



The Infants' Home Child & Family Services

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Child Care

Inquiry into the provision of childcare

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1. Introduction

The Infants' Home Child & Family Services (TIHC&FS) is an innovative leader in the provision of socially responsive and research informed early childhood services. It has been meeting the needs of young children and parents in Sydney for 135 years.

(TIHC&FS) has extensive experience in the delivery of quality inclusive early childhood services integrated with family support and targeted services to meet the needs of children who experience a range of vulnerable circumstances.

We applaud the Government's timely response to the ABC collapse with the commissioning of this inquiry and the contribution it can make to the Government's early childhood agenda.

2. Response to the Terms of Reference

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

Children currently enrolled:

Stability and consistency of care is a well documented research element in the provision of quality care. It also impacts on the wellbeing of their parents. This collapse and the ensuing uncertainty has put the well-being of thousands of families around Australia at risk. While the timely government response has helped to mitigate this the funds used to rescue the situation represent significant lost opportunity for new services.

Financial

A government commissioned report is needed into:

- the financial performance and drivers of the child care operations of ABC,
- the cost of the governments short term financial support,
- the real and opportunity cost of the government and sectors' time in responding to the collapse
- and the opportunity cost to the provision of quality not for profit services.

The community sector had consistently advocated that the true costs of quality care and education could not fund such corporate profits. The actual cost of funding levels necessary to sustain quality community based services to support the rights of Australian children needs to be recognised in future planning.

Industry

Children's services are not a commodity from which profits are generated. The collapse of ABC Learning Centres has clearly demonstrated that significant surpluses and quality care for our youngest citizens are not compatible.

This reality provides a healthy starting point for respectful dialogue as to appropriate philosophical, service delivery and funding models necessary to meet the educational and care needs of all Australia's children.

B. Alternative options and models for the provision of child care;

The provision of child care must be seen as inseparable to education. The current Government's policy commitment to the early years is promising. The creation of the Office of Early Childhood Care and the transfer of child care services to the Department of Education Employment and Workforce Relations demonstrate an appreciation of the educational role of child care services. This inquiry provides it with an opportunity to build on these initiatives and fully reconcile that education and care are inseparable for young children.

Access to quality inclusive early childhood education and care services for young children must be positioned equally to a child's well being and rights to 'formal school' education. Given the plethora of neurobiological and behavioural research confirming the sensitivity of the brain's development during the early years this principle needs to be at the forefront of all models considered. Its central positioning in government policy is critical if we are to develop sustainable models into the future.

Research also demonstrates the central importance and role of high quality early childhood education and care for children and families facing additional challenges. Any model must support the inclusion of such children. This is fundamental to the achievement of a socially inclusive society. The model needs to be adequately resourced to incorporate additional support for these children and their families, including family worker support and allied health and medical services. They need to be fully integrated with high quality early childhood education and care services that have significant participation of four year degree trained early childhood teachers. The research also testifies to the compound disadvantage generated for these children if they participate in poor quality care and education programs, i.e. it can do harm.

Quality care and education requires several enablers that include, staff training and skill, small staff child ratios and group size, continuity and consistency of staff and a safe developmentally appropriate physical environment. This provides

the base from which to build positive relationships and a constructivist play based curriculum that address all areas of a child's development and well being.

The Infants' Home Child and Family Services has extensive experience in the provision of socially inclusive quality education and care services integrated with a range of additional support services. We are able to provide information on establishment, operational, infrastructure and financial considerations.

C. the role of governments at all levels in:

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

Funding for all aspects, operational, capital, research, requires a significant investment at all levels of government. A collaborative partnership between local, state and federal agencies has the potential to identify areas of high need and fund these accordingly. Incentives, ongoing support, resources and funds for providing services in rural and remote areas or urban areas with identified high disadvantage will ensure a more equitable model for families. The funding mix also needs to address requirements for integrated child and family services.

The application, administration and the acquittal aspects of all funding would benefit from being streamlined and simplified. The government has placed increasing compliance and administration burden on the sector that it has never been compensated for. The actual cost and opportunity costs associated with these processes is an unnecessary drain of scarce resources.

The area of capital funding for new and replacement facilities is crucial for the sustainability and growth of the community sector. This area requires special attention by the Government.

The understanding of the true cost of running a viable sustainable community child care services needs to be made explicit. The perpetuation of myths that services can be run cheaply is destructive to the sector and to families and children.

The recognition of the centrality of nationally recognized university qualified early childhood teachers to the provision of quality integrated child care and education is a necessary platform from which the journey for a new model can be built. All other training and professional development becomes a band-aid quick fix if this platform is not in place. Additional government funding to support this level of workforce is required.

ii. consistent regulatory frameworks for child care across the country,

A consistent national framework that reflects the rights and needs of Australian children will provide a solid foundation for policy development. The development of such a framework needs to be negotiated based on research and practice wisdom, not lead by the lowest common denominator. It must hold central that care and education are intertwined and cannot be separated and that university qualified early childhood teachers are an essential element to underpin any framework. No other area of health or education engages in debates as to whether a university qualified professional is required to deliver the services.

iii. licensing requirements to operate child care centres,

Licensing requirements need to be consistent with quality drivers and flexible to be responsive to local needs. It is the aggregation of factors rather than any one factor that will provide the scaffold for the delivery of safe, quality education and care.

Assessments of licensing applications need to be comprehensive to exclude operators that will not protect the rights and dignity of children.

Consistent and diligent processes that ensure services are operating at a high standard and a range of supports and sanctions for non-compliance is a necessary part of the package to protect children and ensure their positive development.

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

The major issue that the government and the community need to respond to is the necessity of university qualified early childhood teachers to deliver the services. Both the provision of sufficient university places and the funding to support their employment in child care centre is critical to the achievement of the Government's agenda.

A national agreement on the competencies and curriculum for university qualified early childhood teachers would support a national authority for the early years and a national framework. It is long overdue; we are a nation where currently moving interstate with your qualifications is similar to moving overseas.

National, industrial recognition of university qualified early childhood teachers is critical for the success of the workforce strategy. Early Childhood Teachers should be entitled to at least the same rate of pay and conditions as primary school teachers along with additional compensation for those who do not access the same holiday benefits.

Nationally recognised qualifications for TAFE trained child care workers would have many benefits for cross fertilization of ideas and practices; the ability to move between states is good for the nation. The workforce strategy must recognize that the diploma TAFE qualified staff supplements the university trained workforce and cannot be seen to replace it. This is the central issue for the delivery of quality education and care.

The introduction of a nationally required minimum training of Certificate III for primary contact staff working in any early childhood service has the potential to raise the status and understanding of early childhood services within the community. It provides protection for both the country's children and the often young predominantly female workforce working in a high risk area where high standards of practice for infection control and manual handling are required and an understanding and skill in respectful interactions with children is paramount in developing respectful relationships with them that form the foundation for their learning.

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

This information is critical to support forward planning and future directions. It is also problematic. The information can be very fluid and requires analysis to understand what is driving the result. Data without all the variants may provide false information, be interpreted generally rather than specifically and mislead government departments. Vacancies vary greatly across a week and across a year. The cause of the vacancy is not always apparent; is it demand? Is it a quality issue? Is it an affordability issue? Is it due to social disengagement of families? Families will avoid centres that are not of sufficient quality or that are too expensive and many socially disadvantaged families will actively avoid services; may think it is not appropriate for their family or feel marginalized.

The benefit to families of centralised information is limited if it is too general. Families have very specific needs in child care around hours, days of the week, program type. The preservation of the key relationship between the family and the service provider needs to be maintained in any such system.

- D. the feasibility for establishing a national authority to oversee the child care industry in Australia;

The development of a national authority that placed the well being of children as central to government policy and action would strongly position the Government to enact its early childhood agenda and draw together previously fragmented strategies to comprehensively address the best interests of children.

An authority that was just focused on the child care industry runs the risk of the needs and rights of children being marginalised within a complex legislative and predominantly market driven environment.

The establishment of a national authority to oversee the child care and education sector needs to sit within an Authority that:

- is charged with the wellbeing of our young children
- brings together the range of inter-sectorial services young children need to support them
- positions children as central to government decision making.

Positioned within such an Authority child care and education would be protected from the influences and distortion of 'market forces'.

Early childhood services need to be able to respond to local community need as well as being encapsulated within a quality and regulatory framework. Any national authority will need to address this balance and devolve some responsibility to state and local levels.

The sector is complex and diverse and the roles of licensing, accreditation, workforce qualification, training, and curriculum would need to be explicitly positioned within the Authority's terms of reference.

3. Recommendations

1. A national definition of child care needs to be developed that acknowledges the interconnectedness of care and education for children less than 6 years of age. Care and education are not severable activities for young children.
2. Four year nationally recognised university qualified early childhood teachers are employed in all child care facilities.
3. Child Care and education services must adhere to the principles of:
 - Socially inclusive
 - Financially accessible
 - Geographically accessible
 - Responsive to local demographics and need
 - Delivered by nationally recognised four year university trained early childhood teachers
 - Led by a national office responsible for the early years
 - National framework for legislative requirements, curriculum and quality improvement
 - Integrated with a range of child and family services

- Principally provided by not-for-profit, community based and managed and government organisations
4. The establishment of a national Authority to take stewardship for the wellbeing of young children
 5. The development of a national regulatory body for child care and education that sits within the national authority for children that provides leadership on regulations, standards and quality, workforce requirements and service distribution.
 6. Development of realistic costing and funding formulas for the provision of accessible and inclusive early childhood education and care that acknowledges employment of a skilled workforce, capital development requirements, and additional support services.
 7. That a study is undertaken to document the true cost of the ABC collapse to the Australian taxpayer to fully inform future policy development.
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