



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

Child Care

SPEECH

Wednesday, 17 June 2020

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Wednesday, 17 June 2020
Page 105
Questioner
Speaker Wilson, Josh, MP

Source House
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Mr JOSH WILSON (Fremantle) (19:49): There are three things we know about accessible and affordable high-quality early childhood education: it's essential for giving children the best and fairest start in life and for putting them on the path to lifelong learning; it's essential for supporting the fullest economic participation of women; and, because of the first two things, it's one of the most important ways we can improve both quality and productivity in Australia.

The significance of all three imperatives has been sharpened by the global health pandemic, which has knocked around families, disrupted kids' education and shown how poorly prepared our economy was for dealing with such shocks. Through this pandemic we've seen more clearly than ever that early childhood educators are essential workers. I want to thank them for their contribution to this crisis and I want them to know that they're valued. We know that they should be better supported. On that basis, it's hard to understand why the government has decided to withdraw support, including JobKeeper, from childcare services next month. We already know that JobKeeper is a short and patchy blanket, with millions left missing out. And now that blanket is being whipped away from a sector that is key to our recovery and key to our long-term future.

In my electorate of Fremantle, there are 75 childcare facilities that provide early education to nearly 6,000 families and 7½ thousand children. Many of these families are dealing with the acute economic impacts of the coronavirus, and those impacts have been hardest on low-income families and hardest on women. A survey of more than 1,000 parents conducted by The Front Project, and reported in *The West Australian* by Lanai Scarr and Bethany Hiatt, has found that for 35 per cent the cost and availability of child care has affected where they choose to live and that for 55 per cent the cost of childcare fees affects their weekly grocery budget. That rises to 64 per cent for low-income families. Back in April, the Prime Minister said:

I don't want a parent to have to choose between feeding their kids and having their kids looked after, or having their education being provided.

This survey indicates that two-thirds of low-income families are facing some kind of conflict in choosing between childcare fees and their weekly groceries.

Since March, the impacts on childcare operators have been devastating in some cases. There are centres that have closed, and many providers, particularly those in the family day care space have suffered substantial losses. As that unfolded it has meant that essential workers—nurses and teachers—were forced to choose between working and finding someone to care for their kids.

If I could choose one example of how early childhood care and education is a life changer I'd pick the Young Parent Centre at Port School in Hamilton Hill. Port is an independent school with a focus on supporting and educating kids who are vulnerable and at risk. Some years ago, the school leadership embarked on the innovation of creating the Young Parent Centre on site, which enabled young mums—mums who are teenagers—to finish their high school education or to undertake a VET course, with their babies or toddlers cared for close at hand. It's really not hard to understand what a massive difference that makes. For those mums and their kids, it's quite literally the difference between a future in the short term with or without education. And that education is being provided at the same time for both the young women and their children. You would think that this kind of service is exactly what every relevant part of our system should be straining to enable and should be falling over itself to support. And yet that hasn't been the case, and Port's Young Parent Centre is one of many centres that have not received proper support through this crisis. That can't be how our system operates; we have to do better.

It's a matter of huge concern that Australia ranks 49th in the World Economic Forum's gender participation opportunity index for 2020, which measures female workforce participation remuneration and so on. While women make up more than 95 per cent of the childcare workforce and 68 per cent of all part-time employees, they still earn on average 39 per cent less than men for doing equivalent work. Until we address these imbalances

and disparities, Australia will not achieve its potential and will not be the best form of the fair and egalitarian nation that is at the core of our national character and ethos.

Other countries do things differently and they get much better outcomes. The Educare model in Sweden is one example, and I'm aware that the effective abolition of childcare fees in Germany has delivered positive results in those three areas I mentioned at the start—better education, better and fairer participation of women in the workforce and a corresponding impact on productivity and broader social and economic wellbeing. Why wouldn't we want that for our country? Why aren't we taking a sensible approach to reforming early childhood education in Australia instead of pulling the rug out from under a sector, a workforce and an educational service that is so vital to Australian families?