

INQUIRER 7

Parents count cost of reform in child care

New quality standards being considered by the states and territories will hit families in the pocket

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BY the time many children start school, they have spent more time in day care than they will in the classroom over the next 13 years. But while schools are tightly regulated by governments — which control where they are built, who owns them, what they teach and who teaches it — child care is a lucky dip.

Eleven per cent of Australia's 5927 daycare centres failed inspections by the National Childcare Accreditation Council this year. Unsafe buildings and equipment, poor hygiene and lax food safety standards — including dead cockroaches in a playroom, faeces in a sandpit and exposed electrical sockets — were found in one in five centres.

In Australia, anyone can build a childcare centre anywhere — subject only to council building laws — and anybody can own one. Child care was even a popular stock market investment until the nation's biggest daycare chain, ABC Learning — which still controls 15 per cent of the market — collapsed under \$1.6 billion of debt a year ago. The group is now likely to be sold to a profit-driven private equity group before Christmas.

Taxpayers will pump \$13bn into the industry, through rebates and subsidies for childcare fees, over the next four years. Parents will spend at least as much in fees, which can top \$120 a day in Sydney and Melbourne. Soon child care will cost even more.

The first national quality standards for child care will be decided at the Council of Australian Governments meeting in Brisbane on Monday. The states and territories appear set to sign off on new staffing regulations that COAG's own consultant, Access Economics, calculates could cost parents \$50 a week more.

In a nutshell, most childcare centres would be forced to hire extra staff, and would no longer be able to hire unqualified workers earning the minimum wage. Every centre would have to employ at least one university-qualified teacher.

At present less than one-third of centres in the ACT, the Northern Territory, South Australia and Tasmania would meet the proposed new standards. In Victoria — where centres are allowed to employ one worker to care for 15 three-year-olds — only 9 per cent of centres would meet the proposed new ratio of one carer for 11 children.

The new standard, championed by the federal government and likely to be ticked off by the states and territories, would make centres hire one carer for every three children younger than two, one for every five children aged two to three, and one for every 11 children three and older. The existing hotchpotch of ratios ranges from 1:5 for babies to 1:15 for the over-threes.

Jodie Thiele, 25, has worked in a childcare centre since she left school and looks after 10 three and four-year-olds in the "kindy room" of her South Australian centre. "Imagine trying to do 10 things at once," she told the recent Senate inquiry into child care.

Thiele, who has a six-month TAFE certificate in child care, earns \$18 an hour but unqualified workers are paid as little as \$14 an hour, the minimum wage.

One-third of staff leave the industry each year, a turnover rate the community would never tolerate among schoolteachers.

COAG will also discuss the

best way to rate centres on quality, so parents can have some idea of how their centre performs.

The reforms have pitted commercial childcare centres — which predict operators will whittle down the number of childcare places in order to meet the new staffing ratios — against childcare unions and early childhood experts who insist the existing staff ratios are dangerously low for children at such a crucial time in their development.

Early Childhood Australia, an advocacy group that describes itself as "a voice for young children", is pressing governments to adopt even tougher standards than those set to be signed off on Monday.

Instead of making centres employ one carer for every four babies and toddlers, a reform that could cost parents \$50 a week for a child in full-time care, it wants a 1:3 ratio, which would cost twice as much.

"The quality of young children's experience in the first five years will shape their future," the group's president, Margaret Young, tells *Inquirer*. "It [affects] their self-confidence and mental health, their achievement at school, their ability to resolve conflicts and capacity to develop relationships."

The group has the support of a formidable list of 43 organisations — among them the Australian Council of Social Service, the Association for Infant Mental Health, charities Mission Australia and the Benevolent Society, and the non-profit KU, C&K and Lady Gowrie childcare groups — that wrote to the Prime Minister, premiers and chief ministers this week urging them to fast-track the reforms, which otherwise would not kick in until 2013 at the earliest.

They are pitted against the commercial childcare sector, which is warning of closures should COAG force up centres' costs. So frantic is the last-ditch lobbying that both sides have hired public relations consultants to pitch their message in the countdown to COAG.

Childcare Alliance Australia — representing 2300 centres — wants more consultation and costings before COAG imposes any changes. It disputes the Access Economics calculations and claims parents will have to pay \$13 to \$22 a day a child in higher fees.

"For a family with two children in child care five days a week, that is an increase of \$220 per week," the group says. "Parents who have already reached the maximum childcare rebate of \$7778 per child per annum will have to meet the entire increase in fees."

Families on low incomes, or those who miss out on taxpayer subsidies because they do not use child care for work or study, would be "forced out of formal care", the Childcare Alliance says. Children at risk of neglect in their own homes would lose the "sanctuary" of daily day care, "often the only place where they have regular meals and access to clean clothes".

Family First senator Steve Fielding is demanding the federal government ensure working families are not priced out of child care.

"Many Australian families do not have the luxury of being able to rely on only one working parent, and depend on being able to access affordable child care in order to make ends meet," he wrote to Childcare Minister Kate Ellis on Thursday.

But when it comes down to knowing their children are being properly cared for, many parents — such as Canberra mother Jemma Greentree — are happy to pay the price. "My children are so important to me," she reasons. "I don't want to compromise quality for cost."

Jemma Greentree with daughters Adana and Caliya in Canberra

