

Eastern Region Preschool Field Officer Group (ERPSFO Group) Submission to the Productivity Commission Review on Childcare and Early Childhood Learning.

Who are the ERPSFO Group?

This group of PSFOs works across seven municipalities in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. As a group of early childhood professionals we meet together regularly for collegiate support.

What is the role of a Preschool Field Officer?

“The main role of the Preschool Field Officer program is to support the access and participation of children with additional needs in kindergarten. It supports children with a range of developmental concerns and additional needs who are usually not receiving supports from Early Childhood Intervention Services or kindergarten inclusion support service packages. Preschool field officers are highly qualified early childhood professionals specialising in early childhood education and development. They support kindergartens by providing consultation, resources and advice to teachers and families. Any family with a child attending a state-funded kindergarten program with additional needs or a teacher working in a state-funded kindergarten program can access this service.”

Reference: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/parents/needs/Pages/support.aspx>

PSFOs work in state funded kindergarten programs in range of settings: stand alone, sessional kindergartens; kindergartens in long day care; kindergarten programs in private schools; and privately run kindergartens.

The Eastern Region Preschool Field Officer Group has put together the following:

- **What role, if any, should the different levels of government play in childcare and early childhood education?**

Continue both Federal and State Government funding to allow ECEC services to continue to operate and receive government funding. However, state and federal government should provide guidelines flexible enough to allow local government involvement in prioritising allocation of current and future funds, due to local government's ability to understand and respond to local community needs and projections of growth.

Federal government needs to be the regulatory and quality authority to allow continuation of Australia-wide consistency especially in relation to quality standards.

- **The Commission is seeking evidence on the effect of the different types of ECEC, including separate preschool programs, on children's learning and development and preparedness for school**

As a group of Preschool Field Officers (PSFO) we have noted, as anecdotal evidence, that what has the most significant impact on school readiness is a quality kindergarten program with a qualified (bachelor level) Early Childhood teacher, regardless of the setting.

In addition to the transition statements already required by the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF), there is great value in school transitions programs where early childhood centres and schools work co-operatively in the best interests of the child and family. Of particular benefit, especially for vulnerable, at risk, or children with additional needs is the opportunity for face to face discussion between ECEC, school and any other professionals working with the child and family, such as ECI and PSFO professionals. Another strategy that is of great benefit to assist all children in school preparedness is the opportunity for prep teachers to observe the children in kindergarten as part of the transition process. The willingness and capacity of both school and ECEC services to engage in such transition programs is very variable and would therefore benefit from government support and funding to ensure prioritising of this and allow time release for educators involved from both services.

- **How does the amount of time spent in ECEC and the age at which a child first enters childcare impact on learning and development outcomes?**

It is not possible to allocate a time or starting age as having the greatest impact on learning and development outcomes as each child and family is unique. What is more significant is the time it takes for the child and ECEC educator to form a strong attachment based relationships with ECEC educator/s. This formation and continuation of stable, predictable, interactive and responsive relationships has the greatest impact on learning and development. This is important for all children to thrive and learn but especially important for vulnerable or at risk children. Quality ECEC programs enable this type of attachment based relationship to flourish.

The Commission is seeking information on:

- **how well the needs of disadvantaged, vulnerable or other additional needs children are being met by the ECEC sector as a whole, by individual types of care, and in particular regions**

There are many concerns around how the inclusion and needs of children with additional needs are being met in mainstream ECEC services. If inclusion is viewed in three components: access; participation; and support; then both the participation and support components need additional support and funding. Even when ECEC services have a philosophy where inclusion is welcomed and encouraged, the educators working with the children frequently find the day to day challenges and work load of including a child with additional needs, demanding and time consuming. Including children with additional needs often requires additional paper work and additional time to meet with or consult with other professionals working with the child and family. The individual educators capacity to do this well is very dependent on: training; experience; knowledge of the specific additional need; ability to individualise the program/curriculum to match each child's needs and skills; knowledge of support services; availability of support services; and attitudes of both management, co-educators and other families utilising the service.

Therefore it would be of great benefit to both the access and participation of children with additional needs if any child with a diagnosed disability (of any kind) or any child receiving ECI services (with or without a diagnosis) automatically received funding for additional assistance (teacher aid) support within the early childhood sector. Such funding is currently available through Inclusion Support Subsidy (ISS) and Kindergarten Inclusion Support Scheme (KISS) programs but is determined by a strict set of criteria and is frequently time limited.

KISS funding for kindergarten programs in Victoria has a criteria that is too limiting and the paper work and process too cumbersome and overly time consuming. As it is an application this often places additional stress on families and educators as they await the results or receive an unexpectedly low amount of funding support. The strict criteria, excludes many children with additional needs and so does not support inclusive practices. With such narrow criteria the KISS program excludes many children whose needs would be much better met with an additional educator in the environment. All children would gain from such funding so that the entire group would benefit from increased time with educators. The criteria for this funding only allows for support of access. Many children who would benefit from additional support to participate do not meet criteria. Consequently if these children with additional needs were to receive additional support to participate in the program, their learning and developmental outcomes would be improved, as would school readiness.

As the paper work involved focuses on what the child needs support with, teachers always find it challenging to form a positive relationship with families because this documentation is negatively deficit based. Due to the time lines involved, within kindergarten, this is often part of the educator's first meeting with the family. This is a contradiction to high quality, where communication with families is strength based. If funding for additional support were made automatic, then this process would be much more aligned with allowing families and children to feel welcomed and gain a sense of belonging.

Some Long Day Care (LDC) services are choosing not to place children with additional needs into their kindergarten program without applying for state government kindergarten funding for that child. This is done so that the child can continue to receive additional support through ISS program. This is because the child would not meet the criteria for funding, or not as much funding, if they were to apply through the KISS program. The different funding available from different levels of government with different criteria makes the process complicated, cumbersome, confusing and inequitable

It is our experience that educators of all qualifications don't consistently know what support services are available or of how to access services. This is often exacerbated due to lack of effective internal communication systems within an ECEC centre. There are often limited opportunities for educators to network (within their own centre or with colleagues from other ECEC services) or to attend professional development (PD) or training, due to time and cost constraints. Time constraints include limited non contact time that can be allocated to seeking out support services.

- **the extent to which additional needs are being met by mainstream ECEC services or specialised services & key factors that explain any failure to meet these needs**

See above.

When children are identified as needing additional support and assessment, there are long waiting lists for Early Childhood Intervention Services (ECIS) services and other medical and allied health services. This obviously contributes to stress on the families and often means that educators continue to work with and support the child without any input from support services. While educators will continue to support the child to the best of their abilities, this lack of support has the potential to affect the child's learning and developmental outcomes.

With the introduction of the NQS, ECEC services have increased in both number and capacity. Ensuring children do have the opportunity to be part of a pre-school program that accesses a qualified kindergarten teacher is an integral part of ensuring quality services and supporting school transition. However, there has not been any associated increase in funding to the PSFO program. This has resulted in increased waiting time for PSFO services. In Victoria 3 year old kindergarten is not funded and therefore educators and services cannot access PSFO services.

Pre-service education, post graduate education and professional development don't adequately meet the needs of teachers to be able to confidently and effectively provide an inclusive environment that meets the learning and development needs of all children. Pre-service training and PD have a direct impact on attitudes and belief on inclusion. Therefore, learning about inclusion should be embedded and made compulsory in all pre-service curriculums.

Children with additional needs who are being supported by a Special Developmental School Early Childhood Intervention Service cannot receive this service once they are school age eligible. This means that children who attend a second year of kindergarten are not able to continue receiving support from the SDS based ECIS service. This is very disruptive for the child, family and any mainstream ECEC service working with the child.

- **What childcare operators and governments can do to improve the delivery of childcare services to children with additional needs?**

Greater education, in both pre and post service training and education, will assist educators in greater levels of understanding around programs, services and inclusive practices which are already available, especially those specific to local regions. Governments can support services to allow this through funding to allow for time release, or additional non contact time for educators, as well as through funding PD programs and workshops.

- **Other workforce and workplace issues, including any aspect of government regulation that affects the attractiveness of childcare or early learning as a vocation.**

For all levels of work in ECEC, pay does not reflect the enormity of the importance and responsibility (for both children today and the future of Australian society) involved in working with young children and their families. Standards now require all educators to have a tertiary qualification education, and pay levels do not effectively recognise all levels of qualifications when compared with similar levels of pay outside of ECEC and therefore does

not attract suitable staff or encourage ongoing employment in the sector. In addition, there is limited career advancement opportunities especially for those who would like to stay in the role of direct work with children. Again this does not attract or retain good staff. Pay also does not reflect the conditions of many ECEC educators. Working in ECEC often involves shifts, working outside of hours (for late pick- ups, fund raising and social events, committee meetings etc.), and an ethical and professional responsibility to keep up with PD.