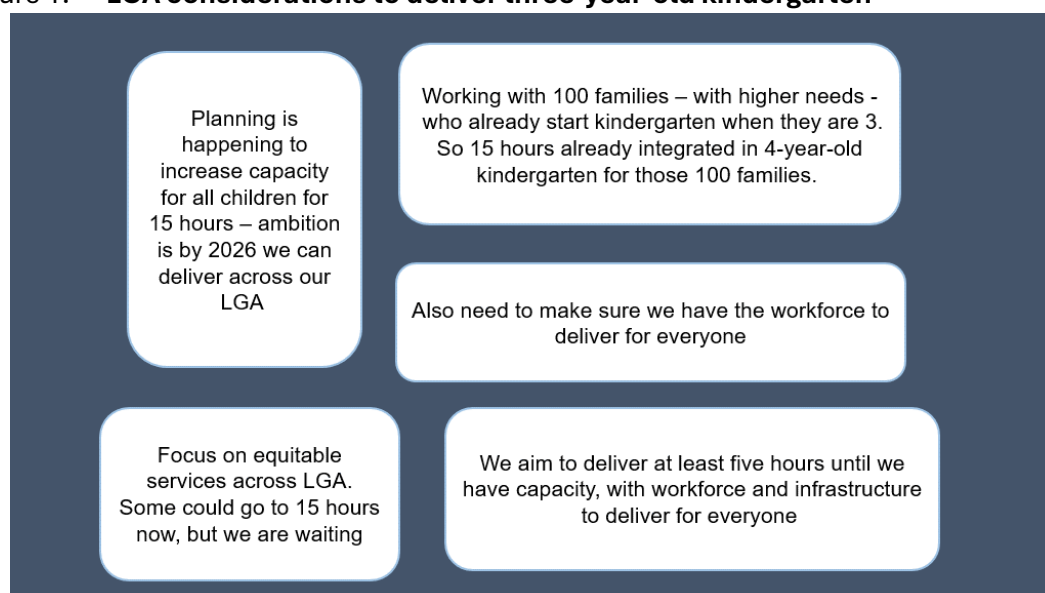
Tailoring for local contexts

Prior to 2018, many stakeholders demonstrated interest in seeing funded three-year-old kindergarten come to fruition, and there was strong support for political commitment. However, there was also a requirement to respond to nuances in local contexts. This cuts across the implementation pillars of workforce, infrastructure and change management.

One LGA representative talked about there not being any long day care options available in their community. In the absence of long day care, having reliable and affordable kindergarten created predictability, enabling workforce participation.

Figure 1e 1 highlights some of the considerations this LGA are working through to offer all children at least five hours of three-year-old kindergarten, responding to local need, and making sure they have capacity to deliver.

Figure 1. LGA considerations to deliver three-year-old kindergarten



Participants from LGAs and the VSBA consistently described the need to tailor implementation to local conditions. There was a sense that at times central DE was too far removed to appreciate the local needs. Additionally, at times the desired pace and scale of change was not always in step with those responsible for delivering it. This created tension between central DE and those responsible for the local roll-out.

For example, there were high levels of flexibility offered in the pilot phase that were tapered back for the full roll-out – reducing local bodies’ capacity to make adjustments or support services the way that they had previously been able.

Sometimes this gap between central DE and local services translated into a lack of flexibility. When describing working with providers in pilot phase, one ECIB manager talked about flexibility that was scaled back to the detriment of other services, reflecting that there was a lot of flexibility at the start of the roll-out. One example of flexibility included some cases where six- or twelve-month block funding was negotiated for services where they were unsure about how many children they would be enrolling. This eased the anxiety felt in the service and helped them appropriately plan for three-year-old kinder.

In other areas, new opportunities emerged. With a kindergarten now co-located with a school, one LGA representative outlined the benefits of there now being a seamless transition into school and the difference that 15 hours provision can make to children’s confidence and learning. Having the opportunity to invest in relationships – between children and educators, between providers and parents – drives local success, especially for families who may have been more tentative or unaware of the benefits kindergarten can offer.

Impact of Interest

Insights from stakeholder interviews revealed a complex range of interests held by actors across different stages of reform. These interests, relative to the stage of reform, impact the roles that different actors take up—both passive and active. Analysis of the interview data also identified the theme of collaborative relationships as important. Stakeholders observed the benefits of these when they were in place – for example, flexibility for LGAs to adapt approaches to local contexts and having the ability to inform policy making. Conversely, actors discussed the negative impacts when this collaboration was perceived as absent, leaving providers with high levels of uncertainty and dissatisfaction. In some cases, this resulted in push back from actors and in others it revealed limitations in policy design that needed to be addressed. The next section unpacks this concept of collaboration, contextualising it in the processes adopted to progress the reform at various stages.

Policy processes and levers

Policy processes and levers played a critical roll in the design and development of these reforms. This sections explores some of the processes and levers that were utilised throughout the reform process.

The interviews with stakeholders elicited descriptions of and reflections on a range of processes that were critical to successful implementation. Some of these processes were planned and intentional, whereas the significance of other processes was only realised in retrospect as emergent.

This included processes involved in laying the groundwork for reform, necessarily led by government and needing to be handled with sensitivity. Structures of previous reforms were also identified as levers for future reform and were important in creating a framework for policy design. In addition to government-led processes, advocacy was also identified as an important process, which supported a long-term change agenda. Processes involving such advocacy were critical levers facilitating a consultative and collaborative approach to implementation acting as enablers to implementation and helping to address issues identified at key stages of the roll-out.

Laying the groundwork – government-led processes

Significant policy reform needs the highest level of endorsement. This meant that the reforms needed to be developed to a level of detail that would give the Treasurer confidence to recommend it and for the Premier to approve it. This standard process is necessarily a confidential one, which enables ideas to be explored without raising community expectations or committing government to courses of action. While the content of these engagements was not able to be discussed in the interviews, stakeholders identified critical stages in the reform process that channelled some of the external advocacy (drawing on the growing evidence base) that was being voiced by the sector and other advocates.

Confidential processes of policy development

Cabinet-in-Confidence meetings were described as opportunities for ministers and public servants to debate, discuss, explore and refine policy. This process allows evidence to be explored and applied to policy development without the sensitivities of formal public consultation and communication processes.

Participation in Cabinet-in-Confidence process is restricted, meaning that expert perspective and experiences of the sector are not directly included. Without a formal way for the sector to contribute, they were unable to present their perspectives directly. In these processes DE played a representative role, giving weight to their knowledge of the sector (its strengths and challenges), the evidence base supporting proposals, their practical experience in implementing policy, the operational requirements and limitations (including funding), and connections to other policy priorities (reaching vulnerable groups).

Reform needs funding

Committing to the policy reform that for universal three-year-old kindergarten in Victoria required funding.

Stakeholders indicated there were previous budget proposals that preceded the reform, describing their engagement in budget proposal processes as intensive and informative to policy design – noting that ultimately the previous funding proposals led to a fuller and more grounded case.

The importance of earlier significant policy reforms, such as 15 hours of four-year-old kindergarten, were identified as providing the architecture for modelling and designing a three-year-old offer. While this demonstrates that the ECEC sector was reflected in the proposal, it would not have been appropriate to engage them in these processes when the outcomes were unknown.

Designing for longevity

One consideration in designing the proposal was how to sustain the reform through electoral cycles. The main challenges to this were capacity, enough spaces in the right places, and workforce recruitment and retention. With each revised proposal, the supporting case was refined, creating a stronger and more sustainable approach.

The design process required compromise and a clear articulation of non-negotiables. This informed approaches to staging the reforms, whereby the intent of the policy would be enacted incrementally. This enabled critical issues such as capacity to be explored, while delivering the progressive reform milestones. The first tranches of roll-out tested the case and gave government an understanding of the critical issues. Rather than continuing a full implementation in limited communities, the government progressed roll-out of fewer hours to all communities. This ensured that all areas were building capacity towards 15 hours concurrently. This also meant that the policy moved out of the hypothetical and into something established, scalable, and resilient to election cycles.

The core components of universality and 15 hours were the non-negotiables. The existing NQF ensured that quality provision would not be compromised. A universal offer was intended to narrow education disparities and the optimal amount of 15 hours was well-established in the evidence and mirrored the existing level of service provision for four-year-olds. Everything else was open to negotiation.

Structures that supported progress

In 2014, the Victorian Government adopted the vision statement of becoming ‘the education state’, to build an education system that produced excellence and reduced the impact of disadvantage. The same year, the Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC), a central agency reporting to the Premier, reactivated interest in early childhood. ECEC was beginning to gain traction in importance relative to school education. Early learning was on the agenda.

Meanwhile, governmental changes were underway. The creation of the Victorian Schools Building Authority (VSBA) in 2016 provided a vehicle to support infrastructure development for education and early childhood. The VSBA remit included building, expanding and modernising kindergartens and schools (VSBA 2022). While it was not set up to support three-year-old kindergarten, when the reform was announced, the VSBA was able to provide crucial support related to infrastructure.

The Victorian Early Childhood Reform Plan was released in 2017 (DET 2017a), outlining the Government’s vision for early childhood, and elevating the profile of early childhood closer to those of other policy areas. It included reforms to create high quality, equitable, inclusive services for children from birth through five years old and their families. Although three-year-old kindergarten was not part of the Reform Plan, it provided a strong foundation for the announcement that would come the following year. This also incorporated concepts, such as the integration between early childhood and schools with co-location where feasible, as part of a range of flexible funding models to effect change created by VSBA and incorporated in the Reform Plan.

Changes to structure of DE that elevated ECEC and the introduction of ministry roles (e.g. Minister for Families and Children in 2014) with a specific ECEC remit, signalled the government's intent for reform. This enabled dedicated work to be progressed in ways that would inform broader policy. Tripartite meetings between the Premier, Treasurer and the Minister for Early Education took place on several occasions, providing opportunities to present the case. The fact that they were taking place boosted confidence within DEECD (and later the Department of Education and Training (DET) as it became in 2017) as it signalled strong interest from the leadership.

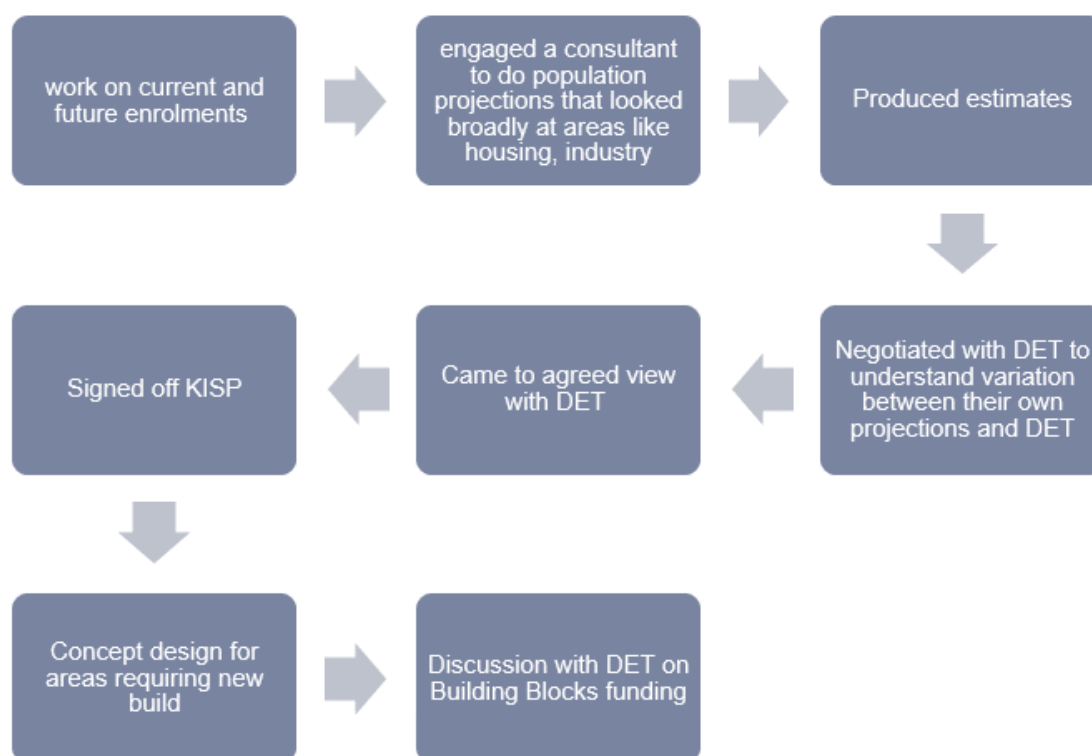
A deep dive into KISPs and why they matter

Kindergarten Infrastructure and Service Plans (KISP) were an important dimension of both the infrastructure and change management pillars, particularly in facilitating conversations between different tiers of government.

Each LGA had to develop a joint assessment with DE, which was used to build relationships between institutions and develop a shared understanding, helping lead to better outcomes. KISPs are published by DE and used to make joint funding decisions. In general, these types of localised approaches to building relationships have been welcomed and are effective. However, it wasn't always received in the way intended. Translating theory into practice can be challenging and creates obstacles. The following examples show some of the barriers that emerged when translating KISPs into real life. They highlight the need to adapt flexibly and how LGAs flexed at times to meet KISP requirements. When referring to the KISP, a government stakeholder noted the air of hesitation, and that at times the service plan wasn't always handled sensitively. The reported lack of communication to some services created a feeling of uncertainty – if the KISP process had been framed more around the aim of maximising the use of services to ensure children don't miss out, then this would have improved the messaging.

This suspicion altered the dynamics in some cases from a process that was designed to foster collaboration between DE and LGAs to a tense exchange of information. In practice, it has meant that translating KISPs into action has not always been as linear nor uniform in application. One of the LGAs outlined how the KISP process worked in reality for them (see 0).

Indicative LGA-DoE KISP working relationship in one LGA



As enablers, funders and providers, the role of LGAs is essential and can be diverse. Building flexibility for collaboration through KISPs is beneficial. But it seems that there could have been more effective ways to derive benefits from engagement between DE and LGAs. For DE to centralise processes and provision means that they are likely to fall short on delivering to communities; but to leave every LGA to decide on its own provision can risk lack of consistency and potentially blurs the lines of accountability. Developing a joint assessment tool like a KISP meant that there was a common framework with shared data and information from which to make decisions. KISPs also provide an opportunity to develop strong relationships between local governments and DE teams. This shows that the way that it was implemented to steer decisions on infrastructure had room for improvement.

Advocacy

Policy reform is usually driven by an identified need for change. This can be progressed through an organised and vocal constituency with social or public desire for change or through incremental change, responding to emerging needs, changing attitudes or new evidence.

An example of this is a public-facing campaign led by the Australian Education Union (Vic), which saw a push from early childhood educators and families for government to commit to investing in three-year-old kindergarten, building momentum over a three-year period. In 2016, a public petition of over 3,500 signatures was delivered to the Minister’s office. In 2017 a further petition was handed directly to the minister by teachers from the sector, this time garnering almost 8,000 signatures. The final push of the campaign was in 2018 in the lead-up to the state election with the AEU and The Parenthood meeting with the Premier to deliver a petition of over 10,000 signatures. Whilst the main purpose of these campaigns was to lobby government for a commitment to three-year-old kindergarten, it also served the purpose of building community awareness and support for early childhood education and the opportunities created for children. However, policy makers reflected that the public support was limited and insufficient for public servants to harness. Therefore, policy makers relied on other leverage points to push the reform.

Consultation and collaboration

Public servants working in central DE valued local relationships and early on acknowledged their importance in informing and tailoring approaches.

While the ‘hub and spoke’ model provided a mechanism within government, it also created mechanisms through which these ‘spokes’ could consult with providers and other groups to inform ongoing policy design. This model has provided a more granular understanding of services, places, number of rooms, and other specific needs and conditions arising from local demographics. It was mostly working, but on occasion it evoked suspicion from local services.

Investing in relationships across services in a particular area has also helped to overcome resistance or suspicion. For example, one public servant summed up how the introduction of early learning networks were effective in overcoming the resistance from service providers to working with three-year-olds. Long day care workers who had experience working with three-year-olds had the opportunity to share their experience with sessional teachers, who had some reservations about extending kindergarten. These networks were a means to bring the sector together and support workers in rolling out reform.

Another example focuses on bringing the sector together to listen to their concerns. A public servant in a pilot area recounted as the policy was announced there wasn’t very much information, but there was a need to bring key stakeholders together. They commented that as initially there was not much policy developed at this early stage, and they expected the providers to have many concerns, they allowed the providers to air their questions, which in turn helped in clarifying the policy and identifying potential issues before they eventuated.

Intersection of evidence and policy

The importance of evidence in policy making has been explored through this paper as foundational for the success of the reforms, however, this work has also highlighted the ways that different forms or sources of evidence may drive decision making depending on the actor group or stage of reform. One senior public servant described the strategic triangle⁹ (NSW Government, 2023) of policy development, explaining that the key to approval of any policy reform, including three-year-old kindergarten, was to situate it at the most appropriate point between what is:

- driven by evidence and provides public value (or is ‘the right thing to do’), i.e., it is supported by robust evidence showing favourable outcomes;
- practically achievable (organisational capacity), i.e., there is the capacity and capability to design and deliver it; and
- politically sellable, sustainable and legitimate (the authorising environment), i.e. politicians would approve it (Moore, 1995).

This section presents examples of how evidence was used at different stages of the reform by different actors to influence decision making.

International and local evidence supporting investment

Engagement with a growing body of international and local research and evaluation of ECEC programs has been a critical strategy for government and sector advocates alike. Evidence includes international and local academics’ research into the benefits of ECEC and the positive outcomes of similar three-year-old ECEC provision offered abroad. This work has been compelling for government and has also supported the development of a shared language on which reforms are built and critiqued.

The evidence is utilised to present a moral and economic argument for change, which demonstrates a ‘public good’ and enables cost-benefit analysis. The evidence base, though not static, provides reference points through which justifications can be made.

Building on foundations

Processes described have highlighted the importance of building on existing policy implementation (e.g. four-year-old kindergarten) as the basis for new relations, extension of services and to help develop costing and modelling. This evidence drawn from practical experience and policy learning has been critical in providing confidence to government and predictability for ECEC providers. It is also a base to build communication channels with families.

Public engagement with evidence

Policy needs to reflect the public’s wants in order for it to gain traction. When a policy becomes an election commitment and part of a political campaign, it is also assessed by other metrics relating to public sentiment and support.

⁹ The strategic triangle was developed by Harvard Kennedy School Professor Mark Moore (1995) as a tool to assist policymakers/public managers devise, refine and assess their policy options and strategic approaches.

Evidence of success: stakeholder hopes and expectations

Interviews explored participant perceptions of success for three-year-old kindergarten. Although each participant articulated success using different words, there was strong consensus on the broad themes of offering every child an opportunity to thrive. Interestingly there were differences in emphasis when it came to defining what that opportunity meant. Anecdotally those with a stronger policy background emphasised closing the attainment gap, focusing on school readiness. For example:

“And we should be as rigorous as we possibly can... to isolate the impact of three-year-old kindergarten on educational outcomes across the entire spectrum of advantage and disadvantage... and whether or not it is widening / narrowing the gap in educational attainment in advantaged and disadvantaged kids.”(Public servant)

“If by Year 7 we can uplift a whole generation of students to get – the rating – have they received as much support and development in their early years, and they’re meeting X benchmark, then to me that’s success of this policy. (Senior sector stakeholder)

Those interviewees working directly with children also referenced school readiness, but when referring to the attainment gap it tended to be broader and have a strong focus on children’s emotional learning and resilience. Many involved in implementation mentioned that success relied on a stable and well-paid workforce.

“[that] children have higher resilience, are socially regulated, can cope with change, function in a group, can participate and listen. That they can socially and emotionally navigate the world – that’s the missing link with children ... [We] want persistence, to be curious and know whether the risk is over or under the limit ... And know their body rhythms when they’re hungry, and ask someone for help ... Language development and ability to communicate their needs [is also important] ... They need to be able to have communication skills.” (service provider)

“All children are enrolled and attending ... The quality of services is amazing; that three-year-olds are enrolled in highest quality of services. [We can see in the] AEDC children are far more ready for school and socially and emotionally developed. People are paid properly and ECEC is seen as part of the educational system, earning a professional wage with career structure. And there is a stable workforce.” (sector stakeholder)

These differences, although subtle at times, are reflective of the wider argument presented in this report. Throughout the policy process, implementation was a bolt-on with experts being consulted on a need-to-know basis. Those closer to and on the front line have experience and expertise that would have been valuable to share earlier in the process. What often seems like a top-down approach could benefit from greater reciprocity. That is not without risk, nor is it always easy; central government departments hold the budget and accountability, but it creates a default if those central functions do not ensure communication, feedback, and relationship building with the other stakeholders is nurtured.

One parent provided a different perspective about success. They saw their child learning valuable information from kinder:

I know that they are learning things, and often things maybe I wouldn’t ever think to be discussing at home and stuff like that. She came home and obviously they’d been doing something about space and she was telling me all about how the moon controls the ocean, and I was like, “Well yeah, it does.” I could probably tell her that or explore that with her, and it’d go in one ear and out the other. But because someone else has had that experience with her and obviously there’s been some sort of activity or something to explore it, it’s been absorbed differently.

The success of three-year old kindergarten, however it is defined, rests on successful implementation; on a workforce that can be recruited and retained across the state; on buildings and spaces where children can thrive; and on systems that support change management – by enabling coordination between and within the multitude of stakeholders that make up the ECEC ecosystem. A range of skills, expertise and experience are needed to make it happen.

While evidence has been influential in building the case for investment in three-year-old kindergarten, it does not enable change in isolation. While there is a tendency to cite evidence as a static force, these examples show the ways in which different types of evidence has been used and been influential throughout the reform process as a dynamic force.

Implications and learnings

Scaling up and implementation

Three-year-old kindergarten was focussed on the three implementation pillars of workforce, infrastructure, and cultural acceptance. Implementing roll-out of policy was built on the aforementioned 'hub-and-spoke' model that is dependent on strong governance and accountability structures. Relationships and information exchange between the central DE 'hub' and the 'spokes' – be they authorities such as VSBA or LGAs, services, or families – is crucial for roll-out.

It is in DE's interest to ensure every actor in the reform has a collective mindset of delivery, and it is their responsibility to facilitate communication channels and manage the governance overhead between the Department-funded authority bodies such as the ECIB and VSBA, and LGAs and the services. LGAs also play a major role at this point in the reform, to ensure their communities' needs are seen to. This early stage of roll-out to regional LGAs facilitated feedback on how the Department's plans for reform could be improved and what systems worked successfully.

In order to have good governance and accountability, everyone has to have a shared understanding of delivery, and it is in the Department's interest to ensure all parties have this collective goal. However, this implementation approach comes with significant investment in governance, which is hard at the beginning but in time runs itself. This hub-and-spoke model was a central feature that senior public servants relied on to coordinate the three implementation strands and to deliver the reform. Adapting and tailoring to the local contexts with the right balance between accountability and flexibility remains a significant challenge.

Public engagement in policy making

One of the tensions surfaced through this work relates to the levels of consultation throughout the reform process. While this work has demonstrated that some of the processes are necessarily opaque, for example Cabinet-in-Confidence processes and budget proposal processes, the work also identifies the benefits that flowed from greater public involvement in the policy-making process. Research suggests that even in the face of vested interest groups arguing a particular position, reform grounded in robust evidence, as this reform was, is likely to be enacted (Daley, 2021). Additionally, reform supported by the public is more likely to be adopted (Daley, 2021). This type of engagement may also assist in addressing resistance to change, a feature of many change management processes. It was noted that once the change is happening and it is no longer a hypothetical, it becomes easier to manage.

There was a lot of intermediary work to be done, for example, around stakeholder engagement between different groups – whether that was between DE and individual LGAs, or LGAs and parents or providers. This approach generated success, for example in developing more effective communication with families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Participants from the sector noticed some communications needed to be focussed on CALD families and approached DE for funding specific for CALD outreach. The strategies required to manage the change varied between councils, and councils needed to be supported.

While timing these processes in advance of roll-out decisions would benefit future roll-outs, this case study had shown that it is never too late to start.

Key learnings and reflections

This case report demonstrates that major policy reform in a minor policy area can be achieved, even if currently there is little push for reform from the constituency despite evidence showing the considerable impact an additional year of education has on individual and economic outcomes when there is little push for reform from the constituency. The key lesson from the case report is that this kind of successful policy reform requires multiple contributing components: a long development time, a strong body of evidence, a capable public service and political will at the highest levels. The public service, who drove a significant amount of the work of this reform, being able to flow with the natural waxing and waning of the policy reform cycle, and reading windows of opportunity, was a crucial player in this reform.

The size and complexity of this reform should not be underestimated. Public servants and political advisers talked about it as the longest, hardest reform they worked on with the most significant impact.

Nonetheless, some of the challenges discussed in this case report remain. Early childhood is still considered the ‘pimple on the pumpkin’, although with the June 2022 announcement of a doubling of four-year-old kindergarten hours in NSW and Victoria from 15 to 30 a week, this may be slowly changing. Engagement with families remains difficult, especially those not accessing kindergarten. Workforce challenges are ongoing in the sector and have the potential to impact both the roll-out of three-year-old and expansion of four-year-old kindergarten, as well as the quality-of-service children receive. Finally, the complex nature of the ECEC sector, with a mixed market and multiple different types of service providers, remains a challenge with many areas for improvement. Children may access three-year-old kindergarten either through stand-alone sessional kindergartens or through long day care centres – each provide qualified early childhood teachers, although family out-of-pocket expenses may vary given different funding models.

The story told in this case report presents the ups and downs so commonly associated with effective policymaking. It highlights the role of evidence, the importance of existing policy and practice precedents, and developing relationships. Lessons learned from Victoria’s experience can be applied in other jurisdictions with regards to ECEC, as well as in other social policy areas.

If 15 hours of three-year-old kindergarten is successful, the benefits will be long-lasting for children, their families and wider society.

Conclusion

Three-year-old kindergarten is being rolled out across Victoria and will continue to be implemented until full delivery in 2029. Given the significant size of this reform, it is reasonable to expect challenges at each stage of the roll-out. The anticipated need for an adaptive and iterative process, has required policymakers, stakeholders, and the sector to be flexible and responsive. Inevitably there have been changes to implementation, but the core principles of the policy have not changed nor has the commitment to children and families. Given the size, scale and timelines for this reform, there have been many successes, and Victorian children and families stand to benefit as a result.

This report identifies some of the challenges, including workforce, infrastructure and change management, as well as some of the opportunities. It also identifies some of the gaps that have emerged as a result of implementation seen as a secondary consideration to policymaking.

The inability to deliver on workforce, infrastructure or change management risks policy failure. Built-in mechanisms, such as a phased roll-out schedule, and KISPS to support robust, targeted implementation, mitigate against some of that risk. This analysis presents a hypothesis that had implementation experts been involved from the beginning, there would have been increased capacity to address some of the challenges. Navigating delivery in a mixed market, recruiting and retaining a high-quality workforce, and being able to tailor provision locally are just some of the areas that could have had obvious benefits.

There is shared commitment and consensus within the Victorian ECEC sector on the value and importance of an offer of this scale. With ECEC reform prominent across Australia, there are valuable lessons to be learnt to support all policymakers and implementation experts to enable Australian children to reach their full potential. The scale of ambition and long-term commitments made to these reforms will benefit children and the economy far into our future.

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Exhibit 1

Timeline of events in the development of three-year-old kindergarten reform

Year	Development	Type of development
Late 1990s	Dr Fraser Mustard harnessed research in child development to advocate for beneficial policy and practice change	Research evidence
1998	Universal kindergarten for four-year-olds in UK	International policy reform
Early 2000's	New Labour's flagship Sure Start program implemented in the UK	International policy reform
Early 2000's	Nobel Laureate James Heckman produced evidence of financial returns from investment in early childhood programs	Research evidence
Early 2000's	Professor Jack Shonkoff published evidence of the benefits of early childhood programs on brain development	Research evidence
2005	Early childhood moved to the Office of Children within the Department of Human Services	Victorian government restructure
2006	Dr Mustard became Thinker in Residence in South Australia	Engagement with research evidence
2006	Sure Start leaders from the UK visited Victoria	Engagement with international leaders
2006	Professor Heckman presented his research in Australia at a conference sponsored by the Department of Human Services; he also to Victorian Cabinet	Research evidence and engagement
2006	Victorian paper highlighting the need for early childhood education to support productivity presented by Premier Steve Bracks MP to Council of Australian Government meeting	Engagement with research evidence
2007	Early childhood moved to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD; formed at that time)	Victorian government restructure
2008	Announcement of the COAG national partnership and Commonwealth-funded universal provision of 15 hours of four-year-old kindergarten	Announcement of policy reform
By 2010	All UK three-year-olds eligible for 15 hours of kindergarten per week	International policy change

Year	Development	Type of development
2010	Effective Early Educational Experiences (E4Kids) study commenced, with findings produced in 2016	Research evidence
2012	National Quality Framework established, combining regulation for early childhood education and care quality (COAG agreement 2009)	Regulatory framework introduction
2013	Commencement of universal four-year-old kindergarten implementation nationally	National policy change and service delivery
2014	Victorian state election (November)	State election
2014	Jenny Mikakos MP became Minister for Families and Children	Victorian government restructure
2014	Victoria adopted the vision statement of becoming 'the education state'	Victorian government vision
2015	DEECD became Department of Education and Training (DET)	Victorian government restructure
2016	Professors Edward Melhuish and Steve Barnett, both leading international researchers in early childhood, visited Australia	Research evidence
2016	Victorian Schools Building Authority established	Policy change and infrastructure support
2016	Three-year-old kindergarten first proposal	Funding proposal
2017	Victorian Early Childhood Reform Plan released	Reform Plan released
2017	Three-year-old kindergarten second proposal	Funding proposal
2017	Jenny Mikakos MP became Minister for Early Childhood Education	Victorian government restructure
2018	Three-year-old kindergarten third proposal	Funding proposal
2018	Announcement of commitment to funded three-year-old kindergarten	Commitment to policy reform
2020	Children in initial implementation sites (six regional local government areas) have access to funded three-year-old kindergarten	Implementation commenced
2021	Children in 15 additional areas in Victoria have access to funded three-year-old kindergarten	Phase 2 of implementation

Year	Development	Type of development
2022	All children in Victoria have access to funded three-year-old kindergarten	Phase 3 of implementation
2022	Victoria and New South Wales announce doubling of funded four-year-old kindergarten to 30 hours per week	Commitment to policy reform
