

**SENATE COMMITTEE
EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS**

Inquiry - Child care in Australia

SUBMISSION

January 2009

Early Childhood Australia (WA Branch)
Contact: Cora-Ann Wilson (Secretary)
(08) 94485812 or 0406992887
Email: ecawa@earlychildhood.org.au

SUBMISSION FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA, WESTERN AUSTRALIAN BRANCH INC (ECAWA)

ECAWA is pleased to present the following comments against the Terms of Reference.

a) *The financial, social and industry impact of the ABC Learning collapse on the provision of childcare in Australia*

- The collapse of ABC Learning and other corporate child care providers highlights the fundamental flaw in the Australian system of child care provision – a flaw which permits profit taking to become the key objective and not the best interests of children’s early learning and care.
- Australian taxpayers are funding shareholders at the expense of adequate investment in early learning and care. Children become commodities in this equation. The focus should be on the children and not on the money.
- The provision of high quality early learning and care is an essential service for children and families and is far too important to be left to the whim of market forces.
- The distress and disruption to children and their families as a result of the ABC collapse is inexcusable in contemporary Australia. The stability and continuity of learning and care is critical and the negative impact of having to move children to a new centre with different carers and children cannot be underestimated.

b) *Alternative options and models for the provision of childcare*

- The provision of services for children below school age should mirror the provision of services for children of school age with the setting up of an Early Childhood Development system that links to the schooling system. This will ensure the taxpayer dollars go directly to supporting the children and not shareholders.
- There are a diverse range of choices for parents to consider when considering a school for their children including public or private (independent) and it should be the same for children from 0 – 8 years.
- Although there is no place for corporate child care providers, there is a role for private operators of early learning and care programs either by the not-for-profit community sector or small private operators. Parents should have a choice about which type of child care which is the most appropriate for their children and family circumstances.
- There is a history of community provision of early childhood services in Australia and this should be fostered and supported. Unfortunately this area of provision has been neglected by government in recent years but could be regenerated as a response to the current crisis.
- The deliberation around models of provision is underpinned by unanswered questions about levels of funding, status of staff in the child care arena and the qualifications and training of staff. There is no dispute about the need to have highly qualified staff but at no point has the key question of “who pays?” been addressed.
- A shift in thinking is required with the provision of services for the early learning and care to be continuous provision from birth upwards and be the responsibility of government. This does not mean government has to directly operate services but provide national leadership and funding. Similar to the school situation, parents would continue to have a right of choice and related payment of fees.

- Early childhood learning and care provided in child care services and schools are inseparable and there needs to be a more cohesive system from birth upwards and through school. This should be supported by parental leave provisions and an array of family support mechanisms.
- The Rudd government has recognised some of the key elements of such a system but the implementation is problematic due to the complexity of federal state relations and the cross portfolio responsibilities at a state and federal level.
- A review of the current funding arrangements is the first step in the way forward. This would include all government payments to parents and subsidises to operators, capital and recurrent. It should also include various bail out payments which have been made to ABC Learning receivers. This will allow for greater analysis of funding allocations and enable feasibility studies to be conducted into new models and possible reallocation of pooled funding.

c) *The role of governments at all levels in:*

a. Funding for community, not-for-profit, and independent service providers

- It is suggested a review of the provision of all early childhood services including the various structures and portfolio responsibilities of different government departments across all levels of government.
- The broad range of services being provided for children 0 – 8 years in a diverse range of settings would be included.
- A current example of the problems which arise as a result of the current structures is the government commitment to a provision of 15 hours per week early childhood education for all four year old children. This is a very positive initiative but currently in WA children from 3 years 6 months attend a broad range of programs in schools (public and private) and in child care. The current mainstream provision is for 11 hours per week for children attending a state school but there is no mechanism to allow child care services to provide an accredited pre-school program.
- State governments should ensure parents can access the setting which suits them best with the primary focus being on early childhood learning and development. Currently there is no available information from either level of government about what's going to happen with the 15 hours commitment in WA.

b. Consistent regulatory frameworks for child care across the country, and

c. Licensing requirements to operate childcare centres

- ECAWA agrees with a commitment to consistent regulatory frameworks across the country but would not want the lowest common denominator approach. The approach should be that national regulatory standards should be agreed and there would be a commitment for an incremental approach to the highest possible standards by all states and territories.
- There are multiple factors which make the Western Australian situation unique and, although ECAWA acknowledges that it is a challenge to manage jurisdictional differences in a federal system of government when seeking to standardise systems, the impact of these factors in WA must be taken into account in any proposed changes to the child care system.

- Western Australia is a vast state which comprises one third of the total area of Australia but with only 10% of the total population of Australia. There are only four population centres outside Perth with a population of over 20,000. This pattern of population concentration creates considerable challenges in servicing communities and in the provision of vital infrastructure such as health and education. Sustainability and viability of traditional models of early childhood education and child care is very difficult due to very low population centres. Any new models must be cognisant of this situation.
- There are vast distances between population sites and restricted access due to the extreme climatic conditions at certain times of the year further compound the difficulties in providing services. Many small communities in the North West can be inaccessible for months due to the tropical rains. Even in the best weather conditions it can take days to drive between communities.
- Hard to service communities, as described above, have a right to equal opportunity and not suffer from having lesser standards of early learning and care. The solution is to provide adequate funding and resourcing to ensure the agreed national standards are able to be met. Per capita funding models are inadequate due to the low population bases in such communities.

d. Nationally consistent training and qualification requirements for childcare workers

- The extent and importance of children's learning from birth is internationally recognised. ECAWA agrees that a four year trained early childhood specialist will achieve the best outcomes for very young children.
- In order to ensure the best qualified staff are working with children, ECAWA suggested significant teacher education courses are audited to determine the appropriateness of these courses in light of the new thinking.
- Terminology is very important and more neutral language may ease the transition to a new more cohesive system for early childhood. In this way, a new profession can be created with "early childhood professionals" qualified and trained to work across health, community services and early childhood education.
- The term "child care worker" would disappear. Such four year qualified professionals would require remuneration commensurate with their responsibilities and status as discussed above.

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

- ECAWA agrees this would be a useful strategy and suggests that such a system is based on a local district level in the same way as schools provide information to parents.
- The important issue is to ensure parents know where to get the information. The problematic system currently in place does not help parents as information is very inaccurate.

f. The feasibility for establishing a national authority to oversee the childcare industry in Australia

- This is a feasible option but a national authority should be a conduit for funding to the states and provide coordination across government. It would not be a direct provider of services.