

**Department of Education and Employment
and Workplace Relations**

**Submission to the
Standing Committee on Social Policy
and Legal Affairs**

**Inquiry into
Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder**

January 2012

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Government recognises that positive early developmental outcomes are essential to a child's future well-being.

This submission outlines the work of the Australian Government through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations' (DEEWR) to support families and children in accessing high quality early childhood services and development. This includes investment in support for high quality services for the best start in life for all children, and additional targeted programs of assistance for children with additional needs, such as families, children and communities affected by Foetal Alcohol Syndrome.

Investing in the health, education, development and care of children benefits children and their families, communities and the economy. The convergence of evidence from a range of fields underlines the importance of a child's early growth and development for establishing the foundations of health, learning, social and cultural outcomes into the future. Quality services are also critical to supporting workforce participation and productivity.

Focusing on children's needs in the years before they reach school helps earlier diagnosis of and intervention to address children's needs and reduce the impact of risk factors before they become entrenched. Early childhood services can play an important role in this regard.

The submission outlines key elements and support delivered through:

- the Australian Government's investment of more than \$21 billion for early childhood education and care (ECEC) over the next four years;
- the National Partnership Agreement for Early Childhood Development, the National Quality Agenda, and the National Early Childhood Development Strategy to support high quality early childhood education and care;
- the National Partnership on Indigenous Early Childhood Development and measures to improve the quality of services for Indigenous children in rural or remote areas, including the establishment of 38 integrated Children and Family Centres across Australia;
- the provision of community level information on children's early development and school readiness, through the Australian Early Development Index;
- measures to ensure that the ECEC workforce is able to deliver high quality services which are best placed to meet the needs of children
- funding to ECEC services to support the inclusion of children from Indigenous backgrounds and those with special needs
- funding for school authorities to support children with special needs.

DEEWR's input should be read in conjunction with submissions from the Departments of Health and Ageing (DoHA) and Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). Collectively, these Australian Government Departments contribute to the Council of Australia Governments' (COAG) National Early Childhood Development Strategy, to support all children and families, with particular focus on vulnerable children at risk of poor outcomes.

Commonwealth investment in child care

The Australian Government is providing \$21.7 billion over the next four years to help 800,000 Australian families annually to access affordable, quality care. This includes \$9.8 billion to reduce child care fees under the Child Care Benefit (CCB) and \$8.3 billion to assist working families with out of pocket child care costs under the Child Care Rebate (CCR).

National Early Childhood Development Strategy

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has agreed an ambitious program of reform to improve outcomes for young children, under the framework of the first *National Early Childhood Development Strategy – Investing in the Early Years* (the Strategy). The Strategy was endorsed by COAG in July 2009.¹

As outlined in the National ECD Strategy, research evidence indicates that participation in quality ECEC services helps young children get the best start in life. It is also widely recognised that the economic returns on investment in early childhood are high particularly for disadvantaged children.²

The Strategy covers children from before birth to eight years and aims to improve the health, safety, early learning and wellbeing of all children and better support disadvantaged children to reduce inequalities. It is based on evidence from Australia and overseas that the first five years of a child's life play a major role in their long term health, development, education and wellbeing and produces significant returns for society and individuals.

The Strategy provides an overarching policy framework for many COAG early childhood reform initiatives, including the National Partnership Agreements on Early Childhood Education and Indigenous Early Childhood Development and the National Quality Agenda on Early Childhood Education and Care. For more information on these initiatives, see www.acecqa.gov.au and www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/Pages/home.aspx

Implementing the Strategy involves a collaborative effort between Commonwealth, state and territory governments. Their shared vision is that by 2020, all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and the nation.

The Strategy also provides guidance for effective partnerships across and between governments, with the non-government sector and with families around the needs of children.

A copy of the Strategy can be found on the COAG website:
www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2009-07-02/docs/national_ECD_strategy.pdf

¹ Council of Australian Governments, *Investing in the Early Years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy*, 2 July 2009.

² Heckman, J. *Return on Investment: Cost vs. Benefits*, University of Chicago, 2008.

National Quality Agenda

The COAG national quality agenda for ECEC focuses on providing families with high quality ECEC services (that is, child care and early childhood education, otherwise known as preschool or kindergarten). The National Quality Framework was endorsed by COAG in December 2009 and is being implemented progressively from 1 January 2012. The NQF aims to improve the quality and availability of early childhood education and care services through a new National Quality Standard (NQS), including improved child-to-staff ratios and new qualification requirements for early child education and care workers, a streamlined regulatory system to replace the current licensing and quality accreditation function and a quality ratings system linked to the NQS so families can easily compare the quality of different child care services and make informed decisions about the best care for their children.

Universal access to preschool

Under the National Partnership Agreement for Early Childhood Education, all jurisdictions have committed to ensuring universal access to a quality early childhood education program, designed and delivered by a four year trained early childhood education qualified teacher, for 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year, in the year before full time schooling. This is to be achieved by 2013.

Implementation of universal access to preschool within each state and territory requires close involvement of government and non-government schools, preschools and child care providers as progress is made towards the 2013 objective for universal access. While the enrolment rate is important, the quality and appropriateness of the program are essential to achieving improved child outcomes. This work is also critical to one of COAG's Closing the Gap targets – that all Indigenous children, in particular, all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities, have access to early childhood education by 2013.

Integrated early childhood services

There is broad consensus that the most effective means of delivering early childhood services, particularly for vulnerable children, is through a multi-agency or integrated systems approach.³ This is supported by the recent emergence of integrated services, established by governments across various jurisdictions. It is envisaged that greater service integration will result in a more cohesive support system for children and families. These approaches, however implemented, should result in children's developmental problems being identified earlier, with more prompt referrals to specialist services and problems with parent and family functioning being identified earlier, leading to appropriate help and support being provided quickly.⁴

ECEC services can provide a platform for other services to support vulnerable children and families, beyond that of the traditional ECEC service model.

³ Centre for Community Child Health, *Policy Brief: Integrating Services for Young Children and Their Families*, No. 17 2009

⁴ Centre for Community Child Health, *op cit.*

Many of these are funded by the Australian Government under the Budget Based Funded (BBF) Program to ensure access to services in areas of market failure and to meet specific cultural requirements. These services can offer a more integrated service approach, linking families to maternal and child health nurses, other health professionals and family support services. BBF and other integrated services can help support strategies that seek to prevent the incidence of FASD and manage its impact on affected children by:

- referring pregnant mothers whose children attend the service to early intervention programs with the aim of reducing alcohol consumption during pregnancy
- referring affected children to health and other professionals for early diagnosis and developmental support.

National Partnership on Indigenous Early Childhood Development

While acknowledging that FASD is not exclusively an issue for Indigenous communities and that both diagnosis and measurement of FASD are difficult, it is clear the prevalence of FASD is much higher among Indigenous children than non-Indigenous children.

Through the National Partnership on Indigenous Early Childhood Development (IECDNP), governments recognise that a shared commitment to improvements in Indigenous child mortality requires better access to antenatal care, teenage reproductive and sexual health services, child and maternal health services and integrated child and family services which focus on quality early learning, child care and family support. As a result, the IECDNP has three elements:

- Element 1: establishing 38 Children and Family Centres (CFCs) across Australia, in areas with high Indigenous populations and high levels of disadvantage.
- Element 2: increasing access to antenatal care, pre-pregnancy, and teenage sexual and reproductive health programs by Indigenous young people.
- Element 3: increasing access to, and use of, maternal and child health services by Indigenous families.

DEEWR manages Element 1, with state and territory governments taking the lead on implementation. Elements 2 and 3 are managed by DoHA.

Element 1 builds on work by jurisdictions to expand integrated ECEC services, including antenatal, child and maternal health, parenting and family support and early learning and child care services, available at the one location to help ensure families receive the support they need.

High quality services – workforce

Recognising that a well trained workforce is essential to delivering high quality ECEC services and achieving the best outcomes for children was a key component of COAG's agreement to a national quality agenda for early childhood education and care.

The National Quality Framework and National Quality Standard took effect on 1 January 2012 with the aim of providing children with higher quality care. Requirements such as qualification, educator-to-child ratios and other key staffing arrangements will be phased in between 2012 and 2020.

While all governments are taking action around workforce, there are still challenges to be overcome. There has been a substantial increase in the number of qualified ECEC educators in recent years, with the 2010 ECEC Workforce Census showing that almost 80 per cent of staff in long day care settings now have a relevant qualification. Nevertheless, the Government recognises that the new National Quality Standard will require further adjustment by the sector over time.

In addition to state and territory initiatives, the Government has provided funding for a number of initiatives to train and retain a quality ECEC workforce. These include:

- \$53.9 million (2008-09 to 2011-12) to create additional Commonwealth supported university places for students wishing to undertake early childhood education qualifications, which started with 500 places in 2009 and rose to 1500 additional ongoing places in 2011.
- \$12.4 million (2008-09 to 2011-12) to reduce by about half the HECS-HELP debt of early childhood education teachers who work in areas of high need based on postcode location.
- \$115 million (2008-09 to 2013-14) to support over 8,000 people per year, including existing child care educators, to gain a Diploma and Advanced Diploma in Children's Services.
- \$9.2 million over four years (2011-12 to 2014-15) to improve the quality and uptake of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) assessments for early childhood educators through:
 - development of new national assessment tools for Certificate III, Diploma and Advanced Diploma in Children's services
 - training for 600 existing RPL assessors in the use of the tool
 - grants of up to \$1125 for rural and remote early childhood workers to contribute to out of pocket expenses associated with accessing RPL assessments.
- \$59.4 million over four years from 2011-12 under the BBF Quality Measure, to raise the quality of BBF services by increasing the qualifications of existing staff to Certificate III and/or Diploma in Children's Services.

Further information about these initiatives can be found at http://www.deewr.gov.au/Earlychildhood/Policy_Agenda/EarlyChildhoodWorkforce

In addition, the Government recently announced it would commit up to \$10 million from the National Workforce Development Fund to support existing and new workers in the early childhood sector enhance their skill levels through formal training. More information on this initiative will be available in early 2012.

A repository of Commonwealth, state and territory government initiatives available to assist early childhood educators attain a Children's Services qualification will be available on the DEEWR website in February 2012.

The Government is also working with states and territories to finalise a National Early Years Workforce Strategy which will provide a framework for future effort to support the ECEC workforce. The strategy is expected to be considered by the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs in early 2012.

Work is also underway to help early childhood educators develop the skills needed to recognise the early signs of mental health issues.⁵ DEEWR is managing a small project in 2011-12 investigating options for enhancing mental health and wellbeing competencies and professional practices in early childhood vocational education and training and early childhood teacher qualifications. The project will be completed in 2012.

Supporting inclusion of children with special needs in ECEC

While the inclusion of children with special needs in ECEC services is primarily the responsibility of state and territory governments and FaHCSIA, DEEWR provides support to ECEC services through the Inclusion and Professional Support Program (IPSP) to promote and maintain high quality care and inclusion for all children in eligible child care services. The IPSP has a number of discrete elements. These are described below.

Inclusion Support Program

The Inclusion Support Program aims to support ECEC services to remove the barriers to access for children with additional needs through the provision of inclusion support. Children with additional needs include children with disability and Indigenous children. Inclusion support is provided through Inclusion Support Agencies (ISAs), which manage a network of Inclusion Support Facilitators that provide practical advice and support to assist child care services to build their capacity and access training, Flexible Support Funding and the Inclusion Support Subsidy (ISS).

The ISS is a contribution to the costs associated with employing an additional educator for services with a child or children with ongoing high support needs,

⁵ Some of these initiatives are managed by DoHA, for example, KidsMatter Early Childhood, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander KidsMatter Early Childhood and KidsMatter Primary, in conjunction with a range of organisations.

or, for home based care, provides a capacity payment in recognition of the impact of this on an educator/carer.

The ISA may also recommend that services access resources, such as bicultural support and specialist equipment, which are administered by Professional Support Coordinators, to better facilitate a child's inclusion in a service.

Professional Support Program

The Professional Support Program (PSP) provides professional development and support to build the skills of the child care workforce to enable it to provide high quality child care. Under the Professional Support aspect of the program, funding is provided for a national network of Professional Support Coordinators (PSCs) and Indigenous Professional Support Units (IPSUs).

PSCs and IPSUs facilitate professional development that is based on evidence and good practice to support eligible child care service educators, carers and managers to provide quality child care for all children. One objective of the PSCs is to provide professional development to support the inclusion of children with additional needs.

In addition to professional development for ECEC staff in mainstream child care services, the IPSUs support the staff and managing bodies in Indigenous focussed BBF services to provide quality environments through facilitating professional development and providing guidance and support. IPSUs also advise PSCs on culturally appropriate professional support that meets the needs of eligible child care services with Indigenous staff or children. Part of this assistance incorporates supporting the inclusion of children from diverse backgrounds, including Indigenous children, children with disability and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Australian Early Development Index

In 2008 COAG endorsed the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) as a national progress measure of early childhood development. The AEDI is a measure of how young children are developing in different communities across Australia in five developmental domains: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills (school based); and communication skills and general knowledge. These five developmental domains are closely linked to the predictors of good adult health, education and social outcomes.

The AEDI was first conducted nationally in 2009 and data will be collected every three years. In 2009 about 97.5 per cent of the estimated five year old population was interviewed in their first year of school. Teachers completing the checklist recorded whether each child had special needs (physical, intellectual or medical needs). They also recorded whether they believed that the child required further assessment.

As a population measure, the AEDI examines early childhood development across the whole community, providing a snapshot of how children in the local area have developed by the time they start school. These results can help

governments and communities understand what is working well and what needs to be improved or developed to better support children and their families. Together with other socio-demographic and community information, the AEDI results are a powerful tool for influencing planning and policy around early childhood development. The AEDI data complements other nationally and locally available data and can assist Australian Government early childhood policy and program development in areas such as education, health, community services and Indigenous issues.

Governments at all levels across Australia have been using the data from the 2009 collection to inform early childhood development policy and practice:

- DEEWR has used the data to assist with the identification of new sites for the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters.
- FaHCSIA has used the AEDI to select Communities for Children sites and will be linking the AEDI to records in Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (where the ages/school levels are appropriate) to provide an external measure of outcomes and school environment.
- The Australian Institute for Health and Welfare has included AEDI data in the 2011 Children's Headline Indicator report.

Other examples of state/territory government initiatives include:

- The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is working with local councils to deliver community forums where AEDI data is presented alongside other complementary information. These forums are specifically for early childhood services, community partnerships and local government planners to promote outcomes.
- The South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services has engaged an epidemiologist to look at AEDI results and regional variations between children diagnosed with special needs and referrals required (informing policy issues on unmet demand for early intervention services).
- The Australian Capital Territory Department of Housing and Community Services has used the AEDI results, in conjunction with other data, to inform development of parenting programs across the ACT.

Support for children at school

The Government is working to improve educational outcomes for students with disability and additional learning needs, including students with FASD.

The Government provides approximately \$65.6 billion over the 2009-12 period to state and territory government and non-government education authorities to

support all students under the National Education Agreement and the Smarter Schools National Partnership Agreements.⁶

Students who have medical, developmental and psychological conditions may need additional support to enable them to engage in learning on the same basis as all other students. Education authorities administer funding in their jurisdictions and have the flexibility to determine how best to allocate resources and support services required to meet the needs of schools and their students.

Disability Standards for Education Review

The Disability Standards for Education 2005 (the Standards) describe the obligations of schools to provide the necessary adjustments to support students with additional needs. This support may be in the form of healthcare support, learning support or a combination of both.

The Standards were formulated under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* and are reviewed every five years to determine whether they continue to be effective and remain the most efficient mechanism for achieving the objectives of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.

The Standards are being reviewed and it is expected that the Review's report will be completed early in 2012.

Trial of the model for collecting nationally consistent data on school students with disability

In 2011, all Australian governments and the Catholic and independent education sectors worked together to trial a model to gather comparable data about school students with disability and, most importantly, the level of adjustment provided to students with disability.

The trial of the model took place in a nationally representative sample of 150 schools across Australia in each education sector in all states and territories. Participating schools were selected by the relevant education authority.

Students with FASD that require ongoing long-term support, and have been diagnosed by a recognised practitioner or validated by an authorised representative of the education authority as having a disability under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, were included in the trial.

The evidence requirements are necessary to ensure national consistency, authenticity and quality assurance in collecting data on school students with disability.

Following this trial, a working group is now developing an approach for national implementation.

⁶ The Government has entered into three Smarter Schools National Partnership Agreements with state and territory governments aimed at addressing disadvantage, supporting teachers and school leaders and improving literacy and numeracy. For more information see the [Smarter Schools](#) website.

More Support for Students with Disability

The *More Support for Students with Disability* initiative will provide \$200 million in additional funding to government and non-government education authorities to support their work with students with disability and/or learning difficulties.

Education authorities will be able to use funding to increase support for students with disability by building the capacity of schools and teachers to better meet their individual needs. This will be accomplished through selection of a range of activities that may include the provision of coordinated services by health specialists within a school (e.g. occupational therapy), adapted curriculum tailored to students' needs based on the latest expert advice and provision of assistive technology to support students' learning in the classroom. Services will be delivered in the 2012 and 2013 school years.

Students with disability will benefit from this funding that will provide real and tangible improvements to their individual learning experiences. Parents and families will also benefit from knowing their child's school will be better equipped to assist them to achieve their educational potential.