

Northern Rivers Preschools Alliance

To the Commissioner,

The Northern Rivers Preschools Alliance is an incorporated group of 28 non-profit, community based preschools located on the North Coast of NSW, with preschools in the local government areas including Byron Shire, Lismore LGA, Kyogle Shire, Clarence Shire and Ballina Shire. Our preschools are generally one- and two-unit stand alone preschools operating in rural and regional localities.

The draft recognizes that community preschools are offering quality early childhood education and have performed highly in the ratings system compared to other service types. This is the result of passionate early childhood teachers leading fellow educators to provide quality early childhood education. Committed educators spend their own time documenting, programming, attending meetings, and advocating for children and colleagues despite a lack of pay equity with similarly qualified colleagues in primary and secondary education. Quality in NSW Community Preschools has not come as a result of excess funding; rather, the truth is that many of our educators and teachers just *go above and beyond* to ensure children don't miss out. It is also the result of our management structure. A voluntary management committee made up of parents and interested community members is focused solely upon what is *best for children* rather than what will suffice for children whilst delivering profits to shareholders.

As advocates for children, our members are in agreement that children's wellbeing and the growth of a strong, healthy and cohesive society should be the primary aims when considering the provision of any type of education and care for young children. We believe that these goals should take precedence over the needs of family members and indeed, over economic gain to individuals, governments, or Australia as a whole.

In view of this, we put forward the following:

Re draft recommendation 7.9: Dedicated preschools should be removed from the scope of the National Quality Framework and regulated by state and territory governments under the relevant education legislation.

In order to fully understand and properly comment upon this recommendation we require more detail in order to ascertain whether preschools and the children enrolled within would be better off if they were regulated under the state government. We believe that while improving the quality of EC services is an excellent goal, the NQF, as a system for creating and maintaining quality learning environments, is not perfect and we would welcome the opportunity to work with the State government in developing and implementing a more effective system of ensuring quality for children if preschools were removed from the NQF.

In addition, we believe that where preschools attached to primary schools are at no cost or low-cost to parents, community-based preschools offering a similar level of education should also be no cost or low-cost.

Re draft recommendation 12.9: The Australian Government should continue to provide per child payments to the states and territories for universal access to a preschool program.

We believe that the National Partnership Agreement to provide Universal Access should continue, not only in the short term, but as a more permanent arrangement between the Commonwealth and the States. We agree that this funding should provide preschool for children in the *two* years before school, with priority given to children who are in the year before school. National and international research supports this:

“A recent summary of the evidence shows that participation in ECE for more than one year is associated with long-term intellectual gains, larger vocabularies, improved word analysis and maths achievement and better memory and future achievement’ Participation for an additional year increases long-term impact and reduces the likelihood of gains ‘fading out’ over time. Extending participation in ECE by one year leads to an improvement of ten score points in PISA, an international student assessment test, at age 15. Further, all the well-known studies that have demonstrated ‘return on investment’ (Abecedarian Project, Chicago Child-Parent Centres, Perry Preschool Project) have involved highly qualified staff and programs of at least two years duration.

The longitudinal UK study, Effective Provision of Preschool (EPPE) showed that the longer duration of attendance at preschool is related to improved achievement in pre-reading and early number skills. US research has also showed significant gains in vocabulary, literacy and maths skills amongst children who attended at least two years.”

Review of NSW Government Funding for Early Childhood Education, Professor Deborah Brennan, UNSW, 2012.

Further, to the Commission’s recommendation that “Australian governments provide universal access to preschool for younger children where this affects the viability of the preschool program”, we support this idea and ask the government to acknowledge that small rural, regional community preschools are often the hub of their local community, closely tied to the needs of local families, and in many cases, the only accessible community service. These preschools are vital in ensuring that children in rural and regional areas have the same opportunities as their peers in cities and towns. It is essential that these preschools be supported to remain viable and attendance at these should be free or low-cost to families. Funding of 2 or 3 year old children is one way that this viability can be maintained.

“The disadvantage starts in early childhood and flows through to school outcomes. Fifteen-year-old students in NSW rural schools are now 1.5 years behind their peers in metropolitan schools, according to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment. Only about half of our rural male teenagers reach the last year of secondary school compared to nearly 70% of all male teenagers in NSW.

My firm belief is that children and young people are entitled to inspiring, relevant and quality preschool, school and post- school education to equip them to live in and

contribute to our complex and globalised society. This is true for all students, regardless of where they live.”

Adrian Piccoli, NSW Minister for Education, Education World Forum, London, 21.1.2014

The Alliance does not agree that attendance at preschool should be linked to the receipt of the FTB as we believe this would disadvantage children and families that are already disadvantaged. We believe that incentives, such as reducing the cost to families, would be far more effective in ensuring attendance than punishments for non-attendance.

We also have concerns about the supply-based funding arrangements as this makes financial viability difficult in rural and regional areas where enrolments fluctuate and where a preschool is a vital service regardless of the number of enrolments.

Re information request 5.1: What are the optimal hours of attendance at preschool to ensure children’s development and what is the basis for this?

In her 2012 review of Early Childhood Funding in NSW, Professor Brennan acknowledged the lack of evidence to support the 15 hours per week model. Our collective observations, over many combined years of working with children in the years before school, suggest that a minimum of 12 hours per week is desirable, with our experienced EC teachers agreeing that 18 hours seems to be most beneficial. We would suggest that 18 hours per week in a high quality service be considered the minimum for children at risk or with additional learning needs.

Re draft Recommendation 12.7: The Government should continue to provide support to children who are assessed as ‘at risk’ to access ECEC services.

Community preschools have historically provide well for children who are deemed to be at risk. We would suggest that at least 2 years of quality preschool education would help to address this disadvantage. Barriers that limit attendance, including attendance fees and lack of transport, should be addressed in considering the needs of children.