



PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION - EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE INQUIRY PUBLIC SUBMISSION

We appreciate the opportunity to provide feedback on the Productivity Commission's Early Childhood Education (ECE) and Care .

Northside is committed to engaging in the national conversation around ECE in Australia. As a community-based not-for-profit organisation, we strongly believe in the right of all children to access high quality ECE – especially children experiencing vulnerability or trauma.

The research on the importance of the first five years is unequivocal, and it is imperative that Australia develops policy settings that mean all children can access ECE, regardless of their parents' work status.

A vision for early education in Australia

We believe that any vision for Australia's ECE system has to start from the following principles:

- All children have a right to access high-quality ECE
- The ECE system is funded in the same ways as schools and educators are paid professional wages
- High-quality ECE should be free for all children and families

We know these are big changes. But if we're going to think about a vision we should be bold. Tinkering around the edges with the current system is not producing the outcomes we need for children.

This is our vision for Australia's ECE system

A child's right to an enrolment in high-quality ECE is guaranteed in legislation.

As is the case in other countries (such as Germany), it is legislated that all children – no matter where they live or what their parents do – must have access to an ECE place. The Federal, State/Territory and Local Governments all work together to ensure that this is enacted for every child.

The ECE system is viewed with the same respect and value as primary and secondary education, and educators are paid and supported as professionals.

Governments fund the system directly, and ensure that educators and teachers working in the system are well-paid, have access to high-quality professional development and are supported to ensure the learning and wellbeing of all children. Families view ECE as just as important as sending their child to school.

It is free for children to access ECE.

Just like public schools, families do not pay any money for their child to attend ECE. Federal and State/Territory funding provides for high-quality ECE services in every community based on need, and a private/independent system operates on a strict not-for-profit basis.

This vision positions ECE where the research tells us it needs to be – at the forefront of an approach to children's learning and wellbeing that sets children up to succeed, and for Australia to benefit in the generations ahead.

The current system is failing children

Australia's current ECE system works to disadvantage many groups of children. Specifically:

- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children** – We know that the current system means that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children access early education at a rate much lower than non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- **Children experiencing trauma and vulnerability** – Navigating the benefit system, the Child Care Subsidy system and separate Federal/State requirements makes accessing ECE for these children complex and challenging (including for services).
- **Children of low-income or unemployed households** – The current system ties a child's right to access ECE to their parent's contribution to the workforce. For families struggling with employment, or employed casually, this drastically affects a child's ability to access ECE.

Bringing ECE fully within the national education system, and funding it in the same way, will allow for stronger implementation of the goals of the National Quality Framework (NQF).

Australia will be able to respond to the latest research on what helps young children learn, as well as ensuring policy settings in the early years are supporting educational and policy goals in primary and secondary settings.

Policy should be focused on ensuring that the children who can most benefit from high-quality ECE – the cohorts identified in the question above – have the most access to ECE, not the least.

End the Activity Test

Research has consistently shown the positive lifelong impact access to ECE can have on children¹, particularly those experiencing vulnerable circumstances². The Activity Test prevents the children most in need of attending a quality ECE service from being able to³.

Northside strongly views ECE as every child's human right, and advocates for the circumstances of a child's family to have no impact whatsoever on their ability to access ECE. Access based on simplistic notions of "participation" in the workforce and economy will deepen existing inequalities in Australia.

The Activity Test must be completely removed from the system of accessing ECE, and no barriers placed in front of any child's enrolment in an ECE service.





Children's education cannot be for profit

In considering long-term reform for Australia's early childhood sector, it is necessary to have the challenging conversation about the failure of the market-model (tied to workforce participation) to meet community need and expectation for the ECEC system.

Governments moved to this model as a "solution" to issues of accessibility and affordability, but it is now clear that this policy shift did not resolve those issues.

Former Minister for Early Education called this "unscrambling the egg", highlighting the challenges but the necessity of doing so.

As well as leading to the ABC Learning collapse and the associated risks to the community of that collapse, it has also lead to the current situation where around \$1 billion of ECEC funding is leaving the community and going into profits for private organisations.

Just as in the primary and secondary school system, there is a place for public and private operation in the ECEC space. But private operators should be legally required to operate in a not-for-profit model, alongside a well-funded public system of ECEC that is free for all children to access.

While a market-based model continues to be the preferred model, the Government will not be able to control affordability.

Early education cannot be delivered without early childhood educators

Despite how important the work of early childhood educators is, the award rate for educators is incredibly low – with a Certificate 3-qualified educator barely paid \$23 an hour.

This has become particularly clear over the last three years during the COVID-19 pandemic as educators have been only of the only non-health sector workforces to never shut down, continuing to work supporting children during a time of such great uncertainty.

This is an issue of gender inequality, as women make up 96% of the early education workforce.

No vision for early education can be realised without qualified and skilled educators. There must be an immediate increase to the wages, support, and professional recognition of educators.

It should be an issue of national shame that Australia continues to rely on a workforce underclass on women to ensure our economy is able to function.

Members of the Government over the last decade have spoken eloquently about the inequity of pay and conditions for early childhood educators.

It is time that actions replaced words.

Endnotes

- 1 HighScope Perry Preschool Study (<http://www.highscope.org/content.asp?contentid=219>)
- 2 The Abecedarian Project (<http://abc.fpg.unc.edu/>)
- 3 Child Care Package Evaluation: Final report (<https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/child-care-package-evaluation-final-report>)