

NICOLE HEGARTY, REPORTER: It's lunch time at the Little Souls early intervention centre, on Queensland's Gold Coast.

SAVANNA BOYER, PARENT: Well, for our family, it's been nearly life changing.

BENSON WILLEMSE, PARENT: Night and Day. It's crazy.

SAVANNA BOYER: Yeah. Absolutely night and day.

NICOLE HEGARTY: Reilly and his twin brother Jonesy are at Little Souls two days a week. Their parents Savanna and Benson have been sending their sons to the centre since the start of this year.

SAVANNA BOYER: The boys when they first came here really needed intensive one-to-one support, therapy throughout the day to even participate in something as simple as sitting down for a meal.

NICOLE HEGARTY: But after 19 years of operations, the future of Little Souls is in doubt.

AILEEN MORGAN, CENTRE DIRECTOR: As an approved provider for NDIS and early intervention supports working exactly with the cohort that Thriving Kids is aimed at, two to six years children with autism, we have had no information.

MARK BUTLER, HEALTH MINISTER: Children with mild to moderate developmental delay or autism need a robust system of supports to help them thrive - a program for thriving kids.

NICOLE HEGARTY: In 2023, the Health Minister Mark Butler announced that the Commonwealth, along with the states and territories, would set up a new program for children under nine.

ANTHONY ALBANESE, PRIME MINISTER: To improve the experience of participants and restore the original intent of the scheme.

NICOLE HEGARTY: It would take kids with autism and developmental delay out of the National Disability Insurance Scheme which successive governments have been warning is unsustainable and forecast to hit \$56 billion this year.

Dr Frank Oberklaid is a paediatrician and one of the architects of the new Thriving Kids program, which is meant to start in October.

PROF. FRANK OBERKLAIID, CO-CHAIR OF THRIVING KIDS ADVISORY COMMITTEE: A major problem with the NDIS was that because it was so focused on diagnosis and deficits and what's wrong with the child, we'd better fix the child up, parents weren't necessary part of that equation.

NICOLE HEGARTY: A key change under Thriving Kids is that care will be available without an autism diagnosis.

Instead doctors, childcare workers and teachers will be trained to identify developmental delay. Parents will be offered online courses and kids referred to group therapies in schools and childcare. Kids with higher needs will still have access to specialist services.

FRANK OBERKLAID: It changes the language from diagnosis and what's wrong with a child to what sort of supports does this child and this family need at the present time?

NICOLE HEGARTY: Another big difference between the NDIS model and the new Thriving Kids model is how the money flows

Families with kids on NDIS plans for autism or early developmental delay can use their funding to pay for services they've chosen to meet their children's needs.

Under Thriving Kids, state and territory governments will foot a larger share of the bill and directly fund service providers but just eight weeks from start date, there is one state is holding out.

DAVID CRISAFULLI, QUEENSLAND PREMIER: I hope that you've seen today that we can work together on issues where we have commonality.

NICOLE HEGARTY: Since January, five of the six states and both territories have cut funding deals with the federal government.

But despite accepting additional federal funding for hospitals, Queensland's Crisafulli government still hasn't signed.

It also didn't allocate any additional money in the June state budget.

JENNY KARAVOLOS, AUSTRALIAN AUTISM ALLIANCE: I would suggest that the hesitancy in Queensland not signing is they understand the magnitude of what needs to occur, and they want to ensure that they get it right.

MARK BUTLER: We've been talking about this now for two or three years, this is the right direction for families with young children, we should build on that for the broader community. And I think it's time governments just got on with the job of doing it.

NICOLE HEGARTY: Last week, Queensland's Disability Services Minister Amanda Camm fronted a state estimates hearing.

AMANDA CAMM, QLD DISABILITY SERVICES MINISTER: The consultation with states has been very little, if at all any, in regards to the Thriving Kids policy.

We are continuing dialogue, we are continuing the important work, but we do not apologise for standing up for people with a disability and their families.

NICOLE HEGARTY: The minister declined 7.30's request for an interview.

Robyn Hawkins started Little Souls after her son Ben was diagnosed with autism.

ROBYN HAWKINS, CENTRE PRINCIPAL: I realised that there was this therapy that was available to help children, but really nowhere was providing that.

AILEEN MORGAN: We've had over 200 children come through our doors and we've celebrated everything big and small from their very first sound to their very first 'hi mom' or 'love you dad'.

NICOLE HEGARTY: Melissa Beidak in Brisbane is facing a similar dilemma. She started a play-based therapy program and is worried about the future of her business, and her own children's access to supports.

MELISSA BIEDAK, CENTRE OWNER AND PARENT: We're losing staff because there's just a massive amount of uncertainty whether there will be work. As a parent, I'm quite concerned.

My children do access therapy at school, it is privately paid by myself. And their therapy is in the corridor outside the classroom and so if there's no space for that therapist to take my child to do their speech lesson into another space, how are you going to fit the needs of each child?

NICOLE HEGARTY: For the families, the big worry is that without a deal, the services they've come to rely on will start to disappear.

SAVANNA BOYER: It really scares me that if we've just started to find therapy and we're really only engaging in it at a minimum rate at the moment, is that going to get less? That could affect their whole life.