

SUBMISSION to the SENATE INQUIRY

As an early childhood consultant who has worked in the children's services field and been an advocate for young children for many years I am responding in general terms to the inquiry.

1) IMPACT of the FAILURE of ABC

This is and will have a major impact on children, families and staff causing stress and unwelcome change for young children when consistency is important.

It is also a cost to taxpayers as managing the collapse of corporations takes financial resources and the time of governments. These funds and resources are needed to enhance the quality of existing services and not to spend on poor management.

Governments had been warned of the dangers of a monopoly and the possible collapse of the corporate sector but these warnings were ignored. This now provides an opportunity to restructure the children's services area and to avoid the dangers of having one corporate group dominate the provision of services. It allows for a more balanced and planned approach to the provision of services including increasing the not for profit sector which has historically been the provider of better quality services.

Children and what is in their best interest should be the central plank for all planning, funding and policy decisions. Shareholders and profits should not be the drivers of education and care services we provide for our very young children.

2) OPTIONS for the FUTURE

a) Planning is critical so as to ensure that services are provided in areas of need and the over provision in other areas prevented. This needs a move away from dependence on market forces as the driver for establishment of services.

In the past planning was undertaken although it was not comprehensive in that the provision of State funded services such as preschools was not usually included in the data. Planning needs to be linked to funding eg Child Care Benefit only available in services allocated places under a planning model. Planning also needs to take account of service types to ensure families have some choice and to ensure that the higher cost places are available in all communities including places for children under two years of age and children with additional needs.

Planning also needs to be undertaken around the supply of qualified staff. Many areas of Australia have not been able to employ qualified staff in part

due to a lack of supply. This is critical to the delivery of quality experiences for children. This needs to take into account the importance of remuneration of staff and working conditions which will result in staff remaining in the early childhood workforce.

The introduction of national early childhood teacher registration would enhance the professionalism of the field and could be used to support greater understanding by the community of the importance of education through intentional teaching using play in the early years.

b) The current plans for a Quality Framework should support the introduction of a national system with nationally consistent Regulations specific to each service type eg centre based, home based, outside school hours etc.

On the top of a Regulation base there needs to be a Quality Assurance System where the focus is on interactions and the program which are difficult if not impossible to include in Regulations. This would reflect the differences in services eg trained staff expected to plan and implement a curriculum in centre based education and care services such as preschools and long day care centres.

Regulations are critical for health and safety and should establish things like required space, numbers and qualifications of staff etc. These would be required to be met at all times for any service to be open to children. Quality Improvement or Quality Assurance Systems should build on this with a focus on the experience of children whilst in the education and care setting. The Early Years Learning Framework which is currently being developed would be a requirement for accredited status. Accreditation would need to be obtained to remain open and to receive any funding.

I would like to see an optional level of Accreditation which services could work towards but rather than having just a level 2 quality standard to have a system that encourages services to apply for recognition or endorsement in a particular area of strength. I do not believe that any service operates at a level of excellence in all areas at all times.

This would allow for quality improvement and for differentiation of strengths eg care of babies and toddlers, environmental education, documentation of the children's experiences, inclusion of children with additional needs etc etc. This would be time limited with the possibility of having one or two endorsements at a time. This could also be used so families can be better informed on the strengths of some programs.

3) Role of Governments

There should be an overarching Council that establishes policy at the highest level. This would review and set down the quality standards including Regulations, Accreditation and the Curriculum Framework and provide advice to governments on current research. This body would include government representatives, academics and other individuals with expertise around the provision of children's services including pedagogy.

The administration of the Regulations could remain with the States and Territories or with a separate national body but with national consistency a driving principle. The administration of the quality system could be with a national body established for this purpose or linked in with the State/Territory Regulations groups. This structure would then separate the setting of standards and their administration/enforcement etc.

Principles should include:

- . national consistency for each service type and some common requirements across service types
- . frameworks and policy decisions based on the best interests of children using current research and practice wisdom.
- . clear sanctions for non compliance which are enforced and transparent
- . resources provided for training and informing the range of professional involved in services on the quality standards and current research
- .information for families so they can select services for their children in an informed way
- .commitment to a universal provision of education and care services with some targeting of special needs groups including socio economic disadvantage and additional needs.
- .attention to the needs of aboriginal children
- .inclusive and accessible services
- .respect for diversity
- .focus on education and pedagogy in services with specialist early childhood teachers
- .removal of current overlap and duplication in systems such as Regulation and quality assurance but also between various levels of government

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