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A National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care: A discussion paper – KPV Final Response

KPV and our members are keen to work in partnership to achieve The Council of Australian Government (COAG) reform program for the modernisation of our sector. A fragmented service system, uneven quality, varying cost to families and inequitable access to early education and care are all markers of an urgent need for fundamental change. Implementation issues for each aspect of the reform program, however, will require a major change management process in Victoria. This will need significant support and goodwill from key stakeholders to ensure its success, and strategies to ensure it is maintained. With the right supports and resources Victorian kindergartens will rise to the challenge. KPV looks forward to further opportunities to discuss with you the issues we have raised in this submission and to work in partnership with the Commonwealth and Victorian governments and other stakeholders to maximise the potentially great outcomes for Australian families and children.

About KPV

Kindergarten Parents Victoria (KPV) promotes the voice of parents in quality early childhood education for Victorian children, serving more than 200,000 children and their families. Our membership is made up of over 1000 early education and care providers offering kindergarten programs and other early childhood services in a range of settings including independent, cluster managed and local government kindergartens and childcare centres.

KPV undertakes a range of activities designed to promote quality in Victorian kindergartens including regular training and an advice service which offers a wide range of supports on governance, management and program issues. This is partially funded by the Victorian State Government and many of our training sessions are undertaken in collaboration with local government.

Our vision for the strategic development of early childhood education includes six core elements:

- Education for life
- Universal participation
- Excellence and innovation
- A cohesive service system
- Involved community
- Responsive and flexible programs

KPV believes that the way forward lies in placing children's learning and development and the wellbeing of families and children at the heart of our policies and practices.

A national quality framework for early childhood education and care

Quality standards

KPV's Vision 2011 sees excellence and innovation in early childhood education program delivery being supported by a quality accreditation system. KPV welcomes a strong national quality system and quality standards that are based on the research evidence around service provision leading to good outcomes for children and families. It is critical that the evidence is both valid and relevant to the Australian context. KPV supports the proposed five main domains for new national quality standards.

Quality services focus on promoting the relationship between the teacher and individual children; developing relationships between the children themselves; between the teacher and the parents; and between the service and the broader community. The standards should address all of these areas.

A critical aspect of relationships between children, teachers, services, families and communities lies in their capacity to promote a shared understanding of how children learn in the early years and how each partner in these relationships can play their part in optimising that learning. Models of service can play a positive role in promoting strong relationships amongst and between the various partners. For example, program models and environments that support a consistent cohort of children enable them to develop relationships that promote their development and encourage shared/reciprocal learning.

The coverage of standards

The movement towards integrated early childhood education and care (ECEC) services requires a quality system with common quality standards applying to the range of settings. The overlay of the current accreditation system provides some coherence to most forms of childcare. There is no such national coherence in the programs for children in the year prior to school or with regard to three year old kindergarten programs. The cost to families, hours of operation and expected outcomes for children vary within and across jurisdictions. A national quality system will address the issue of community expectations and set the scene for children to learn and develop through exploration and creativity.

Quality in Victorian kindergartens is primarily driven by the requirement for qualified early childhood teachers in funded programs. While funded kindergartens in Victoria are required to regularly evaluate the quality of programs provided to children, the quality assurance system requires renewal. The Kindergarten Quality Assessment Workbook and Checklist were developed by the Department of Human Services more than 10 years ago and are the only resources directly provided by the State Government as the funder and regulator to support quality improvement in Victorian kindergartens.

A rating system

KPV supports the objectives listed in section 6.1.2 of the draft framework. However, the content of the quality standards and regulatory framework are critical to the success of those objectives.

Ensuring the quality of the experience for each child and family must be the driving factor in a rating system. The emphasis on continuous improvement is welcome. The framework should allow for services, having met the standards at the time of validation, to demonstrate ongoing compliance and to continually evaluate and improve, such as submitting a regular 'improvement plan' (e.g. every two or three years). A rating system must include incentives for low achievers to improve and for high achievers to strive to do better.

The current quality accreditation system tends to focus on compliance and whether policies exist. The focus should be on the factors that better indicate that quality ECEC is being provided, such as the quality of the interactions and the implementation of policy.

The principles in Box 6.1 are sound and relevant. However, KPV suggests that the principle 'encourage partnerships' be strengthened. This principle should ensure that the interwoven nature of the quality elements relating to ECEC and the relationships with family and community are clear and prominent. If this relationship is central to any assessment or rating system parental choice can be well informed.

Improving the regulatory approach

KPV welcomes the new COAG early childhood agenda as a once in a generation opportunity to achieve better integration of the fragmented regulatory, quality and funding arrangements for early childhood education and care in Australia. Children and families deserve a better system than current arrangements deliver.

Streamlining the current arrangements to remove duplication, inconsistencies and gaps should lead to improved overall quality and efficiency, less burdensome compliance and be easier for parents to navigate and find the best programs to meet the individual needs of their children. This result will only be fully realised by addressing all of the three key areas - licensing, accreditation and funding.

Merely reducing the fragmentation issues of licensing and accreditation will leave service providers and parents still having to deal with the inconsistencies and inequities presented by different funding arrangements. We need nationally consistent funding and eligibility requirements across all ECEC settings. The savings made by reducing duplication could be allocated to improving quality, affordability and access. They would also reduce the out of pocket expenses many families currently pay.

In particular, KPV is concerned that the integration of ECEC services is impeded because childcare is funded by the Commonwealth and kindergarten by the states. We welcome the Commonwealth commitment to 15 hours of preschool. However, a key concern for our members is their inability to access the higher rate of approved Child Care Benefit and Child Care Tax Rebate (CCB/CCT). Currently, working parents with children attending kindergarten programs operating less than 48 weeks per year (the school year is 42 weeks), even those with long hours and add on care programs can only access Child Care Benefit for registered services. To have an integrated ECEC sector this anomaly must be addressed.

The lack of access to the approved CCB/CCT also means that whilst higher income working families may be able to afford the kindergarten fees, the overall fees the service must charge will exclude other families. While Victoria's targeted kindergarten fee subsidy has reduced the

financial barriers to kindergarten for those eligible, KPV is aware that many families still struggle to afford kindergarten fees.

Workforce

Degree qualified staff are essential for high standards of teaching and programs. They provide the pedagogical leadership for all ECEC workers to ensure that children enjoy a rich and engaging educational environment. Kindergarten teachers are overwhelmingly the most highly qualified staff in the ECEC sector. They are an experienced workforce with National Children's Workforce Study data indicating the length of service of kindergarten teachers is an average of almost 11 years.

As well as the COAG commitment to universal early learning increasing the demand in the future, there are a number of factors indicating a move towards a greater shortage of early childhood teachers which will impede access for children to quality learning programs.

There are significant shortages in the ECEC workforce, driven in part by demographic change and the desire of parents to access two years of kindergarten. KPV members continually report difficulty in recruiting teachers. There is both a general shortage across the state and particular shortages in some areas, with rural areas having greater difficulty attracting staff. Childcare settings endeavouring to integrate an education program are also experiencing greater difficulty in recruiting teachers. There is also difficulty in recruiting teachers that reflect the diversity of our community. A range of barriers must be removed if we are to improve the recruitment and retention rates of early childhood educators. These include raising the status by increasing community awareness of the crucial role of early childhood education in improving life chances for children; improving career options; better access to professional learning, development and mentoring as well as improving remuneration and working conditions.

The research overwhelming shows that degree qualified teachers are a key indicator of quality in early learning. An immediate priority therefore, is to promote qualifications in the early childhood workforce. University places are required to ensure an adequate supply of degree qualified teachers to ensure access to high quality education and care preferably for two years but a minimum of one year, for all children prior to school.

Early Years Learning Framework

KPV believes that early childhood education is education for life. Every child should have the opportunity to learn, grow and develop in an environment rich with challenge, exploration and creativity and be able to move confidently to school. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is a crucial component of a National Quality Framework, and will provide guidance to early childhood educators in developing quality early learning programs in a range of settings for children from birth to 5 years across Australia. The framework should underpin the rich diversity our community and the various theories and philosophies of early childhood learning and teaching by:

- Guiding and supporting professional staff in their practice
- Promoting an even level of quality in the diverse service types
- Facilitating communication between
 - Staff and parents, the community and government
 - Service providers and families, and
 - The children themselves

- Promoting pedagogical continuity between the range of early childhood services and schools.

A national EYLF has the potential to be a catalyst for change in the culture and nature of education and care programs and the relationship between ECEC and the early years of school. The EYLF should be a vehicle to promote partnerships between parents and ECEC programs and services, with parents and educators collaborating in children's learning by sharing information and strategies. This collaboration is particularly important to ensure that vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families are engaged in ECEC programs. The framework must support collaboration between educators and services and all families, including those with particular needs such as Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse families and families/children with a disability.

An important role for an EYLF is to promote a common understanding of child development and learning, and to link preschool education with school learning. The framework must also support consistent practice across service types and provide a language that describes children's learning to parents, families, communities and government. The national EYLF has the potential to be a key unifying tool in the national framework providing an umbrella for curricula from all jurisdictions across Australia and for all service types and settings. Existing curricula have no uniformity in the age range, conceptual underpinnings and structures and not all jurisdictions have a curriculum for all (or any) service types. A national framework would be stronger if it applied to the period of early childhood, from birth to eight years of age.

A truly useful EYLF will not be prescriptive. It will be framed in such a way that the learning and development needs of children can be met in a variety of ways in various settings and will be capable of continuing to guide practice as our knowledge evolves with research and reflection.

Implementation

KPV supports strong and consistent quality standards for all ECEC settings. However, as mentioned above, complying with quality standards will pose particular challenges for Victorian kindergartens and other early childhood settings. A workable timetable, training and a range of resources and supports, including written and web-based supports and an advisory service will be required for a smooth implementation. All the components of the national quality framework are essential and interrelated and each must have the thought, consideration and attention to detail required ensuring outcomes are not only optimal, but also sustainable and has strong community support.

An extensive period of consultation and development is needed for the sector to embrace an Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF). The proposed timeframes are short and may undermine support. In Victoria there is great enthusiasm for an EYLF. Many early childhood settings have concerns over the prospect of new or increased requirements to meet quality standards and accreditation. In particular, concerns are held that a demanding administrative burden may be imposed with little direct benefit to outcomes for children.