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Response to Senate Enquiry.....

The commodifying of children and the concept of early childhood care and education as being some type of “industry” was and remains a factor in the anticipated demise of ABC Learning.

The previous government sought a “free market” approach to child care provision, thus shifting the responsibility of providing early childhood services to investors rather than themselves. Whilst it may have been a quick fix response to the increasing demand for early childhood services, the free market framework was neither underpinned by an appropriate understanding of, nor a commitment to, practices and environments that made a difference in the lives of children, their families and their communities. At that time the amount of money invested in early childhood care and education in Australia was the second lowest of all OECD countries. A very poor indictment on the then government’s regard for children’s futures..

The ABC Learning’ free for all’ has had the same devastating effect and is reminiscent of the 1997 federal government decision to remove all funding from community child care centres and introduce as many levels of user- pays as possible ... even after a Senate enquiry recommended that community services stay funded.

Children then, as now, were shunted around, often losing secure attachments, so they could fit into other services. Staff lost their jobs, their careers and their belief in themselves as valuable participants in children’s lives.

Child care is not a social phenomenon so Early Childhood Education should be the domain of the Education Department in each state so that there is wide spread understanding and appreciation that this is where quality education begins. In keeping with this concept, community child care centres could be built on school grounds, thus creating savings through economies of scale.

Home based care has the potential to rise up and meet the increasing demand for child care in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote areas across Australia. Home base care co-ordination teams must remain funded to ensure there is continuous improvement across all home based care environments. The funding for co-ordinator travel has remained the same abysmal amount for over 11 years!

Child care centres and home based care services have the capacity to meet the needs of families who require varying levels of support to care for their families. The social context in which Australian families currently function is in a state of great stress and change. Quality, flexible, well staff and well funded community child care services could offer

- *support parents in the care of their children*
- *offer nourishment for mind and body*
- *offer support for migrant families*
- *model appropriate child-raising practices*
- *provide opportunities for women to participate in the workforce*
- *provide a safe context to share ideas and practices about parenthood*
- *provide a doorway to the community.*

The indigenous children of Australia have a right to access early childhood services where

- *their culture is the context*
- *where their family is welcomed and valued*
- *where their teachers are bi-lingual*
- *their food is nutritious*
- *their history is embedded in the curriculum*
- *where their education is paramount*
- *where their elders and their parents drive planning, implementation and review*
- *where teachers are able to access face to face professional development*
- *where “artists in residence” are funded*

Home based care could again be called upon to provide secure emergency care for children in crisis... and that this should be offered as required and not after the paperwork has been dutifully completed, signed by the often incapacitated parent and sent off for determination by a public servant whose seat and vision is far, far away from the front line.

We call on the Senate to make recommendations to

- *Move early childhood education into the domain of other education services*
- *Immediately reinstate the operational funding of community child care centres across Australia and build new community child care services on school grounds*
- *Fund community based early childhood services that are planned by indigenous communities for indigenous children*
- *Introduce flexibility into home based care parameters*
- *Increase funding to rural and remote home based care co-ordination units to cover the real costs of operating across long distances*
- *Fund home based care services to respond to children in crisis*
- *Maintain quality assurance measures that are responsive, flexible and honest*

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