

2nd September 2014

Childcare and Early Childhood Learning
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
CANBERRA CITY ACT 2601

Response to Productivity Commission Draft Report

Dear Commissioner

We are the elected parent body of Evans Head Pre School and Woodburn–Evans Head Pre School. We volunteer our time and energy to oversee the management of our community pre schools. We have many queries about how your productivity recommendations would affect the quality of education and care that not only our children, but all other young children receive.

Children’s wellbeing and educational outcomes will affect families in the short term but will impact on all Australians as those children grow and contribute to the fabric of our society in the long term. Economic savings made at this point will be short sighted. If quality is compromised even slightly, the long-term costs for our society will balloon. We are interested in mental health, workforce participation and downward slide of education standards on PISA and similar tests.

Your recommendation to place community pre schools in the state education system is not problematic for us in itself. We have chosen a community Pre School over long day care because we consider it the best option for our family. We have also chosen it because we believe that the community ethos it embodies will make for a stronger local community. This is also why we care enough to fundraise, hold working bees and volunteer our expertise to keep the centres viable and focused upon what is important – our children. Some of us juggle full or part-time work commitments in order to have our children attend, some of us juggle our budget in order to have a stay at home parent while our children are small. Whether this is our lifestyle choice or the circumstances are beyond our control, should not impact on whether our children are entitled to quality early education and care.

Your recommendations do not clarify the following:

Fees:

- How will equity on fees be achieved across the states? Fees in NSW have always been way above those charged in other states. For many years funding was actually frozen. The state government did not pass on federal funding intended for “universal access” until pushed to do so.

- If the CCB and CCR are combined and families using registered care can no longer access rebates we will lose out financially. Often a community Pre School is the only option for care in rural communities.
- If Not For Profit Pre Schools lose tax exemptions; pressure will be placed on us to increase fees.

Standards:

- What quality standards would Pre Schools be required to follow if they were no longer under the NQF?
- We would hate to see a return to spot checks, which focused almost exclusively upon compliance issues rather than quality programming and community networks.
- We agree with the idea to do away with The Excellent rating. Parents find it very confusing that our centre can't be judged as excellent unless they pay \$500 for an assessment. If it were to stay it should be called something different to indicate more clearly what the rating denotes such as "Mentor Service" or "Leader in Sector" perhaps.
- Our pre school educators and parent body pulled together and were proud to achieve the rating of Exceeding The National Quality Standards. Was this all for nothing? If we switch to the Education department will we have to face another system all together?

Ratios:

- We are completely opposed to watering down ratios, or any other standards, in NSW to reduce the quality to match that in other states. Lower ratios can only mean more issues with supervision, less attention and hence poorer relationships between educators and children, less time for teaching and learning – more crowd control. All it can mean is more stressed children and educators and more risks to safety and wellbeing, and learning opportunities will decrease.
- In other OECD countries spending on Early Childhood Education and Care is increasing. You don't compete in the modern world and reverse current downward trends of our comparative educational outcomes by decreasing spending.

Linking enrolment to Family Tax Benefit:

- The way to increase participation is to reduce fees. When the State Government introduced the one off grant to reduce fees to families last year, the impact in our two services was instant and indisputable. Both services were full in no time. Families grasped the opportunity to enroll or to increase days. Families often want to send their children to Pre School for three days (and hence achieve the magic 15 hours per week access) but can't afford to.

- “Dysfunctional families”, the term used in the report, need support to utilise services. Families suffering domestic violence or other social disadvantage do not choose to isolate themselves and their children. Taking money away from them will not fix their transport problems or any other barriers preventing attendance. Programs like Brighter Futures, which support *at risk* families and build their resilience, are in short supply with long waiting lists in our area. There is never enough funding for good programs to prevent families losing their way.

Two years of funding:

- We applaud the commissioner’s recognition that rural services in particular need three year olds enrolled to remain viable. They will always give priority to children in the year before school. However, vacant places do not pay the bills. Pre schools cannot leave vacant places in the hope that a 4/5 year old will move to town when a 3 year old is waiting to take up the position.
- We were surprised at the Commission’s dismissal of the large amount of international research available in support of the importance of two years of Pre School for children.

Please give our comments your due consideration. The number of submissions you are receiving reflects the gravity of the concerns so many people have with the Draft Report. Your task is unenviable in its size and complexity. However, we implore you to put children and families first. A community’s worth can only be judged in its treatment of its most vulnerable citizens, its children.

Your Sincerely

Carolien Aleckson

Committee member of the Evans Head Pre School Association Management Committee