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STATE MEMBER FOR NORTHERN METROPOLITAN REGION

- Shadow Minister for Children
- Shadow Minister for Seniors & Ageing
- Shadow Minister for Community Services

5 September 2014

Childcare and Early Learning Inquiry
Productivity Commission
GPO BOX 1428
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Commissioner,

The Victorian Labor Opposition welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning released on 22 July 2014.

Victorian Labor believes that every child, no matter where they live or what their circumstances may be, deserves to have the best possible start to life. We believe lifelong learning starts at birth and recognise that parents are a child's first and most enduring educators.

As has been evidenced through the many submissions received by this Inquiry, Australian and international research demonstrates that a child's learning starts from birth and that experiences in the early years have a profound impact on a child's later cognitive, social and emotional development.

This is why Victorian Labor is committed towards supporting the provision of high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).

Ensuring the Commonwealth contribution to Universal Access funding (15 Hours)

The increase in kindergarten hours for every child in the year before school from 10 to 15 hours per week and other accompanying reforms were significant Federal and State Labor Government reforms, based on strong evidence between quality early learning experiences and life-long impacts.

The Victorian Labor Opposition was disappointed that there was no funding in the 2014-15 Federal Budget towards continuing the National Partnership Agreement (NPA) on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education, with funding ending in December 2014.



The Abbott Government's announcement today of an extension of only 12 months funding will prolong the uncertainty over the Federal Government's contribution towards 15 hours into the future.

The end of this NPA will be a big step backwards and will mean children will miss out on the benefits of more kindergarten, jobs will be lost and many parents will have to make up the time with additional child care or cutting back their working hours.

The NPA did not only contribute to the 15 hours of kindergarten but also to the necessary infrastructure to implement it. Once the NPA ends, local councils and kindergarten service providers will struggle to meet the need for new infrastructure in response to the demands of an increased population, particularly in light of the Victorian Coalition Government failing to invest in kindergarten infrastructure for 2014-15 and beyond.

Victorian Labor welcomes draft recommendation 12.9 that *"the Australian Government should continue to provide per child payments to the State and Territories for universal access to a preschool program of 15 hours per week for 40 weeks per year."*

However we are concerned at the Productivity Commission's following recommendation that this funding be incorporated into school funding. This is because the vast majority of Victoria's kindergartens are standalone kindergartens and are operated independently from the Victorian Government.

Given Ms Ley's comments in the past that she does not believe kindergarten is a Federal Government responsibility, it is concerning that the Abbott Government may use this recommendation to remove itself from the direct provision of kindergarten funding.

We therefore urge the Commission in its Final Report to give further consideration to ensuring that the Commonwealth remains a direct contributor to the funding 15 hours of kindergarten for all Australian children.

Ensuring that kindergartens remain within the National Quality Framework

Victorian Labor supports the retention of the National Quality Framework (NQF).

The commitment by all Australian Governments to a new National Quality Framework for early childhood education and care and school age care was a landmark decision and I am proud that under the former Labor Government, Victoria agreed to host the national legislation to give effect to the NQF.

Improved staff to child ratios and higher qualifications for the early childhood education and care workforce are both fundamental parts of the new Framework and have meant more children having access to quality learning programs to develop the skills and knowledge they need for life and learning.

We are particularly concerned about the implications that may stem from the Commission's draft recommendation 7.9 that dedicated preschools should be removed from the scope of the NQF. Victorian Labor is concerned at any proposal to 'water down' or wind back the ongoing implementation of the NQF.

The Victorian Labor Opposition urges the Productivity Commission and the Abbott Government not to unwind the significant early childhood reforms that we have seen rolled out across Australia in recent years.

Early childhood education and care should be recognised in its own right as part of every child's formal education and not be seen merely as the vehicle by which to enhance parents' access to the workforce.

Finally, we urge the Commission to release its Final Report as soon as possible to enable the continuing uncertainty regarding kindergarten funding to be resolved.

Yours sincerely,

JENNY MIKAKOS MP