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KPV Response to the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee Inquiry into the Provision of Childcare

About KPV

Kindergarten Parents Victoria (KPV) is the peak body and employer group for early childhood education promoting the voice of parents in quality early childhood education for Victorian children and serving more than 200,000 children and their families. Our members include over 1000 independent, local government and cluster managed kindergarten, child care and other early childhood services across the state.

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.

a. The financial, social and industry impact of the ABC Learning collapse on the provision of childcare in Australia - A new vision for Early Childhood

Throughout this submission KPV will use the abbreviation ECEC referring to early childhood education and care when discussing child care. This reflects the fact that kindergarten or preschool is a critical component of early years' service provision. Perhaps more importantly it also reflects the strong research evidence that quality in early childhood service requires that the setting emphasises education as well as care.¹

High quality ECEC should be recognised as an important public good with the capacity to promote positive developmental outcomes for all children and particular benefits for vulnerable children. It is also an essential service to the community particularly given increasing participation in the workforce of parents with children under school age. ECEC must be of high quality and it must be accessible and responsive to the needs of parents and families.

A fragmented service system, uneven quality, varying cost to families and inequitable access to ECEC are all markers of an urgent need for fundamental change. The

collapse of ABC Learning and other for-profit providers represents an opportunity to restructure ECEC with the needs of children and families firmly in mind. In particular, changes to the sector brought about by the demise of ABC Learning present a significant opportunity for long day care providers to increasingly provide educational as well as development opportunities for children in care settings. This requires a new vision for early childhood.

Robust research demonstrates that parental influence remains the primary indicator of many life outcomes for children. A strong evidence base also demonstrates that good quality ECEC can have significant benefits for children both at the time of learning, and across the lifespanⁱⁱ. The evidence is that these benefits are multiplied the earlier the child starts in preschool education although whether the children are in attendance part or full time does not impact on the gains made.

Currently this evidence is particularly strong in terms of the benefits to 3-5 year old children. However, given that rate of brain and other development occurring in children under this age group, the importance of quality ECEC for infants is also increasingly recognised. For example, the policies on which the new US President Obama came to office include creating Early Learning Challenge Grants to promote state "zero to five" efforts as well as helping states move toward voluntary, universal pre-school.ⁱⁱⁱ Similarly the Report of the Expert Advisory Panel on Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (2009) recently advised the Australian Government in relation to the importance of well qualified staff in ECEC:

"Early childhood staff, with a deep knowledge of child development and the ability to form caring, trusting relationships, are integral to a high quality infant program."^{iv}

The KPV Vision 2011 sets out our vision for the strategic development of early childhood education. It includes six core elements:

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

More details of Vision 2011 and about KPV can be found at www.kpv.org.au.

In line with our own vision for the sector KPV welcomes the Senate Inquiry as an opportunity to reinforce the need for a broader vision for ECEC in this country. We are delighted that the new Australian Government has prioritised the early childhood years and with its plans to significantly inject funds into this area over the next few years. However there is much further to go before investment in early childhood in this country is on a par with average spending across the OECD.^v In addition ongoing discussions such as this Inquiry presents are important while the Australian and State Government policy directions in this area continue to evolve.

This is particularly important given the current global financial crisis (GFC). Whilst quality ECEC is beneficial for children it is also a major facilitator of participation by parents in the workforce, and hence is a key component of the COAG Human Capital agenda.

The twin benefits of quality ECEC are reinforced by the economic downturn. Key groups such as single parent families are likely to be especially adversely affected by unemployment. Given the experience of previous downturns there is the danger that the situation of these families will be difficult to redress when the economy improves. Affordable access to quality ECEC is likely to both promote their ready re-entry to the workforce and their children's resilience during a period of vulnerability within the family. We note that in addition to the measures the Obama administration had already proposed to introduce (noted above) these considerations are some of the factors motivating President Barak Obama to make support for ECEC a key component of his GFC response package currently before the US Congress.^{vi}

It is in this context that we have addressed the following specific questions posed for the sector raised by the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry.

b. Alternative options and models for the provision of ECEC

Recent commitments by the Australian Government to restore a diversity of providers in ECEC are welcome. The critical underpinning for funding should be that service provision is evidence-based, supporting high quality services, staffing and parental involvement in order to achieve the most positive outcomes for children. Whilst for-profit providers can offer quality early childhood services, dominance of the system by for-profit providers is highly problematic and has demonstrated clear market failure. KPV's major concerns with respect to the domination of large for-profit providers in the ECEC system have been:

- The necessity to return a profit means that for-profit providers have little incentive to establish or maintain services in areas of disadvantage. This means that access to child care and particularly to early education programs for three and four year olds are likely to be less available in low income and rural areas for example.
- Strong parental participation and community involvement in early childhood services is less likely to be a focus despite the clear research evidence that these factors maximise the benefits to children and the community of these services.
- The adverse impact on profits of inclusion of children with additional needs (such as those requiring early intervention, disability support or other special needs) mean these children tend to be concentrated in not-for-profit services.
- There is a tendency for the for-profit sector to have lower rates of permanent staff and less continuity of staff. . This can be related to the profit imperative. In Victoria, preschool programs provide high levels of education as well as care, with state government funding criteria requiring degree qualified teachers for kindergarten programs.
- Similarly, in the past Commonwealth funding and standards for child care has not required the level of staff qualifications that is required under state regulations for preschools.
- The combination of these factors has contributed to the decline in provision of educational (kindergarten) programs in long day care in Victoria. It is understood that fewer than 1 in 4 ABC child care centres run kindergarten programs.
- Thus while most eligible three and four year old Victorian children attend preschool educational programs recognised and part funded by the State Government some eligible children miss out because they "...attend long day care centres which are increasingly less likely to take up state funding to provide a kindergarten program."^{vii}

Policy reforms and the failure of ABC Learning present a unique opportunity to fundamentally rethink how ECEC is funded and delivered in Australia. Services are largely driven by fragmented funding, staffing requirements and regulatory oversight. Other issues of quality that should also be key questions in reform of sector funding and regulation include:

- The increasingly acknowledged benefits of stronger links between family support services and early childhood education.
- The importance of parental involvement in early childhood education and care services to promote coherence in children's experience of ECEC.
- How the range of ECEC services can deliver intentional education for children. Delivering intentional educational outcomes through a play-based learning approach should be a central objective of ECEC. For many years, too many early childhood settings have delivered programs without particular regard to the importance of intentional education for preschool children.
- In addition it is increasingly recognised that utilisation of this approach would also be beneficial during the early years of school. More generally how to promote the benefits of stronger links between early childhood education and school based education are coming to the fore.
- In most Australian jurisdictions, educational programs for three and four year olds have largely been delivered at fixed hours part time with limited access to additional hours of care - particularly problematic for the increasing number of working parents. Providing these programs in schools without adequately addressing other issues such as those noted above is not an appropriate response.

The options for parent and other community involvement cover a spectrum.^{viii} They can include formal and informal contributions to program planning, or it may take the form of engaged, collaborative relationships with teachers, carers and staff. It extends to governance roles on the board of the service. Like other forms of civic participation, parental involvement also generates a number of positive flow on effects on the health and social capital of local communities. Well funded community-governed early childhood services are in a strong position to generate these benefits.

These issues and trends suggest entirely new early childhood learning and development centres dedicated to children 0-8 could be piloted. The development of 'children's houses' in Sweden, Finland and other European models illustrate how *rethinking* rather than just *reorganising* services together with a diversity of approaches may better meet the needs of more children and their families, stronger relationships between schools and early childhood services and also promote enhanced involvement of parents as well as support their participation in the workforce. The integration of multiple ECEC services into networked or even single sites or organisations has been a policy direction pursued in Victoria with a view to promoting service coherence and improved accessibility, particularly for vulnerable children, parents and families.

ci. The role of governments at all levels in funding for community, not-for-profit and independent service providers

The policy agenda and potential benefits of ECEC service integration have been stymied by a number of barriers, most notably fragmented funding and oversight arrangements.

Preschools in Victoria for example are only part subsidised by the state and not at all by the Commonwealth Government. They are heavily reliant on parent fees and other contributions including varying degrees of local government and broader community sector support.

Not surprisingly, most Victorian preschools may operate full time but mostly offer part time programs, consistent with the limited (ten) hours of early education for four year olds subsidised by the State. (Note: There has also been a welcome introduction of state subsidies for educational (kindergarten) programs for some groups of vulnerable three year olds.) This is not problematic in terms of the research evidence that whether the program is full or part time is fairly irrelevant to the gains made by children participating.

However it is problematic for many working parents. The lack of availability of longer preschool programs and or preschools offering wrap around care can mean that children move from long day care settings to preschools and back again in the course of a day in order that they can access an educational program. It also means that even where long day care centres offer an educational component they are generally also only part-time, often offered in a separate room within the centre. While there may be other benefits to a child of these mini-transitions, they are basically underpinned by the fragmentation in federal and state funding.

This situation is not helped by the failure of the Commonwealth to date to reverse the previous government's refusal to provide the Child Care Benefit and the Child Care Tax Rebate to parents with children in most community preschool education settings. This effectively discriminates against working parents who choose to place their children in the primary settings that offer preschool educational programs in Victoria.

The move by the Australian Government to subsidise kindergarten programs for four year olds fifteen hours per week will assist in extending the programs for four year olds in preschools and prompting other early childhood settings to ensure the availability of an educational program.

However to date, the Government has not moved to provide any alternative support or incentives to those services to extend their program hours or to include care outside state funded preschool hours. The support required simply to meet the Australian Government's commitment to ensure 15 hours of preschool for all children in Victoria will include funding to remodel or extend infrastructure and programming support as well as the welcome emphasis on university places for early childhood teachers. It is also unclear whether the Commonwealth intends to work with the states to ensure the educational programs for four year olds are fully funded or whether a significant parent contribution will still be required.

Obviously the requirement to part fund access is a major barrier to participation especially for low income families, vulnerable indigenous or CALD background families, and families of children with disability or developmental delay. This is despite the fact that these are the very families whose children are likely to benefit most. The state government introduction of increased subsidies for various vulnerable groups including children of health care card holders is welcome but also generates the perverse consequence of higher fees for other parents, ironically perhaps particularly in centres serving high concentrations of low income families.

The Australian Government is to be applauded for its willingness to begin to fund early childhood education, in addition to care alone, for the first time. A continuation of this approach, along with strong collaboration with the states, may offer the best hope of breaking down traditional and counterproductive distinctions between child care and early childhood education. However as noted above, significant investment in ECEC is necessary in order to bring Australian investment in this area up to OECD standards and achieve the best outcomes for Australian children.

cii. Consistent regulatory frameworks for child care and licensing requirements across the country

Regulation tends to be a blunt instrument for achieving policy goals whereas to meet the diverse needs of children and families across Australia considerable capacity for innovation and flexibility will be required. There are guiding principles derived from the research base, drawing particularly on the landmark EPPE study as well as the work of the OECD.^{ix} These principles should inform broad regulatory consistency across Australia for children's services and include recognition that:

- Children tend to make better progress and quality tends to be higher in preschools and fully integrated ECEC settings than those that provide care alone;
- Settings that have staff with higher qualifications, especially with a high proportion of trained (degree qualified) early childhood teachers on the staff, show better quality and their children make better progress;
- Teacher trained staff in managerial roles as well as in direct ECEC roles support better outcomes;
- High staff:child ratios and manageable group sizes facilitate the quality of staff:child interactions including differentiated learning opportunities to meet the needs of individuals including those with additional needs;
- Strong parental involvement, especially in terms of shared educational aims promotes better all round progress for children; and
- High staff:child ratios and manageable group sizes also facilitate a balance between staff supported freely chosen play and staff led small group activities.

Please find more detailed comment in the attached KPV response to Victoria's draft Children's Services Regulations.

ciii. Nationally-consistent training and qualification requirements for ECEC staff

An immediate priority for professional learning is simply to promote qualifications in the early childhood workforce, especially to support intentional education in child care settings, thereby addressing in part what Harrington calls 'problem of program quality in child care settings'^x. Staff qualifications have a critical impact on service quality. Increasing the number of qualified staff in ECEC and their level of attainment will support more consistent quality including pedagogical leadership of less qualified staff across the sector. Children, and their early childhood education and care staff should be valued sufficiently to warrant strong and relevant educational attainment from all workers in the sector.

Degree-qualified staff are in the strongest position to lead intentional teaching among all staff. Proposed changes to Children's Services Regulations in Victoria will require all ECEC workers to be qualified at the Certificate III level and all licensed services to

employ at least one degree-qualified early childhood teacher. This standard may represent a useful starting point in nationally consistent requirements for qualifications. However, as noted above, research into early childhood increasingly shows that having a high proportion of qualified teachers on staff running all ECEC programs for children, ie. from birth, is highly desirable.

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

Improved data collection may well benefit service planning and provision. Such initiatives should include all preschool settings, regardless of whether they attract Australian Government child care funding. Obviously this would include preschools subsidised by state governments.

cv. The feasibility for establishing a national authority to oversee the child care industry in Australia

The benefits of a national authority overseeing the ECEC industry in Australia may need to be further explored. For example, this may be of utility in monitoring prices or fees for ECEC services. KPV considers a more immediate priority for investment in ECEC is the full funding of at least 2 years of preschool education, available to all children for a minimum of 15 hours per week. We also support the extension of a robust accreditation framework to the whole of the ECEC sector.

Conclusion

KPV would be happy to comment further on this or any other aspect of our submission should this be of assistance to the Inquiry.

ⁱ Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. Taggart, B & Elliot (2003) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Findings from the Pre-school Period* www.ioe.ac.uk/projects/eppe

ⁱⁱ Schweinhart, L. (2005) *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40: Summary, Conclusions and Frequently Asked Questions*, p.1, Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B. (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report*, p. ii www.ioe.ac.uk/projects/eppe

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/education/>

^{iv} Expert Panel (2009), p.3.

^v OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care* p. 247

^{vi} ExchangeEveryDay "Obama's Child Care Plans," January 28, 2009 <http://ccie.com/eed/issue>.

^{vii} Victorian State Government Budget Paper No. 3 (2007) Appendix.B p.309

^{viii} OECD (2006), p.53

^{ix} OECD (2006); Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. & Taggart, B. (2004) and Siraj-Blatchford, I, Taggart, B Sylva K, Sammons, P & Melhuish, E., (2008) Towards the transformation of practice in early childhood education: the effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project,' *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 38:1, 23-36. At p. 25-26

^x Harrington, M. (2008) *Preschool Education in Australia*, Australian Parliamentary Library, Background Note

