



ECA NSW Branch Addition to Submission of January 2009 to Senate Inquiry into Childcare

As stated in our submission Early Childhood Australia NSW advocates for young children . Our organisation advocates for quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children from birth to eight years.

Given that there has been some movement in the early childhood sector since the collapse of ABC Learning in November 2008 ECA NSW would like to add to points 1 and 2 of our original submission to this Senate Inquiry into Child Care.

We remind the inquiry that ECA NSW focus is on advocating what is in the best interests of young children and as such our values are:

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

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

As anticipated, ECA NSW believes that the collapse of ABC Learning has had a huge financial, social and industrial impact on children, families and the early childhood profession. The period of uncertainty for children, families and staff arose as the government appointed an administrator to determine which services were viable and which were not, which services were saleable and which not.

ECA has noted from the Australian Government My Child website that by April 2009 210 of the 241 ABC 2 group of Centres have had buyers identified and the sale process was progressing and it was expected that these services would continue with new operators. It now seems only 16 centres will close down and we are told that sufficient alternative long day care places have been found in nearby centres to ensure all of the affected families have had the option of care in their local area.

However, it appears there is still no evidence of government learning from the ABC Learning experience. Upon reviewing the list of new operators of ABC 2 group of services, the corporate model still has a strong presence. Have these companies been investigated in terms of experience in the sector or connections with ABC Learning?

The Corporate model does not sit well with the values of ECA as the quality and standards of education and care is more likely to be compromised. ECA NSW asks, how does the

corporate model meet its obligation to share holders in terms of profits and dividends and provide high quality education and care for young children?

ECA NSW advocates that young children have a right to high quality education and care. High quality education and care is linked to staff ratios and qualifications of staff. (Munton, T, Mooney, Moss et.al) This can make the provision of early childhood education and care more expensive. A not for profit service will typically allocate in excess of 80% of the budget to staffing. The corporate model is more likely to allocate only 65% of the budget to staffing. This gap can best be explained through qualified staffing for better ratios for high quality service provision versus staffing to minimum standards

ECA NSW supports Frances Press (Rattler 88) when she says that” The provision of childcare through corporate chains, exemplified by ABC Learning, became a normal feature of the Australian early childhood landscape. So significant was ABC Learning’s footprint that corporatisation overshadowed alternative views of how early childhood services could be provided – and for what purposes.” ECA NSW agrees that the meaning of the term quality care became muddled.

In addition ECA NSW advocates that the early childhood service provision needs to be reviewed in terms of location. In other words the licensing and registration of an early childhood service provider should also be dependant on the demographics and the number of services needed in a particular location. This would be similar to those regulations that pharmacies and newsagents are required to adhere to. Even council permission is required to start a new school, why has this not been so for Early Learning Centres?

We as a society need also to learn from the ABC Learning experience that the predatory nature of this corporation forced long term respected smaller private and community based services to close their doors as the government ‘promoted the myth that for profit provision, as a generator of competition, would in turn result in better quality childcare and provide parents with greater choice’.(Press,2008) In fact what happened was that families were so often left with no choice – an ABC Learning Centre or nothing.

ECA NSW remains concerned about the associated and as yet hidden aspect of the collapse of ABC Learning. What other child care organisations still have links to ABC Learning and as the forensic accounting and investigations continue other services may also become part of the problem.

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

It is well known that Australia’s rapid privatisation, and then corporatisation of childcare was achieved by diverting the funding to parents and abolishing capital and operational funding for not for profit childcare infrastructure. This has created an imbalance of service provision. ECA NSW believes that if families are to have true choice of early childhood care and education providers this balance need to be restored and as such ask that the Government give consideration to providing funding for infrastructure and operational funding.

One suggestion is that if the government paid or contributed to the salaries of four year qualified teachers and child care workers then the early childhood sector would be better equipped to provide the promised 15 hours a week preschool programs for four year olds and improve the ratios for the care and education of babies to 1:4 and further to 1:3. This would also enhance access and equity for more families as fees could be reduced.

The research consistently tells us that the early years are important for development and learning and this learning is enhanced through meaningful connections and relationships. As stated in the COAAG Reform Agenda:-

“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.”

ECA NSW supports the July 2009 COAG Early Childhood Reform document in the area to the introduction of one licensing and quality standards body for all early childhood services across the nation.

However, it is important that representatives from the States and Territories need to have input into this national body so that the individual and changing needs of communities can be incorporated. It would also be an opportunity to improve the standard of education and care for children and improve the qualification and status of those who work in this profession. A large corporate model would not address this.

In short 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

ECA NSW supports the introduction of the newly released Early Years Learning Framework –Belonging, Being, and Becoming. This document provides an opportunity to not only raise the status of the profession but importantly the standard of the delivery of early childhood and care which provides uniformity across Australia and what constitutes best practice in this area. This uniformity will allow families to experience continuity in the provision of early childhood services and a common language for the provision of high quality education and care.

However, ECA NSW identifies the need for the Australian Government to provide professional development for all early learning environments for the effective implementation of this document. This responsibility needs to come directly from the government and not from the auspice of large conglomerates of children's services so that there is a unified understanding of how this document can support best practice in the early childhood field.

ECA NSW thanks the Senate Inquiry for this opportunity to add to our original submission.

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