

Productivity Commission Inquiry into Child Care and Early Learning Response

CareWest Ltd. 03/02/2014

CareWest thanks the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to comment on issues relating to the education and care of young Australians.

CareWest is a community business that specializes in an integrated range of disability, child and family and aged and community services and client programs. CareWest Head Office is located in Orange NSW, with many services provided across the Central, however we also service towns including Parkes, Dubbo, Nungun, Wagga and Griffith in the Orana Far West and Riverina regions of the state.

Our children's services include the provision of mobile preschools to children aged from 3 to 5 years in a variety of locations, and we have been a SCAN (Supporting Children with Additional Needs) provider since the earliest inception of this initiative.

We would like to make the following comments;

- CareWest supports with the key themes as put forward by Early Childhood Australia, especially around putting child and family wellbeing before all other considerations. Provision of high quality children's services in a developed economy is an inalienable right and should be matched by increased government commitment and funding to support service provision for every child. A measure of a developed country's commitment to its citizens should be how it cares for, educates and protects children; its most vulnerable members.
- The foremost consideration should be on children's care and education in the belief that this will most benefit the individual and our society as a whole. Increased workforce participation should be seen as fundamentally important, but secondary to the benefits to be gained by educating our youngest members in high quality settings.
- The notions of child care and early learning should not be seen as different aspects, but as two parts to a whole. Education and care should never be separated and should be central to any and all services for children aged from birth to school commencement, and indeed beyond. This should apply equally across the country, to family day care, long day care, preschool, occasional care and any other service that cares for young children.
- CareWest supports the development of an Outcomes Framework to monitor and assist the decision making process, and against which to measure performance, as stated by Early Childhood Australia. CareWest would suggest the inclusion of a statement about the child's social and cultural background (ECA Outcome 1) as in;

Outcome 1: All children have access to high quality early learning programs from infancy to the commencement of school education, regardless of cultural background, location or social and economic means.

- CareWest fully supports and agrees with the COAG reforms of 2009, and welcomes the introduction of the National Quality Framework, even though CareWest is a provider of mobile preschools, which have not yet come “in scope” with NQF. CareWest would support the inclusion of mobile services as soon as possible, in the belief that the NQF is well conceived with a focus on improving quality in service provision for all children. CareWest would not support any “watering down” or lessening of conditions in the NQF, however recognizes that any new system requires some “tweaking” over its functional life.
- CareWest supports the setting of targets to improve the number of children accessing early childhood services, but recommends setting a range of targets so that all children from the wide diversity of different groups in modern Australian society are captured. In particular separate targets must be set for inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with a disability, children from low income and disadvantaged families, those for whom English is not their primary language, and children living in remote communities. The AEDI clearly demonstrates the link between Aboriginal and children living in remote areas with higher rates of developmental vulnerabilities.
- CareWest recommends a separate and specific plan to identify and implement strategies to manage outside the school hours care sector (OSHC). Strategies should be also included for services offering outside school hours care that cater for high numbers of children with a disability. An increase in provision of OSHC is one of the major reforms required to enable parents to more readily engage in the workforce. CareWest recommends the expansion of these services within school communities, to enable children to access both services without the need to move to a different place when regular school hours are finished. Rigorous provision and regulation for child safety should be paramount in the expansion of this sector.
- High level of support for increased wages across the sector, for both qualified teachers as well as child care workers. Special consideration should be given to recruitment and retention of university qualified teachers into early childhood settings, given the large pay disparity between early childhood teachers and their counterparts in primary schools. Government must play a continuing role in supporting services to afford increasing levels of highly qualified staff. Special consideration should be given to recruitment and retention of staff in remote areas.
- CareWest supports the current diversity of early childhood provider mix, but would make the point that new and different initiatives should be carefully considered. In particular provision of mobile preschools could be expanded in areas where the market has not responded, or where demographics have or are likely to change quickly e.g. in mining communities, those with large agribusiness, and remote communities. Mobile preschools can operate in a variety of locations, without the substantial capital and set up costs of centre based services. As well, mobiles can respond quickly to changing local circumstances, and can be dismantled and/or moved when the need for an early childhood service is no longer there.

- The highest levels of assistance should be targeted at the children and families most in need. Participation in a high quality preschool program should be free or close to free for all children living in poverty and disadvantage, and for those cultural and societal groups most disadvantaged. High income parents should pay a fair and appropriate price for early childhood education, but low enough to encourage workforce participation, and the ability to effectively manage a positive work / life balance.
- Transition to school processes should be investigated and enhanced between early childhood and school settings, and should be streamlined across the country. CareWest welcomes and supports the various initiatives taken by individual states in this area, but stresses that a national approach is desirable, at least in terms of basic principles and outcomes.
- Integrated service provision should be thoroughly investigated, as positive gains are made when early childhood services, health and welfare agencies and schools work together to create a family friendly environment where families can access a range of services at the same venue. This can be particularly beneficial for disadvantaged families, or for those with a child or family member requiring additional health or welfare support.
- Special consideration should be given to the benefits of, and high cost of including children with additional needs in all early childhood services. Every child with a disability should be given the same rights of access as other children, and should expect to have their unique needs met and their future developmental prognosis enhanced. Improved funding must focus on the real costs of providing additional support staff. Again there are a variety of supports available, but some are only available to certain sector types. For example the Inclusion Support Subsidy is only available to long day care services, where SCAN and ISP (Intervention Support Program), both NSW initiatives have only been available to preschools. CareWest awaits a final decision from the NSW government on the possible merger of SCAN and ISP, but recognizes that approaches and funding streams to support the inclusion of children with additional needs need to be clearly understood by the sector providers and also by parents. The current arrangements are confusing and inequitable.