



Committee on the Rights of the Child – National Children’s Commissioner

Submission to Consultation
May 2018

Introduction

Australia can and should do more for its children. Early childhood education offers a great opportunity for Australia to lift its game. (Lifting Our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions, 2017)

Australian governments must support all young Australians to achieve not only equality of opportunity but also more equitable outcomes. (Melbourne Declaration on the Educational Goals for Young Australians, 2009)

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) can change lives. At Northside Community Service, we believe that all children have the right to quality early childhood education. We advocate for each child's right to be heard, to belong to a safe learning community and to become active participants in their community and world.

Northside Community Service welcomes the opportunity to submit to this important consultation conducted by the Human Rights Commission, and commends the Children's Commissioner Megan Mitchell for seeking the views of the early education sector.

Summary

Northside is committed to engaging in the national conversation around ECEC in Australia. As a community-based not-for-profit organisation, we strongly believe in the right of all children to access high quality ECEC – especially children experiencing vulnerability or trauma. The research on the importance of the first five years is unequivocal, and it is imperative that Australia develops policy settings that mean all children can access ECEC, regardless of their parents' work status.

Yet when compared to their peers in other developed countries, there is a wealth of evidence that Australian children are not being adequately supported to have the best possible start in the first five years.

- 22% of Australian children are starting school developmentally vulnerable¹
- Only 15% of three-year-olds in Australia participate in pre-primary education, compared with the OECD average of 68.6%²
- Australia ranks 20th out of 30 OECD countries in terms of affordability of ECEC – a crucial determining factor in children's access³
- The Federal Government has been clear that around 25% of children and families will receive less access to subsidised ECEC from July
- In the 2018 Budget, the Federal Government announced it would cease funding for the National Quality Agenda for ECEC⁴

Northside calls on the Commissioner to report to the United Nations that Australia is rapidly falling behind the rest of the developed world in provision of ECEC to young children, and that the provision should be seen as a critical right for all young children.

How could Australia uphold a child's right to access ECEC?

A child's right to an enrolment in high-quality ECEC is guaranteed in legislation. As is the case in other countries (such as Germany), it is legislated that all children – no matter where they live or what their parents do - must have access to an ECEC place. The Federal, State/Territory and Local Governments all work together to ensure that this is enacted for every child.

The ECEC system is viewed with the same respect and value as primary and secondary education. Governments fund the system directly, and ensure that educators and teachers working in the system are well-paid, have access to high-quality professional development and are supported to ensure the learning and wellbeing of all children. Families view ECEC as just as important as sending their child to school.

It is free for children to access ECEC. Just like public schools, families do not pay any money for their child to attend ECEC. Federal and State/Territory funding provides for high-quality ECEC services in every community based on need, and a private/independent system operates on a strict not-for-profit basis.

This vision positions ECEC where the research tells us it needs to be – at the forefront of an approach to children's learning and wellbeing that sets children up to succeed, and for Australia to benefit in the generations ahead.

Are there particular cohorts of children who are being let down?

Australia's current ECEC system works to disadvantage many groups of children. Specifically:

- **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children** – We know that Australia failed to meet the previous Closing the Gap target for access to early childhood education.
- **Children experiencing trauma and vulnerability** – Navigating the benefit system, the CCMS system and separate Federal/State requirements makes accessing ECEC for these children complex and challenging (including for services).
- **Children of low-income or unemployed parents** – The current system ties a child's right to access ECEC to their parent's contribution to the workforce. For families struggling with employment, or employed casually, this drastically affects a child's ability to access ECEC.

We refer to SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children who have stated that⁵:

“We are concerned that the Australian Government – through fewer subsidised hours, less funding flexibility and no stable, long term funding under the Child Care Assistance Package – may deny many Indigenous children the benefits of integrated early childhood development services.”

The elimination of the Budget Based Funding (BBF) model ignores the clear contextual requirements of these services. SNAICC state that this will inevitably see the closure of many of these centres, with the result that:

“By excluding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from adequate access to services, the Government will diminish their potential to make a smooth transition to school, compounding the likelihood of intergenerational disempowerment and unemployment. Children will fall behind before they have even started school and suffer greater risks of removal into out-of-home care.”

How can early education outcomes be improved for all children?

Bringing ECEC fully within the national education system, and funding it in the same way, will allow for stronger implementation of the goals of the National Quality Framework. Australia will be able to respond to the latest research on what helps young children learn, as well as ensuring policy settings in the early years are supporting educational and policy goals in primary and secondary settings.

Policy should be focused on ensuring that the children who can most benefit from high-quality ECEC – the cohorts identified in the question above – have the *most* access to ECEC, not the least.



About Northside Community Service

We are a community-based, not for profit organisation established in 1976 through the efforts of concerned people wanting to provide and develop support and services for residents of North Canberra.

Today we employ over 150 staff, along with an active volunteer program and operate an annual budget of over \$11 million. In responding to the needs of our community we currently deliver a diverse range of services, including:

- early childhood education
- services for older people and people with a disability
- home support, transport and social programs for seniors
- support programs for young people and families
- women's housing and support for formerly homeless people
- venue hire for community activities

About Northside Children's Services

Northside manages four Early Childhood Centres in the ACT located in Civic, Dickson, Turner and Harrison. All Northside Centres operate under the National Quality Framework, and are committed to supporting the Early Learning of young children through high-quality, play-based educational programs and professional practices in a safe and enjoyable environment. Northside also operates the ConnXtions Early Childhood Program, an early childhood program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Our Centres work with children from six weeks old to school-age, and are open 51 weeks a year. Each Centre is committed to working closely with children and their families to support every child's early learning and wellbeing.

Northside feels strongly about advocating for the importance of all children's birth right to high-quality early education, and actively works within the local and national community to improve understanding and knowledge of issues affecting children and Early Childhood.

Early Childhood Education can change lives. We know that giving children a love of learning, and supporting wellbeing at an early age can drastically improve the opportunities and life-long outcomes for every child – and in turn, the whole community.

¹ <http://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2015-aedc-national-report>

² https://www.education.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1159357/Lifting-Our-Game-Final-Report.pdf

³ <https://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-in-action/report-card-the-wellbeing-of-young-australians>

⁴ <https://the-framework.org/2018/05/15/government-ends-funding-for-national-quality-agenda/>

⁵ <http://www.snaicc.org.au/early-years-policy-reform/>