

## RESPONSE TO PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

### CAIRNS & DISTRICT CHILD CARE DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION, INC.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Child Care and Early Learning.

Early Childhood Education and Care services are an integral part of the Australian lifestyle and allow parents the opportunity to contribute to the workforce on a regular basis. The need for child care services has changed significantly over the past 20 years, with a proliferation of child care service types now established throughout Australia. More parents need to work and a double income family is considered one of the 'norms' in Australian Society. The need for child care that is affordable, flexible, high quality and inclusive will only increase over the coming years, with workplaces becoming more 'family friendly' allowing for different work hours and structures that will meet the environments of families.

Any changes to the National Quality Framework roll out would have a negative impact on early childhood education and care services. The introduction of the NQF is welcomed by the sector and is imperative to quality care and inclusion. The importance of the early years needs to be acknowledged and increasing the quality of care for all children should be at the forefront of Government initiatives.

#### Flexibility

Flexibility in child care is present, with a choice of Family Day Care, In Home care, Long Day Care, Before School Care, After school care, Vacation Care and Occasional Care. All services give parents the choice of care which meets their needs. In the past, CDCCDA, Inc., has trailed After Hours Long Day Care – which was not successful, due to lack of numbers of children in care after 8pm. This was done in conjunction with a large State Government Employer – it has not been considered since the trial. Family Day Care and In Home care go a long way in meeting the needs for 'out of office hours' care. Nannies, when regulated by a service similar to Family Day Care/In Home care, should also be considered with CCB or similar being available to families who choose to employ Nannies.

#### Cost of Child Care

Child care is expensive for parents, even with Child Care Benefit and the Child Care Rebate, families cannot afford the out of pocket expenses. The 'new poor' are the middle income parents who do not receive CCB – these families can pay upward of \$180 per week per child out of their pocket for child care – not affordable to most families, by any means. Overseas models that value early childhood education and allow parents to access 'free' child care or heavily subsidized child care work very well. Considering that existing funding parameters need to be adhered to, some consideration for affordability coupled with quality child care needs to be considered. Some families struggle to find a place that is suitable to their needs, especially if they have children under 15 months of age, as the number of child care services

providing nursery care is falling, due to the increased costs for staffing and resourcing the care environments.

#### Transition to school

Satisfactory transition to the school system, in particular for vulnerable children is a must. More communication from the Education Department and the Early Childhood Services would alleviate any problems in this area. The long day care services may be 'linked' with school's in their suburbs with a joint project to allow for a smooth transition physically, emotionally and academically – involving Educators, Teachers, Parents and Principals of the schools.

#### The importance of Quality Care for children with additional needs (disability, A&TSI, Culturally diverse and Refugees)

All children need to feel safe and valued in early childhood. Educators can seek assistance from the Inclusion and Professional Support Program when they have vulnerable children in their care. Supporting educators with professional development, face to face support and assistance, specialist equipment and funding to employ an additional worker to support all children who attend child care services is important. Inclusion Support Agencies assist the educators with information, resources, support, seeking funding to employ additional educators to allow staff to feel comfortable to support all children in their care. Ways to alleviate the paperwork and red tape involved with including children with additional needs should be looked at. (Inclusion Support Subsidy applications are time consuming for educators and staff of the Inclusion Support Agencies). This will ensure a safe, nurturing and happy environment for all children and families, giving more choices as the support from the Inclusion and Professional Support Program, which covers all service types that receive CCD, plus the MACS and Budget Based Services, responding to the dynamic and individual needs of both children and families.

One difficulty is the amount of subsidy provided for Inclusion Support Subsidy and Flexible Support Funding, which does not cover the costs of staffing and is seen as a 'subsidy toward the cost of employing an additional worker'. Some services believe that the additional cost they are asked to carry, when including a child receiving ISS/FSF, is prohibitive and does not allow services to consider enrolling a child with additional needs. (e.g. an owner several early childhood services who includes a number of children with additional needs has suggested that it costs the services \$30,000 per year over and above the ISS/FSF subsidy, to employ the additional educators required to support the inclusion of children with disabilities.) Increasing the subsidy may alleviate some of the difficulties for services.

#### Rural and Remote families and services

Rural and remote families who have children with disabilities require ongoing support. Difficulties in maintaining quality staff with the appropriate qualifications is evident. Looking at ways to encourage local community members to take up the challenge of studying and supporting their community needs to be looked at, especially in the Aboriginal and Islander communities throughout our nation. Subsidy for entering tertiary institutions or TAFE to study need to be available, with additional support and mentoring for students wanting to and are willing to take up the challenge. Financial support should be

there when the students graduate, with some incentive to keep them in their community (*bonding to the community for 3 years, if all HECS fees and costs of travel are paid for during training*).

### Staffing

Difficulty in recruiting and maintaining staff is always a challenge. Remuneration for educators is certainly a problem, at this stage the wages for staff are quite low, considering the qualifications and responsibilities required for the positions of educators. Cessation of the Quality Fund will cause disruption to many services, especially those who had been through the process of application and were awaiting sign off to receive the funding. Levels of wages need to be looked at by Government and employer's, as the retention level of educators is not particularly good, with 15% turn-over of staff being acceptable throughout the industry. Increased wages without increasing the fees paid by parents is difficult – and this is especially evident in the rural and remote regions of our country. Government should support setting up of services in the more vulnerable communities, giving access to additional funding or decrease in local government costs e.g. rates/water etc. Demand should reflect where new services are established and employer based care should be encouraged.

### Outside School Hours Care and Vacation Care

OSHC works well in most regions, although it may be the only choice a parent has for care outside the school hours. Unfortunately, this support usually ends when children enter secondary school as it is assumed that children of this age can look after themselves. Older children with a disability do not have a choice and may be able to attend the OSHC or Vacation Care program in their region. If this placement is not deemed 'appropriate', there are no other choices left for most parents. Alternative support, that is appropriate for their age and abilities, should be available. This is particularly evident in the remote regions – where there is nothing available and children may need to be supported through the Aged care or disability support agencies.

### Family Day Care

Family Day Care is responsive to the needs of families in most regions throughout Australia. It is flexible and supportive of families. Coordinators are available to support families in their choice of educators and discuss their care needs, as well as supporting the educators in the care of children. It is particularly responsive to out of hours care, with educators prepared to care during any period of the day or night. It gives families the choice of what type of care will meet their needs. Expanding the number of places available may help alleviate any waiting times for families. It is evident that in some regions, it is difficult to recruit educators, especially in the rural and remote regions. The support for Family Day Care schemes must continue, to allow parents the choice of care type.