

To the Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

Re: National Childcare Inquiry

As a parent and local Councilor with Brimbank City Council, I am writing to contribute my views for the direction of childcare in Australia.

I believe that the collapse of ABC Learning opens an opportunity for restructuring the provision of care and integrated early childhood education and services in Australia. It demonstrates that private, for profit childcare cannot and should not have a place in the delivery of quality childcare in Australia.

Local communities have experienced the collapse of ABC Learning in different ways depending on the availability of alternative care in the community.

Early Childhood education, care and related services are as essential for children and families. They must be affordable, accessible and of a high quality to all. Their provision has a positive impact on child development, family cohesion, local community building and female participation in the workforce.

The early childhood sector in Australia requires greater public investment as a common good. This investment should be carefully and holistically planned, guided by the extensive international and local research and experience into the delivery of high quality, accessible and affordable early childhood care, education and related services.

a) Alternative options and models for the provision of child care

The current model for the provision of child care in Australia splits funding and regulations across levels of government and funds corporate, private and community providers equally. Despite the best efforts of workers, parents and communities at local levels, this fragmented model is not appropriate, nor adequate, for the provision of an essential service.

An improved model would:

Providers

- discontinue provision of early childhood care and education by corporations;
- extending current legislative requirements regarding private schools to the ECEC sector – i.e. private provision is not permitted for individual private gain;
- prioritise greater support for community based not-for-profit providers; and
- support a range of locally appropriate delivery models including employers, educational facilities, local governments, community organisations, family day care, occasional care and family members, on the basis that this allows for strong connections between providers and local community needs.

Locations

- locate ECEC services on the basis of local need and community structures;
- maximize use of existing community, local and state government infrastructure as appropriate, including better use of existing kindergarten facilities; and

- create hubs and clusters as appropriate¹, particularly in new suburbs.

Equity and social inclusion

- comprehensively integrate all ECEC services, professionals, regulations and funding arrangements to ensure universal access for children and families, equity for workers and high quality environments and facilities for all;
- better support voluntary committees;
- target appropriate funding and support for indigenous communities, CALD communities, children with disabilities and communities and families experiencing social and economic disadvantage; and
- Funding provided directly to centres, based on the incomes of families attending the service.

b) The role of governments at all levels in:

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

Funding for ECEC services should be a responsibility of the federal government. The preferred funding model would involve direct operational and capital funding that is linked to quality outcomes for children. Mechanisms should exist to ensure funding delivers quality outcomes for children rather than profits for providers.

It is considered that the current 50% rebate is a regressive method of funding in that it offers greater benefit to high income families.

ii. Consistent regulatory frameworks for child care across the country, and iii. Licensing requirements to operate child care centres

A national coordination, licensing and regulatory framework must exist to provide planning and consistency across Australia. The framework should outline standards that reflect recognised international best practice for:

- Staff to child ratios
- Qualifications of staff
- Maximum group sizes
- Planning time for staff
- Professional development opportunities for staff

The framework should be accompanied by appropriately rigorous accreditation and assessment and funding to facilitate compliance without negative impacts on affordability.

iv. Nationally-consistent training and qualification requirements for child care workers

Training and qualification requirements should be improved by combining resources from both Universities and TAFEs to ensure that courses provide appropriate theoretical and practical training that is consistent across Australia.

In addition, a unified industrial tool should exist that applies consistent wages and conditions for ECEC professionals including assistants, unqualified and qualified staff.

¹ Hubs provide a 'one stop shop' for parents but must be easily accessible by public or other community transport services.

A professional institute with accreditation mechanisms and professional development opportunities should exist for all ECEC professionals in Australia.

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

It is important to collect national data on supply of and demand for ECEC including hidden or suppressed demand. This can be achieved by making better use of current data, beyond waiting lists, collected by agencies, including Maternal and Child Health, local, state and federal government agencies, NGO's, census, demographic projections etc. The collection of data should inform planning for ECEC services.

c) The feasibility for establishing a national authority to oversee the child care industry in Australia;

A national body overseeing the accreditation, licensing, planning and funding of ECEC services should be established.

d) Other related matters

A review of the provision of ECEC in Australia is not complete without consideration of support for parents as carers. Parents need to have a living wage that enables a family to survive when one parent is required to stop work and care for children. Paid parental leave, unpaid parental leave and flexible work arrangements for both parents and or other carers, such as grandparents.

Signed: