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Albanese's Childcare Legacy Goal Faces Bigger Challenges Than Access

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Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's efforts to implement universal childcare are encountering resistance, as deeper systemic issues continue to challenge Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector. While government initiatives aim to expand access and affordability, persistent oversight problems and concerns about profit-

driven service providers are raising questions about long-term effectiveness and child safety.

Labor's childcare platform, introduced during the 2022 federal election and reiterated in subsequent policy discussions, includes the proposed "3 Day Guarantee," removal of the Activity Test for subsidy eligibility, and a \$1 billion Building Early Education Fund intended to increase capacity and access. Despite these measures, critics argue they do not address underlying challenges in the sector.

Recent data from the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) shows that more than 70 percent of long day care centres operate on a for-profit basis. Sector analysts and educators have raised concerns that this model may incentivize cost reductions at the expense of quality, with issues reported in staffing levels, food standards, and supervision practices.

According to ACECQA's 2024 Quality Ratings Snapshot, over 1,500 services failed to meet safety and quality benchmarks, drawing attention to regulatory and compliance gaps. In one recent case under investigation by Victorian authorities, a childcare worker was charged with multiple offenses related to child safety breaches. This incident has prompted calls for stronger preventative measures and enforcement.

In response, the federal government introduced the Early Childhood Safety Bill, which grants regulators greater powers to sanction non-compliant providers. However, some policy experts argue that legislative adjustments fall short of addressing structural inefficiencies. Andrew Hudson, a senior fellow at the Centre for Policy Development, has recommended prioritising direct funding for not-for-profit services, which

he suggests may offer more stability and transparency than profit-based models.

Shadow Education Minister Sarah Henderson has also called for tighter background screening procedures, including more frequent checks of Working With Children Clearances and the introduction of mandatory psychological assessments for staff. “Stronger preventative measures are essential to ensure child safety is not compromised,” Henderson stated in a public release.

Another ongoing challenge is the divided responsibility between federal and state governments. While the Commonwealth provides funding and broad policy direction, states manage regulatory compliance, creating occasional accountability gaps. Issues such as lapsed Working With Children Checks and inconsistent reporting procedures have been cited in parliamentary reviews as areas requiring attention.

Cost pressures also remain high. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that childcare fees have increased by approximately 6.5 percent annually, significantly above the national inflation rate. This places further strain on families, especially in metropolitan areas with limited service availability.

With ongoing scrutiny from educators, parents, and policymakers, Prime Minister Albanese’s childcare reform ambitions will likely depend on addressing both financial access and sector-wide governance challenges. While recent reforms mark progress in some areas, sustained improvement may require a shift in focus toward structural reform and improved accountability measures across the ECEC system.