



# Annual Report 2025

# Belonging and becoming

## A group of children gathers under a tree at Bulldogs Children's Community Centre.

One child points to a tiny beetle moving through the leaves. "Where is it going?" another child asks. The group leans in, watching closely. Nearby, their educator stays close, listening, smiling, and giving the moment time.

Moments like this can seem small. But they're full of learning.

Here, children are curious and connected. They're learning together, in relationship, and in a place where they feel safe to wonder and explore. Because they belong.

This year's Annual Report is shaped by that idea: Belonging and Becoming. At ECMS, we create environments where children, families and teams feel welcomed and supported, and where children grow into confident learners, one meaningful moment at a time.

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can seem small.  
But they're full of learning.**

## Acknowledgement of Country

ECMS acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the first inhabitants of this nation and the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live, learn, work and play. Aboriginal peoples have always taught through their deep connections to Country, community, language and culture.

We recognise their continuing connection to Country and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We honour the wisdom held in culture, community and Country, and the way these strengthen children's belonging, being and becoming. ECMS operates on the lands of the Wurundjeri, Boonwurrung and Wadawurrung Peoples.



# A message from the Chair and CEO



## This year has been one of steady progress and purposeful investment, grounded in our enduring commitment to the safety, wellbeing, and learning of every child.

At ECMS, child safety is foundational. It shapes our decisions, our practice, and our culture. Across the year, we have strengthened our safeguarding approach, embedding clear expectations and continuous improvement at every level of the organisation. We remain vigilant in creating environments where every child feels safe, respected, and supported to thrive.

As a not-for-profit organisation, our purpose is clear. We exist to advance

inclusive early childhood services and to support children and families experiencing vulnerability. We achieve this by providing high-quality, accessible education and care to those experiencing social or economic disadvantage, ensuring that no child, regardless of their physical ability, cultural background, or financial circumstance, is denied the foundational support necessary for a dignified life. We know the first five years of life are critical. We take our role seriously in helping remove the barriers that can prevent children and families from accessing the support they need.

Children, families, and communities remain at the centre of everything we do. Our place-based approach ensures that learning is meaningful and connected, and that our services respond to the strengths and needs of each community. In doing so, we support greater participation, connection, and pathways to improved outcomes for children and their families.

2025 marks the conclusion of our Strategic Plan 2021–2025. Over this period, we have strengthened our capabilities, expanded our reach, and maintained a clear focus on quality at scale. We are ready for the next stage of our growth, supported by our 2026–2030 Strategic Plan.

We also completed our transition to a company limited by guarantee, strengthening our governance foundations and positioning ECMS for sustainable growth and accountability.

Our people are central to our impact. We continue to recognise and invest in our highly skilled educators, including pay and conditions that exceed award conditions. This reflects our belief that valuing and supporting our workforce directly benefits children and families.

As ECMS continues to evolve, we are investing purposefully in the future of early learning. Our Board has endorsed

a planned operating deficit in 2026 to enable timely and strategic investment in the capabilities required for sustainable growth. This includes strengthening service leadership, system readiness, and workforce development, areas essential to delivering high-quality, inclusive education at scale.

We thank our educators, team, families, partners, and Board for their continued commitment and trust. Together, we look ahead with confidence, united in our purpose to foster lifelong learning and ensure every child has the strongest possible start.

**Dr Vanda Fortunato**  
Board Chair

**Kieren Kearney**  
Chief Executive Officer

## Our purpose



# We foster lifelong learning.

### Every child deserves a place where they feel safe, known and free to grow.

At ECMS, that is not an aspiration, it is our daily practice. Across 75 services in Greater Melbourne, more than 6,500 children continued their lifelong learning journey with ECMS each week in 2025, in environments built on warmth, curiosity and deep respect. Each service is distinct, shaped by the people, cultures and places around it, yet all are united by the same commitment: that every child belongs, and every family is welcome.

Child safety and wellbeing are not a baseline at ECMS, they are the foundation that makes everything else possible. Our more than

1100 educators know the children they work with, and create calm, caring spaces where children feel genuinely heard and protected. When children feel truly secure, something remarkable happens. They take risks, ask questions, develop resilience, and begin to understand who they are and what they are capable of.

Our teaching approach is place-based and evidence-informed, with play at its heart. We believe children learn most powerfully when their experiences are rooted in the real world around them - their neighbourhood, their community, and their family's story.

Our educators bring skill and intention to every interaction: stretching a child's thinking through a well-timed question, sharing in a moment of discovery, and knowing when to step back and let curiosity lead. This thoughtful, responsive practice is what supports children who don't just meet learning outcomes, they love to learn.

Families are their child's first and most important educators. At ECMS, we walk alongside them, deepening that learning, and ensuring every child and family feels genuinely valued and heard.



# Play and curiosity

In early childhood education, play is both widely valued and frequently misunderstood.

It is often spoken about as something instinctive, something children simply do. But in contemporary practice, the question is no longer whether play matters. It is how deliberately it is designed, how skilfully it is guided, and how clearly it is understood as a driver of learning.

At ECMS, this has become a strategic priority. In a system shaped by expanding access, evolving policy settings such as Best Start, Best Life reform, and increasing expectations of measurable outcomes, we have made a clear choice to invest in play and curiosity as a disciplined approach to learning.

This choice has not been without tension. Funding environments are tighter and more complex than they have been in years. The needs of children, families and communities have shifted, and expanded.

In that context, the easier path would be to narrow practice, to prioritise more

structured, easily legible forms of teaching that appear to deliver faster or more measurable results.

Contemporary research points to a consistent conclusion. Deep learning in early childhood is most powerful when it is active, relational and driven by the child's own curiosity. It requires educators to notice what children are drawn to, to interpret the thinking beneath their actions, and to extend that thinking with intention.

ECMS's response has been to anchor practice in enquiry-based learning that emerges from play. This is a deliberate organisational decision. It requires investment in educator capability, in leadership, and in the conditions that allow teaching and learning to be visible within everyday experiences.

**We have made a clear choice to invest in play and curiosity as a disciplined approach to learning.**



Across ECMS services, this can be seen in how ordinary moments are approached. A child experimenting with how their body moves through space, becomes an exploration of balance, force and coordination. Through running, climbing and shifting weight, children develop physical confidence, spatial awareness, persistence and self-regulation. These are foundational capabilities that sit beneath later learning.

Curiosity plays a similar role in cognitive development. When children ask questions about the world around them, why shadows change, how water moves, what happens when materials are combined, they are engaging in early scientific thinking. They

are forming hypotheses, testing ideas, revising their understanding. The role of the educator is to recognise these moments and to deepen them, introducing language, concepts and connections that expand the child's thinking.

This approach also reflects ECMS's clear position on equity. For children experiencing disadvantage or developmental vulnerability, access alone is not enough. The quality of the learning experience, its responsiveness, its depth, and its ability to engage and sustain curiosity, is what enables children to build the foundations for lifelong learning. Protecting play, and strengthening it through professional practice, is therefore our deliberate strategy to improve outcomes.

As the sector continues to evolve, there will be ongoing pressure to simplify and standardise early learning in ways that make it more easily measured. ECMS's position is that rigour in early childhood education does not come from reducing complexity, but from engaging with it.





### Ice cream is data

At The Merrell Kindergarten, children use Duplo blocks to graph their favourite ice creams. As the towers grow, one child pauses and asks: "If I change my mind and move my block, does that mean I'm changing the data?" In that small moment, play becomes deep thinking, curiosity turns into reasoning, and reasoning into learning. It is exactly what learning through play looks like at ECMS: a living, breathing foundation that shapes every experience.

### Meeting children where they are

When a child could remove puzzle pieces but could not replace them, ECMS Practice Coach Rosemary Monagle didn't take over, she built a bridge. One piece at a time, with quiet naming and encouragement, she scaffolded his path to independent exploration. This is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development in action: children learn most when a responsive educator reads the moment with care, knowing when to demonstrate, when to support, and when to let curiosity take the lead.

### Intentional teaching, with purpose and care

At Bulldogs Community Children's Centre in the City of Maribyrnong, a child noticing a bird sparked a rich journey into Indigenous language, art and understanding of Bunurong Country. It is a powerful example of what intentional teaching looks like when it is truly responsive, with educators noticing a moment of genuine curiosity and following it somewhere meaningful. This is co-construction: not delivering a curriculum but discovering it alongside children.

# Strong relationships underpin learning and child safety



At ECMS, learning does not sit alongside relationships. It happens through them.

This is grounded in what we know from birth to three research and attachment theory. Before children can engage in sustained thinking, exploration or social learning, they need to feel safe. That safety is experienced in the consistency, responsiveness and attunement of the adults around them. It is built in repeated moments where a child is seen, responded to and understood.

#### **This has implications for how education is designed.**

At ECMS, we have invested in strengthening the quality of interactions between educators and children as a central measure of practice. This is a deliberate organisational decision. It recognises that it is not only what is provided to children that matters, but how it is experienced. Learning, regulation and identity formation take place when an educator responds to a child's cue,

joins their exploration, or supports them through uncertainty.

#### **This is also where safeguarding begins.**

When we talk about safeguarding children, we often start with policies, procedures and compliance frameworks. These are essential. Safeguarding also begins with relationships. It begins at the foundation of wellbeing, in children's physical and emotional safety. Safety is felt in the relationships that happen every day between educators and children, in the moment of trust between a child and an educator.

**High quality relationships are not separate from child safety**

## Strong relationships underpin learning and child safety



A child who experiences consistent, attuned relationships is more likely to express their needs, to seek support, and to signal when something is not right. In this way, high quality relationships are not separate from child safety. They are a primary mechanism through which it is enacted.

ECMS works through the CLASS framework, an internationally accredited program that measures the effectiveness of educator interactions with children.



This level of relational practice requires continuity, stability and investment.

ECMS has taken practical steps to strengthen these conditions. Increasing our internal casual workforce has reduced reliance on agency staff, supporting greater consistency for children. Our internal casual workforce, often permanent employees who want to work more hours, fill more than 70% of relief roles each month. We are also trialling dedicated relief models in some areas to protect relational continuity and minimise disruption.

As expectations of the sector continue to grow, there will be pressure to focus on what can be most easily measured or delivered at scale. When relationships are prioritised, they shape safety, identity and learning from the very beginning.



## Bringing research to life: academic mentoring

At ECMS, academic mentoring is a deliberate strategy, one that bridges the gap between leading research and what educators do, moment to moment, with children.

We partner with experts to bring contemporary thinking in social justice and Pikler-informed practice into our practice, policy, and everyday work in services. Critically, this expertise does not sit at the top of the organisation. It is worked alongside teaching teams, with Practice Coaches supporting translation, critical reflection, and application within each service's unique context.

These mentors use their research to support our educators in building strong relationships with children.

## Toddler and infant practice

ECMS's birth to three work is an initiative focused on deepening understanding of how infants and toddlers learn through relationships, curiosity and connection to their surroundings. The project began in 2023 through a partnership with infant and toddler specialist Dr Katherine Bussey, who joined ECMS as an academic mentor. Drawing on research and practice based on the Pikler pedagogy, the partnership supports educators to reflect more deeply on how they nurture learning in the earliest years.

In 2025, the work expanded with the creation of a Birth to Three Champions group. Services nominated educators to join an ongoing professional learning community, strengthening knowledge across teams and creating a network of colleagues exploring practice together. Alongside this, ECMS invested in specialist roles, including a Birth to Three practice coach, who works alongside educators through mentoring, observation and reflection.

ECMS's birth to three work reflects a growing commitment to understanding how infants and toddlers learn through relationships, curiosity and connection to their surroundings.



# Place and community ground our work

At ECMS, place is understood as a primary feature to shape how education is designed and delivered.

This is a deliberate choice. Across our network of 75 services, no two communities are the same. They differ in language, culture, history, access to services and patterns of disadvantage. They differ in what families need, how they engage, and the opportunities available to children beyond the early learning setting.



Place matters because children do not learn in isolation. Their learning is shaped by the environments, relationships and systems around them. Our place-based approach recognises this. It reflects the understanding that education is most effective when it connects with children's lived experiences and the broader ecology around them.

At ECMS, each service is expected to develop a curriculum that reflects its local context. It is a recognition that what is meaningful for children, and therefore what will engage and extend their learning, is shaped by place. The same principle applies to partnerships. The relationships a service builds with Maternal and Child Health, playgroups, schools and community organisations are not centrally prescribed. They are developed locally, based on what will best support children and families in that setting.

This means that while there is a shared organisational purpose and a clear set of

pedagogical principles, there is no single model expressed identically across services. Each service carries its own identity, shaped by the community it is part of.

This is reflected in how we approach workforce design. In communities where a significant proportion of families speak languages other than English, we prioritise employing educators who reflect that linguistic diversity. This ensures that children can communicate, learn and build relationships in languages that are familiar and meaningful to them, and that families can engage with confidence. It is a deliberate choice to align staffing with the realities of place, rather than expecting communities to adapt to a fixed model.

This approach also strengthens how services connect into local systems. Early learning does not sit apart from other supports. It intersects with health, family services and community networks. By working in a place-based way, services are

better positioned to build relationships that support continuity for children and families.

There is discipline in this approach. It requires leaders and educators to make informed judgements about their community, to engage deeply with families, and to continuously adapt their practice. It also requires ECMS to hold a clear line on purpose, while allowing for difference in how that purpose is realised.

**Early learning does not sit apart from other supports. It intersects with health, family services and community networks.**



### Bush kinder is the place to be at Bunyip Preschool

In 2025, Bunyip Kindergarten in Cardinia Shire brought learning with place to life by launching bush kinder. Guided by the same learning frameworks as traditional kindergarten, bushkinder takes place outdoors in a natural bush setting and gives children time to explore, discover and learn through play in nature.

For Pauline Griffiths and the Bunyip team, bush kinder grew from a desire to be more visible in the community and strengthen children’s connection to place. Through these experiences, children build a stronger connection to the environment, their local community and the places around them, strengthening their sense of belonging and supporting their becoming confident, capable learners.

### Making it easier for parents

At Hurstbridge Children’s Centre in Nillumbik, learning with place shaped the team’s work with children and families throughout 2025 and beyond. Led by Centre Director Bonnie Wirawan, the team listened closely to their community and paid attention to the everyday realities of family life, asking what support would make the biggest difference.

From those conversations came a family handbook created especially for Hurstbridge. It brought together practical information about starting early learning, transitions, bush kinder, clothing, fees and available supports - all in one place, and all shaped by what families said they needed to know.

### Learning with Country and Indigenous perspectives at The Merrell Kindergarten

At The Merrell Kindergarten in the City of Boroondara, learning with place begins with respect for Country. Educators support children to notice their surroundings, ask questions about the land, and think about what is meaningful in this place. This includes building respectful relationships with Aboriginal artists and learning from them directly. By seeking permission to display artwork and sharing the stories behind it with children, the team helps make connection to Country visible in everyday practice.

This approach also creates space for the many cultures within the service community. Along with a Welcome Wall, families are invited to share items that reflect their heritage, helping children see that place holds many stories. Together, these experiences help children grow respect for other cultures, Aboriginal perspectives, connection to Country, and a deeper sense of belonging.

# Our commitment to inclusion and access



Access without support fails children with complex needs. ECMS funds and operates a three-tier system to support inclusion and access, with priority access settings and the Early Start Kindergarten program used to secure access for children who would otherwise be excluded.

Where ECMS establishes the timetable, services offer 15 hours for three- and four-year-olds of kinder. Priority of access is applied to enrolment decisions so children experiencing vulnerability are placed first. Early Start Kindergarten removes cost barriers for eligible families and enables participation for children who require additional support.

ECMS has introduced a system of support for inclusion, that allows us to customise solutions to the needs of individual groups and children.

Tier One is universal. Every service operates with trauma-informed practice, anti-bias training, culturally safe environments, and an embedded child safeguarding framework. Practice coaches and additional non-contact time for service and educational leaders are funded above award to lift interaction quality. Accessibility tools, including translation functionality on the website, remove basic participation barriers at the point of entry.

Tier Two targets children who cannot participate on universal settings alone. Supports include first-language assistance, individual learning and participation plans, and structured transition support into school. Multidisciplinary input from social workers, psychologists and autism specialists is built into these plans. Applications for the Kindergarten Inclusion Support program are actively managed and implemented.

Tier Three addresses cases where needs exceed what a single service can manage. ECMS funds additional educators above standard ratios to keep children in our programs. External systems are brought in and coordinated, including the National Disability Insurance Scheme, therapeutic providers, and specialist partners such as Noah’s Ark and Melbourne City Mission. Internal safeguarding specialists support complex cases.

**ECMS has introduced a system of support for inclusion, that allows us to customise solutions to the needs of individual groups and children.**

## Our commitment to inclusion and access

ECMS funds these supports; more than \$3m in 2025 was directed to initiatives supporting inclusion. Inclusion support workers and social workers are embedded to extend educator capability and maintain continuity for children.

ECMS addresses food insecurity through breakfast clubs, community pantries and food provision within services. Learning access is extended through lending libraries and take-home materials, shifting literacy support into the home.

Therapeutic and wellbeing needs are addressed inside each ECMS service. Programs such as KidsRoar, therapy dog initiatives and targeted partnerships support

children experiencing trauma, disability or emotional distress.

ECMS social work practice coaches coordinate care across child protection, health and disability services. They run care team meetings, support family engagement, and develop safety plans where family violence or trauma is present.

Interpreter services, visual communication supports and engagement with preschool field officers and disability support systems remove structural access barriers. ECMS supports cultural safety through Aboriginal partnerships with organisations like Biik Bundjil, yarning programs and culturally responsive practice for culturally and linguistically diverse communities.



## Coaching that changes practice

At ECMS, practice coaches and social work practice coaches are not a support service on the side. They are central to how we grow capability, confidence and consistency across our teaching teams. Working alongside educators through observation, modelling and reflective dialogue, our coaches bring together pedagogical expertise and relational depth. Research shows that embedded coaching changes practice more effectively than one-off training. Social Work Practice Coaches extend this further, building skills in attachment, trauma-aware practice and family engagement. The result is measurable: stronger interaction quality, greater team cohesion, and educators who are confident, reflective and ready to make a real difference every day.

## Moving beyond words: embedding First Nations perspectives in everyday practice

Across several ECMS kindergarten services in Hobsons Bay, educators have been coming together each term to learn, reflect and deepen their understanding of First Nations perspectives in early childhood education. Supported through School Readiness Funding, these gatherings bring educators from multiple services together, creating space for shared professional learning, dialogue and reflection. The gatherings are facilitated by *wayipungitj* (supporter) Kristine Willems from One Tree Community Services, who works collaboratively with team members at all levels to increase their capacity and ensure their service is culturally safe and inclusive for Koorie families.

Through presentations and facilitated conversations with knowledgeable practitioners, educators explore how connection to Country, storytelling and cultural knowledge can be meaningfully embedded in everyday practice with children. These discussions encourage educators to move beyond symbolic gestures and consider how First Nations perspectives can be lived through daily experiences.

As a result, many services are weaving these ideas into play, storytelling, caring for local environments and guiding children through respectful conversations. For children, this supports a deeper sense of belonging and connection to place. It also nurtures respect for culture, curiosity about the natural world and an early understanding of responsibility for caring for people, animals and Country.





# Partnerships

## supporting quality



ECMS understands that to deliver quality early learning, partnerships are a vital part of our ecosystem. We use partnerships to extend capability around children and families, not to outsource responsibility for them. That distinction matters because partnerships disconnected from daily practice can fragment support for children and families. Partnerships that sit outside service delivery create fragmentation. Partnerships embedded into teaching and learning, inclusion and local planning increase a service's ability to respond to complexity.

This is the tension ECMS works within. No early childhood provider can internally hold every capability required to support children experiencing vulnerability, disability, trauma, cultural exclusion or developmental complexity. At the same time, children and families experience services as a single system. When support is disconnected, delayed or siloed, participation breaks down. ECMS has responded by building partnerships directly into how services operate.

Some partnerships strengthen inclusion practice inside the room. ECMS's

partnership with Noah's Ark focuses on Embedded Learning Support, using targeted educator coaching and research to strengthen consistent inclusive practice across services. The objective is not parallel specialist intervention. It is lifting educator capability so children remain connected to everyday learning alongside peers.

Other partnerships reshape pedagogy and organisational thinking. Through the Ngarrngga Project with the University of Melbourne, ECMS is contributing to Indigenous-led research connecting children with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, histories and cultures. This work informs professional learning and resource development nationally, while also reshaping how ECMS understands curriculum, identity and place.

**Partnerships embedded into teaching and learning, inclusion and local planning increase a service's ability to respond to complexity.**

ECMS also uses partnerships to solve operational and access challenges within communities.

In preparation for the rollout of Pre-Prep to priority cohorts in 2026, ECMS partnered with the City of Casey to identify eligible children and design session structures, workforce plans and engagement strategies that support participation. The work combined local government planning capability with ECMS's operational and pedagogical expertise. Insights from this partnership are informing future service planning beyond the initial rollout.

At Topirum Primary School Kindergarten and Quarters Primary School Kindergarten, ECMS worked with the council and school leaders to design a tailored operating model responding to local demographics. More than 42% of families spoke a language other than English. ECMS responded by recruiting bilingual educators fluent in community languages. The model improved family engagement and enabled staged growth from one kindergarten group to four as demand increased.

Partnerships at service level are equally deliberate. At Keon Park Child and Family Hub, ECMS has partnered with VACCA for more than two years to deliver a culturally safe Aboriginal playgroup. Elders participate regularly. Hearing and vision checks are integrated into the program. Lunch and transport reduce participation barriers. The result is not only stronger cultural connection, but increased trust in early childhood services and smoother transitions into kindergarten.

These partnerships rely on reciprocal relationships, not transactional referrals. ECMS service leaders participate in local planning groups alongside schools, Maternal and Child Health, Child FIRST and child protection services because prevention and early intervention require coordinated systems around children.



## Growing connection through playgroups

In 2025, ECMS continued to support and grow playgroups across our services, recognising their value as a gentle first step into early learning. Playgroups help children build confidence, language and social skills through play, while giving families a welcoming space to connect, share, and feel part of their local community.

At Koomail Tardy Community Centre in Truganina, Erica, known warmly as Auntie E, helped initiate, support and grow a thriving and diverse playgroup community. This kind of early connection helps children and families feel known, supported, and welcomed from the beginning.

Playgroups also create stronger pathways into kindergarten and help services build trusted relationships with families over time.

## A shared goal of supporting children and families

In 2025, our ongoing partnership with Melbourne City Mission (MCM) brought educators and allied health professionals together around a shared goal: supporting children and families in ways that are practical, consistent, and connected.

Within our services, this support is not separate from everyday learning. It is woven into play, relationships and daily routines, with educators and practitioners working alongside one another to notice children's strengths, interests and emerging needs.

MCM brings longstanding expertise in supporting children with disability and developmental delay through its Early Childhood Intervention Services. Working across homes, early learning settings and community spaces, practitioners - including speech pathologists, occupational therapists and psychologists - engage with children in the contexts that matter most to them. Central to this approach is the key worker model, where each family builds a consistent relationship with one practitioner who coordinates support. This continuity helps reduce complexity for families and offers a steady, trusted connection during times that can otherwise feel uncertain.

# Growing the profession together



ECMS made an early judgement that the success of the Best Start, Best Life reforms would depend on workforce capability as much as system expansion. Increasing access without strengthening educator expertise would produce growth in participation, but not necessarily growth in learning quality.

That judgement shaped ECMS's workforce strategy. The scale of change is significant. ECMS projects the need to recruit more than 550 full-time equivalent roles over the next five years and expects its workforce to at least double by 2029 as Pre-Prep and broader reforms expand across Victoria. ECMS's position is explicit: quality cannot be compromised during expansion. As a result, ECMS has invested in capability-building as core infrastructure.

ECMS's workforce plan treats educator expertise as cumulative. Strong educational practice is built through sustained professional learning, mentoring, leadership development and reflective practice over time. The goal is not simply to recruit more

educators. It is building a workforce capable of delivering high-quality education at scale.

This begins with workforce pathways. ECMS invests in traineeships, like the Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care in our Early Learning Centres, to grow the future educator pipeline and uses placements strategically to strengthen retention in the profession. We have also developed a Provisionally Registered Teacher program to support graduate teachers as they transition into practice. This is designed as a capability strategy, not an induction process. The objective is to stabilise workforce growth while strengthening pedagogical confidence, professional identity and teaching quality early in career development.

Professional learning is structured as an organisational discipline. In 2025, Learning Circles created ongoing opportunities for educators to engage deeply with pedagogy, practice and emerging research alongside peers. Large-scale learning events, including the ECMS Conference and organisation-wide Professional Development Days, are used to connect educators across services,

## Growing the profession together



### ECMS is building a workforce capable of delivering high-quality education at scale.

strengthen shared practice and expose teams to leading thinking in early childhood education. A spirit of connection extended across the organisation in 2025. In May, more than 600 educators gathered at VECTEA PD Day to explore place, Aboriginal perspectives, inclusion, and leading through change. Held in Reconciliation Week, it was an opportunity to further understand how ECMS can apply Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in our classrooms. Our Conference, themed Phase: Next, united more than 800 of our team for a day of shared ideas and fresh thinking, with speakers including Aunty Denise Proud, Dr Melinda Miller, and Dr Katherine Bussey.

ECMS has deliberately invested in learning structures that lift capability across the organisation rather than concentrating expertise within isolated teams or individuals.

Practice coaching is central to this model. ECMS continues to invest in coaching because the quality of interaction, educator judgement, and relational capability directly shape children's learning experiences. The workforce plan identifies pedagogical capability, emotional wellbeing and the quality of interactions as central determinants of educational quality.

Leadership capability is treated with the same seriousness. ECMS has evolved traditional management structures into a broader Service Leader model, recognising that educational leadership drives workforce stability, pedagogical consistency and service quality. Additional non-contact time and leadership support continue to be funded above the award because ECMS considers leadership capacity fundamental to sustaining quality in growing, increasingly complex services.

ECMS's workforce investments reflect a broader organisational belief: educator expertise is the mechanism through which quality, inclusion and child safety are delivered.

## Recruiting for belonging, connection and quality

At ECMS, recruitment is purposeful, relational, and focused on quality. We work closely with hiring managers to find great people who align with our purpose, child-safe culture, and pedagogical approach. We move quickly, but never at the expense of quality.

At Topirum Primary School Kindergarten in Clyde, the appointment of six bilingual educators, four of whom speak languages listed among the top five most common languages other than English in the region, has significantly strengthened engagement with families, leading to increased enrolments and positive feedback throughout the orientation period.

## Mentoring new teachers

In 2025, ECMS continued to strengthen our support of 46 graduate teachers, with 11 of those now having full registration. The Provisionally Registered Teacher (PRT) program combines strong coordination with thoughtful mentoring.

At the heart of the program is ensuring our graduates have the skills and confidence to pass their registration. Graduates are carefully matched with mentor teachers who can support their practice, interests and growth. Through a cycle of inquiry, teachers reflect on their work with children, explore a question from practice, and present their learning to a panel as they move towards full registration. This investment helps build confident, skilled, and committed early childhood teachers.

## Male educator community of practice

ECMS holds a regular male educator community of practice once each term. Facilitated by Danny Lewis and Lucas Wang, it is a chance for male-identifying team members (including a chef) to connect, share stories and learn.

At a time of increased scrutiny on male educators, the sessions include wellbeing check-ins, plenty of time for conversation, and a strong focus on sharing positive advocacy stories - practical ways colleagues can support male educators in services.

# Spotlight on services



## 01

For Doncaster Park Kindergarten 2025 was a milestone year, celebrating their 60th birthday. In May, generations of families, educators, local partners, and the wider community came together, celebrating not just a birthday, but what Doncaster Park Kindergarten means for the community: a place where children and families feel welcomed, known and supported. Celebrations like these are a great reminder of the important and lasting role kindergartens and early learning centres play in community life, and the deep sense of belonging that helps children and families feel safe and connected from the very first moment they walk through the door.



## 02

Delta Road Preschool has worked alongside Banyule City Council planners to help ensure children were included in shaping a local community project. Alongside families, educators and students from Greensborough Secondary College, the children joined council planners on a walk through the local village, where they shared their thoughts and ideas about the future of the area. This partnership shows how early learning services, schools, councils and families can work together to strengthen children's connection to community.



## 03

Guided by an anti-bias approach, Barayip Kindergarten has worked on embedding First Nations perspectives and pedagogies in their everyday practice. Through partnerships with local Elders, Indigenous artist Kobi, community members, Barayip Primary School and neighbouring services, they have reflected on current practice and collaborated on their own Reconciliation Action Plan. These partnerships, and specifically learning and acknowledging First Nations history and perspectives, have helped shape learning, symbols, and shared understanding within the kindergarten.



## 04

Two of our services took some important steps to strengthen community and belonging through a shared focus on language, culture and connection.

With many of the children and families at Topirum Primary School Kindergarten speaking multiple languages at home, they have started recruiting educators with specific language skills. Communicating in children's and families' first languages has strengthened relationships, supported smoother transitions, and honoured the cultural strengths families bring.

Greensborough Kindergarten has embedded inclusive practices into everyday experiences, with visual displays, translated books and, where possible, language matching, to help multilingual families and children feel seen and supported.

These two services have different approaches, with a shared outcome: making children and families feel safe, respected and connected.



## 05

The team at Melton Central Kindergarten supported a newly arrived family with a war-torn background. Recognising the family needed practical support, they helped connect them with services, information, and strategies to support their child's settling in and development. Through strong relationships and a well-coordinated response, the kindergarten became a place of warmth, safety, and trust. It is a powerful example of how early learning services can support not only children's development, but family wellbeing and community connection.

# Moments we're proud of

## Sharing practice on a bigger stage

In 2025, the ECMS ECE team, led by Rebecca Hand and joined by Kathryn Main and Emma Forsyth, proudly shared stories of practice on a bigger stage, with a record number of conference abstracts accepted across Australia and internationally.

From the INSPIRE Conference in Sydney to BERA at the University of Sussex, and national gatherings including ECA and Social Justice in Early Childhood, the team presented work grounded in anti-bias approaches, Indigenous perspectives, and intentional teaching in practice.

These moments reflect ECMS not only learning and growing internally, but contributing to the broader sector - sharing what quality practice looks like, and helping shape conversations beyond our own services.

## Helping families enrol with confidence

In 2025, a newly introduced Family Liaison Officer (FLO) role opened the door for families who needed extra support with enrolment to access early learning more easily and with greater confidence. Across the enrolment period, close to 600 families received tailored, on-the-ground support - from help completing forms and understanding the process, to in-person guidance and language support in Hindi, Chinese, Arabic and more.

By working alongside local councils and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) officers, the Family Liaison Officer (FLO) reached families who might otherwise have missed out. The role also freed up time for the Enrolments team, making the enrolment process faster and more efficient.

## Personal and practical support

A newly arrived family from Jordan in the City of Brimbank received support at a key point in their kindergarten enrolment journey. Ruba Al Sheikh Hassan, a highly experienced early childhood educator now part of our Enrolments team, was able to support the family in their first language and shared cultural understanding. Her guidance, which was both practical and personal, made all the difference: the family felt understood, welcomed and confident navigating the process.

Their positive experience led them to also enrol some of their other children, strengthening their connection with ECMS and creating a smoother path from kindergarten to school.

## Exceeding services

In 2025, 29 of our services underwent Assessment and Rating, with a strong number of our services achieving or maintaining an Exceeding rating against the National Quality Standard, taking the proportion of ECMS services rated Exceeding to 31% above the national average.

Quarters Primary School Kindergarten and Toun-nun Child and Family Centre both achieved Exceeding at their first Assessment and Rating, with Toun-nun achieving Exceeding in all seven quality areas - a rare accomplishment.

We also celebrated our services that maintained their Exceeding rating, including Alamanda Kindergarten, Altona Kindergarten, Clayton South Kindergarten, Copperfields Preschool, Keilor Park Preschool, Macleod Preschool, Seaholme Kindergarten and Yallambie Park Preschool. The Merrell Kindergarten and Somers Parade Kindergarten again achieved Exceeding in all seven areas, with Somers Parade Kindergarten maintaining that status for the third consecutive time.

Maintaining an Exceeding rating - particularly across all seven quality areas - reflects sustained, embedded practice over time and a strong commitment to high-quality early learning.

# Our research partners



## Ngarrngga Project - University of Melbourne

This is an Indigenous-led research project with a vision of connecting every child in Australia with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, histories, and cultures. Based on the needs of our people, and in partnership with the Ngarrngga curriculum team, this research will produce resources and professional learning for teaching teams across the country.



## Dr Kerry Howells

In partnership with Dr Kerry Howells, ECMS has embedded deep gratitude as a relational practice to strengthen belonging, connection and wellbeing. This work has supported a shared approach between Barayip Kindergarten and Barayip Primary School in the City of Wyndham, demonstrating how simple, intentional practices can build community, identity and cohesion across settings.



## Noah's Ark

In partnership with Noah's Ark, ECMS is continuing to strengthen the implementation of Embedded Learning Support (ELS). Building on pilot learnings, this work focuses on embedding consistent, inclusive practice across services, supported by targeted educator coaching and ongoing research to measure impact.



## Worldly Justice in ECE – Professor Jayne Osgood and Dr Red Ruby Scarlet

Through engagement with Prof Jayne Osgood, Dr Red Ruby Scarlet and the Becoming-Worldly-Wit(h)nesses Research Collective, ECMS is contributing to emerging research that reimagines early childhood practice beyond human-centred approaches. This work explores worldly justice, positioning educators and children as part of interconnected, more-than-human worlds, and strengthening relational, ethical and responsive pedagogies in everyday practice.



## The Gift of Place - Anti-Bias Approaches - Dr Red Ruby Scarlet

Beginning in 2022, this project engages with anti-bias approaches to reconfigure how our organisation can become 'critically inclusive'. This whole organisational change research project begins 'with place' and is led in partnership with Dr Red Ruby Scarlet.



## Birth to Three - Academic Mentorship - Dr Katherine Bussey

Beginning in 2023, this research partnership is co-located in two ECMS Early Learning Centres. With academic mentor Dr Katherine Bussey, the aim is to build internal capability to assess and improve birth-to-three practices.

# Our practice partners

## AERO – Learning Partner Project

Through a learning partnership with Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), ECMS has contributed to the translation of research into practice through professional learning, coaching and implementation approaches. This work has focused on strengthening evidence-informed pedagogy at scale, supporting educators to engage with research in meaningful, practical ways that enhance teaching, learning and outcomes for children.



## The Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE)

The Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE) is our professional development partner for implementing CLASS, an internationally accredited program that measures the effectiveness of educator interactions with children. CLASS enables targeted improvement plans for educators and ECMS to monitor our improvement over time in the domains of intentional teaching, responsiveness, and emotional support.



## Melbourne City Mission

Melbourne City Mission (MCM) continued to be our partner of choice for the delivery of allied health supports for services under School Readiness Funding. Our work together continues to evolve, with increasing levels of sophistication and responsiveness.



## Circle of Security International

ECMS partners with Circle of Security International to build leader and educator capability in relational, attachment-informed practice through Circle of Security (CoS). This partnership supports leaders and educators across ECMS to strengthen their understanding of children's emotional needs and enhance their capacity to provide secure, responsive and relationship-focused environments.



# Our funding partners

We recognise our work is made possible through government funding, grants and subsidies. We'd like to thank the Victorian State Government and the Commonwealth Government for their continued recognition of the invaluable impact of early childhood education and care.



Australian Government

We also want to recognise the support of the councils we work alongside, and the services they provide to our shared communities

City of Banyule  
City of Boroondara  
City of Brimbank  
Cardinia Shire  
City of Casey  
City of Darebin

City of Hobsons Bay  
City of Kingston  
City of Manningham  
City of Maribyrnong  
City of Melbourne  
City of Melton

Shire of Moorabool  
Shire of Nillumbik  
City of Whittlesea  
Wyndham City

# Our team

## Our Executive Team

**Kieren Kearney**  
CEO

**Amanda Hughes**  
Director of People

**Clare Jennings**  
Director of Risk & Compliance\*

**Vanessa Karamesinis**  
Chief Financial Officer\*

**Kate Smith**  
Director of Marketing & Communications

**Rebecca Hand**  
Director of Early Childhood Education

**Stu Braganza-Travis**  
Director of Strategy\*\*

\* new appointment 2025  
\*\* exited 2025

## Enhanced governance arrangements

As ECMS continues to grow and respond to the changing needs of children, families and communities, we are taking thoughtful steps to ensure our organisational structure supports our future direction. As ECMS has grown, we have recognised the need for a governance model that supports both our current operations and future direction.

To support this, ECMS transitioned from an incorporated association to a company limited by guarantee under the Corporations Act 2001 (Cth). This change ensures strong foundations for sustainable growth, allowing us to remain focused on supporting children's learning, development and wellbeing, and continuing to build communities where every child can belong and become.

## Board

During 2025, the following people were Directors of ECMS:

Board member	Role	Appointed	Resigned
Vanda Fortunato	Director Board Chair Company Secretary	9 March 2021 23 May 2023 18 December 2025	
Jason Talbot	Director	2 December 2019	
Jenny Mikakos	Director	21 May 2024	
Paul Linossier	Director	1 February 2025	
Peter Lewinsky	Director	21 May 2024	
Ryan Mistry	Director	24 September 2018	26 May 2025
Celia Pollard	Director	11 July 2016	26 May 2025
Linda Weatherson	Director	11 July 2016	26 May 2025
Ellen Hooper	Director	9 October 2022	1 July 2025
Amanda Watkinson	Director	9 March 2021	1 July 2025
Susan McKean	Company Secretary	13 May 2024	17 December 2025

## Directors' meetings

The following table sets out the number of Directors' meetings, including meetings of committees of Directors, and the number of meetings attended by each director (while they were a director or committee member).

Board member	Board of Directors Meeting	Finance, Risk, Audit, & Compliance Committee	Nominations & Remuneration Committee	Quality & Safety Committee	Attended / Eligible	
					Attended	Eligible
Vanda Fortunato	7/7	-/-	3/3	-/-		
Jason Talbot	7/7	8/8	2/2	-/-		
Jenny Mikakos	7/7	-/-	1/1	2/2		
Paul Linossier	6/7	3/3	-/-	2/2		
Peter Lewinsky	6/7	8/8	-/-	-/-		
Ryan Mistry	1/3	2/3	-/-	-/-		
Celia Pollard	3/3	-/-	1/1	-/-		
Linda Weatherson	2/3	3/3	-/-	-/-		
Ellen Hooper	2/3	3/4	-/-	-/-		
Amanda Watkinson	1/3	2/3	-/-	-/-		

# Financials

## Statement of profit or loss for the year ended 31 December 2025

	2025 (\$)	2024 (\$)
Revenue and Other Income	82,102,543	73,507,567
Investments classified as FVPL - net gain/ (loss) in fair value	43,574	(357,993)
Investments classified as FVOCI - realised net loss transferred from Fair Value Reserve	(73,131)	-
<b>Total Revenue</b>	<b>82,072,986</b>	<b>73,149,574</b>
Admin Expenses	6,819,443	6,406,504
Depreciation and amortisation expense	1,179,447	1,196,633
Employee benefits expense	68,278,477	61,007,920
Property expenses	4,616,772	3,606,319
Finance expenses	122,080	121,494
Other expenses	335,270	458,221
<b>Total expenses</b>	<b>81,351,489</b>	<b>72,797,091</b>
<b>Surplus for the year</b>	<b>721,497</b>	<b>352,483</b>

2025 Total Revenue

**82 million**

Revenue Growth

**11%**

