



RESPONSE TO THE PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO CHILDCARE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING FROM THE VICTORIAN PRINCIPALS ASSOCIATION (VPA)

*The VPA is the peak professional association for government primary school leaders in Victoria
It currently has over 950 members*

It is imperative for federal and state governments to work together to ensure that early childhood services are extended to include high quality childcare and early childhood learning for all children in Australia, with equitable access for those families living in inner suburban areas extended to those in rural and remote locations. There are too many children falling between the cracks.

Benefits of a high quality childcare and early childhood learning system

There is much evidence both here and internationally that clearly demonstrates the benefits of prioritising the early years of a child's education and directing policy and funding to that end. One of the most convincing summaries of this can be found in the 2009 report to the Premier of Ontario by the Special Advisor on Early learning Charles E Pascal, "*With Our Best Future in Mind. Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*" <http://www.ontario.ca/education-and-training/early-learning-report>

This report recommended that:

- prior to entering their primary school education, children be entitled to attend 2 years of a full-day, school-year early learning program operated by schools
- parents would have the option of extended programming before and after the school day as part of this program
- parent fees would only be charged for extended day/year programming

The forecast benefits of such a system include:

- improvement in primary school literacy and numeracy results
- children with challenges being identified earlier and getting help sooner
- greater resilience and health outcomes
- higher secondary school completion rates
- higher postsecondary participation and success rates

The evidence cited in this report can be found in: Early Learning – An Updated and Annotated Summary of Evidence, which can be downloaded from the Early Learning Advisor – Ontario website at www.ontario.ca/earlylearning

Early childhood learning facilitates future success

The VPA concurs with the findings and many of the recommendations of the Canadian report cited. In particular we ask the Committee to consider the crucial role that pre-school learning opportunities play in contributing to children's later educational and social success. As stated by the Canadian Council on Learning: "*Research indicates that the experiences during the first five years of a child's life have a major bearing on his or her future success in school, in the workplace and many other aspects of a health fulfilling life.*" Pascal cites Nobel laureate economist James Heckman's observation that big gaps in children's learning are present at age 5 and has shown, with depressing accuracy, how they predict who will complete high school and post secondary education and who will not.

In order to commence the life-long learning of Australia's next generation as effectively as possible governments and bureaucracies must take into account the continuum of learning for children from birth through to adulthood. This learning is cumulative and short term initiatives in later schooling will not be sufficient to sustain improvement in outcomes. As Pascal states in his report *"Research has shown that starting early can change developmental trajectories for our youngest children and break intergenerational cycles of illiteracy, poverty and poor health."*

Neuroscience – evidence that supports the importance of early childhood learning

Our children are the biggest asset to our economy; therefore we must address pertinent issues relating to scientific knowledge of child development from 0-5 years and understand that the first five years are crucial to children's prospects. Neuroscience provides compelling evidence that prior-to-school years are critical to the long-term outcomes for children as the rapidly developing brain is building its architecture and the way it functions. The biological pathways developed in early childhood influence health, wellbeing, learning and behaviour across a lifetime. The brain remains plastic, flexible and able to adapt to and learn from environmental stimuli throughout life but predominantly between 0-5 years. This makes a child at this stage most vulnerable to both positive and negative effects of the environment.

Children learn to regulate their emotional responses to people and experiences by watching and perceiving their carer's responses (Goswami - Professor of Cognitive Developmental Neuroscience and Director, Centre for Neuroscience in Education, St John's College, Cambridge, 2008) and emotions, learning and memory are closely linked. Children's self control is critical for learning, responsibility and relationships. Self-regulation is consistently ranked by teachers as the most critical aspect of 'school readiness' and has a direct link to high academic achievement (Howard-Jones, renowned neuroscientist from Bristol University, 2008). Research indicates that half of the young children entering Australian schools do not have sufficient levels of social-emotional and cognitive self-regulation (Bodrova, a principal researcher at McREL , Midcontinent Research for Education and Learning, in Zaslow & Martinez-Beck, 2005).

By supporting parents and providing positive modelling and engaging, caring and supportive environments, early education can ideally enable all children to develop self regulation prior to entering primary school. In summary both research and neuroscience strongly indicate that if managed properly, government commitment to improving children's development in early childhood can have transformative effects on individual children and ultimately on society and the economy.

Resourcing parental involvement in early learning

Parental training and guidance is essential to support early learning. It is vital that government resources are made available to integrate this into early childhood education. As principals in government schools, we see too many parents who lack skills in encouraging their children and in setting limits and sticking with them and who never read to their children or involve them in activities that will expand their horizons.

Increased government funding of early learning and the resulting benefits

It is unfortunate that currently Australia is not faring well in comparison to other OECD countries in the area of early childhood services. The UNICEF Innocenti Report Card research study undertaken in 2008 attempted to evaluate and compare early childhood services in the 25 OECD countries where data has been collected by indicating which countries were meeting the suggested standards. That Australia ranked 23 out of 25 developed countries is a cause of serious concern. The Canadian province of Ontario, which has already carried out a successful transformation of its primary and secondary education systems, responded to their low ranking in the Innocenti Report Card by planning a similar transformation of its early childhood services.

In Australia funding levels in education and early childhood need to be totally revised. Following the lead of Canada where there is a totally new emphasis on government funding levels and support in education Increased funds are directed into the preschool and early years sector at a higher rate than the later years education. The rationale is that focusing on these years means that a real difference and improvement can be made with outcomes in learning at an optimum age. It is vital to emphasise the high value of spending earlier.

The Ontario report points to some useful and objective data to keep in mind. It provides research evidence documenting the economic benefits from public spending on quality early childhood programs:

- University of Toronto economists showed a 2:1 payback on public spending for developmentally enriched child care created from the increased taxes paid by working parents, coupled with reduced social service and compensatory education costs.
- Over 40% of the public cost of Quebec's early childhood program is covered by the tax revenues from mothers who otherwise would not be working if low cost childcare was not available
- A Manitoba study reveals that spending on early childhood programs has an economic multiplier effect on local economies, generating up to \$1.7 dollars for every \$1 spent.

Furthermore Pascal refers to a Rutgers University study that found prolonged and regular full-day preschool attendance significantly increased children's verbal and mathematical test scores in Grade 1 and beyond. With concerns expressed by national and state jurisdictions about the decline in Australia's PISA performance such evidence provides a compelling argument that universal access to full-day quality early years learning is essential to turning this situation around.

Cost of childcare

The VPA's members are aware that increasing numbers of their parents, despite being two income families, are finding the cost of child care and before and after school programs prohibitive. The price range, even within areas, can vary from A\$60 per day to A\$150 a day. Commonwealth funding needs to be comprehensively increased.

Integration of early learning with primary schools

Internationally, many early childhood leaders, including Sweden, Iceland and New Zealand have transferred responsibility for the care and development of their youngest children to their education departments. We cannot afford to perpetuate a divided and fragmented service system. We need to encourage our preschools and to a lesser degree our childcare centres to be connected to or even on the same site as primary schools as a default. This means there is enhanced communication and consistency with a one stop shop supporting early years learning

Qualifications and training

It is of utmost importance to have well-trained educated staff in charge of our young children, as modelled in many overseas countries including Norway, Sweden and Canada. The Commission should review entry standards, training and remuneration here to ensure we are attracting suitable applicants and then providing them with the qualifications and skills required for quality delivery of learning and care, e.g. is a TAFE Certificate suitable for childcare workers or should tertiary qualifications be required? Are pre-school teachers being adequately prepared for their work in the field?

Conclusion

In conclusion, the VPA advocates for resources to be focused on early learning and the early years of formal education in order to provide high quality universal access for children across Australia.

Gabrielle Leigh

President

On behalf of

Victorian Principals Association.