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Urgent reform crucial to solving serious safety issues in early childhood settings

The union representing teachers in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in NSW and the ACT has called for urgent action to address the staffing crisis in the sector as new data reveals ongoing child safety issues.

A Productivity Commission report shows there were 9430 serious incidents at early childhood services in NSW in 2024-25, a rate of 154 incidents reported per 100 centres. A serious incident is one that has a grave impact on the health, safety or wellbeing of a child.

It also reveals NSW's use of staffing waivers, which allow services a temporary exemption from some quality regulations, has more than doubled from 316 in 2019 to 658 in 2024 – the highest in the country.

"This data shows the sector needs urgent changes to rebuild a strong child safety culture," said Independent Education Union of Australia NSW/ACT Branch Secretary Carol Matthews. "Well-trained, properly paid staff are key to solving this safety crisis."

Matthews said children attending centres with staffing waivers are at greater risk of serious harm. The reduction in the proportion of staff who have qualifications also directly impacts the safety of children.

"When there aren't enough staff, children aren't properly supervised, and that's when safety breaches occur," she said. "Serious incidents are often the result of inadequate supervision and that is a direct consequence of understaffing."

Matthews said better pay and conditions are key to improving the quality of services and solving the sector's staffing shortages. Early childhood teachers should have pay parity with their colleagues who teach in primary schools.

"Our members are constantly telling us that employers and governments need to take child safety seriously by addressing the staffing crisis in the sector," Matthews said.

The Productivity Commission's report also showed the importance of adequate staffing ratios to effectively protect the safety and best interests of young children attending early learning centres.

"Staff-to-child ratios must be reviewed; for example, to ensure that one adult is never left alone with a group of children," Matthews said. "If one staff member leaves a group of 20 children to assist one child in the bathroom, that leaves one adult alone with 19 children."

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The IEUA NSW/ACT Branch represents 32,000 teachers, principals and support staff in Catholic and independent schools, early childhood centres and post-secondary colleges.

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