

PARKDALE PRESCHOOL ASSOCIATION – SUBMISSION TO PC EARLY CHILDHOOD

Parkdale Preschool provides one three-year-old group and two government-funded four-year-old groups. Our kinder was established in 1948 and is wholly owned and run by a parent-led committee.

We acknowledge that the Productivity Commission's review of early childhood is a huge and important undertaking, and respect the process and opportunity to participate in what will hopefully bring some long-term beneficial changes to the sector.

1) Funding for 15 hours (Draft Recommendation 12.9)

We were pleased to see the Draft Report recommend that 15 hours of funded 4-year old places be retained, and that Minister Ley recently announced that Commonwealth support for this would be extended for 2015.

We are very concerned, however, about the possibility that State and Federal governments have not negotiated a final agreement about funding support beyond 2015. Thus we are somewhat concerned at the potential that preschools may fall through the gaps if preschool funding is linked to the overall State education budget as currently recommended.

It is clear that funding for at least 15 hours of 4-year old kinder is supported by the scientific research, and that the country gets a huge bang for of its buck in supporting education in these early years. The evidence is also clear that the extension of this funding has increased participation in 4-year old kinder, most particularly among the more marginalised families in the community who may previously have felt excluded due to the cost.

At Parkdale Preschool we are constantly speaking and listening to our parent community regarding the 15 hours issue. Our parents are strongly supportive of retaining this: often having had several children through the kinder, they are conscious of the differences in children from the greater amounts of time spent here; and they often have more of an opportunity to re-enter the workforce without resorting to long day-care through the longer sessions that we are able to provide.

We would urge the Minister to ensure that funding for 15 hours continues indefinitely.

2) National Quality Framework (Draft Recommendation 7.9)

We are somewhat concerned at the recommendation that preschools be removed from the National Quality Framework (NQF).

Parkdale Preschool has invested heavily in adapting to the running of and services provided as suggested by the NQF process. We have found it to be a useful quality system to guide the preschool itself, and a useful means of communicating to parents the quality of the service we deliver.

We are concerned at the possibility that separation of preschools from the NQF will lead to an artificial separation of "care" from "education". We believe that this will result in lower paid educators who work in long day care, leading to more difficulty for centres in finding staff, less full time jobs for educators across the board. This will also invariably lead to poorer outcomes for children, particularly those who don't have the choice between child care vs sessional kindergarten due to family circumstances.

From our perspective, the recommendation to remove preschools from the NQF will add another layer of complexity with another new system to learn about, new officers being trained to visit centres for assessment etc.; or, alternatively, we go back to the old days of quality being only self-assessed and therefore huge variability across kindergartens in terms of quality.

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This recommendation at heart devalues the early childhood education sector as it appears to suggest that nothing serious happens in preschools here – therefore no need for us to talk about quality.

Alternatively, if Early Childhood Education is rolled into the primary school system, we would be concerned with the push-down of primary school values, curriculum and testing into preschools if we were no longer part of the Early Childhood world.

3) Staff ratios and Qualifications of Educators

Recommendation 7.3 refers to staff ratios and qualifications, stating that State-based staff ratios and qualifications requirements should be eliminated and placed under the Federal system.

Parkdale Preschool believes that the position on staffing requirements negotiated between the Federal and State governments through COAG in 2009 was appropriate and we are concerned that this would be so quickly walked away from.

We believe that across the sector it is devaluing the youngest (and often the most vulnerable) members of our society by suggesting qualifications are not required to work with the younger children (again the separation of care vs education). Again, the research shows that having access to a university qualified early childhood teacher makes a huge difference in the outcomes for children and this is especially true of those from disadvantaged backgrounds and with disabilities.

4) Communication to stakeholders through the review process re 15 hours funding

While we appreciate the extension of funding for 2015, Parkdale Preschool was disappointed by the failure to understand that the original plan to link the funding decision to release of the final report would lead to huge difficulties for preschools in their future planning.

We made a number of attempts to contact Minister Ley's office after it was revealed in June that funding may not continue beyond 2014. The communications from Victorian Minister Lovell's office and the media articles relating to this, particularly with respect to Minister Ley's refusal to confirm whether funding would continue, created a level of panic within the sector and amongst parents that was totally unnecessary.

We believe that if Minister Ley's office had better understood the way that the State and Local government, preschools and parents conduct their planning for kinder then a lot of angst and difficulty would have been avoided. Better planning around the decisions that stem from a review such as this, and better communication to stakeholders, is important in future, particularly where children are concerned.