

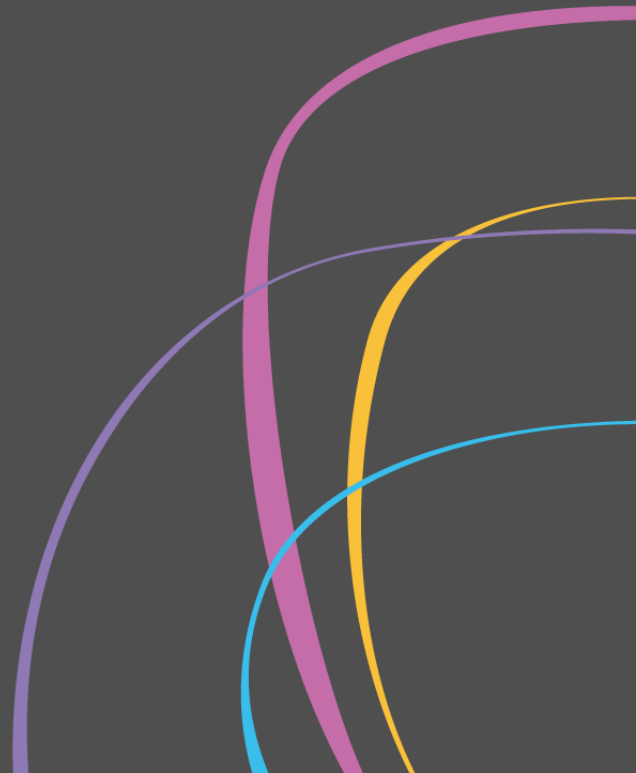
Goodstart Early Learning

Submission to Productivity Commission National Education Evidence Base Inquiry

June 2016

**goodstart
early
learning**

visit goodstart.org.au



1. Introduction

One of the best investments Government can make to boost productivity in the short, medium and long term is in early learning and care as a recognised part of the holistic education system. There is significant national and international evidence demonstrating that early learning can deliver a threefold return to the nation through increased workforce participation for women, building human capital in the first five years and addressing children's vulnerabilities and disadvantage through early intervention before children start school.

However, more Australian based evidence would support policy makers and service providers in making decisions about where to focus resources to have the biggest impact and also to ensure that vulnerable children get the support they need. A focused national evidence strategy would also benefit families and the community more broadly by providing better information about how families can maximise their children's outcomes through access to early learning and education.

Goodstart is committed to working collaboratively with Governments, families, practitioners and the sector more broadly to help build a world-class early childhood education and care system which forms an integral part of a national education system that equips children with the skills they need to succeed in life.

Goodstart commends the Australian Government's vision in commissioning the Productivity Commission Inquiry into a National Education Evidence Base. We agree that improved access and greater ability to link data across the full education spectrum, including early childhood has the potential to enhance the quality and scope of national education evidence. This evidence could then be used to monitor and improve educational outcomes, inform policy development, and enhance teaching behaviours and practice.

In many ways, Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system is world class. The Productivity Commission acknowledged that the primary regulation instrument, the National Quality Framework was viewed by many as leading practice globally. However, evidence about the benefits and impacts of early learning, particularly for children under the age of four years needs to be updated and improved to capture the implementation of the National Quality Framework and better granularity around child attendance and access information. With significant investments being made by Governments, families and providers in ECEC there has never been a more important time to ensure decisions about ECEC policy and practice is informed by a high quality evidence base.

In this short submission we address relevant questions from the issues paper and make several recommendations for consideration in preparing the Commission's draft report. We also commend the submissions of our sector colleagues to the Commission, in particular those made by early childhood peak bodies, Universities and academics.

We look forward to participating further in this inquiry and seeing how the Productivity Commission's draft report will ensure Australia has a world class education evidence base system that recognises the critical contribution made by the early years.

2. Summary of Recommendations

Below is a summary of the key recommendations made in this submission.

- 1. Goodstart recommends that the scope of the inquiry should include data on children younger than 4 years and should cover all children, not only those accessing ECEC. We note that there are existing high quality data available to Government that would make this possible.**
- 2. To deliver a National Early Childhood Education and Development Researchable dataset Goodstart recommends a two tiered approach consisting of:**
 - a. Improving the collection, linkage and availability of existing population level ECEC data; and**
 - b. Developing a new longitudinal dataset that addresses the implementation of the National Quality Framework in 2012; and the introduction of New Australian Curriculum in 2013 as new contexts that shape child outcomes. The development of this new dataset should focus on ensuring the long term relevance of the data and be developed in consultation with the sector, including service providers and build on the experiences of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC).**
- 3. Goodstart specifically recommends ongoing funding for the AEDC data collection.**
- 4. Goodstart specifically recommends linking the following administrative datasets: Government Paid Parental Leave, Family Tax Benefits, Parenting Payment, Child Care Subsidies; including providing the necessary framework to link and access information about vulnerable groups within the dataset.**
- 5. Goodstart recommends that the Australian Government lead work with state and territory governments to develop a National Education Research Strategy.**

3. Scope of the Inquiry

Relevant Issues Paper Questions:

Should the scope of the evidence base include data on children younger than 4 years old (or prior to the year before compulsory schooling begins)? If so, why, and should it cover all children, or only those attending early childhood education and care programs outside the home?

The Scope of the Inquiry must include children younger than four years

Goodstart commends the Government for setting Terms of Reference for the Commission that recognise that the National Education Evidence Base must examine issues relating to data for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and schools.

Goodstart strongly supports an interpretation that includes data in relation to the outcomes, conditions and circumstances of children aged from birth to five years, as per the scope of scope of early childhood education and care set out under the national *Early Years Learning Framework*, *National Quality Framework* and related documents. This includes children who attend early childhood education and care programs as well as those who do not attend any such programs prior to beginning compulsory schooling.

It is important that the scope of the evidence base include children younger than 4 years because:

1. ECEC has an impact on children's learning and development outcomes including their transition to and success in school;
2. Australian evidence shows that access to ECEC can reduce disadvantage;
3. It appears that the children who benefit most from ECEC are the least likely to attend due to a range of barriers that need to be better understood;
4. ECEC is a critical part of the overall education continuum and children's learning experiences; and
5. Government makes significant investments in ECEC in recognition of the significant benefits it delivers for individual children, families and the community.

ECEC has an impact on children's learning and development outcomes including their transition to and success in school

There is significant evidence that children's participation in high-quality early learning and care improves school readiness and addresses developmental vulnerabilities.¹ However we need to know more about how we can leverage this important intervention to make a difference in more children's lives.

Substantial investments are made by tax payers in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Australia and around the globe because it delivers a return on investment in terms of children's outcomes as well as a return on investment in terms of female workforce participation.

1 Melhuish, E., Ereky-Stevens, K., Petrogiannis, K., Ariescu, A., Penderi, E., Rentzou, K., Tawell, A., Slot, P., Broekhuizen, M., & Leseman, p. (2015). A review of research on the effects of early childhood education and care (ECEC) upon child development. Brussels, European Commission pp 25-38 <http://ecec-care.org/>

OECD data shows that the benefits of access to early learning persist throughout schooling – PISA² test scores of 15 year olds showed children who had attended pre-primary education for more than one year scored 53 points higher than those who had not. The same OECD report found that Australia had the 6th lowest participation rate of children in pre-primary education for more than one year.³

International studies in literacy and numeracy of primary school children have also found higher test scores for children who attended 3 or more years of pre-primary education. Again, Australia was one of the countries with the lowest levels of participation in early entry to pre-primary education.⁴ Further, a long-running study of the educational experiences of children in England recently reported that 16 year olds who had attended more than two years of quality preschool (compared to none) scored on average 51 points higher on their final GCSE exams, which is the difference between getting eight ‘B’ grades versus eight ‘C’ grades.⁵

“A growing body of research recognises that early childhood education and care (ECEC) brings a wide range of benefits, for example, better child wellbeing and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning; more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty; increased intergenerational social mobility; more female labour market participation; increased fertility rates; and better social and economic development for the society at large. But all these benefits are conditional on ‘quality’.”⁶

OECD Starting Strong 3 review of early learning

This evidence supports the argument that if we are interested in improving children’s outcomes at school, we must focus effort on the factors that set children up for success at school including ECEC.

Australian evidence shows that access to early learning can reduce disadvantage

Evidence from the Australian Educational Development Census (AEDC) shows that around 23% of children entering Year One are developmentally vulnerable. Children who start school behind all too often never catch up, and will leave school without the skills necessary for an effective transition to the workforce.

The AEDC also found that children from the lowest income quintile were twice as likely to start school developmentally vulnerable as children from the highest quintile. However, if they have accessed a preschool program, the level of vulnerability reduces by about one third.⁷ This effect is summarised in the graph over the page.

2 PISA: Program for International Student Assessment

3 OECD 2013 “PISA 2012 Results in Focus” p.12

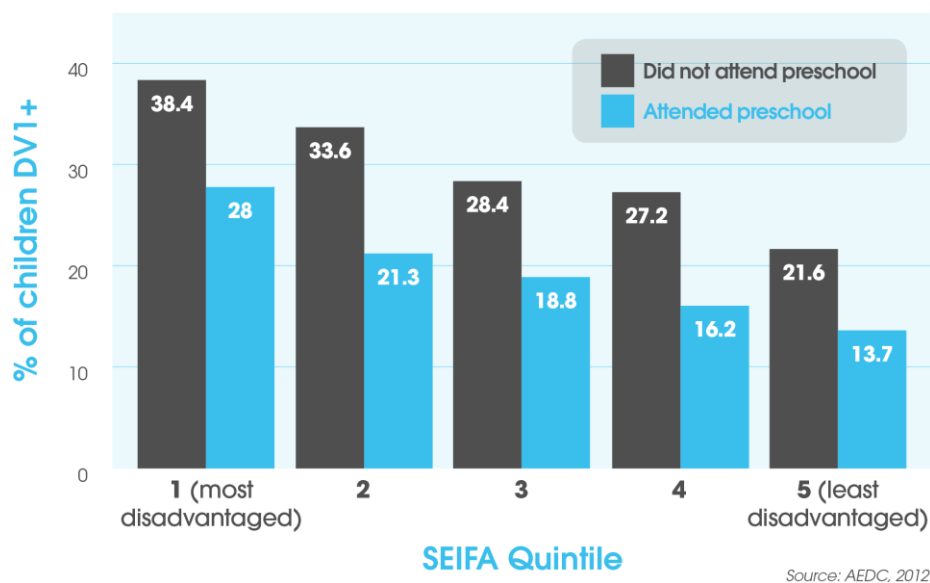
4 <http://timssandpiris.bc.edu/>

5 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/children-who-have-early-education-get-higher-gcse>

6 OECD 2012 “Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolkit for Early Childhood Education and Care” <http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/startingstrongiii-aqualitytoolboxforearlychildhoodeducationandcare.htm>

7 Australian Educational Development Census 2012 www.aedc.org.au

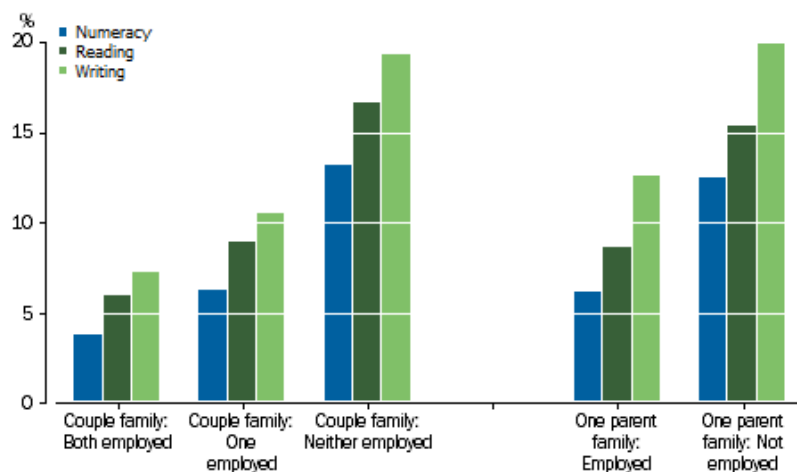
IMPACT OF PARTICIPATION IN PRESCHOOL ON LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENTAL VULNERABILITY 2012



In a data matching exercise, the ABS compared Census data and NAPLAN scores for students in Queensland and with AEDC data in Tasmania.⁸ It found that:

- children living in disadvantaged communities were far more likely *not* to meet minimum NAPLAN reading scores; and
- children with both parents employed performed considerably better on NAPLAN numeracy, reading and writing tests than those where one *or* both parents were not employed.

PROPORTION OF STUDENTS BELOW NATIONAL MINIMUM STANDARD FOR READING, BY PARENTS' EMPLOYMENT STATUS



Source ABS 2014: Data is for Queensland government school students

The ABS study of Tasmanian children matching AEDC data with census data found:

- families with at least one parent employed were the most engaged with the school and more likely to regularly read to their child at home; and
- children from double income families were less likely to start school developmentally vulnerable than children from single income or non-working families.⁹

⁸ ABS 4261.3 - Educational outcomes, experimental estimates, Queensland, 2011

⁹ 4261.6 - Educational outcomes, experimental estimates, Tasmania, 2006-2013

Collectively, these studies and AEDC trends highlight the importance of ensuring that children from low income; single income and non-working families benefit from access to early learning to ensure that they have the best possible start to life by being ready for school. A richer data set and analysis would allow researchers, policy makers and service providers to further explore these relationships and ensure that ECEC and schools policy is designed to support the children who need it most.

The children who would benefit most from early learning are least likely to attend.

There is strong evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit most from access to early learning.¹⁰ These children are also the least likely to attend. ABS data on preschool attendance shows that children from non-working households were five times more likely *not* to attend preschool as children from households where both parents work.¹¹

Children from other vulnerable groups like from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and children with disability are also underrepresented in ECEC. Unlike schooling, which is compulsory, and can generally be accessed for free or at very low cost, we need to gather more information at a population and sub-group level to understand exactly what barriers prevent children and families from accessing ECEC and how these could be better addressed.

Importantly, as many of Australia's children are doing well and achieving good development and educational outcomes, measures of success and research should include a focus on those that are either not doing well or are not participating in ECEC and the possible flow on consequences for their schooling and life outcomes.

ECEC is a critical part of the overall education continuum and children's learning experiences.

Access to early learning through formal and informal channels is the platform from which lifelong learning commences and most Australian children under the age of 4 years are accessing ECEC. As noted in the recent Productivity Commission Report on Government Services over half of all children aged 2 years or older are attending Australian Government approved ECEC services and nearly 40% of children aged between 12 and 24 months are attending an approved ECEC service.

Researchers have concluded these early years build the foundation for learning, health and success with essential numeracy, language, literacy, behavioural, social, and emotional skills formed during this time.¹² These early years are sensitive periods for different aspects of brain development and approved ECEC services delivered through the *National Quality Framework* and the *Early Years Learning Framework* are tailored to meet the differing needs of babies, toddlers, and pre-schoolers – all with an end goal of giving them the skills they need for further success in school and life. For example:

- the foundations for emotional control are primarily established in the first six to 30 months of life and are powerfully influenced by the quality of the care and stimulation a child receives during this time;

¹⁰ Productivity Commission (2014) "Childcare and Early Learning Report" p 180

¹¹ ABS cat. No. 4402 Childcare Education and Care Australia, June 2014

¹² Urbis Social Policy, 2011; Wise, Da Silva, Webster, & Sanson, 2005

- the acquisition of language is highly associated with the quality of language and interactions from birth to two years; and
- Behavioural and social skills develop through interactions with adults and other children in the preschool years.^{13 14}

The evidence has established that high portions of children already access approved ECEC, more children are attending these services each year, and we know these services have an impact on children's later educational outcomes. It therefore makes sense that they should be included in the scope of an inquiry into a national education evidence base.

Government makes significant investments in ECEC in recognition of the significant benefits it delivers for individual children, families and the community.

Child development outcomes are a key focus of government's involvement in ECEC including through the delivery of child care subsidies in the order of \$8 Billion per year for approved child care and early learning services that meet minimum quality standards. It follows then, that child outcomes should be a strong basis for planning activity, setting policy priorities and measuring success. However, recent reform processes have highlighted that a more up to date domestic evidence base would allow Government and the sector to make more informed decisions about policy to maximise the benefits for children and efficiency for tax-payers.

Finally, from a broader, whole of economy perspective, consideration should be given to not just the short-term economic impacts of ECEC and fiscal costs of government spending on services, but also the longer term social and economic benefits through better school, health and employment outcomes. This approach has a flow on effect to longer term positive impacts on Government finances, including through higher tax revenue and reduced spending on welfare and services. Considering these factors, it is clear that that ECEC must form an integral part of a national evidence approach, and that such an investment is likely to yield short and long term benefits to individual children and the nation.

Goodstart recommends that the scope of the inquiry should include data on children younger than 4 years accessing approved ECEC and should cover all children, not only those accessing ECEC. We note that there are existing high quality data available to Government that would make this possible. These data sets are discussed on page 10.

Goodstart would not support any narrowing of the scope of the Inquiry to exclude early childhood education and care or to limit data for children under the age of 4 years.

13 McCain M, Mustard J, and Shanker S, (2007), the Early Years Study 2: Putting Science into Action. Toronto Council of Early Childhood Development.

14 Mustard J, & Young M, (2007) Measuring Child Development to Leverage Early Child Development Policy and Investment.

4. Objectives, Outcomes and Framework

Relevant Issues Paper Questions:

Do you agree that the objective of a national education evidence base should be to improve education outcomes? Are there other objectives that should be included?

What education outcomes do you see as relevant? For example, outcomes in traditional academic domains (such as literacy and numeracy), outcomes in non-cognitive domains (such as communication and interpersonal skills).

There is a need to focus effort on developing a national education evidence base in order to inform policy and practice that ultimately improves educational outcomes for our nation's children. Within this scope, we believe that educational outcomes should be interpreted broadly, to encompass the educational performance and well-being of children as well as of population groups and sub-groups – particularly those experiencing vulnerability such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from low-income backgrounds and children who are refugees or humanitarian entrants.

This broader interpretation is important in light of evidence that there is a wide range of factors that interact and shape and individual child's development and learning and that some factors can be more easily influenced by policy settings and policy levers than others.¹⁵ A broad approach with freely available data and evidence would significantly improve investment decisions and practice by Government and service providers and would ultimately lead to more efficient use of limited resources across the ECEC and Education sectors.

Goodstart's approach to the evidence base

Goodstart's purpose is to ensure children have the learning, development and wellbeing outcomes they need for school and life. To achieve our purpose we have a specific strategic goal to embed evidence informed practice and strengthen the Australian evidence base.

To deliver on those commitments, Goodstart is in the process of developing an outcomes framework to measure the impact our early learning programs are having on the more than 70,000 children that attend our services.

As a result of this process, we have a deep understanding of the complexity involved in developing an outcomes approach for children and the supporting indicators and measurement tools. Given the non-linear relationships associated with children's learning and development outcomes, we have settled on a Results Based Accountability approach. The benefits of this approach are that it starts with an 'end in mind' and separates population and performance accountability. By providing a frame to clarify, for example how a particular teaching practice or days of attendance might influence speech and language outcomes, rather than lead to it. This framework will provide Goodstart and, eventually the sector more broadly, with robust reliable evidence about how policy and practice can influence outcomes. Critically, this approach will also allow us to determine which policies and practices influence outcomes for which groups or sub-groups of children.

¹⁵ Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2009

Goodstart's approach to the evidence base cont.

Goodstart is currently prioritising effort on better understanding the outcome areas of Speech and language as well as self-regulation and executive function. These outcome areas were identified and prioritised by our Thought Leadership Group that comprises internationally recognised early childhood practitioners and international academics as making the most difference for children's outcomes. Goodstart's work involves detailing the desired outcomes – and their enablers of family partnerships and community connections – and identifying how these prioritised outcomes are supported and reflected within our existing service model as well as our current policies and initiatives such as our Practice Guide. This approach is helping Goodstart to consider how change can be measured to show performance at an individual service level and the contribution this makes to the broader Goodstart population.

Goodstart would be pleased to provide the Commission with any additional information about our Outcomes Framework approach.

Along with others in the sector, **Goodstart recommends the development of a National Education Research Strategy including a comprehensive Child Outcomes Framework that captures a wide range of within-system and external determinants of child outcomes.** The final Strategy and Framework should be informed by expert advice about the extent to which the relative contributions of specific determinants can be identified.

5. Data Sets – what we need and what we have

Relevant Issues Paper Questions:

What data should be collected nationally?

Which aspects of administrative datasets are likely to be most useful to inform policy development?

What additional research or policy activity would be enabled by this data collection?

What data do we have and do we need?

A new researchable data set is needed to inform policy, practice and investment decisions

From an early childhood perspective, there is an urgent need to collate a new researchable dataset that reflects contemporary minimum quality standards and is focused on child attendance at ECEC, quality of ECEC and child outcomes. Much of these data are collected already through administrative data sets and the challenge is in linking the data and improving accessibility.

This information would facilitate descriptive research, correlational research as well as provide a framework for new experimental research. Facilitating high quality experimental research is critical to building the evidence base about what process elements of early learning and education, including educator and teacher practice and behaviours contribute to improved educational and development outcomes and for which cohorts of children.

Goodstart provides the following suggestions about the required data:

- data on early learning and education outcomes (for example, child outcomes data, destination data and data from developmental assessments such as AEDC and NAPLAN);

- data on student characteristics sourced from within the ECEC and education system (including data on non-cognitive skills — such as speech and language (expressive and vocabulary), social emotional well-being and cognitive thinking skills);
- data on the ECEC services and workforce (including National Quality Framework ratings, ECEC qualifications and length of service for teachers and educators);
- data on other ECEC inputs (including administration data which provides access to mainstream and targeted child care subsidies, attendance patterns, dosage and duration, other funding sources such as Universal Access to Preschool reporting, ABS preschool attendance data, access to targeted support such as through the Inclusion Support Subsidy);
- data on external determinants (for example data collected through administrative datasets for Parenting Payment and other income support payments, Family Tax Benefits administrative datasets to report and link information about cultural background, language and socioeconomic status, parental workforce participation status); and
- data from health and social services data sets (access to Paid Parental Leave, immunisation and health records, social services data indicating other specific sub-groups such as children whose parents have disability or are in receipt of Carer Payment).

It is important that a new longitudinal dataset is developed that reflects contemporary structural and process settings that influence child outcomes and that it is robust enough to reflect important granular differences in these settings. For example, the phased implementation of qualification requirements under the National Quality Framework must be captured in order to ‘future-proof’ this dataset; researchers need to be able to distinguish between a child whose educator is ‘Working Towards’ their ECEC qualification, compared to those who are fully qualified. The development of the dataset must also be mindful of rapidly changing social-cultural contexts such as the use of technology in order to ensure the long term relevance of the data.

To deliver a National Early Childhood Education and Development Researchable dataset Goodstart recommends a two tiered approach consisting of:

- a. Improving the collection, linkage and availability of existing population level ECEC data; and**
- b. Developing a new longitudinal dataset that addresses the implementation of the National Quality Framework in 2012; and the introduction of New Australian Curriculum in 2013 as new contexts that shape child outcomes. The development of this new dataset should focus on ensuring the long term relevance of the data and be developed in consultation with the sector, including service providers and build on the experiences of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC).**

Goodstart specifically recommends ongoing funding for the AEDC data collection.

Goodstart specifically recommends linking the following administrative datasets: Government Paid Parental Leave, Family Tax Benefits, Parenting Payment, Child Care Subsidies; including providing the necessary framework to link and access information about vulnerable groups within the dataset.

In order to deliver this dataset, some form of national unique identifier will be necessary and would be a worthwhile investment.

6. Role for Government

Return on Investment – there is a role for the Australian Government in funding and facilitating the availability of the evidence base and supporting research

Developing a researchable dataset would deliver wide ranging benefits for Governments, the community, individual children and the sector. At a systemic level, such a dataset coordinated by a national approach would allow policy makers, service providers and families to make more informed decisions about priorities for investment and evidence based practice.

Making such a dataset more freely available would also provide new opportunities to better answer complex policy questions at a national, state and local level such as:

- where should we focus investment and effort to improve outcomes to Close the Gap for children of specific ages?
- what dosage of early learning is optimal to improve educational outcomes for particular cohorts of children?
- what are the practices that lead to better outcomes in ECEC services and schools that serve similar populations?

Providing an evidence base to focus effort and investment would ultimately benefit the nation by improving the effectiveness of investment decisions.

Goodstart recommends that the Australian Government lead work with state and territory governments to develop a National Education Research Strategy.

Behind Goodstart

Goodstart was created by a partnership of organisations who saw the potential of early learning to transform Australia. They wanted to address one of the key sources of many future problems—poor early childhood experiences.

It made perfect sense for these groups to pool their energy and invest in early learning to fix the root cause of so many social problems.

benevolent
SOCIETY

Formed in 1813, The Benevolent Society is Australia's first charity. It is a not-for-profit and non-religious organisation that helps people, families and communities achieve positive change through support and education.

SVA
social ventures australia

Social Ventures Australia is a non-profit organisation established to improve the lives of people in need. It focuses on keys to overcoming disadvantage including great education, sustainable jobs, stable housing and appropriate health, disability and community services.



**Brotherhood
of St. Laurence**
Working for an Australia free of poverty

The Brotherhood is a not-for-profit organisation that works to alleviate and prevent poverty through research, services and advocacy. It is a non-government, community-based organisation that supports people experiencing disadvantage at all stages of life, to build a better future for themselves and their families.

**MISSION
AUSTRALIA**

Mission Australia is a non-denominational Christian community service organisation that aims to reduce homelessness and strengthen communities across Australia. It works to help people secure jobs, receive an education, find housing and develop important life skills.

Goodstart would like to acknowledge the funding and support provided by:

Australian Federal Government
New South Wales Government
Northern Territory Government
Queensland Government
South Australia Government
Tasmania Government
Victoria Government
Western Australia Government

**goodstart
early
learning**

to find out more, visit
goodstart.org.au