

Implementation Lesson:

LEARNINGS FROM THE EDGE STUDY ABOUT THE ROLL-OUT OF THREE-YEAR-OLD KINDERGARTEN

the
FrontProject

Acknowledgement of Country

The Front Project respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and learn. We pay respect to Elders past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded.

It **always was** and **always will be, Aboriginal Land.**

About the Front Project

The Front Project is a national, philanthropically-funded organisation that puts children and families at the centre. We work with the early childhood sector, government and business leaders to ensure the early childhood system lives up to what children and families want from it.

Our vision is of an early childhood system that delivers quality and access for families and supports children's agency and voice, early development, and future outcomes.

We believe in matching the quality of our nation's early childhood system with the high expectations we hold for all children. We want all families to have the opportunity to thrive, regardless of the challenges they face.

The Front Project works systematically to develop evidence-based, meaningful, and pragmatic policy solutions that create deep, sustained, and long-term change for greater impact.

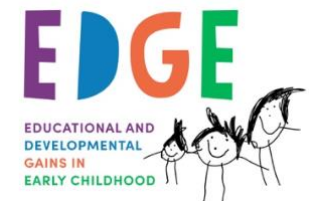


info@thefrontproject.org.au
www.thefrontproject.org.au

The **Educational and Developmental Gains in Early Childhood** (EDGE) study is a comprehensive initiative aimed at evaluating the rollout and impact of three-year-old kindergarten in Victoria, Australia. This five-year study, led by the University of Melbourne in partnership with The Front Project and the Victorian Department of Education, seeks to fill the gap in Australian evidence on the impact of kindergarten on children's outcomes and how to achieve an equitable and impactful system.

The EDGE study focuses on five key domains:

- **Impact on children**
- **Professional Practice and Learning Experiences**
- **Economic Impact**
- **Policy, systems and infrastructure**
- **Integration and influence**



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This series profiles implementation lessons from the EDGE study to explore critical policy questions aiming to support planning both at local and jurisdictional levels that seek to deliver quality preschool and improve outcomes for children.

The series explores issues that government, services, teachers and communities often grappled with during different stages of the implementation of three-year-old kindergarten reforms in Victoria between 2020 and 2029. This profiles **program and practice** implementation alongside matters relating to **conditions and structures**.

Program and practice	Error! Reference source not found.	Error! Reference source not found.	Error! Reference source not found.
	What does it take and its impact on practice?	Does mixing age groups make a difference to quality and teacher experience?	Can three-year-old kinder leverage early support?
Conditions and structures	Error! Reference source not found.	Error! Reference source not found.	Error! Reference source not found.
	What else is in place in high-quality services?	What does the workforce need to deliver two years of quality kindergarten?	What is needed to grow quality at the scale required to shift outcomes?

The implementation lessons draw on findings and insights from three of the five EDGE study domains: *Impact on Children*, *Professional Practice and Learning Experiences (PPLE)*, and *Policy, systems and infrastructure*. Examination of large-scale reform through the *Policy, Systems and Infrastructure* domain enabled exploration of some of the approaches, challenges and stages implementation. Insights drawn from the *Professional Practice and Learning Experiences* domain centre the experiences teachers, educators, directors, Kindergarten Improvement Advisors and Preschool Field Officers, families and children in the roll-out of three-year-old kindergarten. Preliminary analysis from the *Impact on Children* domain explores some of the specific program, practice and policy settings and their impact on quality and children’s outcomes. Combined, these learnings aim to provide responses to critical policy questions to inform similar reforms with practical recommendations.

Programs and Practices

Rolling out three-year-old kindergarten has required a range of program and practice changes to work with younger children. Some of these changes have related to practice (differentiating teaching practice for younger groups), while others have related to how the program offer is configured (mixing three- and four-year-old groups). There are also a range of opportunities and that are presented through these reforms (inclusion and early intervention) that require and enable different practice responses.

Without attending to these program-level issues and opportunities, large-scale implementation outcomes may be compromised.

Implementation priorities

This section draws on *Policy, Systems and Infrastructure* examination of implementing large-scale reform (including literature, interviews, and sector engagement) to frame three key program and practice implementation priorities commonly perceived as barriers at early stages of the reform.

Teaching younger children	Mixed age groups	Early intervention
Implementing three-year-old kindergarten at scale has required kindergarten teacher to differentiate their practice for a younger age group. Teaching children in earlier developmental stages Supporting needs of a younger age group – physical (e.g. toileting and sleep) and emotional (separation anxiety) Perceptions that children may be too young to engage in a kindergarten program (held by some parents and professionals)	Mixing three- and four-year-old children in kindergarten requires teachers to manage a broader range of developmental diversity. Teaching and responding to broader developmental diversity Ensuring programs engage all children - challenging older children without leaving younger children behind Being intentional about programming mixed age group – rather than ‘topping up’ enrolments	Implementing two years of quality kindergarten offers early support for children’s inclusion and early intervention. Ensuring capability in identifying developmental concerns across a broader age range Opportunity to support families and children with referrals to specialist support earlier and over two years Readiness in settings to support inclusion Referral pathways rely on access and availability of specialist support

The following priorities relating to the workforce apply to each of the above areas of practice and program implementation:

- attracting and retaining enough qualified teachers with the required skills, capabilities and confidence to deliver three-year-old programs
- conditions of teachers and educators including working hours, remuneration, planning and programming time
- time to support inclusion and early intervention effort (supporting families, navigating referral pathways), and
- ongoing professional learning and support to build knowledge and practice

This requires both broader change management strategies and supports in addition to those needed for program and practice level implementation.

In the next section, these perceived barriers are cross-examined using insights from the *Impact on Children* and *Professional Practice and Learning Experiences* domains that test and respond to the underlying assumptions.

Findings from the EDGE study

Findings from across the EDGE domains have been used to identify the following themes that respond with evidence to some of the presenting priorities. For example, the Professional Practice and Learning Experiences domain sought the perspectives of teachers, educators and directors involved in the study about their experiences of reforms, while the Impact of Children domain brings forward comparative findings from different service types relative to children's outcomes and the quality of their settings. Research undertaken through the Policy Systems and Infrastructure work supports these findings with insights from policymakers that relate to the process of developing and implementation the reforms.

Teachers and parents can see the benefits of two years of Kindergarten

The participants spoke about the value of two years of kindergarten for children. Not only in the benefits children gained, but in supporting their ability to gain deep knowledge of children's learning and development over time. This enabled teachers to share their knowledge with prep teachers to support the child's transition to school.

"[Children] Having the knowledge of themselves that they know their interests and knowing how to regulate their own emotions... But we give that full story to the prep teachers, which is really nice, because we've got at least two years of knowing the majority of these children" (Director – regional service) (Page et al., 2025-a, p.8).

Parents saw the friendships and connections that the children develop in kindergarten as beneficial for children in establishing their own community and having that continuity as they transition to school.

"... a lot of the kids that she's in kinder with will go to the same school. There's that continuity of being in the same cohort and having. (Parent, regional, interview)"

Parents recognised the opportunities of peer interactions that their children gained from two years of kindergarten. The parents themselves were also able to develop networks and a community with each other over this time.

"He knows how to interact with his peers. Then for me, . . . just getting to know the other mums and just chatting with them and having that little community, which was really nice. (Parent, metro, interview)"

Scaling brought new networks

To deliver three-year-old kindergarten at scale the Victorian Government leveraged the capacity of both sessional kindergartens and long day care services – an extension of its approach to delivering 15 hours of four-year-old kindergarten. While this represented a new contracting approach for government it also enabled learning opportunities to be accelerated through networks between different service types. This brought together the knowledge and history sessional of kindergarten with long day care rich experience of providing quality education and care programs with younger and mixed age groups.

"...early learning networks were created to allow long day care and sessional kindergarten staff to discuss their experiences in supporting three-year-olds. The department, along with local government and the sector worked together to communicate their experiences and learnt from each other. A public servant noted that once the roll-outs happened in 2022, there has been less resistance from teachers (The Front Project, 2024, p. 14).

Preliminary analysis undertaken by the Impact on Children domain using Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which assesses the quality of teacher-child interactions in kindergarten programs, also shows that there is no significant difference between the results in kindergarten when compared to long day care (Eadie et al, 2024).

CLASS assesses the quality of teacher-child interaction in their learning environment in three areas:

Emotional Support: involves fostering relationships that enable emotional connection. It focuses on creating an environment that is warm, positive, and inclusive, where children feel secure to take risks and develop friendships.

Classroom Organisation: how teachers prepare and plan environments and how they spend time to support children's learning.

Instructional Support: how well teachers help children learn and support them to make connections between their learning and their experiences.

Peer learning was an untapped asset in kindergarten

Teachers found that mixing three- and four-year old age groups could benefit the children and their learning providing opportunities for four-year-old children to be mentors and role models for three-year-old children.

“I also feel like the peer learning has really been an essential part of our program, and I feel like that does elevate quality to listen to the child’s voices but also see those interactions from the age groups. And then that peer role modelling is - there’s things that I feel like I can’t teach (Teacher/director - regional service)” (Page et al., 2025-a, p. 7).

This benefit is supported by preliminary analysis undertaken using CLASS results, which show that “comparison of 3-year-old, 4-year-old and integrated kindergarten rooms process quality did not reveal any systematic differences between them” (Eadie et al, 2024) – meaning that mixed age groups deliver quality comparative to single age group environments.

There were, however, mixed views in the sector about the appropriateness of mixing age groups, for example, one Kindergarten Improvement Advisor noted hearing a spectrum of perspectives from:

“we shouldn’t be running mixed age group, it’s too hard...[to] a really inclusive attitude towards the program and the reform (KIA, regional, focus group)”

Consultations with children highlighted some of their experience in three-year-old kindergarten. Children highlighted the things they liked, for example, experiences of play, places that they played, or who they played with:

“Cos I play with my friends (child, regional, child perspective journal)”

Insights were also drawn from children speaking about their challenges in the environment, for example, being overwhelmed or being challenged by experiences that they were not yet confident or skilled.

This underscores the importance of intentional programming when involving younger children.

Building on strong foundations

Participants also described the foundation of their approach to teaching three-year-olds was “built on an understanding of children as capable learners... [and that they are to] draw on their knowledge of variations in children’s learning and development” (Page et al., 2025, p.7). This shows that overall teachers’ existing knowledge, skills and understandings provide a strong foundation to teach the younger age group.

“For the children, I just think that base knowledge of learning and understanding their social skills, that’s the biggest thing, and their emotional resilience will be the biggest thing that we will see coming out of this, and that consolidation of learning moving forward. (Teacher/director – metro service)” (Page et al., 2025-a, p. 7).

Children perspectives reinforced these foundations through their references to the physical environment and range of materials and experiences on offer

at Kindergarten. For example, showing researchers the areas and experiences they valued:

“I like painting. I like to play at the space one [space area in room] I do these spacemans. This is the playdoh. This is the couch. This is the playground. (child, regional, child perspectives journal) ” The consultation also drew out themes relating to children’s experience of their relationships along with the enjoyment and the challenge that they derived from Kindergarten.

Planning for inclusion up front

Contracting provides a powerful mechanism to name conditions of delivery and identify the capacity required in the system. Through its case study on Implementing Large-scale Social Policy Reform and subsequent mapping of national preschool reform, the Front Project has identified “inclusion and support (assessment and interventions focussed on children’s learning development and wellbeing), and wraparound support (connection to community supports for families)” (The Front Project, 2024-b) amongst five key areas of capability to scale preschool nationally (alongside workforce, quality, and infrastructure).

This builds on examples such as Victoria’s School Readiness Funding (SRF), which provides access to evidence-based supports tailored to local needs, and The South Australian Royal Commission definition of preschool that includes a focus on developing a suite of funded interventions that respond early to the identification of children’s additional developmental needs.

Parent perspectives illustrated how beneficial three-year-old preschool was in practice, both for their children and themselves:

“... both of our children had speech delay and so having the two years to navigate that before starting prep and having the teacher input and the other students working out how we can communicate so they can understand it as well with that behind us... having two years has been really helpful (Parent, metro, interview).“ This relies on strong knowledge and support. Preschool Field Officers, in interviews, spoke about teachers seeking

support in identifying children’s additional developmental needs and in supporting parents with referrals, this included:

“Supporting them to find out where the family is at in terms of their readiness for a referral or a journey where what’s happened in the past for that family, and seeing where the teacher is at in terms of, have they had similar difficult conversations, have they referred to particular types of services before? (PSFO, regional, focus group)”

Teachers also “spoke of the importance of professional learning for building capacity to support young children’s language development, regulation of behaviour, learning about targeted assessments for young children, and supporting children experiencing trauma” (Page et al. 2025-a, p.9).

Implications

With adequate time and support, initial concerns were countered by experiences and data

Teachers recognised the value of two years of kindergarten and the opportunities that mixed age groups presented. Their qualifications, knowledge, and skills provided strong practice foundations that, when supported, transferred and developed across settings and for the younger age group, without compromising quality.

Bold policy that names the conditions of access, quality, and inclusion required supports implementation. Having clear expectations underpins the partnerships and funding arrangements required to deliver reforms as well as enabling capacity mapping and needs assessment. Knowing where capacity exists and understanding the scale of need helps to prioritise and sequence implementation stages and resource allocation.

Sharing experience supported program and practice development

New relationships were required to support practice and program development for example, developing networks across stand-alone kindergartens and long day care services, leveraging experienced teachers and practitioners, and embedding local support for practice and program development.

Build in resources and time to attend to program and practice change required of the workforce. A strong workforce is critical for delivering on reform. Professional learning and support through mentoring and networks is an essential element in supporting the level of practice and program change required.

In addition, relationships between state government and providers—particularly federally funded long day care services—need to be configured to ensure the conditions of access, quality and inclusion are embedded.

Conditions and structures

Significant changes were made to the way that services were planned to support the rollout of three-year-old kindergarten. The support structures vary significantly across provider and service types – as do the conditions under which teachers and educators work. Understanding the conditions and structures that underpin quality delivery of three-year-old kindergarten provides insights the enablers and barriers of reform.

Implementation priorities

This section explores three areas relating to the structures and conditions that support delivering and sustaining positive outcomes and implementation priorities that were perceived at early stages of the reform:

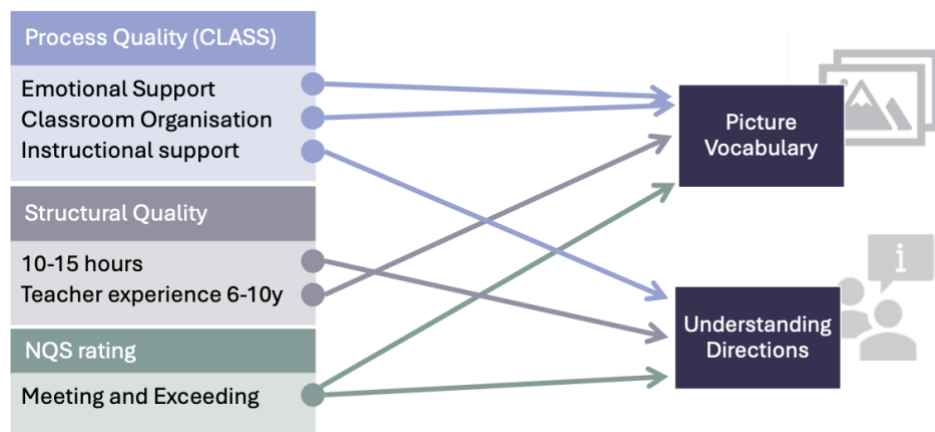
Structures that support quality	Workforce support is essential	Change Management
Identifying the impact of structures (such as, service type, size, and management structures) on quality provision provides an opportunity to configure resources so that all services deliver the intention of the reforms. Incentivising and controlling for conditions that drive equitable access to quality programs that deliver outcomes for children and families.	Understanding what teachers and educators need in a changing environment provides a foundation to grow and retain people with the right skills and capabilities and grow the profession. Attracting, training and retaining teachers and educators in a context of workforce shortages.	The rollout of three-year-old kindergarten requires significant change impacting practice and structures. Resources and support need to be targeted and distributed centrally and locally to respond and learn throughout implementation. Identifying resources, support and processes needed to implement durable large-scale reform in stages that encourage learning and responsiveness.

Quality makes a difference

The Impact on Children domain of the EDGE study assesses both the program quality of three-year-old kindergarten settings, and the outcomes of children participating in the program to examine its impact. The study examines structural elements of quality using data collected on ratios, group size, and teacher qualifications/experience, and process elements of quality using Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) measuring the quality of teacher-child interactions. Children's cognition and language skills are measured using the Woodcock Johnson fourth edition Tests of Oral Language and Tests of Achievement.

This enables analysis of elements of quality that are associated with positive outcomes for children.

Preliminary analysis of children's development, particularly their language skills, at the end of three-year-old kindergarten showed promising and positive associations with higher CLASS domain scores, funded universal hours 10-15, more teacher experience, and higher NQS ratings.



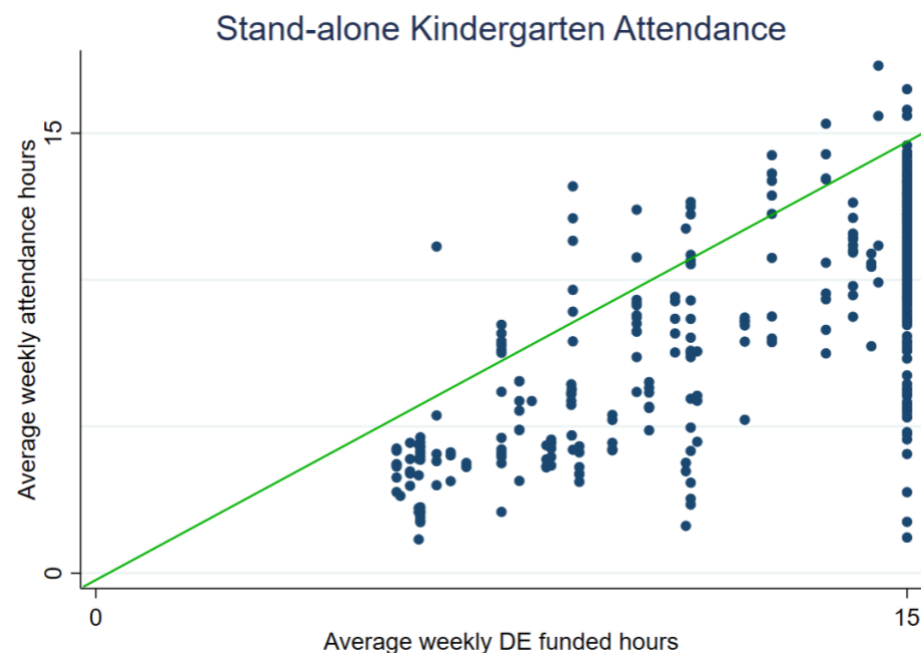
CLASS analysis has also shown that in the Victorian sample of services, the service characteristics such as higher **NQS rating** are associated with higher process quality in both three- and four-year-old kindergarten programs.

The preliminary analysis focusses on a limited range of factors and their impact. Subsequent analysis will incorporate direct assessments of children after their second year of kindergarten and will examine a broader range of service characteristics. This will enable analysis of the impact of two years of kindergarten across a broader range of characteristics of services attended by children.

Understanding which components of quality deliver outcomes enables targeted policy that reinforces conditions of quality at scale.

Children's attendance data has also been collected and analysed to compare average hours of attendance in stand-alone kindergarten alongside the level of funded hours available (plotted on the chart).

The chart shows that a large proportion of children attend below the level of funded hours available to them (dots appearing beneath the green line).



Collecting actual attendance hours will enable subsequent analysis to consider the effect of the amount of time in ECEC relative to children's outcomes.

Workforce support is essential

More teachers are needed to expand kindergarten to three-year-old children at scale making attraction and retention critical in a backdrop of pre-existing workforce shortages. High turnover of teachers and educators is a significant issue that providers faced during the rollout of three-year-old kindergarten:

"...you're forever just re-teaching and re-teaching and putting your energy into all of those things rather than delivering the program and practice... (Teacher/director - regional)" (Page et al., 2025-a, p.8).

The findings related to the significant impact that experienced teachers have on children's outcomes further emphasises the importance of retention. This experience is also vital for mentoring and supporting new teachers:

“luckily I had very experienced co-educators that had been in the service that were able to give me that support and we were able to keep a pretty high level of quality... (Teacher/director - regional) (Page et al., 2025-a, p.8).

This is not always the case:

“So then there's a big gap... there's not enough mentors out there to be able to mentor and guide the graduate teachers. (KIA, regional, focus group)”

A Preschool Field Officer commented on the challenges that this places on delivering quality:

“quality comes from them all being on the same page and actually working together consistently, and that becomes more challenging...(PSFO, regional, focus group)”

Workforce conditions across settings can also vary significantly, which can impact teacher experience and the way that kindergarten is provided.

It is critical that conditions that support the growth and retention of teachers and educators are in view for policymakers when scaling services to ensure parity of conditions that contribute to outcomes for children and to “understand how specific industrial and pedagogical conditions may enhance staff morale and retention in an expanded preschool context” (The Front Project, 2024-b). This prompts consideration of remuneration alongside other conditions such as leave entitlements, planning time, professional development and structures that demonstrate professional recognition.

Change management

A high level of change has been required to implement three-year-old kindergarten impacting both practice and structures. Teachers identified leadership as a significant factor in supporting various levels of change:

“I listen a lot and I discuss any matters or issues with my education leader. And we reach out to the pre-school field officer as well. I can feel the support from my service. (Teacher – metro)” (Page et al., 2025-a, p.9).

This example identifies practice leadership available within the setting through an educational leader supported by additional resources available through the Preschool Field Officer program, a Victorian government program that provides “targeted and time-limited capacity-building program” (Department of Education, online) available to all Victorian funded kindergarten programs. These structures were also supported by the development of strong relationships – a Preschool Field Officer noted this was pivotal for effective engagement:

“it's...about the relationship that I build with each service, both the teaching staff as well as the management. (PSFO, regional, focus group)”

Teachers and providers also experienced challenges due to lack of physical space, which added complexity to timetabling or meant limiting the hours of three-year-old kindergarten that they could offer (Page et al., 2025-a, p.9).

While rolling out three-year-old kindergarten, the Department distributed resources and support throughout central and local teams to respond to practice challenges (in the example above) and other structural and planning matters (e.g. workforce and infrastructure). This included establishing mechanisms to map service capacity and demand and providing resources to support for planning (The Front Project, 2024a).

The Department has recently released a range of [resources](#) that support services and providers through change management specific to their Best Start Best Life reform initiatives drawing on learnings from previous reform stages (including guides to support multi-age groups, rotational-models, team-teaching, and longer days) along with [resources](#) supporting services to plan for the inclusion of children from priority cohorts.

Effective change management involves establishing communication and collaboration across stakeholders, creating supportive structures, and allowing staged implementation to adapt locally while maintaining overall project goals. An example of this in practice surfaced through interviews with Kindergarten Improvement Advisors:

“it’s not assuming that I know what they need in that situation, that every service is different, every community is different (KIA, regional, focus group)”

Building consultative and collaborative relationships across different parts of the sector was also identified as an important element with potential to either support or compromise progress towards successful implementation – particularly if organisations or individuals delivering services didn’t feel adequately involved (The Front Project, 2024a, p. 15).

Implications

Quality and practice matter

Quality and practice are essential in kindergarten because they build on the foundation for a child's learning. The CLASS results demonstrate the outcomes of the impact of quality and practice.

Investing high quality delivery across the sector is essential to deliver outcomes for children. This means being explicit about the need for quality and leveraging funding relationships to ensure the conditions that support quality teaching and learning are in place.

Experience matters

Preliminary findings show that teachers with 6-10 years of experience have the biggest impact of children's outcomes.

Targeted strategies aimed at retaining the workforce are required to ensure that there are enough teachers with knowledge and experience now and into the future. In addition to support for program and practice development, conditions such as remuneration and entitlements, adequate planning time, and investing in professional development.

The Victorian Government's Kindergarten Funding Guide, for example, specifies the qualifications, registration requirements for teachers and ties rates of funding for providers to the industrial instrument that they employ staff under (paying more for more supportive conditions such as additional time for planning, assessment and professional development).

This provides a mechanism through which Government can ensure that services are delivered to the standard required.

Infrastructure and capacity matter

Delivering three-year-old kindergarten at scale leveraged all service types. The Victorian Government Kindergarten Funding Guide specifies the requirements for delivering kindergarten, which are consistent across sessional and long day care settings: "led by a qualified early childhood teacher and offer a play-based learning program based on the same government guidelines" (See: <https://www.vic.gov.au/kinder-tick#about-the-kinder-tick>).

Significant change management and support is required to support services to configure program delivery to meet increased demand. This requires coupling non-negotiable core conditions with flexibility and support to configure service offers to meet these conditions (e.g. stage approaches or through scheduling).

Strategies and support to maximise existing capacity—alongside investment in infrastructure—are crucial. Funding agreements can be used to incorporate requirements that drive quality, access and inclusion, while a variety of other mechanisms and supports are needed to operationalise this (for example, Victoria's School Readiness Funding, Kindergarten Inclusion Support, and change management resources).

Conclusion

The Victorian experience demonstrates that universal three-year-old kindergarten can be successfully implemented at scale—provided reforms are backed by deliberate, sustained efforts to support practice quality, educator wellbeing, and systemic inclusion. The EDGE study offers a roadmap for future policy, helping governments and service partners ensure that early learning reform delivers meaningful, measurable outcomes for children.

Findings from the EDGE study have challenged some of the initial concerns held by some teachers and provides and has also highlighted opportunities to embed conditions of quality, access and inclusion in policy design.

Key take aways:

- **Invest in Quality at Scale:** Sustained reform requires targeted investment in workforce capability, structural supports, and inclusive practices.
- **Prioritise Retention:** Experienced teachers are a high-impact asset—policy must focus on improving conditions that attract and retain them.
- **Build in Flexibility:** Naming outcomes and conditions, rather than rigid structures, allows services to tailor delivery while maintaining quality.
- **Embed Inclusion:** Inclusion must be designed into the system, with adequate resources and clear expectations across funding and contracting mechanisms.

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