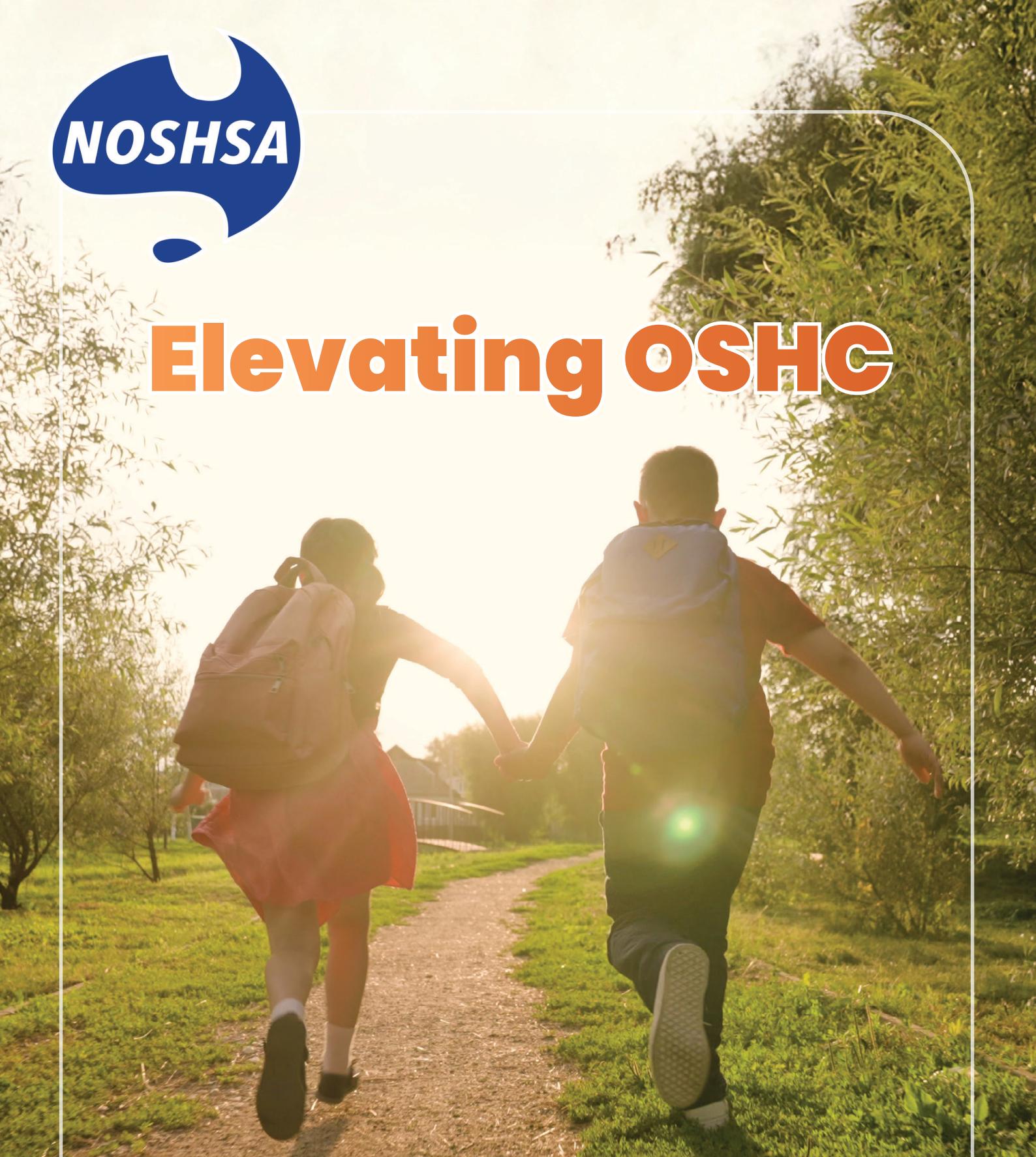




NOSHSA

Elevating OSHC



**A Strategic Framework for capacity,
growth and investment in Outside
School Hours Care in Australia**

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Executive Summary

Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) has reached a critical inflection point in Australia's education and care landscape. With increasing numbers of children spending significant portions of their childhood in OSHC settings – 1 in 4 primary school children averaging up to 16 hours per week across up to 50 weeks annually—the sector's role extends far beyond supervision to encompass vital wellbeing support, social development, and experiential learning during the crucial primary school years.

Recent policy reforms, particularly the lifting of the activity test to provide 3 days or 72 hours of Child Care Subsidy (CCS) for all eligible families, have expanded access to OSHC for vulnerable children who stand to benefit most from consistent, high-quality care environments. However, this expansion of access has occurred without commensurate investment in the workforce and infrastructure required to deliver the quality outcomes children deserve.

This roadmap articulates NOSHSA's **four strategic advocacy priorities across three interconnected domains:**

Domain 1: Workforce Sustainability and Professionalism

- Strategic Priority One: Building a sustainable, professional OSHC workforce through better jobs, improved wages and conditions, and guaranteed professional development and non-contact time.

Domain 2: Quality Program Delivery

- Strategic Priority Two: Implementing appropriate educator-child ratios that enable genuine inclusion and individualised support.
- Strategic Priority Four: Recognising and elevating OSHC's unique educational role and wellbeing support for children.

Domain 3: Infrastructure Investment

- Strategic Priority Three: Securing critical investment in fit for purpose facilities that support safe, high-quality programs.

These priorities are grounded in evidence about current workforce challenges and the developmental needs of primary school-age children, and are designed to position OSHC as a valued pillar of Australia's education and care system. The roadmap aligns with, and builds upon, the implementation of mandatory child safe standards and training from February 2026, recognising that creating truly safe, supportive environments for children requires not only compliance training but fundamental investment in workforce capability, working conditions, and physical environments.

Context and Rationale

The Growing Significance of OSHC in Children’s Lives

OSHC now occupies substantial space in the lives of Australian children. When a child attends before and after school care in a full time capacity, five days per week, they can spend 25 hours per week in OSHC settings. While school operates for approximately 40 weeks of the year, OSHC typically operates for up to 50 weeks, which represents 800 – 1250 hours of care and learning experiences that shape children’s development, social competence, and wellbeing. This is the equivalent of approximately 2 - 3 terms of formal schooling. For some children, particularly those who attend before school care, after school care and vacation care full time, the number of hours spent in OSHC can exceed the time they spend in school classrooms over the year.

This is not incidental time. During these hours, children build strong peer relationships, develop independence and self-regulation, explore interests through play and structured activities, and develop important social-emotional skills with support from educators, who often build relationships across multiple years. For many children, particularly those from vulnerable backgrounds who may now access OSHC through the expanded activity test provisions, these services provide stability, nutritious food, safe spaces for play and learning, and consistent relationships with caring adults.

Expanded Access and Equity Imperatives

The lifting of the activity test represents a significant policy achievement, enabling up to 72 hours per fortnight of subsidised OSHC access for all CCS-eligible families regardless of parental work and study commitments. This reform recognises that all children benefit from quality education and care experiences, and that access should not be contingent on parental employment status.

For vulnerable children—including those experiencing family stress, housing instability, developmental challenges, or socioeconomic disadvantage—this expanded access creates unprecedented opportunities for early intervention and wellbeing support. OSHC services are uniquely positioned to provide consistent, developmentally appropriate support during the primary school years, when children are building foundational social and emotional competencies but may fall outside the intensive support systems available to younger children in preschool settings.

However, access without quality is an empty promise. To deliver on the potential of this reform, the OSHC sector requires urgent investment in the very foundations that enable quality: a stable, skilled workforce with appropriate working conditions including training and professional development opportunities; staffing ratios that allow for individualised attention and inclusion; and physical environments purposefully designed to support the diverse developmental needs of primary school-age children in a play-based environment.

Current Workforce Reality

The OSHC workforce demographics and employment conditions create significant challenges for service quality and sustainability. The workforce is notably young, with many educators in their late teens and early twenties entering the sector as their first experience of formal employment. While youth brings energy and contemporary perspectives, it also means many educators lack the life experience, professional maturity, and developed interpersonal skills that support nuanced responses to complex child behaviours and family situations.

The sector is highly casualised, with the majority of positions offering limited hours split across morning and afternoon shifts. This employment structure creates multiple challenges. Educators often work across multiple services or combine OSHC work with other casual employment to achieve viable income, reducing their ability to develop deep knowledge of individual children and families. Casual employment provides minimal job security, no access to paid planning or professional development time, and limited incentive for long-term commitment to the sector. OSHC hours also attract full time university students, possibly studying unrelated disciplines, but their study commitments often take priority and most leave the sector once they graduate. High turnover resulting from these conditions disrupts relationship continuity for children and places constant demands on services for recruitment and orientation.

Many educators enter the sector with minimal formal qualifications, relying heavily on limited on-the-job training to develop the complex skills required to facilitate meaningful learning experiences, manage challenging behaviours, support children with additional needs, and build effective partnerships with families. Without structured professional learning time and career pathways, educators have limited opportunities to deepen their practice or see OSHC as a long-term career rather than a temporary job.

This workforce reality comes at a critical time, with mandatory child safe standards training starting in late February 2026. While compliance training is essential, creating genuinely child-safe environments requires more than meeting minimum training requirements. It requires a stable, skilled workforce with adequate time and support to build protective relationships with children, recognise and respond to wellbeing concerns, implement trauma-informed practices, and maintain the consistent, nurturing environments that keep children safe. Workforce investment and child safety are inseparable priorities.

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STRATEGIC PRIORITY ONE:

Building a Sustainable, Professional OSCHC Workforce

The Case for Workforce Investment

Quality in education and care settings is fundamentally determined by workforce quality. Research across early childhood and school-age care contexts consistently demonstrates that educator qualifications, skills, stability, and working conditions directly influence children's experiences and outcomes. Yet the OSCHC workforce has historically been underfunded, under-qualified, and undervalued compared to other education and care sectors.

Creating a sustainable OSCHC workforce requires systemic change across multiple dimensions: making OSCHC work financially viable and professionally rewarding, ensuring educators have the skills and knowledge to deliver high-quality programs, and creating conditions that support continuous improvement in practice.

Better Jobs and Career Pathways

NOSHSA advocates for the development of clear career pathways within OSCHC that recognise and reward increasing expertise and responsibility. This includes creating differentiated roles beyond the basic educator level and program coordinator. This includes meaningfully engaged pedagogical leaders, inclusion support specialists and senior educators with appropriate remuneration for these roles. Career progression opportunities allow educators to remain in the sector while developing specialisation and advancing professionally.

The sector requires investment in workforce development infrastructure, including nationally recognised training programs specifically designed for school-age care contexts. The **OSHC Educator Microcredential** represents a critical industry-led innovation in accessible professional development and must be made available nationally as a foundational standard for educator knowledge and skill. This microcredential addresses the unique competencies required in OSCHC settings—understanding middle childhood development, facilitating experiential learning, supporting diverse age groups, managing complex group dynamics, and implementing play-based and experience-based pedagogies—in a format accessible to the sector's predominantly casual workforce.



The microcredential is ideal in size and content for OSHC staff balancing university and other commitments and provides also provides valuable support for service leaders who are continually recruiting and training new educators.

National availability of the OSHC Educator Microcredential would establish a consistent baseline of professional knowledge across the sector, complementing Certificate III qualifications while providing more OSHC-specific content than generic children's services qualifications. This is particularly important as the sector prepares for mandatory child safe standards training implementation. The microcredential provides the foundational understanding of child development, relationship-building, and pedagogical practice that enables educators to apply child safety principles meaningfully in their daily practice, moving beyond compliance to genuine protective practice.

NOSHSA advocates for:

- National rollout funding to make the OSHC Educator Microcredential accessible to educators in all states and territories.
- Recognition of the microcredential as meeting baseline professional development requirements within the National Quality Framework.
- Integration of microcredential content with child safe standards training to create comprehensive professional development pathways.
- Employer incentives to support educator participation in the microcredential, including paid study time and fee subsidies.
- Development of advanced microcredentials building on the foundational program to support career progression.

The microcredential should be positioned as the first step in establishing professional standards for the OSHC workforce, with clear pathways to further qualification and specialisation. As the sector builds professional capability, the microcredential creates a foundation for more sophisticated conversations about practice quality, pedagogical approaches, and children's learning and development in OSHC contexts.

Transition pathways from casual to permanent part-time or full-time employment should be actively supported through funding models that enable services to offer stable positions. Split-shift models should be examined for alternatives that consolidate hours and improve work-life balance for educators, potentially through expanded service models that include coordination time during school hours or school holiday program delivery.

Improved Wages and Conditions

OSHC educators deserve remuneration that reflects the complexity and importance of their work. Recent Fair Work Commission findings on gender-based undervaluation confirm that the education and care sector, including OSHC, has been historically undervalued. While award wage increases are now being implemented for many classifications, these changes do not adequately address the undervaluation of OSHC work across all roles. In particular, managers/directors of large OSHC services have seen little or no improvement, despite increasing operational, regulatory, management and leadership responsibilities. Award wages fail to recognise the sophisticated pedagogical knowledge, behaviour guidance skills, risk management capabilities, and interpersonal competencies required to support children, lead teams of educators, negotiate with various stakeholders and manage complex regulatory and quality requirements.

NOSHSA advocates for wage increases that position OSHC remuneration comparably with other education and care sectors when qualification levels and responsibilities are equivalent. This requires advocacy both through industrial relations processes and through government funding increases that enable services to pay competitive wages without pricing families out of access.

Improved conditions must sit alongside wage reform. This includes greater access to permanent employment and paid leave entitlements, clear and supported career pathways with corresponding salary progression, and professional development that is funded and embedded within service operations. Educators should not be expected to rely on unpaid time or personal financial contribution to maintain professional capability in a sector with growing regulatory and quality expectations.

Non-Contact Time for Planning, Evaluation and Reflection

Perhaps no single workforce condition has greater potential to transform OSHC quality than the provision of guaranteed non-contact time for professional development, program planning, documentation, evaluation, and professional reflection. Currently, most OSHC educators are expected to develop and implement developmentally appropriate programs, assess individual children's interests and needs, document learning and development, communicate with families, participate in professional development, follow local policies and regulatory requirements and respond to administrative requirements entirely during contact time with children or in unpaid personal time.

This expectation is unsustainable and professionally inappropriate. Effective programming requires time to observe children's interests, research activity ideas, prepare materials, evaluate how activities meet intended learning outcomes, and adjust plans based on children's responses. Building strong family partnerships requires time to have meaningful conversations, document children's experiences to share with families, and respond thoughtfully to family concerns or inquiries. Professional growth requires time to reflect on practice, engage with pedagogical literature, participate in professional learning, and collaborate with colleagues.

The implementation of child safe standards training adds another layer of professional responsibility requiring dedicated time. All educators need time to complete mandatory training, participate in service-level child safety discussions, contribute to risk assessments and safety planning, maintain appropriate documentation of child wellbeing observations, and engage in case discussions when concerns arise. These cannot be adequately addressed in stolen moments between supervising activities or in educators' personal time.

NOSHSA advocates for a minimum allocation of non-contact time equivalent to 20% of an educator's rostered hours, consistent with reasonable professional standards in education contexts. For an educator working a 15-hour week across morning and afternoon shifts, this represents an additional three hours per week dedicated to professional responsibilities beyond direct supervision. This time should be paid at the educator's regular hourly rate and explicitly protected in rosters as non-contact time.

Funding models must account for this workforce investment. The cost of non-contact time is offset by reduced turnover, improved program quality, better family engagement, and decreased reliance on director and coordinator time for tasks that educators could complete more effectively with appropriate time allocation. Services that have implemented structured non-contact time, have reported improvements in educator morale, retention, and practice quality that justify the investment as well as decreased burnout and overwhelm of directors and coordinators who are left to undertake the majority of non-contact work, often out of work hours and without pay.



STRATEGIC PRIORITY TWO: **Appropriate Ratios for Quality and Inclusion**

Evidence for Lower Ratios

Australia's National Quality Standard establishes a maximum educator-to-child ratio of 1:15 for school-age children in OSHC settings. This ratio, while an improvement from historical practice in some jurisdictions, represents the bare minimum threshold for supervision rather than an optimal standard for quality learning and development.

Research on educator-child ratios across early childhood and school-age settings demonstrates clear relationships between lower ratios and multiple quality indicators. Lower ratios enable educators to develop deeper knowledge of individual children, respond promptly to safety concerns and emotional needs, facilitate more sophisticated learning experiences, support positive peer interactions, and provide individualized attention to children requiring additional support.

The current 1:15 ratio becomes particularly problematic in several common OSHC scenarios. Services caring for children across a wide age range, from four-year-old students to twelve-year-old adolescents, cannot adequately address the vastly different developmental needs, interests, and supervision requirements within a single 1:15 grouping. Services supporting children with disability or additional needs cannot provide meaningful inclusion support when the educator responsible for this support is simultaneously supervising fourteen other children. Services operating in challenging physical environments, such as multipurpose school facilities or outdoor play spaces with limited sight lines, cannot maintain adequate supervision and engagement at 1:15 ratios.

From a child safety perspective, lower ratios are essential for protective practice. Educators with fewer children in their care can build deeper relational knowledge of each child, noticing changes in behaviour or presentation that might indicate wellbeing concerns. They can maintain better visual supervision while still engaging meaningfully with children's play and activities. They can respond promptly when children seek support or disclose concerns. They have capacity to provide trauma-informed support for children who have experienced adversity while maintaining appropriate attention to other children's needs.

Advocating for 1:10 Maximum Ratios

NOSHSA advocates for a reduction in maximum educator-to-child ratios to 1:10 in OSCHC settings, with flexibility for further reductions when children's needs or environmental factors warrant additional support. This standard recognises that primary school-age children, while more independent than younger children, still require adult support for learning, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and safety.

A 1:10 ratio enables educators to implement genuinely responsive, experiential learning programming. With ten children in their care, an educator can learn each child's current interests, friendship dynamics, learning goals, and support needs. They can facilitate complex learning experiences that require sustained engagement with small groups. They can intervene promptly and thoughtfully when conflicts arise, helping children develop social-emotional and problem-solving skills. They can notice when a child is dysregulated or having a tough day and provide appropriate emotional support or modify expectations.

Lower ratios are particularly critical for inclusion. Children with disabilities or developmental differences often require additional adult support to participate meaningfully in activities, manage sensory environments, regulate emotions and behaviour, and build peer relationships. When a service receives inclusion support funding for a child, this translates to an additional educator's presence in the service. If that educator is simultaneously responsible for supervising their own group of children, the intended support becomes functionally impossible. A 1:10 baseline ratio allows inclusion support educators to provide genuine one-on-one or small group support while maintaining adequate supervision across the service.

Flexible Ratios Based on Need

While advocating for 1:10 as a maximum baseline, NOSHSA recognises that some situations require even lower ratios to ensure safety and quality. Services should have the regulatory flexibility and funding support to implement ratios of 1:8, 1:5, or even 1:3 when appropriate based on the specific needs of enrolled children, the physical environment, or the planned activities.

Situations warranting lower ratios include caring for mixed-age groups including very young school-age (or pre-school age) children, supporting multiple children with complex behavioural or developmental needs, operating in challenging physical environments such as services without dedicated facilities, implementing activities with elevated risk such as excursions or water-based play, and maintaining appropriate supervision during transitions and routine care tasks.

Funding models must account for services' actual ratio requirements rather than assuming all services operate at maximum regulatory ratios. Services that maintain lower ratios to meet children's needs should receive proportionally higher subsidy rates to ensure this quality practice is financially sustainable.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY THREE:

Critical Infrastructure Investment

The Hidden Disadvantage: Inadequate Facilities

While workforce and ratios receive attention in quality discussions, physical infrastructure represents a critical yet often overlooked determinant of OSHC quality. The majority of OSHC services in Australia operate from school facilities that were never designed for out-of-school-hours care. Services cobble together programs in multipurpose halls, gyms, libraries, classrooms, or outdoor areas that must be packed up daily to return spaces to school use. Many services lack access to age-appropriate furniture, dedicated storage for program materials, display space and/or outdoor play spaces that balance active play with quieter retreat spaces.

This infrastructure deficit creates multiple challenges for quality practice. Educators spend significant time daily setting up and packing away, reducing time available for engaging with children and families. Program resources must be portable and limited to what can be stored in minimal space, restricting the complexity and richness of learning experiences. Children experience institutional spaces designed for classroom learning rather than relaxed, home-like environments suited to recreation, leisure and self-directed play. Sometimes all children are grouped together in the one noisy room, with no access to a quiet space, which can lead to the dysregulation of some children. Services cannot implement many best-practice program elements, such as sustained project work, natural materials and loose parts play, quiet retreat spaces for reading or rest, or specialized interest areas for arts, construction, science exploration, or creative play.

Physical environments also impact child safety in fundamental ways. Facilities with poor sight lines create supervision challenges. Spaces that must be shared with school programs cannot be modified to address specific safety concerns or child needs. Inadequate storage forces services to leave equipment and materials in configurations that may pose hazards. Lack of secure outdoor play areas limits children's opportunities for active play and connection with nature. Purpose-designed facilities address these safety considerations through thoughtful spatial design while creating environments that support children's wellbeing and development.

Vision for Purpose-Built OSHC Environments

NOSHSA advocates for major capital investment in purpose-designed OSHC facilities that recognise the sector's permanent place in Australia's education and care infrastructure. Current approaches largely assume OSHC must conform and operate within existing school facilities, limiting the sector's capacity to deliver high-quality programs. Purpose-built OSHC environments should reflect contemporary understanding of primary school-age children's developmental needs, supporting social interaction, physical activity, creative expression, relaxation, and independent learning.

Physical design elements that support quality OSHC programs include flexible indoor spaces that can accommodate different group sizes and activity types simultaneously, from large group games to small group projects to individual quiet time. Services need dedicated storage, allowing educators to maintain accessible, organised program resources without daily pack-up requirements.

Kitchen facilities should enable large scale food preparation and children's participation in food preparation activities, while meeting food safety requirements. Outdoor spaces should offer diverse experiences including active play areas, natural elements and vegetation, shaded retreat spaces, and areas suitable for messy play and exploration.

Environmental design should support inclusion through thoughtful consideration of accessibility, sensory environments, and spaces that accommodate diverse needs. This includes wheelchair-accessible facilities, spaces with controllable noise and light levels for sensory sensitivities, and retreat spaces where children can self-regulate when overwhelmed.

Services require adequate technology infrastructure for program documentation, family communication, and supporting children's digital literacy development. This includes reliable internet access, devices for educators' professional use, and age-appropriate technology resources for children's learning.

Implementation Strategy for Infrastructure Development

Achieving this infrastructure vision requires sustained government capital investment through dedicated OSHC infrastructure funding programs. These programs should support both new purpose-built facilities and renovation of existing spaces to better serve OSHC programs.

Funding models should recognize that schools may not be the appropriate facility managers for OSHC infrastructure, particularly where services are operated by community organisations or private providers. Infrastructure investment should flow to OSHC providers with appropriate security of tenure to justify capital investment.

Planning frameworks should embed OSHC facility requirements in school design standards, ensuring that new schools and major school renovations include dedicated, fit-for-purpose OSHC facilities rather than treating out-of-hours care as an afterthought accommodation in leftover spaces.



STRATEGIC PRIORITY FOUR:

Recognising and Promoting OSHC's Educational Value

Distinguishing Experiential Learning and Learning Through Play

OSHC programs are fundamentally built on two complementary but distinct pedagogical approaches: **experiential learning** and **learning through play**. While both are essential to quality school-age care, they represent different theoretical frameworks and practical applications that should not be used interchangeably.

Experiential learning, grounded in the work of educational theorists such as David Kolb and John Dewey, refers to learning through direct experience followed by reflection, conceptualization, and application. In experiential learning, learners engage in concrete activities, reflect on their experiences, draw conclusions about what they have learned, and apply new knowledge to future situations. This learning cycle—often described as “learning by doing”—is central to how OSHC educators facilitate children’s skill development and understanding across diverse domains.

In OSCH contexts, experiential learning might include:

- **Cooking projects** where children measure ingredients, observe chemical and physical changes during cooking, problem-solve when recipes don’t work as expected, and reflect on what made the dish successful or unsuccessful.
- **Construction challenges** where children design structures to meet specific criteria, test their designs, analyse why structures succeeded or failed, and refine their approaches based on engineering principles they’ve discovered.
- **Science investigations** where children formulate questions about natural phenomena, design experiments, collect and analyse data, and draw evidence-based conclusions.
- **Community service projects** where children identify needs, plan responses, implement their plans, and reflect on the impact of their actions and what they’ve learned about citizenship and social responsibility.
- **Gardening programs** where children plant seeds, observe growth patterns, troubleshoot problems like pests or inadequate water, harvest produce, and connect their experiences to broader concepts about ecosystems, sustainability, and food systems.

The critical feature of experiential learning is the intentional cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and application. Educators facilitate experiential learning by designing meaningful activities, asking questions that prompt reflection (“What happened when you tried that? Why do you think it worked/didn’t work?”), helping children articulate the principles or concepts they’ve discovered, and creating opportunities to apply new learning in different contexts.

Learning through play, while also involving active engagement, differs in its emphasis on child-directed exploration, imagination, and intrinsic motivation rather than structured learning cycles. Play-based learning recognises that when children engage in self-directed play—whether dramatic play, construction play, physical play, or games with rules—they naturally develop cognitive, social, emotional, and physical competencies without adult-imposed learning objectives.

In OSHC contexts, learning through play might include:

- **Dramatic play** where children create narratives, negotiate roles, work through social and emotional themes, and practice perspective-taking without explicit learning goals.
- **Indoor and outdoor freely chosen, self-directed play** where children set their own physical challenges, create games, explore natural environments, and experience risk and mastery on their own terms.
- **Construction with loose parts** where children's engagement is driven by their own creative vision rather than prescribed outcomes, allowing for open-ended exploration and creative expression.
- **Sports and active games** where children develop physical skills, understand rules and fair play, practise leadership, manage competition and cooperation, and experience the joy of movement.
- **Creative arts** where children express themselves through drawing, painting, sculpture, music, or dance without pressure to produce specific products or demonstrate particular techniques.

Both experiential learning and learning through play are essential in quality OSHC programs, and skilled educators move fluidly between facilitating experiential learning opportunities and protecting space for genuine play. The key is recognising when adult-facilitated experience and reflection will extend children's learning, and when stepping back to allow child-directed play is most appropriate.

Research supports the importance of both approaches in middle childhood development. The Australian Curriculum's General Capabilities framework recognises experiential learning as critical for developing personal and social capability, ethical understanding, and critical and creative thinking. Studies of school-age care programs (such as the work of Reed Larson and colleagues published in *Human Development and Applied Developmental Science*) demonstrate that structured experiential learning activities in out-of-school programs support initiative development, emotional regulation, and identity formation.

Simultaneously, researchers like Peter Gray (Free to Learn, 2013) and Vivian Gussin Paley have documented the continued importance of play in middle childhood for social-emotional development, creative thinking, and intrinsic motivation. **Play Australia** and the **International Play Association** emphasise that primary school-age children need regular opportunities for self-directed play to complement increasingly structured school environments.



Experiential Learning as Foundation for OSHC Practice

NOSHSA advocates for explicit recognition of experiential learning as a defining characteristic of quality OSHC practice and a key indicator of service quality within regulatory frameworks. This requires several shifts in how the sector is understood and evaluated:

1. Professional development focused on experiential learning facilitation

Educator training, including the OSCHC Educator Microcredential and Certificate III qualifications, should explicitly address theories of experiential learning and practical skills in designing experience-based learning opportunities, facilitating productive reflection with children, and supporting children to transfer learning across contexts. This differs from generic “activity planning” by emphasizing the intentional learning cycle and educator’s role in deepening children’s thinking about their experiences.

The connection to child safe standards is significant here. Experiential learning inherently supports child safety by fostering children’s critical thinking, risk assessment, problem-solving, and self-efficacy—all protective factors that enable children to recognise unsafe situations, advocate for themselves, and seek help when needed.

2. Assessment tools that capture experiential learning quality

Current quality assessment in OSCHC often focuses on the presence of materials, schedules, and interactions without capturing whether programs genuinely facilitate experiential learning. Assessment frameworks should evaluate how educators design meaningful experiences with clear learning potential, how they facilitate children’s reflection on experiences, how they support children to articulate concepts they’ve discovered, and how they create opportunities for children to apply new learning.

3. Physical environments designed for experiential learning

The infrastructure advocacy outlined in Priority Three should explicitly articulate how purpose-built facilities enable experiential learning. This includes workshop spaces for construction activities, science investigation areas with access to natural materials and equipment, kitchen facilities supporting cooking and food science experiences, garden spaces for growing and environmental learning, and outdoor environments that invite exploration and investigation.

4. Research and evaluation demonstrating experiential learning outcomes

NOSHSA will work with research partners to document how experiential learning in OSCHC settings contributes to children’s cognitive development, problem-solving capabilities, persistence and resilience, transfer of learning across contexts, and intrinsic motivation for learning. This evidence base supports positioning OSCHC as an educational setting with distinct and valuable pedagogical approaches that complement, without duplicating, school-based learning.

Learning Through Play in Middle Childhood

While experiential learning receives less attention in public discourse about school-age care, play is more commonly recognised but often misunderstood as simply “recreation” or “leisure” rather than a developmentally essential context for learning. NOSHSA advocates for deeper understanding of play’s continued importance in middle childhood and the sophisticated pedagogical skills required to facilitate play-based learning with school-age children. With societal change and the decline of neighbourhood play, OSHC now plays a critical role in providing opportunities for play.

NOSHSA advocates for deeper understanding of play’s continued importance in middle childhood and the sophisticated pedagogical skills required to facilitate play-based learning with school-age children.

Play in middle childhood looks qualitatively different from early childhood play, incorporating more complex rules, extended narratives that may continue across days or weeks, sophisticated peer group dynamics and social hierarchies, and integration of popular culture, media, and current events. Effective OSCHC educators understand these characteristics and create environments that support the types of play most meaningful for primary school-age children.

This includes providing materials and spaces that invite complex construction and creative play (building materials, art supplies, props for dramatic play), protecting extended time blocks that allow for sustained play development rather than constantly interrupting for transitions, supporting inclusion when peer groups exclude or when social hierarchies become problematic, helping children navigate conflicts that arise in play without unnecessarily imposing adult solutions, and extending play experiences by introducing new possibilities, challenges, or resources that take children’s play to new levels of complexity.

Research from developmental psychology confirms play’s importance throughout middle childhood for social competence development, emotional regulation and coping, identity formation and self-concept, creative thinking and flexible problem-solving, and intrinsic motivation and sense of agency. OSCHC services provide one of the few remaining contexts in many children’s lives where they have extended time for self-directed play with peers, making this function increasingly important as schools become more structured and neighbourhoods less conducive to independent play.

Positioning OSHC in the Learning Continuum

NOSHSA advocates for recognition of OSCHC's distinct and valuable place in the continuum of children's learning and development. OSCHC is neither an extension of the school day nor purely recreational child care, but rather a specialised education and care setting that complements school learning by addressing developmental domains that structured academic instruction cannot adequately address through experiential learning and play-based approaches.

This positioning has implications for policy, funding, and regulation. OSCHC should be integrated into education portfolio considerations alongside schools and early childhood education, rather than treated solely as child care for workforce support. Quality frameworks should recognise the distinct pedagogical approaches appropriate to school-age care—particularly experiential learning and play-based learning—rather than simply adapting early childhood or school-based standards. Professional development and qualifications should be specific to school-age contexts, building educators' expertise in middle childhood development, experiential learning facilitation, and supporting meaningful play.

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Wellbeing Support as Core Function

Beyond learning and development, OSHC services provide critical wellbeing support for primary school-age children, particularly those experiencing family stress, social difficulties, or developmental challenges. The consistent, caring relationships children develop with OSHC educators create opportunities for emotional support, trusted adult guidance, and sense of belonging that complement but differ from school-based relationships.

For vulnerable children now able to access OSHC through expanded activity test provisions, these wellbeing supports may be particularly impactful. An OSHC educator has the time and relational foundation to check in, provide comfort, and alert the family to potential concerns of a withdrawn or upset child. Services can provide consistent nutritious meals and snacks for children who may not have reliable access to food at home. The predictable routine and safe environment of OSHC can provide stability for children experiencing housing instability or family disruption.

The impending implementation of child safe standards training in late February 2026 recognises and formalises this wellbeing support function. OSHC educators will be required to complete training to recognise and respond to child abuse and neglect, understand trauma-informed practice, implement child safe policies and procedures, and create physically and emotionally safe environments. This mandatory training, when combined with improved ratios, non-contact time for reflection and case

discussion, and the foundational knowledge provided through the OSHC Educator Microcredential, positions the OSHC workforce to fulfill its wellbeing support to its full potential.

NOSHSA advocates for integration of child safety training with broader professional development about experiential learning and play-based practice.

NOSHSA advocates for integration of child safety training with broader professional development about experiential learning and play-based practice. Creating child-safe environments is not simply about compliance with policies but about pedagogical approaches that promote children's agency, voice, and protective competencies. Experiential learning that develops children's critical thinking, risk

assessment, and problem-solving skills, directly supports their capacity to keep themselves safe. Play environments where children's autonomy is respected and their perspectives valued create contexts where children are more likely to disclose concerns and seek help from trusted adults.

Implementation Framework

Phased Advocacy Approach

Achieving these strategic priorities requires sustained advocacy across multiple levels of government, staged implementation as funding becomes available, and coordination across policy domains including education, social services, and employment.

Phase One (2026-2027): Building Evidence and Political Will

Foundational phase focus:

- Develop comprehensive evidence briefs demonstrating the impact of current workforce and infrastructure limitations on service quality, with specific emphasis on how inadequate conditions undermine child safety.
- Produce cost-benefit analyses of proposed reform opportunities, including economic modelling of non-contact time implementation, ratio reduction, and infrastructure investment returns (potentially through the service delivery prices project SDPP).
- Create case studies illustrating the benefits of lower ratios and adequate facilities for children's learning, wellbeing, and safety outcomes.
- Engage with government through formal submissions, ministerial correspondence, and stakeholder consultations.
- Launch national campaign for OSCHC Educator Microcredential availability as foundation for professional standards.
- Position OSCHC workforce investments as essential infrastructure for child safe standards implementation.
- Document connections between experiential learning practices and child protection outcomes.

Phase Two (2027-2028): Securing Initial Investments

Implementation phase focus:

- Negotiate funding increases through CCS reviews to account for non-contact time and improved ratios.
- Secure pilot funding for non-contact time implementation and ratio reduction trials, with evaluation frameworks to document outcomes.
- Advocate for capital infrastructure programs in federal and state budgets, emphasising purpose-built facilities that support both learning quality and child safety.
- Support regulatory advice to enable flexible ratio requirements based on children's needs and inclusion requirements.
- Establish national OSCHC Educator Microcredential implementation framework with government funding support for educator access.
- Integrate child safe standards training with OSCHC-specific professional development pathways.
- Develop research partnerships to document experiential learning outcomes in OSCHC settings.

Phase Three (2028-2029): Scaling and Sustaining Reform

Consolidation phase focus:

- Establish ongoing funding mechanisms to support workforce and ratio improvements as permanent features of the sector, not pilot programs.
- A national rollout of infrastructure investment programs with clear criteria prioritising services with greatest facility deficits.
- Embed OSCHC facility requirements in school planning standards across all jurisdictions.
- Evaluate reform impacts to demonstrate outcomes and justify continued investment.
- Establish professional standards framework for the OSCHC workforce that recognises microcredential completion and builds pathways to further qualifications.
- Develop advanced professional development offerings building on the foundational microcredential.
- Create national quality indicators that explicitly measure experiential learning, facilitation and play-based practice.

Measurement and Evaluation

Advocacy must be accompanied by robust evidence of reform impacts. NOSHSA will work with research partners to document the outcomes of workforce investments, ratio reductions, and infrastructure improvements, measuring impacts on:

- educator retention, job satisfaction, and career progression patterns
- program quality as assessed through observation-based quality measures that capture experiential learning facilitation and play-based practice
- children's wellbeing and development outcomes, including social-emotional competencies, problem-solving abilities, and engagement
- effectiveness of child safety practices and educators' confidence in recognising and responding to wellbeing concerns
- family satisfaction and access patterns, particularly for vulnerable populations
- service financial sustainability and capacity to maintain quality standards.

Research should specifically examine how experiential learning approaches in OSCHC contribute to children's capability development, comparing outcomes for children with regular OSCHC attendance against those without access. This evidence base supports positioning OSCHC as an educational investment, not simply child care for workforce support.



Coalition Building

Success requires building broad coalitions of support across stakeholder groups. NOSHSA will actively engage with:

- Parent organisations to elevate family voices in advocating for quality improvements, emphasising both learning opportunities and wellbeing support
- United Workers Union and other education sector unions to build solidarity around workforce professionalism, working conditions, and pedagogical approaches
- School principals and education departments to position OSCHC as part of comprehensive educational planning and address facility challenges
- Children's rights and wellbeing organisations to emphasise OSCHC's role in supporting vulnerable children and implementing child safe standards effectively
- Research institutions to build evidence and demonstrate the value of experiential learning in OSCHC contexts and the outcomes of proposed reforms
- First Nations education organisations to incorporate culturally responsive approaches that support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's access to quality OSCHC
- Disability advocacy organisations to ensure inclusion is centred in ratio advocacy and infrastructure design.

Alignment with National Frameworks

NOSHSA's advocacy aligns with, and builds upon, existing national frameworks:

- National Quality Framework: Proposed reforms are enhancements that enable services to achieve higher quality ratings and better meet NQF standards.
- National Child Safe Organisations Principles: Workforce investment, appropriate ratios, and quality infrastructure create the conditions for effective implementation of child safe standards.
- Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration: OSCHC's role in promoting educational excellence and equity is connected to national education goals.
- National School Reform Agreement: OSCHC infrastructure is positioned as educational infrastructure, worthy of similar investment to schools.
- Closing the Gap targets: OSCHC's potential to support improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children when services are culturally responsive and adequately resourced is highlighted.

Conclusion

Outside School Hours Care stands at a crossroads. Expanded access through activity test reform creates unprecedented opportunity to support children's wellbeing, learning and development, particularly for vulnerable children who benefit most from stable, high-quality care environments. The impending implementation of child safe standards training in February 2026 signals national recognition of OSCHC's protective role in children's lives. However, these opportunities will be lost without commensurate investment in the workforce, ratios, and infrastructure that enable quality and safety.

Children spending 16 hours per week, 50 weeks per year in OSCHC deserve more than supervision. They deserve skilled, stable educators who have the time and capacity to build meaningful relationships, facilitate rich experiential learning opportunities, support meaningful play, and respond to wellbeing concerns. They deserve appropriate staffing ratios that enable genuine inclusion and individual attention. They deserve physical environments thoughtfully designed to support their developmental needs for active play, creative expression, hands-on learning, social connection, and quiet retreat.

The OSCHC sector has been under-invested and under-valued, with its distinct pedagogical approaches—experiential learning and play-based learning—poorly understood and rarely recognised in education and care policy discussions. This advocacy roadmap articulates the reforms necessary to position OSCHC as a valued, high-quality component of Australia's education and care landscape, with clear recognition of the sector's unique educational value and protective function in children's lives.

Making the OSCHC Educator Microcredential available nationally is a concrete starting point for elevating workforce capability and establishing professional standards, particularly as the sector implements child safe standards training. This industry-led innovation demonstrates the sector's capacity to drive its own professional development when given appropriate support and recognition.

NOSHSA is committed to sustained, evidence-based advocacy to achieve these reforms in partnership with government, services, families, and the broader education and care sector. The time for investment in OSCHC quality is now. Our children deserve nothing less than our full commitment to creating outside school hours care environments that truly support their safety, wellbeing, learning and development during these significant hours of their childhood.



National Outside School Hours Services Alliance

www.noshsa.org.au