

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

22 May 2023

Dear Commissioners,

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

I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission as part of the public consultation on the Productivity Commission inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care. I have worked in the sector for 23 years. For 15 years I worked primarily in long day care (centre based care) as a manager for community and corporate centres and for 10 years having owned my own early learning centres. I have also worked for TAFE and private RTO. I am currently taking a break from the sector due to burnout.

The work needed to address the challenges and failures of the sector is one of great enormity. Underpinning this work is the amazing work of the workforce, in particular the early childhood educators who are often praised for their efforts, however are left behind when it comes to addressing the wages crisis. I'd like to take the opportunity to highlight that without addressing the wages crisis all other measures in early childhood policy are as a result will be impacted. The impact will be financially through policy drive that can't be implemented to increase financial benefits economically, as an example increase in child care subsidy allowing families to attend extra days but are unable to due to lack of staff, or quality impacted because of a weakened workforce, as an example developmental outcomes being effected due to lack of consistency of staff. If we don't have a strong and stable workforce underpinning all the great policy work in early childhood, the investment and time will be diminished and an opportunity wasted. This opportunity isn't just economic, which I feel is the missing part of the discussion, the missed opportunity is children's outcomes and therefore societal outcomes. We are already seeing a breakdown in community, a failed ecec sector will only add to this.

I'd now like to address some of the key points of the Terms of Reference:

- affordability of, and access to, quality ECEC services that meet the needs of families and children
 - *We must work hard at bringing back community led services. When we are looking at expansion of new developments local community services should be earmarked for these areas and not left to private and corporate interest. We should be putting community first as we do local schools.*
 - *In addition to this we need to look at the current model for planning.*

- *We could also be looking outside the box to a 'buy back' type scheme to get community services in heavily corporate operated areas.*

- developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school
 - *We need to look at 'school readiness' in terms of not just getting a child 'ready' for school but getting the schools 'ready' for the children. For most, this is being done in a fantastic way. However, for children who have inclusion needs and diagnosed challenges, we need to do better. We need a more streamlined approach to funding for children with additional needs to reduce the stress placed on our Prep teachers, who are often left with little to no support in the transition first term.*
 - *We have a growing number of children who have behavioural challenges and additional needs yet we are failing them in preparation to mainstream school. We have extensive wait list for allied health support and a sector under extreme pressure in knowing how to work with children and families.*
 - *We need a review of all levels of funding, State and Federal, as well as the NDIS, and see how we can streamline support to children and families 'through' their early year's services to provide a wrap-around approach in the kindergarten years.*

- economic growth, including through enabling workforce participation, particularly for women, and contributing to productivity
 - *We won't meet the targets in this area without first addressing the wages issue and securing the best and brightest educators to work long term in the sector.*
 - *Educators are some of the lowest paid professionals in the country, a boost to their wages will be a direct boost to the economy. We will also see the return of many educators to the sector which will relieve the workforce crisis.*
 - *Solution: Introduce wages funding, introduce a wage sign on bonus to encourage educators who have left to re-entre the sector. A win/win. The funding will be going straight back into the economy, and we will have educators re-entre opening up the rooms needed for increased workforce participation for those who currently can't access additional days due to not enough staff in services.*

- outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability
 - *Again we need to look at how best to streamline funds to have a wrap-around support network in the early years.*
 - *We need to drop access hours for all of the above, and have this opened for families how require more hours than is currently available.*
 - *We need to streamline all of ACCS, not just 'child wellbeing'.*
 - *We also need a more streamlines approach to Inclusion Support Funding. The whole system needs a complete overhaul. Currently we have a system that has no backdating on initial entry, no backdating on annual roll over, which impacts*

services financially, impacts staff as they have the additional staff taken away while the rollover of funding is being processed, impacts children who don't get the additional support needed, and impacts families who are left stressed that their child isn't being cared for appropriately. The administrative burden placed on educators is absolutely ludicrous, there is no simple manual or guidance available, nor is there any online training or support. This should all be accessible in PRODA. Services who are the deliverer of the ISF are heavily burdened with time management and spend most of their valuable time administrating the red tape, as opposed to supporting educators in services helping them with strategies and supporting them. Too much time is allocated to administration which is absurd. The children need support. Currently the support is going to the educators and service providers in administration support. We have got this all wrong. As a result, children are not being accepted into services. Families have no way of knowing that this is wrong and have nothing to fall back on in terms of support or knowing how to report this discrimination. This is happening and needs to be addressed.

- the efficiency and effectiveness of government investment in the sector.
 - *I have been a private owner and operator for 10 years. We need to introduce profit caps for private and corporate providers. We can't have a sector licenced to print money for greedy operators when educators aren't paid well and reinvestment into resources and training isn't happening. A line needs to be drawn on how much profit can be made from services whose primary funding stream is tax payer dollars.*
- impacts on demand, supply, and fee growth.
 - *We need to again, go back to the planning and treat ecec like we do the school sector. We don't have private schools popping up on every corner, we need the planning to reflect how we manage the development and planning of schools.*
- interactions with existing and planned Commonwealth, state and territory ECEC policy settings and funding, including recent commitments by the New South Wales and Victorian governments to expand access to 30 hours of preschool for children in the year before full time school and support more 3-year-old children to participate in preschool, and any commitments in response to the South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care.
 - *We need a more Nationalised approach to ecec. Strength in unity. At the moment we are seeing State lead the way for others to follow leaving a divide in children's outcomes.*
 - *We also see States advertising for staff in other States, which is fine, but again isn't helping with the overall problem of attraction and retention, you're just applying band aid solutions to an overall National problem, that needs an overall National solution.*

- interactions with other incentives and disincentives to join or increase participation in the workforce.
 - *You can have all the incentives in the world but you aren't going to attract and retain educators long term, as a career, if the overall wages crisis isn't addressed.*

- ECEC sector workforce requirements and the capacity to meet these requirements within current Commonwealth, state and territory initiatives.
 - *We wouldn't have a capacity issue if the overall wages crisis is addressed.*

- required regulatory settings, including to manage compliance and integrity risks for Commonwealth programs.
 - *We need to have a more robust, regular, systematic approach to Assessment and Ratings. We currently have too long a wait between assessments, too much stress is placed on services and educators throughout this process. We need to make this more streamlined, more supportive, more regular, in order to build on relationships with services, and support services in receiving the training or resources they need in order to achieve the best quality outcomes for children. More investment is needed to support a better system.*

- impact on access to quality ECEC, including by remoteness and access to flexible (non-standard hours) services.
 - *We need more community services operating that are funded on a deficit, as most of these areas are abandoned by private operators as they provide not clear profit.*

- whether different settings are required based on the location of services or family circumstances.
 - *We need more community services operating that are funded on a deficit, as most of these areas are abandoned by private operators as they provide not clear profit.*

- the operation and adequacy of the market, including types of care and the roles of for-profit and not-for-profit providers, and the appropriate role for government.
 - We need a better overall planning system when looking at market viability and need.

- activity requirements and other ECEC policy settings, including to reduce system complexity and debt for families.

- *As mentioned previously – refer to ISF administration complexity*
- *Family debt is a huge administrative burden for service providers. Work needs to be done with software providers, **alongside** service providers, to come up with a better solution on debt management.*

- impacts on the economy, including workforce participation, productivity and budgetary implications.
 - *No comment to provide*

- a pathway for implementation
 - *Start at the core of the problem, educator wages.*
 - *Work with the sector, create a Ministerial Advisory Committee to liaise with Government on the steps forward and how best to implement recommendations. This Committee must have educator representatives and not just organisation representatives. The impacts and implications of recommendations must be discussed with educators.*

I hope that the summary of my input an opinion, gathered from my 23 years' experience of working in the sector, is of benefit to the inquiry. If you would like to discuss any aspect of my response, or would like further information please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely,
Tamika Hicks