



SUBMISSION

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY

UNITINGCARE VICTORIA and TASMANIA

UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania is part of the UnitingCare Network, one of the largest providers of community services in Australia. The UnitingCare network provides early childhood learning and care services at well over 150 sites across Australia. We also provide a range of other services for families, young people, Indigenous Australians, people with disabilities, the poor and disadvantaged, people from culturally diverse backgrounds and older Australians in urban, rural and remote communities. Altogether the national network employs 39,000 staff and is supported by the work of over 28,000 volunteers.

UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania manages and operates 90 early childhood services including kindergartens, long day care centres, out of school hours programs, family day care, occasional care and mobile services.

We believe:

- Early childhood education and care meets two objectives: education and development of children; and support for parents in paid work. It is vital that policy settings never lose sight of the central significance of the first of these two objectives – with the emphasis on the quality of the education and care provided. Flexible and affordable childcare placements so families can go into paid work has great merit but any cost cutting measures to promote affordability need to be carefully weighed up.
- Disadvantaged children and low income families require a high level of subsidy to ensure access to quality education and care. Supporting labour market access for these parents will provide long term benefits to those individuals, the community and the government welfare costs. The proposed work and study test means there is a potential for the children in disadvantaged families to miss out on having quality

early childhood education and care, when children from disadvantaged backgrounds actually benefit the most. The benefits of quality learning outcomes for children in their formative years are extremely important.

This could all be undermined if not high quality/qualified staff.

- Greater investment is required in early childhood education and care to reflect the strong positive benefits it provides for children, and the long term economic benefits to society.

We support:

- The single subsidy, but note that close attention will have to be paid to what is meant by 'deemed cost' or 'reasonable cost' of providing education and care. We want to make sure the model does not drive down the quality of program. It would be with great difficulty that a 'deemed cost' is assessed as there are a large number of variables and complexities to take into account and keep the flexibility and diversity of programs that are offered. Eg. L.D.C. in the city and mobiles in remote rural areas.

But the unspoken suggestion that parents only pay for the time their child/children are in care is fraught with difficulty as to the continuing viability of centre's operation. How would you fill early morning and late afternoon hours?

While the capped 'viability assistance' program has merit, there would need to be assurance that the Early Care and Learning Subsidy and the Special Early Care and Learning Subsidy remain in place. The population and viability of these services are constantly fluctuating.

- The Commission's focus on inclusion. We welcome provisions of specific groups of vulnerable children but are concerned by the many children who fall outside these targeted groups, who are also vulnerable. If parents find themselves out of work, children should not be expected to drop in and out of quality education and care. It needs to be quality and it needs to be consistent.

It is imperative for disadvantaged children and low income families in all areas including remote/rural areas.

- Universal access to a preschool program delivered to children in the year before they attend school by an early childhood degree qualified teacher. We want to focus on quality services and outcomes for children.

We really welcome this but cannot stop there. First step should be access to subsidised Early Childhood programs with degree qualified staff for 3 year old children.

Brain research shows the incredible brain development of 0-3 year olds and we need to support and harness this with well qualified staff.

- A certificate 3 working with vulnerable families does not have the skills/expertise to eg engage in a conversation of any quality regarding the education of their children, but also the conversation you need to have with vulnerable families.
- No change to the NQF, in particular maintaining early degree qualifications for 0-3 year olds. No standards or elements to be changed until all services have been assessed and a full review is undertaken at that time. All services should go through the same process before changes are made to the system or there is 'tinkering around the edges.'

Need this time to ensure there is consistency of assessors.

- Keeping all service types under the National Quality Framework, including preschools.

All early childhood programs need to remain within the National Quality Framework.

- Integrated child and family centres that provide quality early childhood education and care.
- A highly skilled, well paid professional workforce to attract and retain early childhood staff in the sector.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Productivity Inquiry and to present personally to the Commission. I appreciate you giving time to hear our thoughts and issues.

Joy Williams

Early Childhood Consultant

UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania

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