

NSW and Victoria meddle in pre-schools

Graham Pinn



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On June 16, the Premiers of New South Wales and Victoria announced ‘the greatest transformation of childhood education in a generation’.

The Victorian government will spend \$9 billion to provide 30 hours a week of play-based learning for four-year-olds, with a rollout from 2025. They will also provide free kindergarten for three-year-olds, for up to 15 hours.

The New South Wales government will spend \$5.8 billion on a similar scheme with later commencement, it reports that this would somehow eventually translate into \$17 billion in increased economic activity; this is in addition to the federal government committing \$5 billion to the cost of childcare.

Following Covid, the federal and state finances are in disarray.

Federal debt has ballooned towards \$1 trillion. NSW debt stood at \$50 billion in 2019, heading to \$140 billion this year and under \$200 billion by 2025. Figures for Victoria are equally parlous, increasing from under \$50 billion in 2019 to \$150 this year and \$210 billion by 2025. The other states and territories have had relatively smaller increases as they were less damaged by Draconian, and perhaps unnecessary, lock-downs.

With these economic threats, it seems a bad time to introduce yet more welfare demand, a demand which we know, once introduced, will never be rescinded. Should we need a better example of where this leads, we have to look no further than the sky-rocketing cost of the NDIS.

Apart from the financial consequences, there are a number of political imperatives at work here. There is a belief that early commencement of education will result in improved educational outcomes; teachers and other unions are in favour of this job creation.

Also, that greater child care will allow more parents to return to the workforce. Underlying this debate is the changed concept of parenting, with the welfare state increasingly expected to take over the traditional role of rearing children, a role which was once considered not only a parental obligation but also their financial commitment.

Currently, there is a shortage of workers in many areas, it is tempting to think that freedom from the (self-inflicted) demands of parenting, would allow many women to return to work to fill those shortages. There are, fortunately, still some who consider involvement in their children's development to be an obligation and a source of iuytrsatisfaction. At the other extreme, there are a number who look on this as a release from responsibility, but who have no intention of going to work. In view of the cost, it would seem logical to provide child-care, if considered appropriate, only for those who do return to work. There may also be only a short-term demand for workers, if predictions of a recession come to pass the situation may change dramatically, with unemployment rising.

The other big question is the predicted educational outcome, there is no doubt education is in disarray. A UNICEF study in 2017 showed that Australia had slipped down the league tables of educational achievement, coming in at 39 out of 41 in high and middle-income countries, ahead of only Turkey and Romania. In 2003, the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) ranked 15-year-old Australian students 10th in maths, 4th in reading, and 6th in science; 15 years later the results were 23rd in maths, 16th in reading, and 14th in science.

The problems besetting education relate to classroom discipline, distorted curricula, declining teaching standards, fad-driven teaching methods, and reduced parental input. As classroom size has declined and more money is invested, (\$36 billion in 2019-2020), the deterioration continues, now enhanced by the Covid pandemic. It is nothing short of scandalous that after 12 years of schooling, 40 per cent of adults have achieved only a basic level of literacy; for many of my parents' generation, leaving school at 14 had educated them better than those with 4 extra years

A quarter of a million children were enrolled in pre-school activity at 3 years age, part of Julia Gillard's "education revolution" to develop a child's "social and cognitive development"; this number had risen to 330,000 by 2021. The traditional education starting point had been at age 5 years, prior to commencing year 1 schooling at 6. Studies from America (whence all good things come) in the early 2000s suggested that improved economic outcomes could be achieved with an earlier start, but that misguided philosophy seems to have persisted. It is also concerning that children of this age are

being subtly targeted by left-wing ideology in areas such as trans-gender, climate change, anti-colonialism, etc.

Parents in America have complained about drag queens in classrooms to promote 'inclusivity', New York schools have spent \$200,000 on this activity; at least the parents (when informed) have the ability to demand change.

A suggestion of early improvement following pre-school does not carry through to later years. Several studies, both in Australia and overseas, have failed to show any long-term benefit from early education, in literacy and numeracy, on NAPLAN (National Assessment Program, Literacy and Numeracy) testing. The latest 2021 US study has confirmed no academic benefit, it did suggest it resulted in better-adjusted children, but without considering the input of motivated parents who had to pay for this activity. NSW and Victoria appear intent on following the Biden playbook with free pre-schooling, in the case of America, an eye-watering extra \$1.8 trillion over 10 years, would be needed from the debt-ridden economy.

We are already breaking the bank with debt, yet politics indicate, without evidence, we 'must do more' to improve both education and employment prospects. As is often the case, with welfare, education, health, care of the disabled or elderly, or the NDIS, we must be governed, not by what we would like, but by what we can afford.

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