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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Early Childhood Education

SPEECH

Monday, 24 November 2014

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Page 12956
Questioner
Speaker Elliot, Justine, MP

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Mrs ELLIOT (Richmond) (12:45): I rise to support this motion, by the shadow minister and member for Adelaide, about the importance of quality early childhood education. We value that so much that in government Labor committed to making sure there was more funding, because we understand the importance of quality early childhood education. The fact is that there is a large amount of evidence that this high-quality early childhood education has enormous benefits. I certainly have seen it firsthand in my electorate. I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge and thank the outstanding work of the hardworking childcare workers in my area and also acknowledge the childcare centres as well. But those workers do a fantastic job. Yet, despite all the benefits that are provided by early childhood education, this government, the Abbott Liberal-National government, continues to refuse to commit to supporting this very crucial year of early education. Instead, since coming to office, it has already announced \$1 billion of funding cuts to early childhood education.

The fact is that investing in early childhood education has massive developmental benefits, which have a positive effect on a child's abilities and, of course, also their future life opportunities. It was the Labor government that first negotiated the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education to provide universal access to preschool and kindergarten, making sure that every single child in Australia could access this very crucial part of their education.

In 2008, before Labor introduced this universal access funding for preschool and kindergarten, just 12 per cent of Australian children received at least 15 hours of quality education in the year before school. In 2012, that figure had risen to over 56 per cent. Research shows that children who attend preschool go on to score significantly better in year 3 NAPLAN tests and in year 4 reading, maths and science, yet this government continues to provide uncertainty through its lack of an ongoing funding commitment. This is even with the evidence staring it in the face: international and Australian research has shown that at least 15 hours of preschool education per week in the year before school has such lasting positive impacts on the educational and social outcomes for children throughout the rest of their education and throughout the rest of their life.

If we look at what federal Labor did, we provided \$970 million over five years for universal access and topped that up with an additional \$660 million to make sure that states and territories were reaching the target of 15 hours per week, especially reaching out to disadvantaged children so that they got the early education that they needed. We do know that it is so incredibly important when it comes to early childhood education, because many preschoolers begin their first year of formal schooling, usually kindergarten, with varying levels of literacy skills. This variability is largely affected by their home environments but also by the availability of quality early childhood education programs. We know that a child's preschool entry literacy skills are a significant predictor of their first grade reading scores and that poor literacy skills of the start of preschool are more likely to lead to poor reading skills in grade 1. All of this highlights the need for targeted and very specific programs focusing on early childhood education. In fact, the CEO of the Benevolent Society, Joanne Toohey, said:

One in five children starting school—

or 22 per cent—

is 'vulnerable' in one or more areas of development. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children the rate is double this, at 43 per cent. We know that early childhood education and care enhances child development and makes a significant difference to children's school readiness and performance in later life, particularly for disadvantaged children, if the services are of a high quality.

So we know that investment in early childhood education helps all children achieve their full potential.

Evidence also suggests that there is an economic value in investing in the national quality framework. In their report *Putting a value on early childhood education and care in Australia*, PricewaterhouseCoopers outlined some of the long-term benefits from increasing childhood participation in quality early care and education. The

modelling used within the report shows that children receiving quality early childhood education and care—defined in the report as 'education and care which either meets or exceeds national quality standards'—would generate up to \$10.3 billion.

It seems, though, that the future of our children and their preschool education is just being ignored by the Abbott Liberal-National government and is subject to more of their cruel and unjust cuts. The government seems determined to undermine the hugely successful national partnership agreement, which, as I said, was introduced by Labor in 2008. We know that, without funding certainty, contact hours could be reduced, services closed or staff laid off, and that would make the pressure on other childcare centres very great as well.

I, like others who are speaking in support of this motion, call on the government to provide certainty of funding for kindergartens and preschools, with the continued goal of ensuring that every child receives 15 hours of quality early education a week in the year before school. We see the facts and we know what a difference it makes—and we know how important it is to a child's education and also to their future livelihood.