

Submission to Productivity Commission from the Association of Independent Schools, Western Australia.

Context

The Association of Independent Schools, Western Australia (AISWA) is the representative body for the non-government, non-Catholic sector in Western Australia. The diversity of our member schools is wide and includes remote indigenous sole-provider schools, philosophically driven schools, religious schools, low fee systemic schools and large high fee schools.

The provision of pre-school (known as kindergarten in WA) within schooling is an established practice in Western Australian independent schools. Families see Kindergarten as the entry point into school and families begin the relationship that can last for eight years for K-6 schools and fourteen years for K-12 schools.

Western Australia has a high participation rate in enrolment at Kindergarten and high attendance within metro and regional localities. Attendance in remote schools is subject to a number of factors mostly due to the mobility of parents however as a general rule when children are in the community they attend Kindergarten. The provision of kindergarten in remote schools each week day for three hours a day helps children develop a regular pattern of attendance at school.

Funding for kindergarten in WA for independent schools come from three sources.

- State Government re-current funding,
- Parent fees
- Universal Access funding from the Federal Government through the National Partnership for Early Childhood.

AISWA administers the funding for Universal Access processing payments to schools based on a per child payment related to the State Funding Category. State funding supports the provision of 11 hours of Kindergarten and Universal Access supports the provision of the further 4 hours to meet the commitment to 15 hours per week of pre-school education.

AISWA strongly supports Recommendation 12.9

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 of 15 hours per week for 40 weeks per year. This support should be based on the number of children enrolled in state and territory government funded preschool services, including where these are delivered in a long day care service.

The Australian Government should negotiate with the state and territory governments to incorporate their funding for preschool into the funding for schools, and encourage extension of school services to include preschool.

In 2013 118 independent schools provided 15 hours of pre-school education per week to 3440 students.

Universal Access funding is essential to the continuation of providing a high quality early childhood program of fifteen hours within independent schools in Western Australia.

Without continued Universal Access funding independent schools will be faced with two options.

- (i) to reduce the hours offered for Kindergarten to 11 hours.

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(ii) to increase fees.

Neither of these options will benefit children. The reduction of hours will lead to less opportunity throughout schooling. The reduction in schooling hours offered will see working families seeking alternative arrangements for care. Increasing fees would put undue pressure on family budgets and may result in decreased enrolments.

Existing community expectations in WA is that Kindergarten is now fifteen hours. This fits better with family work patterns particularly when kindergartens are connected to Out of School Hours Care.

Schools have already confirmed their Kindergarten enrolments for 2015 and many have entered into a contractual arrangement with parents to provide 15 hours of schooling.

The benefits of a high quality program have been well documented. The additional four hours of kindergarten in WA offers children another half day of schooling increasing their opportunities for learning with and from others within an education environment.

We strongly support Draft recommendation 12.9 and stress with urgency that the funding issue be resolved quickly so that schools can plan for 2015 and beyond.