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Early Childhood Education and Care
Productivity Commission
Locked Back 2, Collins St East Melbourne
VIC 8003

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Dear Commissioners

RE: Submission for the inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

As the Early Childhood Organisation (EChO) South Australia, established in 1976, we recently accepted the opportunity to formally present a submission into the development of universal three-year-old preschool as part of the South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care. Given the relevance of this work, we would like to share our submission with the Commissioners for the Productivity Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care. Whilst it was written specific for universal 3-year-old preschool, we believe our submission can be applied to relevant Productivity Commission scope and terms of reference including areas of quality, inclusivity and workforce across the broader early childhood education and care setting.

The structure of our submission will outline the following:

1. EChO's vision, mission and structure
2. Overarching priority for the consideration of universal three-year-old preschool (central aims)
3. Critical key considerations to support children, families, communities, and the workforce (central aims)
4. Other key considerations (secondary aims).



EChO's vision, mission and structure

EChO is committed to developing the status, high quality and future direction of early childhood education and provides professional learning for early childhood educators and leaders locally, nationally, and internationally.

We are governed by a volunteer Board whose primary focus is advocating for children's rights, aligning with the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child. This provides the foundation from which we build upon to:

- promote and maintain the visibility of early childhood education
- provide opportunities for professional growth and development for early childhood educators and carers
- advocate for the rights of young children and their educators in line with contemporary research and practice in the early years.

EChO is and is perceived to be:

- an association that provides a forum to inspire and provoke early childhood educators
- a forum to engage, inspire and be inspired
- an association whose approach to professional learning and growth is underpinned by contemporary research and practice.

As an association which focuses our work on children from birth to eight-years we have a broad membership base. We provide paid membership to any person or site whose primary concern is the care and education of young children. This includes and is not limited to:

- educators and sites in varying sectors, including the Department for Education, Catholic Education, Association of Independent Schools and Private Providers
- educators, carers and sites from long day care, family day care, children's centres, stand-alone preschools, co-located preschools, and schools



- preservice educators and carers from tertiary education institutions and educational organisations.

Overarching priority for the consideration of universal 3-year-old pre-school (central aims)

In alignment with EChO's vision and mission, the overarching priority for the consideration of universal three-year-old preschool should encompass a universal continuity based approach to learning. We believe learning should continue to be grounded in and built upon international and national policy directions, along with a strong evidence base. Key documents we believe should continue to underpin preschool in South Australia include:

- United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the child
- The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration
- Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)
- National Quality Framework (NQF)
- The Early Years Learning Strategy (Department for Education, South Australia).

EChO's submission is also grounded in the assumption that high quality early childhood education and learning is framed around the principles and practices outlined in the EYLF, the findings from the [National Quality Framework Approved Learning Frameworks Update Literature Review](#), and is not limited to nor discussed in isolation of chronological age.

Critical key considerations to support children, families, communities and the workforce (central aims)

We aspire for three-year-old preschool to be framed as honouring continuity in a child's learning, since birth, and should not seek to "schoolify" the early years of learning. Building upon the findings from the National Quality Framework Approved Learning Frameworks



Update Literature Review, and [Carla Rinaldi's Reimagining Childhood Report for South Australia](#) EChO would like to affirm and advocate for a particular focus on the following:

- **child as citizen and possessor of rights**

All children are born with rights (UNICEF, 1989). Central to Carla Rinaldi's placement as Thinker in Residence in South Australia was the view of the competent child, one who is powerful from birth (Rinaldi, 2013). This view of the child as an active citizen was mirrored through Goal 2 of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Agreement (Education Council, 2019). It is with this understanding of the child as citizen and possessor of rights that any consideration and planning for three-year-old preschool should occur. Therefore, children's rights rather than economic gains or service convenience should be paramount to preschool planning. In any model the minimising of children's experiences of fragmentation and the holistic frame of family should be evident.

- **minimising the fragmentation of early years' education in South Australia**

When adopting an educational standpoint based on chronological age, we believe there is an increased risk in the fragmentation of learning. If children are capable, from birth, then learning should be seen as occurring in a continuum rather than a silo. There is great possibility in exploring a focus on learning from three to six years rather than the isolation and approach to learning of strictly three-year-olds. It is our belief that whilst there is currently a fragmentation between ages in early years' education, there is also fragmentation between services. Language is often disconnected not only regarding types of sites but also in relation to pedagogy, practice, and learning.

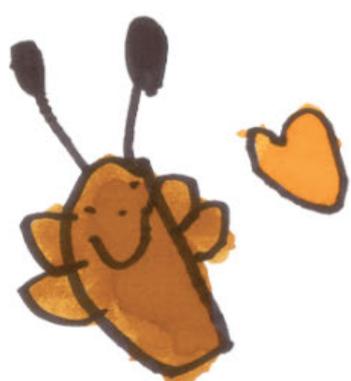
Our most critical fear for children in the early years of education in South Australia is the risk for children to experience fragmentation in their experiences and day to day life. Attending different fragmented services of formal and informal education and care with disparate social connections causes a disconnect for children and impacts their ability to belong and to also feel like they belong. It greatly impacts families through their experiences and relationships as well. This was evidenced within Rinaldi's 2012/2013 work in South Australia. One key



example was the outline of two children’s weeks as shown in the following image (Rinaldi, 2013, p. 41):

A fragmented week – Two children’s perspective

<p>Tuesdays</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent at home – all day <p>Mondays & Wednesdays</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent 7.00am – 8.15am • DECD Preschool 8.15am – 3.45pm • Grandparent/Family Friend Care 3.45pm – 5.30pm • Parent 5.30pm – 7.00pm <p>Thursdays & Fridays</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent at home 7.00am – 9.00am • Montessori Preschool 9.00am – 3.00pm • Parent 3.00pm – 7.00pm <p><small>Data collated by Early Childhood Australia – South Australian Branch, March 2012</small></p>	<p>Monday</p> <p>8.00am – Arrives with Dad at long day care</p> <p>8.00am – 6.00pm Long Day Care Centre</p> <p>6.00pm – leaves long day care with Mum</p> <p>Tuesday</p> <p>8.00am – Arrives with Dad at long day care</p> <p>8.00am – 6.00pm Long Day Care Centre</p> <p>6.00pm – leaves long day care with Mum</p> <p>Wednesday</p> <p>8.30am Arrives with Mum at long day care</p> <p>8.30am – 3.30pm Preschool</p> <p>3.30pm – 6.00pm Grandparent/Family/Friend</p> <p>6.00pm – leaves long day care with Dad</p> <p>Thursday</p> <p>8.30am Arrives with Mum at long day care</p> <p>8.30am – 3.30pm Preschool</p> <p>3.30pm – 6.00pm Grandparent/Family Friend</p> <p>6.00pm – leaves long day care with Dad</p> <p>Friday</p> <p>8.30am Arrives with Mum at long day care on Alternate Fridays</p> <p>8.30am – 12.30pm Alternate Fridays Preschool</p> <p>12.30pm – 6.00pm time with Grandparent/Family/Friend</p> <p>6.00pm – leaves long day care with Dad</p> <p><small>Data collated by Early Childhood Australia – South Australian Branch, March 2012</small></p>
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CARLA RINALDI: RE-IMAGINING CHILDHOOD

This inconsistency influences a range of factors including wellbeing and mental health. As explored in the [National Strategies Shaping our Future Education and Care National Workforce Strategy](#) (Education Services Australia, 2021) wellbeing is not just crucial for the



children accessing preschool services, but also must be a priority when considering those providing the care and education. High quality early childhood education must encompass both high quality learning and a pedagogy of care rather than operate in false dichotomy.

- **strengthening the continuity of learning for children from birth**

If learning is viewed, as suggested, on a continuum then continuity for children's learning should be of utmost importance when considering three-year-old preschool. This is again where the notion of learning groups and reframing thinking to three to six years rather than solely three-year-olds will help to create a sense of belonging and continuity of learning (Rinaldi, 2013). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has rich data to support the role of integration in the early years of education. Supporting this further are the known values and benefits for play-based pedagogies within such environments as evidenced throughout the National Quality Framework (ACECQA, 2021). In addition, there is also strong emphasis in Australian studies and international studies which highlight the stark dangers of enforcing a more academic or school like curriculum in prior to school settings (Dockett & Perry, 2015).

- **enhancing effective transitions for children**

Successful transition experiences influence a child's potential in that moment and into the future (OECD, 2020). Children experience times of transition frequently within their weeks and for many on a daily basis. Supporting transition in an authentic and holistic approach is needed. One possible exploration could be into sites that currently cater for a range of age groups or through dialogue with schools that supported Year 7 transition or similarly support reception transition from preschool. Whilst such information could support future planning, the children beginning three-year-old preschool are at a younger age and therefore require much more in-depth support for transition than their older counterparts. Consideration must also be given to the role of families in transition as well as the transition of families. Early learning services, irrespective of their name or sector, must work closely in partnership with families to achieve the best experience for each child. The added benefit of two years in a



preschool environment means greater continuity and less times of transition for not only the children but families as well.

- **relational and responsive pedagogy**

The holistic support of transition and continuity of learning is best evidenced through relational and responsive pedagogical practices. Children's knowledge and capacity for metacognition and self-regulation develops critically during childhood (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017). To best support this significant period in a child's development and life it is essential that preschool environments for three-year-olds are conducive to these pedagogies. Relational and responsive pedagogy is crucial with families as well, the reciprocal relationship between parent and teacher forms a strong partnership of support for the best interests of the child. Group size and ratios of children to educators however, must also be factored. Group size is of particular concern given the evidence on group size as an indicator of quality impacting on a child's sense of belonging as well as an educator's ability to build relationships and a deep knowledge of children both individually and as a group. This also has reciprocal impacts on physical infrastructure needs, which will be explored later in the submission. The increase in length of time attending preschool from one year to two years will allow for a stronger relationship development not only between children and educators but also the partnership between families and educators. It is important that continuity is encouraged and supported through planning and policy development. It is also apparent that consideration must be given to supporting the continuity of learning and relationships through avenues such as playgroups within a quality ecology of early childhood in South Australia.

- **equity and excellence for all children with increased emphasis on embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice and children with additional requirements voice**

The participation and voice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and children with additional learning requirements and hence special rights, should be a core consideration when developing universal three-year-old preschool. This emphasis has been reiterated in the 2023 changes to the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). Feedback from the EChO



Member Survey regarding the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care further supported this emphasis and celebrated the ability for support and intervention from a younger age as a result of three-year-old preschool.

- **building capacity in the workforce through professional development**

In order to provide the best learning experiences for all three-year-olds it is crucial that all children have a right to well qualified educators. Studies demonstrate the strong correlation between qualifications and quality (Rinaldi, 2013). Unless a strong, equitable commitment is made to support ongoing professionalism, then the quality and potential of three-year-old preschool is at risk. As highlighted through the refresh of the EYLF, critical reflection also plays a significant role in educator, staff and site development (2023).

In response to Carla Rinaldi's *Thinker in Residence* and the *Re-Imagining Childhood Report* for South Australia, EChO designed the *Reimagining Childhood Project* to address the challenges in Early Childhood Education and Care, many of which are still paramount today. This project was a two-year commitment for participating sites, with over 30 preschools, Early Learning Centres, Child Care Centres and schools who all engaged with the mentor based project. A whole site approach to pedagogy was central to the project, with mentoring provided to educators and leaders from the sites. Learning days, leader's days, reading groups and mentor visits were all intricate facets to the project. Underpinning the pedagogical inquiry was a targeted question relevant to the individual community. Highlighted in this project was the power of learning through inquiry as active researchers and communicators. Key themes which emerged from these sites were the importance of environment for early learning, the pivotal nature of relationships and partnerships between educators, families and children, and the richness of learning through play. The learning journey, growth and reflections of participating educators and sites were shared with others through a professional learning conference titled the *EChO Expo: Making our Own Road*.

Reflections from participants highlighted how empowering it made them feel as educators, how connected they felt to other like minded colleagues and peers, and how it supported them to grow in practice and pedagogy with the image of the child and the child's voice



forever at the centre. EChO found that an ongoing inquiry approach to professional learning supported greater growth and motivation to continue the learning journey more than single focus or standalone professional learning sessions. Participants commented that the project “reinforced the image of the child and helped facilitate change, not only in valuing the image of the child, but also putting this into practice” (EChO Project Participant, 2019). Reflective practice was another key theme which emerged from the EChO Project and supported site development beyond our involvement and saw pedagogical inquiry soon become “a forever project” (EChO Project Participant, 2019). For more reflections and insights into our findings, we welcome you to watch two short videos [EChO Expo Part 1](#) and [EChO Expo Part 2](#) taken as part of our documentation and association learning journey.

High quality professional learning which follows a similar model to this project would be one idea which could be reimaged to address the central aims for consideration across preschool sites in South Australia. With a quarter of the workforce in early childhood aged under 25, as highlighted in the Shaping our Future Strategy (ESA, 2021) it is crucial that this is considered when planning for professional learning in support of development and retention of the workforce.

Other key considerations (secondary aims)

EChO aspires for an environment and experience in preschool where all three-year-olds will thrive holistically with high quality positioned as fundamental for success. We believe there are core economic and financial considerations of importance when planning for universal three-year-old preschool, they include:

- **equitable resourcing and staffing**

Given the range of service providers in South Australia one key consideration will need to be resourcing and staffing. This is impactful not only in metro areas but also critically in rural environments. If the goal of a three-year-old preschool is a rich learning experience



universally, then this must be reflected in the resources and staffing supporting the development of rich environments and experiences for children. When completing an EChO Members Feedback Survey, many commented on their anxiety and caution regarding three-year-old preschool and in particular many identified fear around inadequate staffing and expectations.

- **financial investment**

Similarly, the addition of another cohort of children to preschool providers will have great economic influence. A key focus should be strengthening the attraction to the profession and leveraging this to bring about quality, economic gains, status and reflected importantly through improved remuneration. As highlighted earlier with such a high number of young staff it is also important to not just focus on attracting new employees but in retaining them. Statistically the National Quality Framework data illustrates the high number of staffing waivers currently in place, so much so that South Australia records above the national average in all but one sector (ACECQA, 2023). Of even greater concern is the predicted increase for future years. This also has a correlation to leadership and how staff, sites and communities are not only developed but supported through highly successful leaders.

- **physical infrastructure**

If the environment, as suggested by Loris Malaguzzi, is ‘the third teacher’ and therefore there are intrinsic rights of a child to a quality environment (Rindaldi, 2013), then the physical infrastructure and architecture of preschool sites have significant correlation to the quality of services provided. There needs to be consideration given to the capital expenditure of quality learning environments to support flexibility and the capacity for smaller group configurations within bigger centres. The designs and spaces used must be explored with great intentionality during planning stages. Large group areas, smaller working spaces, access to outside learning environments are all important factors to consider. Group numbers must be the central part of this conversation in order to ensure educators aren’t being forced to teach large numbers of children in spaces not adequate in size or stature. Preschool environments are not school classrooms and link deeply to pedagogy. Universal quality should be mirrored through



universal standards, such as those outlined through the National Quality Framework. However, it is important that these qualities are delivered upon by services in order to continue providing high quality education.

- **safeguarding Early Childhood Education**

A true commitment to universal three-year-old preschool should ensure that measures are put in place to safeguard its success for all children, and in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children with additional requirements. Whilst the National Quality Framework currently seeks to mandate quality of education sites, exemptions for outcomes are possible. Feedback from our EChO Members Survey illustrated concern that there will also be an increased academic pushdown unless it is taken seriously with measures put in place to ensure this does not occur. It is crucial that there is a safeguard for children to ensure the quality preschool education envisaged for three-year-olds is accessible for all children.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our submission from the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care for the Productivity Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care. We understand that these aims may be of significant importance at different times and that the priority of aims may be dependent on stakeholder views. We would welcome any opportunity to further expand on our views and ideas expressed in this submission to further support the children of South Australia and the consideration, planning and implementation of early childhood education and care across Australia.

Kind regards

Sarah Graham
EChO President



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