

Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning

From

Westmeadows Primary School OSHC

This submission reflects the views of the staff of Westmeadows Primary School OSHC and seeks to comment on several recommendations in the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning draft report.

Westmeadows PS OSHC is a community run not-for-profit OSHC service, which has operated since 1998. We provide both Before and After School Care and are licenced for 45 children in both. There is 5 staff members employed, 3 of whom are long term employees. We are committed to quality care and education in OSHC and to working collaboratively with the school and the community.

Key Issues of concern

Draft Recommendation 7.4

Governments should develop and incorporate into the National Quality Framework a nationally consistent set of staff ratios and qualifications for those caring for school age children in outside school hours and vacation care services. These requirements should take into consideration ratios that are currently acceptable for children during school hours, the uncertainty surrounding the additional benefits of more staff and higher qualifications, and the valuable contribution that can be made to outside school hours care services by less qualified older workers and university/TAFE students.

We believe the current minimum 1:15 ratio for OSHC must be maintained. Our OSHC services like most OSHC services cater for a mixed age group with children ranging from approximately 5 to 12 years of age. There is a vast difference in catering for the needs of prep children of approximately 5 years to that of grade 6 students who is a pre-teen and all the ages' in-between. A number of activities in OSHC such as art and craft are hands-on and require educators to work with and assist small groups. There are usually several activities going on at once often across multiple areas including outdoors. There are changing numbers and continual configurations of groups as children arrive and leave across a session. In addition to overseeing activities educators also are supervising breakfast and snack times and the preparation of food, as well as attending to parents for such things as making bookings, payments and general enquires. As such as it is not cogent to draw parallels between staff to child ratios in OSHC and the classroom as they operate in very different context. We believe any increase in the number of children to educator ratio would have a significant negative impact on the quality of care and education that services would be able to provide to children and families and the overall outcome for children.

We believe there have been many benefits for educators to meet the current qualification requirements for OSHC in Victoria. Our educators feel that these requirements have enhanced their skill set enabling them to strengthen their abilities to provide quality outcomes for children. We consider The NQF and qualification requirements have led to the increased recognition of the critical and professional role OSHC educators play in the lives of children, families contributing to the development of strong communities. We believe any watering down of qualification requirements will undermine the quality of care currently provided, undervalue the role of educators and effect staff morale.

Draft Recommendation 7.5

All governments should allow services to temporarily operate with staffing levels below required ratios, such as by maintaining staffing levels on average (over a day or week), rather than at all times.

We believe minimum ratios are essential to ensure that children, educators and families are protected from harm and hazards. OSHC services often operate in isolated locations within school grounds and outside of times when other persons may be in attendance. Allowing staffing levels to drop below minimum required ratios could result in insufficient staff to deal with incident such as accident, intruder or an aggressive parent as well as undermine the provision of quality care and education. We are of the opinion that this recommendation is dangerous with the potential of serious consequences.

Draft Recommendation 8.2

State and territory governments should direct all schools to take responsibility for organising the provision of an outside school hours care service for their students (including students in attached preschools), where demand is sufficiently large for a service to be viable.

Whilst we welcome the Draft Recommendation that school take responsibility for organising the provision of OSHC services where demand is sufficient, we have grave concerns with the suggestion: *Schools organise appropriate external organisations to provide a range of optional outside school hours (including vacation) care and activities using school.* We believe there are considerable benefits to all stakeholders (children, families, school community and the wider community) when OSHC services are run by the schools and not for profit community groups and not outsourced to private providers.

As a school operated not for profit OSHC service we have consistently demonstrated the provision of affordable care with our charges being less than those of privately operated OSHC services, while still generating income which is utilized in providing additional resources and programs for the entire school community.

The dynamics and community structure of our service sees the majority of the staff being long-term employees. This equates to a wealth of local knowledge and established connections with, not only our children and families but other community groups and services within the area such as sporting groups, local council and a variety of services. We believe these factors serve to enhance the quality of our care of education service.

We question the recommendation to outsource OSHC services to external providers as the capacity of private operators to effectively engage with the community, provide quality care and education, provide families with cost effective childcare whilst returning income to the community is potentially compromised by their primary focus of profit making.

Welcome Draft Recommendations

Westmeadows Primary School OSHC welcomes the following recommendations.

- Introduction of a single subsidy to replace CCB and CCR
- Diverting funding from the proposed new Paid Parental Leave scheme to education and care
- Increased investment in subsidies for low income families
- Funding of coordination of activities in integrated services
- Ongoing funding by the Australian Government for universal access to 15 hours of preschool
- Extending the scope of the National Quality Framework to include all centre and home based services that receive Australian Government assistance
- Encouragement for employers to trial innovative approaches to flexible work and other family friendly arrangements
- Implementing a nationally recognised working with children check
- Requirement for all schools to take responsibility for organising the provision of an outside school hours care service, where there is sufficient demand.