

29 January 2014

Childcare Inquiry

Productivity Commission

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Dear Commissioners

Please find attached a submission from Communities@Work to the Productivity Commission Inquiry on Child Care and Early Childhood Learning.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this issue.

Yours sincerely

Lynne Harwood

Chief Executive Officer

Communities@Work

**RE: Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry on Childcare and Early Childhood Learning on behalf of Communities@Work**

Communities@Work provides a broad suite of quality community programs of social value and practical benefit. Established and developed in Canberra, we are a local organisation that understands local needs. Our innovative and progressive culture seeks to respond to changing community needs in a thoughtful and constructive manner. Communities@Work is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee, governed by a volunteer Board of Directors. We have a paid workforce in excess of 600 staff, engage 150 self-employed family day care educators and harness the passionate commitment of around 250 volunteers.

***Nurturing and Educating Children***

***Child Care and Education Centres:*** We operate 13 Child Care and Education Centres, including two Early Childhood Services, which provide safe learning environments in which children can explore, build positive relationships and grow.

***Family Day Care and In-home Care:*** Our Family Day Care Scheme offers quality child care in the private homes of approved educators while our In-home Care option provides for the care of children in their own homes.

***School Age Care:*** We operate 14 Before School Care Programs, 18 After School Care Programs and 6 School Holiday Programs.

***Paint & Play and Pram Pushers:*** At Paint & Play children engage in painting, puzzles, craft and singing, while the Pram Pushers walking group provides social / physical activity for families.

***ACT Professional Support Coordinator (PSC):*** We provide high quality professional support and development opportunities for eligible early education and care services.

***The Centre of Professional Learning and Education:*** Our registered training organisation provides nationally accredited training and professional development for people working in children's services.

Firstly, we would like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to put forward our key views on the issues surrounding early education and care in the ACT.

From 2012, the National Quality Agenda put in place the National Quality Framework (NQF) that introduced compulsory national law, regulations and standards for the education and care sector. We would like to emphasise that Communities@Work fully embrace the NQF and believe that the NQF and in particular the National Quality Standard (NQS) will raise the bar on quality learning and education.

We would like to begin by saying that the introduction of increased child to educator ratios and mandatory qualifications requirements has had a direct impact on families and educators in a most positive way. We believe that this is the way forward for providing quality education and care for all children. It has become even more important for educators in the sector to have current and relevant qualifications in order to provide quality education and care.

However finding quality, qualified educators to support the new ratio and qualification requirements has been challenging. Due to an extensive shortage of educators across the ACT we have needed to be innovative with our recruitment strategies. This has included supporting new and existing educators to gain formal qualifications. Due to low wages and lack of government financial support students are unable to fund their own qualifications, this has created financial implications on the organisation. We have funded professional development, VET qualifications and degrees and anticipate that over the 2013 – 2014 financial year, we will have spent in excess of \$100,000.00 in doing so. We have managed to do this through scholarships, training incentives and professional development, resulting in an extensive cost to the organisation. We are aware of government initiatives to support students in completing qualifications, such as free diplomas and traineeships, however these initiatives, are inflexible models, offer little choice in training provider and often come at an additional cost to the employer.

Furthermore there has been added pressure on educators to study and work at the same time, leading to employees resigning, excessive time off and leaving the sector to pursue a higher paid career. As we strive to meet and exceed national quality standard, we aim to replace vacant positions with passionate, driven educators. The ACT has an enormous shortage of qualified, motivated educators and as a result, this makes fill vacant positions very challenging, in turn leading to the organisation needing to apply for waivers through ACECQA. Communities@Work centres, educators, children and families deserve quality, dedication, commitment and professionalism, so therefore we are very thorough during recruitment and decision making process around who goes on to further study.

Over the last two years, we have had over 200 educators leave our education and care programs, all for various reasons (data can be provided on request). Through this significant loss of educators, we have needed to increase the recruitment process which proves costly and on countless occasions has led to no success. We have people apply through our website with the correct qualifications, however lack the knowledge and required skills to carry out their expected duties. This makes us question the quality of training provided and the demand being placed on RTO's rushing people through qualifications, due to a lack of funding to RTO's. For example, we recently received notification from a training organisation in the ACT who is offering the Certificate III in Children's Services in 8 weeks. We do not consider this to be a significant period of time to produce quality educational outcomes for students.

The impact of high educator turnover has on our children and centres have led to the following:

- Lack of attachment for children, particularly with infants. Attachment is a critical part of any child's life. Research into attachment theory tells us that infants need to develop a relationship with at least one primary caregiver, for social and emotional development. Furthermore research shows us that a secure attachment is the best way of enabling a child to become independent and to ensure normal brain development.
- Building and maintaining positive ongoing relationships and partnerships with our families can be challenging and not always sustainable or long lasting. Quality area 6 of the NQS talks about the importance of collaborative partnerships with families. Detailing how respectful and supportive relationships with families should be developed and maintained, in order to achieve quality outcomes for children (ACECQA 2011).
- Lack of rapport within teams, leading to inconsistency and lack of reflective practice. Again the NQS states that critical reflection is regularly used to implement the curriculum (ACECQA 2011).
- Centres are unable to fill positions and have needed to apply for waivers resulting in over expenditure and non-compliance issues.
- Cost to centres in the overall recruiting process.

Although Communities@Work is faced with these ongoing issues, we would like to reinforce our support for the NQF and to be clear, we are not asking for regulations or quality gains to be halted or turned back. What we would like to see is more government support for increased sector wages. It is a known fact that the cost of living in the ACT is significantly higher due to the average income. Therefore we are in great competition in providing well above award wages for our educators. We are also faced with competing for EC teacher with the Education Department. Teachers working in a long day care setting are not entitled to the same conditions as an EC teacher working in a government preschool. For example a teacher working within the government system receives shorter work hours, more planning time, increased holidays and much higher wages, all financed by the government. We would like to see more funding available to support our valued educators and teachers in the sector.

#### Positive impact of the NQF:

- **Increased child to educator ratios - has significantly improved the quality of learning and education provided to each individual child.**

*"Research shows that participating in a quality early childhood education program can significantly increase positive educational and life outcomes for children, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds". (Alberici, 2013)*

- **Increased qualifications, the importance of the early years has been proven over and over again within research. We cannot expect quality teaching and learning to occur within education and care services if educators are not qualified.**

*"Over the past decade, ground breaking neurological research has revealed that 80 per cent of brain development occurs before a child is three years old. By the age of four, 92 per cent of the brain is formed. Neuroscience can now tell us that the experiences and environment in the first years of life affect the way the brain develops". (Alberici, 2013)*

- **Increase in professionalism, the NQS has assisted in the development of a professional workforce. Acknowledging the importance of what education and care services do and the impact this has on society now and in the future.**

*"Nobel Prize Winning James Heckman has found that every dollar invested in early childhood programs now generates a 17 per cent return to society". (Alberici, 2013)*

## Reference

- E, Alberici, (2012) ABC.net.au - Early childhood education: it really is brain science.
- Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2011b). Guide to the National Quality Standard, Sydney, ACECQA.