

Submission by Catholic Education South Australia

Introduction

Catholic Education South Australia (CESA) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the discussion and subsequent planning of ongoing developments in accessible and high-quality early childhood education and care.

Catholic Education South Australia – Aspirations for 3-year-old preschool children in South Australia

The mission of Catholic Education is, in part, to help create a more socially just, equitable and hope-filled future within communities and society. Ensuring successful educational outcomes for all children and young people is crucial to this mission, as is enabling the best start to learning, wellbeing, and spiritual development for every child. Therefore, in the context of the National Inquiry, we aspire for every child, from the age of three or earlier, to have access to a high-quality preschool program where they can flourish as capable, curious, creative and spiritual learners. Furthermore, the introduction of 3-year-old preschool should provide opportunities for children and their families to engage in encounters where their inherent dignity is honoured and where their uniqueness is celebrated through accessible high-quality education and care.

We believe in the dignity of all children and the right of families to choose a preschool that matches their beliefs and choice of school. Therefore, as an important partner of the State Government and Federal Government in the delivery of education, CESA is preparing to increase the provision of preschool education to 20% of all 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds in the state. This proportion of children reflects the proportion of South Australian children and young people in our 103 schools and includes children from all socio-economic backgrounds, especially those most marginalised.

Building on leading practice in Australia for 4-year-old preschool, new programs need to be universally accessible, culturally responsive, and inclusive for children especially those who are most disadvantaged including children with a disability, under Ministerial Guardianship, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children from non-English speaking backgrounds. We advocate for programs where our young people are deeply known by members of their community and where their families are offered support for better social and emotional outcomes. As such we believe there is value in providing a range of flexible options for families that maximise connection and belonging.

Access to high-quality early years education is enhanced through the strong commitment to inclusion, with the provision of enhanced services and supports for children with disability and for their families as they enter preschool. Therefore, it is important that future models provide wrap-around support to children and families – encouraging family contribution in decision-making along with equitable and accessible pathways to allied health services such as occupational therapy, speech pathology and psychology.

Nurturing effective partnerships with parents/carers, parishes, and the wider community is essential to ensuring high-quality education and care for children. Local initiatives including playgroups, counselling, community outreach and parenting classes offer families further points of connection with the school community, practical tools and strategies they can implement within the home along with further support and information about the importance of brain development in the early years.

Every child has a right to access high-quality early childhood education.

- Children who miss out on early childhood education opportunities are over-represented in measures of educational vulnerability.
- Differential access to ECEC contributes to inequality of educational and life outcomes.
- It is time for Australian governments to reframe the nation's perception of Early Childhood Education from something that is 'nice to have' to 'something that should not be missed.'
- Provision of universal access to preschool offers improved equity for children and opportunities for increasing the workforce participation rate of women especially.
- In areas of poverty and intergenerational disadvantage, improved access to ECEC along with wrap-around family support, connection to communities and opportunities for parents to reconnect with adult learning and workforce pathways are necessary.
- Initiatives that help parents build upon the learning and development of their children in preschool have the potential to multiply the impact of increased investment in ECEC. Conversely, failure to invest in support for disadvantaged parents undermines the efficacy of educational initiatives such as universal access to 3-year-old preschool.

Government Funding arrangements and the shape of the Early Childhood Sector should reflect the importance of Early Years Education in the B-12 context.

- The Commission should seek to understand how the history of funding approaches for ECEC combined with a history of undervaluing the contribution of ECEC to life outcomes has led to a disproportionate growth of the For-Profit (NF) Operators that is largely absent in the provision of compulsory school-age education in Australia.
- The Commission should seek to understand how accessing multiple ECEC providers affects workforce participation and family stress. Would increasing the quantity of ECEC time while reducing the need for families to access different providers, lead to increased workforce participation and improved social outcomes for families?
- Further, the Commission should consider how altering the mix of Early Childhood Education Providers might adjust the balance of access and equity in favour of improved outcomes. Note: The SA Royal Commission findings in relation to differences between NFP and FP sectors in workforce retention and quality.
- The Care paradigm and the operation of CCS and ACCS – families accessing multiple ECEC services to create blocks of employment opportunities across the week. Would 15 hours of 3-year-old preschool and 30 hours of 4-year-old preschool delivered in a greater proportion on school sites deliver a more sustainable model for families?

A Way Forward

- Transition to a national/state funding model that extends the principles of Gonski to the provision of preschool for 4-year-olds and 3-year-olds. Such a shift would immediately increase the capacity of the nongovernment school sector to invest in and provide greater ECEC in the NFP sector.
- Over time it would encourage a reshaping of the long day care sector into the B-3 age groups allowing for greater specialisation and localised (close to home/work) access.
- Remove the option of mid-year intakes into the first year of schooling (Reception SA) and replace it with the option for 4-year-olds to complete six terms of preschool at 30 hours per week. This can be modelled to provide access to 3-year-old preschool for 15 or 30 hours (per week) depending upon when the child turns 4. The overall effect would be to provide all children access to two years of preschool. This approach assumes that preschool places will be funded by governments under a new funding mix which gives Catholic schools the opportunity to grow their market share to approximately 20%.
- Targeted support for low-income families to access Long Day Care and learn/work options to address issues of intergenerational disadvantage.
- Further research to understand why some families do not access existing ECEC options and any links to the workforce participation rates in these communities.
- It is time for governments to reframe the notion of compulsory education ages. Given the research into the importance of the early years and the potential impact on workforce participation rates, now may be the time to speak of preschool attendance as a right for every child and therefore compulsory.
- Compulsory preschool has the potential to act as a strong lever to reduce the developmental gap for children who currently do not attend any preschool.

CESA Aspirations for greater participation in an expanded preschool sector

- CESA seeks to expand its preschool offerings to provide access to high-quality ECEC for approximately 20% of families within SA. Such growth would provide similar access to Catholic preschools as has long been the case for R-12 schooling.
- The SA experience shows that when provided access to government-funded places, families take advantage of it. Under the existing funding arrangement for a limited number of preschools, CESA has delivered consistently high-quality preschool for 40 years – with associated benefits for children, families and the community.
- While not addressed yet by the SA Royal Commission, it is likely that reducing the extent to which the SA Government funding model restricts competition from the independent and catholic sectors will generate increased capacity.
- Growing the school-based preschool services will likely contribute to improved
 - transition to school for children and families
 - access to wrap-around health and social services for families
 - access to workforce management systems for early childhood workers
 - convenience for families because a greater proportion of the children are cared for across one site delivering Preschool, R-12 and OSHC

Funding disability provisioning

- It is often too early to diagnose the extent of disability in young children. Therefore, it might be better to adjust base funding and educator ratios in accordance with national data on the extent of disability in the broader school population.
- Provide universal access to high-quality curriculum materials, parenting guides, and teacher development.
- Promote cross-sectoral collaboration to improve understanding of and systems to better support children with a disability in preschool.
- Further research into enhanced early years programs that will better prepare children with a disability to transition into school.

Purpose-built or refurbished learning spaces for three-year-olds

Preschool programs warrant high-quality facilities with both indoor and outdoor learning environments that are purpose-built. Environments that are welcoming to families, that cater for and have wrap-around services are essential. In many cases, pre-existing infrastructure including outside learning environments will require significant upgrades to accommodate the increased number of children and the specific needs of 3-year-olds. As a system, CESA is committed to local schools and communities leading the design of their facilities and grounds in partnership with leading architects, builders and the planning and infrastructure team at the Catholic Education Office. This approach has served CESA well for decades and was instrumental in our successful delivery of nearly one hundred projects during the Building Education Revolution and many projects since.

High Quality and Optimal Program Delivery

The history of ECEC in SA is a history of a diversity of providers and different types of early childhood education and care settings. With 60 per cent of 3-year-olds currently accessing some form of education service in SA, it provides a strong argument for the ongoing support of multiple providers and diverse options for families into the future. When considering the possible benefits of providing universal access to preschool for 3-year-olds, CESA encourages the government to continue to support a diversity of providers and modes of delivery as an intentional component of future initiatives.

CESA has always played an important role in the overall mix of providers for education and care in the early years. With our current agreement with the South Australian Government dating back over forty years, our commitment to ECEC can be traced back to the earliest days of Catholic Education in SA in the 19th century, when young children of preschool age were often educated in religious schools of the day and often due to family tragedy or hardship. With such a legacy of providing high-quality education to young children from all backgrounds, CESA is committed to expanding its provision of high-quality education and care in the decades ahead.

CESA's largest involvement in preschools is found in eight primary schools that were included in a state project over the last forty years targeting low socioeconomic suburbs and/or suburbs with a high proportion of new migrants. With similar aims to the current investigation into preschool for 3-year-olds, this longstanding program has delivered access to high-quality education and care for generations of 4-year-olds in addition to generating many social benefits for families who have and continue to establish deep relationships with other families across these local communities. Given the success of this model of partnership, CESA welcomes an expansion of this type of program and commits to extending and improving our services in those areas identified as having the highest needs for better access to high-quality early childhood education and care.

NAZARETH CATHOLIC COMMUNITY – A Case Study of Innovation and Excellence in the Provision of ECEC

Established in 2007 in response to emerging community needs in the western suburbs of Adelaide, Nazareth Catholic Community focuses on ways of engaging families in a whole life journey. Nazareth Early Childhood Centre is an integrated service within the Nazareth Catholic Community offering long day care and preschool for children aged six months to five years old. The Universal Access funded preschool program is offered during school terms, with a holiday program operating for families throughout the term breaks. This demonstrates Nazareth's commitment to providing an educational program that is inclusive, equitable and accessible for all children particularly to families in need. It provides a useful model of what is possible when developing a whole of community approach to the provision of Birth to Year 12 education, complete with wrap-around social and health services. Nazareth Early Childhood Centre is well supported by an extensive and supportive team of personnel including Allied Health Professionals that includes Speech Therapists, Nutrition and Dietetics and Occupational Therapists and student clinics through partnerships with Flinders University. As a result, allied health professionals are readily available for advice for educators and families, observations, and small group and 1:1 support for children, in addition to pastoral support for both families and staff in times of hardship and grievance. Nazareth works in collaboration with the supported playgroup that is run by a paid facilitator and provides a time and place for children and families to play, be and belong. Integration also occurs with staff from the College, particularly those who work in Wellbeing Coordinator roles that enhance transition processes into Reception.

The integrated model of Nazareth Catholic Community is not static and evolves as the needs of the community, young people and families change over time. Nazareth's commitment to working collaboratively and respectfully with families from diverse backgrounds and cultures has been instrumental in delivering outstanding educational outcomes for students including twelve consecutive years of 100% SACE completion.

The success of early childhood education at Nazareth is attributable in part, to the overall schooling model in that community, where the economies of scale provide access to greater financial reserves and management capability necessary to steward the development of this impressive service. CESA is well positioned to undertake similar developments to Nazareth in the extension of its facilities in developing suburbs in the North and South of metropolitan Adelaide, corresponding with recent SA Government announcements regarding future residential land releases.

New ventures in Catholic Education that respond to emerging community needs

CESA is committed to providing access to high-quality education in new and emerging suburbs and our growth over 2015-2023 provides strong evidence of our ability to partner successfully with government, private developers, and communities. At the same time, our renewed presence in older suburbs with high socioeconomic needs demonstrates the advantages of having multiple providers collaborate to address inequality and disadvantage. Catholic Education has schools and early learning services in almost all parts of the state and remains committed to ensuring accessibility for all. This is particularly evident in our most recent initiatives, which include:

1. a fee-free school for young adults aged 18-24 in Adelaide's north together with an accompanying early years' service for the students' own children; and
2. a state-wide scholarship scheme for children under the guardianship of the Minister to have the choice of attending a Catholic school.

The recent opening of our latest preschool in Port Lincoln provides strong evidence of what can be achieved through leveraging government funding through existing community partnerships. In the case of St Joseph's School, that partnership included the expertise and resources of St Joseph's School and its community, the Diocese of Port Pirie, and the finance, planning and early years teams at the Catholic Education Office. In regional areas and other suburbs where it can be difficult to provide new services, partnerships across organisations are key to providing access to the high-quality ECEC services contemplated in this Royal Commission.

Investing in Access and Quality OSHC Services

- Is vitally important for improving the participation rate in employment. Anecdotally, it is even more important for the parents of a child with a disability.
- Having a variety of OSHC providers creates healthy competition and choice for schools and families.
- Access to CCS and ACCS is OK. The commission should investigate how changes to CCS across different income thresholds might influence the participation rate to achieve the desired funding/economic and social balance.
- Improving OSHC services for children with a disability
 - Improve the mechanism for obtaining additional funding or adjust the overall rate of funding to provide a more manageable staff-to-student balance and allow/require providers to make the adjustments necessary. The effect of Gowry funding (SA) is to decrease staffing ratios
 - Provide models of practice that educators can easily adapt to the needs of children enrolled in their service

Workforce Development

Catholic Education is a well-organised, resourced, and agile education system with experience in tertiary education, schooling, and early childhood education and care. As such, CESA aspires for 3-year-old preschools to be led by passionate educators who possess appropriate qualifications for their roles in ECEC settings. In this regard, there appear to be opportunities to recalibrate some Early Childhood Education tertiary courses to bring more educators online earlier than is currently possible, while providing a clear articulation of postgraduate courses to support the ongoing professional development of educators throughout their careers. CESA strongly supports initiatives that promote excellence in early years teaching and deep commitment to building authentic relationships and supportive environments essential for children's social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and physical well-being already outlined in the AEDC.

Addressing workforce issues in the sector is critical to attracting qualified and experienced teachers and educators. CESA is proud of its ability to retain staff in its early years services and commits to addressing factors that cause inequitable working conditions for early years educators that undermine the development of a strong and stable workforce. At Catholic Education SA we acknowledge the important role of early childhood educators as professionals and significant influencers on the learning and development of children. CESA has already commenced work in supporting tertiary students studying Early Childhood to develop self-efficacy and prepare for work beyond their university placements. Similarly, we believe there are further opportunities to engage with tertiary students employed casually in OSHC services and to support their development as educators, to attract and retain a highly skilled teaching workforce once they graduate.

CESA values the opportunities created by the colocation of ECEC services on or near existing schools as it offers many benefits to parents who are also early years educators, allowing them a greater variety of employment opportunities while raising children themselves. We believe that such flexibility is an important strategic consideration for workforce planning in rural and remote schools.

South Australian Funding – The benefits of investing in the nongovernment sector

The long-term benefits of successive governments investing in early years education partnerships with CESA are readily appreciated in the ongoing success of the eight preschools established over forty years ago and the access they continue to provide to high-quality preschool for 4-year-olds at low or no cost to families.

Capital costs and workforce development are considerable in any educational setting. Therefore, providing predictable long-term funding supports private investment in the development of new centres and refurbishment and expansion of others. Similarly, medium to long-term funding agreements assist schools and school systems recruit and develop staff knowing that employment opportunities are ongoing, offering real career opportunities in the early years sector as an integral part of a larger system of education.

Conclusion

Catholic Education South Australia believes that much more can and needs to be done to improve access to high-quality early years education for all South Australian children. We welcome the renewed consideration of the importance of Early Years Education and Care by governments throughout Australia and look forward to the publication of the findings of the Royal Commission and those of the Australian Productivity Commission. CESA also commits to partnering with the South Australian government and other education providers in implementing those changes identified as having the greatest benefits to children throughout the state.

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