



NSW BRANCH

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISION OF CHILD CARE

ECA (NSW BRANCH) SUBMISSION

Introduction

Early Childhood Australia NSW advocates for quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children from birth to eight years.

Our values are:

- The rights of children
- Leadership, excellence and respect
- Courage, honesty and openness
- Collaboration and diversity
- Justice
- Social inclusion of children

As a non-profit, non-partisan organisation, ECA NSW is in an ideal position to present a submission to this Senate Inquiry which will provide some guidance to government on how to proceed following the collapse of ABC Learning.

1. The financial, social and industry impact of the ABC Learning collapse on the provision of child care in Australia.

ECA NSW believes that the collapse of ABC Learning will have a huge financial, social and industrial impact on children, families and the early childhood profession. Given that one hundred services will close because they have been deemed by the receivers not to be viable, there will be a major impact upon children, families and staff employed in those centres. ECA NSW Branch are concerned about:-

- Disruption to the continuity and stability of children's relationships and predictability in their lives
- Financial and emotional stress of families not being able to find care for children
- Ability of parents to stay in the workforce

- Remuneration, employment and training for those staff who are now unemployed

ECA believes it is essential the Government ensures the process of dismantling the ABC Learning organisation is an orderly, well thought out process, where the best interests of families, staff and children are considered. We recognise however that no matter how well the process is executed, there will be some groups and some individuals adversely affected. We consider this was an inevitable outcome of government in Australia allowing the ABC Learning organisation to become too large and take too dominant a position within the early childhood education sector in Australia.

An associated and as yet hidden aspect of the collapse of ABC Learning is the number of other child care organisations which may have links to ABC Learning and which may also become part of the problem. A number of child care services which had seemed to be part of ABC Learning at one point have been differentiated from the main company in recent years and yet may retain significant links to ABC Learning and hence remain at risk of failure. The collapse of at least some of the Neighbourhood Group Early Learning Centres just prior to the end of 2008 and the difficulties of the Child's Family Group in late 2008 may well be associated with the collapse of the ABC Learning group. We should not forget the children, families and staff from these associated groups.

In the longer term we consider that the demise of the ABC Learning group is very much in the best interest of the provision of child care in Australia. Diversity will ensure that no one organisation can dominate service provision and have too large a say in decision making re staff training, family choice, programming and service parameters. Within any large dominant group within a sector there is a tendency for decision making to become centralised. That did occur within ABC Learning and resulted in their services having a sameness across Australia.

It is important that early childhood services are responsive to the local contexts in which they are situated. We consider that the provision of child care by a small, locally based organisations results in child care services that better meet the needs, aspirations and best interests of families within those communities.

Services with diverse policy approaches, diverse programming, diverse staff training and development and diverse management structures will result in child care services whose identity will reflect local, regional, cultural or environmental difference. The conglomeration of ABC Learning centres had resulted in services across Australia that were differentiated only by the names and locations of the services.

Within the ABC Learning group there were various aspects of service provision being centralised and developed in house and on an organisation wide basis. This included policy

development, staff training, ongoing staff development, and career paths. Some staff would join ABC Learning and undertake their initial qualifications, ongoing professional development, further qualifications and work experience for a career path only within the ABC Learning organisation. Staff learning is more likely to be enhanced when staff are exposed to a wide range of perspectives and contemporary theories and practices which go beyond their workplace experience.

ABC Learning represented some 25% of the sector overall in Australia and in some areas (e.g. south east Queensland) almost 50% of the sector. ECA NSW Branch considers the break up of the ABC Learning group will provide staff from those services an opportunity to experience a wider range of experiences in terms of education, training and professional development. This will be in the long term best interests of early childhood education in Australia.

2. Alternative options and models for the provision of child care

A for-profit model has intrinsic conflicting priorities. On the one hand there is a requirement to provide a service within the regulated framework with its requirements for qualified staff, appropriate child-to-staff ratios, and resource programs which extend children's curiosity, development and learning. On the other hand there is a need to make a profit to meet shareholder's expectation for dividends and capital growth

Fran Press recently wrote in her article " Learning from ABC" in Rattler 2008 pp24-25

"Australia is now dependent upon the private sector for the provision of childcare. While it is naïve to position all not-for-profit providers as good quality and all for-profit providers as poor quality, it is equally simplistic to believe that reliance upon the market is problem free, as ABC Learning's collapse dramatically illustrates.

Further, the consistent stance of some private sector representative organisations in NSW against key regulatory reforms such as improved staff to child ratios for infants and toddlers illustrates the policy fragmentation and ambiguity of purpose that so typifies the current system. It is timely to embed new policy directions, particularly in relation to provision. At the core of systemic reform of ECEC, should be provision, which is explicitly grounded in community services. This is the distinct contribution of public investment in a non-profit sector.

This does not mean abandoning or disenfranchising the private sector. It does require, however, a renewed commitment to sustaining a strong and viable public/not-for-profit sector as well as placing limits on corporate growth.

Many for profit providers may stand with not for profit providers in making a commitment to community. Nevertheless, a strong public sector must be sustained in order to act as a

countervailing influence against commercialization - and to benchmark the achievement of policy objectives at are centred around notions of citizenship and community.”

ECA NSW supports the provision of services within a greater type and range of licensing models across the nation. Currently within the States across Australia there have been few mechanisms within the regulations which allow for flexibility and the meeting of and responding to the changing needs of communities.

ECA NSW Branch submits that with the COAG Early Childhood Reform Agenda on the table there is a great opportunity to standardize licensing across Australia with a model which allows for and supports flexible licensing in children’s services to ensure early childhood services are continually meeting the changing needs of the community

As a not for-profit, non-partisan organisation, ECA NSW reminds this Senate Inquiry of the contents of the COAG Reform Agenda. It states:-

“There is clear evidence that early childhood development provides the foundations for life and learning, both inside and outside the home environment. This involves developing the cognitive, emotional and social skills needed to succeed, as well as achieving sound health and wellbeing. Investing in early childhood, including through quality early childhood education and care, benefits individuals, our community and the economy.

An important component of a broad framework for early childhood development is the provision of quality early childhood learning, development and care across a range of settings, including child care and preschool. High-quality early childhood education and care is important for providing support to parents who choose to participate in education or the workforce, and for ensuring the best possible outcomes for children, especially children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Despite these clear social and economic benefits, a recent OECD report argued that Australia’s investment in early education is only one fifth of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average, placing it at the bottom of the ladder of developed nations.

Australia needs to increase its focus on the early years to ensure the wellbeing of our children throughout their lives and to lift the productivity of our nation as a whole. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and the Commonwealth Government have responded to this need and committed to action. (Part A Discussion Paper)

3. The role of governments at all levels in:

I. Funding for community, not for profit and independent service providers

ECA NSW acknowledges that community, not for profit and independent service providers can provide quality care and are economically viable if enrolments are high and the management is good. However, given that Early Childhood is currently a high priority on the Australian Government Agenda now may be a good time to explore the possibility of determining infrastructure costs for early childhood education as part of public education. Early Childhood could become a strong branch of the Departments of Education in each state. This would facilitate the acknowledgement and acceptance of the vital necessity for high quality education and care in early childhood and the status and remuneration of those professionals who have specialized in this area.

Our National CEO, Pam Cahir, is strongly supporting the efforts of community groups to band together to become more effective and efficient in meeting the needs of young children and their families. In addition, we advocate that government provides financial support to those early childhood service providers who are striving to meet the needs of those diverse families experiencing difficulty or hardship particularly in smaller rural and remote locations.

ECA NSW asks that government provide more support for small and local integrated services. An integrated service model can provide a diversity of service provision at the local level. This model reflects the philosophy that 'it takes a community to raise a child and has the capacity to raise the profile of children in our society by providing a quality early childhood experience for all young children. This model, too, would facilitate the enhanced corporate memory, diverse staff career paths, and longer term involvement and skill development of community members in management in early childhood services.

ECA NSW believes that if government could provide seed funding and support for the formation of integrated not for profit services within regions across the country this would help build community capacity through those involved with the care and education of young children.

II. Licensing requirements to operate Child Care Centres

Carol Lymbery CEO of Community Child Care NSW issued the following Press Release in November 2008.

“One of the key factors that has contributed to the failure of ABC and also to the struggles of the non profit sector is that the previous federal government did away with any sort of planning framework that identified areas of need. The previous process (prior to 1997) was not perfect, and the delivery of services was not altogether equitable, but the solution would have been for some inducements for services to be set up (private or non profit) in areas where a service was less viable e.g. small rural areas. The end result was oversupply in some areas where land was cheap or small community based services could be threatened out of existence. The market still failed to supply in areas such as Marrickville.

I believe that without a planning process (and this needs to be very carefully thought through) any rescue package or expansion programme will not be effective. The end result of leaving the early childhood service provision to the market has been a downgrading of services to our children. Due to continuing vacancies in services there are very few services that have not had to cut:

- numbers of staff
- levels of qualifications of staff
- replacement of equipment
- reserves for maintenance or upgrades
- levels of support for children with additional needs
- programming time for teachers

These all impact on our ability to provide optimal services to children.

The solution must include an effective national planning process that identifies the level of supply of services required, and ways to meet this demand by utilising existing vacancies in services already established identifying experienced and effective management structures for ABC centres that are in areas of demand (with financial support for re-establishment) the closure of ABC centres in areas of oversupply mechanisms for the transfer of title of the ABC assets to a new management structure (which would include capital funds for community based / local government sector or self funded purchase by private operators) only offering CCB to areas of need.”

ECA NSW supports the introduction of a national planning process that ensures that child care centres are located in areas of need.

III. Nationally – consistent training and qualification requirements for child care workers

As part of the Productivity Agenda Working Group – Education, Skills, Training and Early Childhood Discussion Paper on ‘A National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care’, COAG and the Federal Government acknowledge that:-

“There is increasing acceptance that a well-trained workforce is essential for fostering the best outcomes for children. Key drivers of quality include staff qualifications and experience, child-to-staff ratios, group size and management capability. If requirements in these areas are strengthened there will be implications for the early childhood and care workforce and demand for qualified staff will increase.

In addition, an increasing number of children are accessing early childhood education and care services each year, leading to increasing demand for early childhood professionals. The COAG commitment to universal access to early learning is likely to further drive demand for trained teachers.

There are significant demand, supply and retention issues for early childhood education and care professionals. For example:

- Demand for early childhood teachers is strong in most jurisdictions and will only get stronger with the implementation of arrangements to support universal access to early childhood education programs
- The level of remuneration
- Child care workers have been in short supply across the nation for many years
- Job turnover is high – over one in five child care workers leave the occupation every year
- While there has been growth in enrolments in Certificate III child care courses, enrolments in Diploma child care courses have fallen since 2002²³
- The early childhood education and care workforce comprises both qualified and unqualified staff, with staff shortages more significant among qualified staff. “

ECA promotes high standards of practice and understanding in those who care for and educate young children. (ECA Strategic Directions 2009-2011). Further, ECA has a commitment to four year degree qualified early childhood teachers providing pedagogical leadership in childcare and preschool services.

The pathways to an early childhood teaching qualification must be of a robust standard. For example, the pathway of a high school student doing Certificate 3 in Children’s Services going on to a Diploma as a trainee, then to a University qualification in Early Childhood, must be as strong and robust as a mature student doing a University qualification. Qualifications and expectations must also be the same in rural and remote areas as they are in the metropolitan areas.

This inquiry provides an opportunity for new models of early childhood qualified people to be employed across departments in remote locations. For example, an early childhood teacher may be employed by a primary school to run Early Childhood Education programs, might also work at a local preschool and on other community projects (with DET conditions).

ECA has a strong commitment to a workforce strategy in early childhood services because such a strategy underwrites stability and quality of staff, and therefore relationships with children and pay parity with primary school teachers. (ECA Strategic Directions 2009 – 2011).

ECA NSW also advocates that all early childhood teachers be professionally accredited.

Finally ECA NSW Branch submits that it would be in the best interests of young children that there be consistent training and qualification requirements for child care workers across the nation.

IV. The collection, evaluation, and publishing of reliable, up to date data on casual and permanent child care vacancies

Some members of ECA NSW raised the notion that vacancies in child care centres imply that parents have choice. From some of our members’ experience it seems that few families rely on vacancy data to drive service choice. Families tend to talk with other families, look at centres, listen for information about each service’s reputation and then make active choices. The choice of who is to look after your young child is a very personal decision and few families make it lightly. Our observation is that choice of an early childhood setting is more often about reputation of staff and the relationships staff have with children, families and each other than about vacancies.

There will always be services which are full with a waiting list and other services that are perennially half full. It is our belief that current types of data about vacancies will not inform the decisions that families make about early childhood education and care.

ECA NSW would suggest that when data is gathered that it be more highly analysed, so it would have relevance to a wider audience. For example, there needs to be a higher analysis of data if there are to be comparisons across different types of service provision. The consideration of variables will inform the audience in a more useful way.

4. The feasibility for establishing a national authority to oversee the child care industry in Australia

National Authority



Funding	CCMS/Operational	Regulations	Quality Standards	National EYLF
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ECA NSW branch believes that if a National Authority was to be established it would need to focus on education and take a non partisan approach. It would also need to use the language of the Early Childhood field so that it would be distinct from an ‘industry’.

The development of the model should commence from expected outcomes and engage in a process which works backwards to costings and funding. For example, start with planning for early childhood education with strong communities and positive education outcomes, then the engagement of a qualified, supported workforce then to quality, regulations, etc, then to the funding (what might it really cost and how do we plan for the long term.)