

Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry –Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

The Aberfoyle Hub Community Children's Centre is a service located in the southern suburbs of Adelaide providing quality education and care to over 100 families.

We are licensed to educate and care for up to 50 children per day ranging from 3 months to 5 years of age. We service a unique community both culturally and socio-economically diverse.

As a service we have first-hand experience of the issues that have surrounded the early childhood education and care sector for many years. In this submission we will highlight the issues that impact our service, its educators and the community the most.

Much research has been undertaken in the last decade demonstrating the importance of early childhood education. Studies and research from across the globe demonstrates the importance of quality education and care in the 0-5 age bracket, and demonstrates that it continues to have positive impacts in adult life. The most up to date brain research shows us that the experiences children have in early childhood (0-5) develop neural connections and grow the brain and is a critical time like no other for a person's future. Research (Frank Oberklaid) indicates that if we were to put more money into the 0-5 age bracket we would see decreases in adults in prison, welfare and the need to support as many people with mental health issues.

Australia has taken huge and important steps in progressing the quality early childhood agenda. We now have a transparent assessment and ratings process which motivates centres and shares with the public the quality of education and care. It is important for all children in all areas to have access to the best quality learning and development opportunities, and actually research demonstrates that it is even more important for children from low socio-economic areas.

Please do not take away the quality of education and care for those who most need it. We have taken such positive steps – don't throw it all away for the sake of a few dollars. We wouldn't decrease funding in our schools because it costs too much- why would we do it in our early education and care centres. These are important years of life and they influence our whole lives. In deregulating the system you don't impact on the high and middle class- you impact outcomes from those from low socio-economic backgrounds- for those children who need it most.

Overarching Focus

We request that the focus of the findings of the Productivity Commission Inquiry Report be on the rights of all children in Australia to access quality early education rather than the workforce participation needs of their families.

A large body of evidence exists that shows:

- Children learn more in the first five years of their life than at any other time;

- That children who access quality early education and care perform better academically at school;
- Investment in early education and care delivers high economic returns;
- Access to early education and care ameliorates educational economic disadvantage;

To ensure that each child in Australia gets access to high quality early education and care, we believe the following changes need to be made to our existing Australian early education and care system:

1. Adoption of a best practice model of early education and care by all states and territories. This has meant that most children have their early education and care planned by a university qualified early childhood teacher. Research shows that this increases quality of early education and care.

2. Retention of the NQF

- Considerable investment by both the early education and care sector and all levels of government has already been made into the National Quality Framework.
- The National Quality Framework was based on sound and extensive evidence about the factors that impact on education and care quality and was developed after extensive consultation.
- We are committed to maintain the current timelines for qualifications and ratios in centre based services and levels of quality identified in the NQF because these are based on this evidence.
- Ratios need to be lower. It is not acceptable, safe or high quality to expect educators to be able to educate and care for children at the current ratio levels.

3. A better system of planning for early education and care

- There needs to be a more targeted approach to provide and fund services rather than relying on market forces. The market tends to leave gaps in service provision (children with additional needs, babies, children in remote areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, economically disadvantaged and other vulnerable and at risk children).
- Increased opportunities for community based providers to establish and expand including access to funding mechanisms to restore a balance in the provision by for profit /non for profit providers.

4. Reform of the way we fund early education and care services

- Increased investment to support quality provision in all education and care services.
- Consider moving from the current system of parental subsidies through CCB and CCR to a system which funds services directly.
- Build into this funding system funding to support the full inclusion of children who would otherwise be excluded at a rate that does not economically disadvantage the service by their inclusion.
- Ensures that priority of access guidelines do not exclude those children who would most benefit from access to early education and care.

5. A sustainable early education and care workforce

- Mandate professional development pathways for all educators.
- Recognition of the increased responsibilities and professionalism of educators, as well as the importance of early education and care to children needs to be reflected in increased wages and better conditions..
- High educator turnover can have devastating effect on quality. Finding quality educators willing to work for low pay can be difficult. Often as a service we find educators use ECEC as experience and funding during their university studies. Availability is often sporadic arranged around their study time table which affects educator consistency. When educators leave it often takes months to go through the interview process which can also be costly. This takes valuable resources away from the children as we are a non for profit organisation. Once a new educator has been hired they then need to be trained and start to build relationships with other educators, children and families. It can be a stressful time for all.
- The NQS states: Consistent and committed educators and coordinators support good quality standards and continuity of care for children. (NQS pg111)

We leave you with a quote from an article written for the National Childcare Accreditation Council by Professor Frank Oberklaid.

“Nurturing and responsive relationships build healthy brain architecture, providing a strong foundation for children’s learning, behaviour and health. The relationship a child has with their caregivers literally sculpts their brain and determines the development of brain circuits. Therefore it is essential that child care settings promote consistent, nurturing relationships between childcare professionals and children in which childrens’ needs are recognised and responded to sensitively.” (NCAC Issue 24 Dec 2007)

Sources:

Websites : www.acecqa.gov.au