



**CHILDREN'S
SERVICES INC.**

*educating and caring
for our children*

SDN Children's Services Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Child Care

January 2009

1. Introduction:

1.1 Inquiry and government policy direction supported

SDN Children's Services (SDN) congratulates the Senate for establishing this Inquiry. The Inquiry is timely because we urgently need to address the quality of Australian children's early childhood experiences.

We congratulate the Rudd government for recognizing that the education revolution has to begin before school, and that the most effective approach to teaching and learning in the early years of a child's life is based on play and self directed explorations within a curriculum that has clear outcomes and intentions. SDN Children's Services applauds the establishment of an Office of Early Childhood and Child Care; and the stated desire to see a greater integration of early childhood education with care.

SDN also congratulates the Rudd government for confronting the reality that the gap between the life experiences of Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians is too wide and must be reduced. Quite rightly the task of 'closing the gap' is best approached from both a broad social policy perspective of 'social inclusion' on the one hand and also by tackling the challenges posed in individual policy areas such as health, housing, employment and education.

SDN supports the commitment to provide universal access for all four year olds to 15 hours of early childhood education and for making this essential for all Indigenous children.

However SDN has been disappointed that the current opportunity that we as a community are presented with by the collapse of ABC Learning is not being capitalised on to achieve these policy goals.

1.2 SDN's Recommendations

We recommend the establishment of a national regulatory body to oversee standards and distribution of children's services across Australia. One of the reasons ABC Learning failed was because there is no central coordination overseeing where services are needed. The previous federal government took no responsibility for monitoring where new child care centres would be built and as a result we have seen excessive supply in areas where some providers believed a profit could be made.

It is essential that the current federal government steps in and helps to stabilize the sector, ensuring we don't see another ABC debacle in 5 years time.

Presently all three tiers of government are overseeing child care services and preschool education to varying degrees, resulting in duplication of processes and costs. Even more importantly there is a lack of a consistent national guarantee to Australia's children and families of what will be provided and what outcomes they can expect. With the federal government providing funding, States keeping track of licensing and regulations and local governments approving development applications for new services, there are enormous savings to be made by introducing a national regulator.

The federal government must take a leading role in deciding where child care services should be set up and most importantly what standards they should meet.

The current Senate Inquiry into the provision of childcare gives the Government an opportunity to improve the quality of services. SDN believes all Australian children deserve access to high

quality child care services with a university qualified early childhood teacher to guide their learning in every centre. We can use the collapse of ABC Learning as the 'excuse' to bring child care services in every state up to a national standard, recognising the critical importance of early learning opportunities in a child's life.

Children's minds do not suddenly begin to develop when they get to school, they are learning from the day they are born and deserve to have quality education in their early years.

SDN urges the federal government to take over the regulation of child care, to introduce mandatory early childhood teachers into all child care services and ensure young children receive the care and education they deserve.

This submission outlines the systemic and national approach that SDN believes will substantially improve the wellbeing of all Australian children, improve developmental and educational outcomes and support families who need extra support.

The recommendations in this submission are based on SDN's:

- 103 years of providing nursery care for babies; and then for the past
- 75 years integrating education into that care in 21 Early Childhood Education Centres;
- Feedback from the 3,000 families in SDN's centres and
- 250 families in SDN's family support programs;
- Innovative award winning programs for disadvantaged and Aboriginal children and families (*The Parent Resource Program*);
- The findings from the evaluation of our programs;
- SDN's Child and Family Learning Framework;
- Feedback from the 1,200 other early childhood education and care services supported by SDN's federal and state funded resource and advisory services.

1.3 Summary of what we are recommending:

- An integrated early childhood education and care system for all children, birth to school age, across all state/territory jurisdictions; with common:
 - National Standards/Regulations and
 - Curriculum.
- A national consultation process, guided by a national Early Childhood and Child Care Advisory Group to map out:
 - Details and issues involved in the development and implementation of an integrated Early Childhood Education and Care system to get Australia closer to world's best practice in this critical area of national performance;
 - Scope what exists in each state/territory already and
 - Outline an Action Plan of steps to be taken to move each state/territory towards the national system.
- Introduce legislation to ban the provision of early childhood education and care services by listed companies (as Canada has done).
- Purchase the 1,000 ABC Learning Centres and use this physical infrastructure as the base for a national system of integrated early childhood education and care.
- Reinstate the Planning process to ensure CCB is only made available to those centres who can demonstrate need and demand.

2. Why a national system is needed:

Current situation:

- 752, 800 children are in child care, while 257,100 are in preschool.
- 12% of staff in child care hold a teaching qualification; while 50% of staff in preschools hold a teaching qualification.
- 704,825 families in Australia are working, while 1 in 7 families are not working.
- 0-3 years are the most critical for brain development.
- 42.9% of families on low incomes (below \$40,000) have **no access** to early education or care services for their children, compared to 18% of families on higher incomes (above \$70,000).
- UNICEF's assessment of the material wellbeing and health and safety of children across all OECD countries indicates that as a whole Australia's children are below the OECD average on **both** counts.
- Centres have proliferated like mushrooms in some areas, other areas are undersupplied.

Problems with this situation	Results
Disparate, individual state/territory driven system	Inconsistency for children and families, no national guarantee
The greatest number of children are in the services with the lowest concentration of teachers	Poor educational start for the majority of Australia's children
Disadvantaged children can't afford and are not receiving the benefits of early childhood education and care.	Social exclusion and ongoing entrenchment of disadvantage into adulthood. Reduced national productivity.

3. What SDN is proposing: Three levels of improvement to the current system, which build on each other, adding additional levels of specialisation, with corresponding additional levels of outcomes.

3.1. The basic model: Classic Example: SDN Early Childhood Education Centres

Systemic solution: NSW template for a national system of **preschool in child care**, through the employment of teachers in all child care centres of a certain size, creating an organised network of **Early Childhood Education Centres**, supported by nominated NGOs.

Benefits	Outcomes
Hours suit working families	Convenience for families, supporting their work and family life balance
Care and education combined on one site	Reduced duplication, greater efficiencies in the system
0-3 year olds catered for	Better education outcomes for children due to earlier start, this is particularly important for children who are marginalised
More children reached	Wider educational impact
National platform	More consistency and a national guarantee for Australia's children and families

To build this model will take:

- New national regulations amalgamated with the national accreditation system which mandates and enforces consistent employment of early childhood teachers in child care centres across Australia (as is the case in NSW).
- Nationally consistent Industrial Instrument that remunerates early childhood teachers at a rate consistent with their peers employed in preschools and early years of school.
- National curriculum framework, with agreed outcome measures, taking a child-driven play based approach to learning.
- Enhanced training and related labour force strategies.
- Organisational support.

3.2 The enhanced model: building on the strengths of the basic model and adding extra performance features.

Classic example: **SDN Riverwood Child and Family Learning Centre**

Systemic solution: *SDN's Parent Resource Program* template for a national system of initially 260 lighthouse centres: **Child and Family Learning Centres**

Extra features	Outcomes
A scholarship pathway for marginalised families	Social inclusion and support for economic participation for marginalised families
Parenting education	Enhanced family functioning
Staff support/training	Professional development/career paths
Community hub of information and activity	Community engagement, child friendly communities, stronger communities and local networks of support

To build this model will take:

- Scholarship funding of \$6,000 per child for 3 days of attendance for 50 weeks a year (assuming families are eligible for maximum CCB).
- Parenting resources and education costs per centre of \$8,000.
- Staff release time/extra funding per centre of \$15,000.
- Staff support from the existing federal system of Inclusion Support Agencies (ISAs).

Current target groups expanded to include disadvantaged families and/or target groups conceptualized as 'marginalised children.' Selected ISAs to receive an extra \$200,000 to provide this support.

3.3 A niche model: a more nuanced model, responsive to local conditions

Classic Example: **SDN Redfern Child and Family Learning Centre**

Systemic solution: *SDN's Aboriginal Scholarships* template for an identified number of Aboriginal-friendly services nationally

Extra features: In addition to what is provided in the Enhanced model, the Aboriginal scholarships model would involve:	Outcomes
Intentional engagement with local Aboriginal families and community leaders and Elders	Social Inclusion and participation
Greater involvement of Aboriginal families in the curriculum	Cultural relevance
More support with transition to school	Improved educational outcomes

To build this model would take:

- Careful selection of Aboriginal friendly centres
- An additional \$50,000 per centre to ensure:
 - Specific training in cross-cultural competencies for non-Indigenous staff,
 - Encouragement of employment of Aboriginal staff,
 - Contribution towards local facilitation to build links with Aboriginal communities and families,
 - Employment of Aboriginal Family Worker.

4. Steps to the national system

The following is a bare outline of what we believe is achievable in terms of the integration of care and education into a national system of quality provision for all children in their early childhood years.

4.1 Start with federal levers and controls

From experience of the variations that exist in the different state and territory provisions of 'preschool', we suggest that the federal government starts with shifting the child care sector.

The current state/territory provision of preschools is reasonable, and while these services could be encouraged to extend their opening hours, make structural alterations to their buildings and employ more staff or current staff for longer hours, the control of the Commonwealth in these jurisdictions is limited.

The national picture is where the Commonwealth has more levers and is more of a 'green field' site.

4.2 Introduce National Regulations to ensure teachers are employed

The first step to a national system of integrated early childhood education and child care would be to legislate for all child care centres (of a certain size) to employ teachers. The NSW Regulations are an example of what the regulatory framework would look like.

This addresses the quality of the services and ensures that preschool education is provided in most of the 3,000 long day centres in the country. NSW already has this in place and has approximately a third of the centres.

4.3. Address industrial concerns

Teachers employed in these new integrated settings would need to be remunerated at a level consistent with their colleagues in other parts of the education sector. Currently in NSW teachers in early childhood settings are covered by the award administered by the Independent Education Union, the union that covers teachers in Independent and Catholic schools. Teachers in early childhood settings in NSW are paid a starting wage of approximately \$40,000, which rises over 11 steps to a high of over \$60,000. Centre managers/directors are entitled to an additional allowance of \$10,000.

Equivalent arrangements would need to be put in place to ensure teachers are attracted to this service type.

4.4 Plan for increased labour force

Approximately 2,000 new teachers would need to be trained annually across the country to fill the new demand. Funding to the universities who currently provide this training would need to be increased. Attracting students would need to be considered as well, however this is not as big a problem as might be imagined as currently we know that the universities in NSW already can not offer training places to the number of applicants.

4.5 Fund increased cost

The cost of paying these new teachers would result in fee increases in states/territories other than NSW. This cost is already built into NSW fee structure and a comparison of fees charged in different states would be part of the national mapping and scoping exercise. The CCTR increase to 50% would help offset some of the fee increases.

A scholarship for lower income families to attend these centres would be an economic pathway for those on very low incomes for whom CCB still does not make child care affordable.

4.6 Establish a national curriculum for educational settings

An Early Years Learning Framework that supports the delivery of an integrated early childhood education and care program in early childhood educational settings is another piece of work that would need to be undertaken. There are already very well researched documents in many of the states and we recommend a framework that takes an ecological view of children's learning. The current document being developed is trying to be all things to all people and fails as an inspirational EDUCATIONAL document.

4.7 Increase participation by disadvantaged groups

Low income families can not afford the current child care system and mostly don't feel welcome in the current preschool system. Additionally we know from research into early intervention and prevention and brain development that the key ages for impacting on the wiring of the brain (and how a child will come to see the world and themselves) is between birth and three years of age. Waiting until the age of four is too late for disadvantaged children who have already had 1,500 days of exposure in their most vulnerable and impressionable years to anything from poor nutrition, chaotic environments and family violence to uncertain housing, neglect of basic emotional and physical needs and sometimes outright abuse. The impact of this exposure is life long and often plays out in repeated cycles of unemployment, drug dependence, mental illness and possibly crime and incarceration.

The moral imperative (and return on investment) of creating an integrated early childhood education and care system would exist even if only for the 1 in 7 children who live in a family where no-one works. However from the work of McCain and Mustard; Shonkoff and Phillips, the OECD and others, we know that ALL children and families will benefit.

Such a system is what SDN believes the government needs to work towards.

However some families are going to need an additional economic and social pathway into that system. SDN is proposing that a program of scholarships, parenting education and family support be augmented into initially 250 selected or created centres. These centres would become lighthouses of innovation, involved in documenting the outcomes for the children and families who participate in a *Parent Resource Program* type approach.

SDN has developed, evaluated and taken to scale an innovative child and family learning approach that draws on the McCain and Mustard (1999) Canadian proposal of Child Development and Parenting Centres.

This model (initially known as the *SDN Parent Resource Program*) was funded initially by the Federal Government after a visit to an SDN centre by the then federal minister, Jocelyn Newman, in 1999. It started in one just one centre in Waterloo, Sydney. It was later expanded to six centres under the Federal Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy and in late 2003 after media attention on the effectiveness of this approach, and external evaluation by Macquarie University won the Early Childhood section of the National Child Protection awards granted by the Australian Council for Children and Parenting (ACCAP).

SDN continued to evaluate the effectiveness of this model through the contracted services of Dr Joy Goodfellow who chose to involve the staff delivering the program in reflective practices so

that the innovations being developed have become sustainable as part of on-going everyday practice.

The NSW Department of Community Services *Brighter Futures* program (of which SDN is one of 14 Lead Agencies) has incorporated some of the elements of SDN's *Parent Resource Program* (such as child care placement) into its recent state based early intervention program. SDN now runs a variation of this model in 120 centres (SDN and local partner centres), supported by four Child Care Resource Officers. The model is also run in the *SDN Riverwood Child and Family Learning Centre*, with support from the FaCHSIA funded Child Care Links project.

Over nearly ten years, SDN Children's Services has trialed, evaluated and demonstrated that this innovative approach, which has achieved positive advances in early childhood development, better transition to school, increased social inclusion and economic participation for struggling and challenged families, many of whom are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, can be taken to scale.

5. Conclusion

SDN's recommendations have the ability to reduce the education gap between Indigenous and non Indigenous children as well as assist all children and families.

While we know that all children benefit from early childhood education, it is those from disadvantaged backgrounds who most benefit and who are currently proportionally more represented in the non-participation statistics.

SDN's recommendations will allow the challenge of universal access for all four year olds to an early childhood education program to be achieved quickly and sustainably. It will also make a substantial contribution to the enrolment of Aboriginal children in early childhood education programs in urban and regional areas where services already exist (and communities are not overwhelmed by more pressing concerns and issues.) By getting some quick wins with more urbanized Aboriginal communities (where this model can assist with the barriers of cost and cultural divides), encouragement to tackle the more substantial challenges of rural and remote Aboriginal communities can be given.

We believe that the priority of the COAG Early Childhood Task Force and the Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care in DEEWR should be on ensuring those families who will need additional assistance to access early childhood education receive this help as soon as possible.

Note: detail on the research and evidence base for this model is provided in the companion paper by SDN: *Achieving Greater Social Inclusion*, March 2008. Also supplied.