

1<sup>st</sup> February, 2014

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for the opportunity to add my thoughts to the inquiry into Early Childhood services in Australia. I have worked in the Early Childhood sector since 1985, with breaks to raise my three children. Since 2003 I have been the Director of a rural, community based, not for profit preschool. I hold a Masters in Education (Inclusive Education) from Charles Sturt University, a Diploma in Teaching Early Childhood (Mitchell CAE), and a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. In 2011 I was awarded a National Excellence in Teaching (leadership) scholarship which was used to attend the Forest School training programme in the UK and Bush School Assessment Week in Auckland, New Zealand. Since 1994 I have been actively involved in promoting Inclusive education practices for children with additional needs.

The recent changes to Early Childhood Education and Care regulatory requirements have done great things to improve the professionalism of the sector. The NQF mandated changes to ratios, staffing qualifications and use of the EYLF as a curriculum framework are all positive reforms in a sector that has historically been viewed as a group of 'nice ladies looking after children'. The NQF has helped raise the profile of Early Childhood Educators to be seen as professionals who work with children in the most formative part of their lives, and provide support to families in their time of greatest vulnerability. In order to attract and retain qualified Early Childhood Teachers the pay inequity between Early Childhood Teachers and Primary and High School teachers must be addressed.

The reforms mentioned above all cost money. The money that we invest in Early Childhood will save our communities money in the future. I hope that the present government will look beyond the short term costs and look towards creating a future for our country where children are given adequate supports to grow, learn, overcome difficulties (be they disabilities or poverty) and become positive contributing members of their communities and our nation.

Briefly, my thoughts for Early Childhood reforms include:

\*Building of community hubs where all early childhood support services are co- located. These hubs should have baby and maternal health nurses, playgroups, disability support services such as speech, physio and Occupational Therapist, child psychologists, preschools and some extended hours care. The preschool programme should be viewed quite separately to the extended hours care in the same way that the primary school programme is not linked to Out of School Hours Care.

\* The number of young children presenting with disabilities or psychological issues is increasing. This, coupled with our push towards inclusive education means that Early Childhood Education services often require the support of specialists in order to provide the best outcomes for children and families. This is best done on a regular basis with professionals with whom you have strong rapport and respect, rather than on an 'ad hoc' or irregular basis. If these young vulnerable children are not given the support they need in the preschool years they will fall behind academically and socially, resulting in poor long term outcomes for the individual, the family and for our communities.

\*Very young children and babies thrive in small, nurturing, home style care. I support the concept of providing financial benefits or incentives for families to employ a nanny or au pair. This model of care and support reduces stress on families, and allows for flexibility of work hours. Children being cared for in their home, or in a smaller group (if they share a nanny with another family) are less likely to become ill as a result of exposure to a large number of children. Aside from the positive health implications for the individual, this also has an impact on the amount of sick leave accessed by parents, resulting in improved productivity in their work place.

\* The Nanny or Au pair model of care should have financial provision to provide subsidies for children 3 to 6 year old to attend a preschool programme for two or three six hour days per week. It is vital that all children attend a two year preschool programme run by a degree qualified Early Childhood Teacher. This has been shown to have long term benefits educationally and socially.

\* It is vital that three year olds are funded for preschool programmes. For many children it is the time when a developmental delay is identified. A two year preschool programme provides greater opportunities to support the child, the family and to access appropriate disability support services.

\*A voucher system for families on a Health Care Card. These vouchers should be sent to all families with children aged 3 to 5 with information about their local preschool, and the benefits of preschool education. Families should only pay the subsidized rate, rather than paying the full amount up front and then accessing a rebate. This would increase participation rates for low income families.

\* Linking parental payments with attendance at "Parenting classes". These can include some prenatal classes as well as providing postnatal support and education. These should be held in the community hubs so they are easily accessible. These classes will improve a parent's confidence and skills. Attendance at these courses will help to build a support network around the family as well as highlighting to specialists and community workers where a child or family is particularly vulnerable. Having established trust, connection and rapport will mean that the required supports can be put in place early. Completion of these courses will increase their ability to implement effective parental strategies, resulting in increased self esteem.

A new model of education and care for babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers should focus on the long term benefits of reduced stress, increased participation in the work force, flexibility for families as well as enhanced educational and social outcomes for children.

When discussing flexible hours of care for children please remember that Early Childhood educators are amongst the lowest paid, least regarded members of our work force. There is a high 'burn out' rate and it is difficult to attract and retain dedicated Early Childhood professionals. Having 24 hour care centres would not provide the home style environment that children require, nor would it improve the morale of Early Childhood professionals.

If you require any further information in regard to this submission please feel free to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Deni M. Harden