

VECIM

(Victorian Early Childhood Intervention Managers)

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Commonwealth Senate Enquiry into Special Education Program

This response is made on behalf of the Victorian funded agencies through VECIM (Victorian Early Childhood Intervention Managers). VECIM is a voluntary alliance of managers and coordinators of funded agencies providing information, peer support, training and combined action as required. It is associated with the Early Childhood Intervention Association Inc. VECIM frequently acts as spokes-organisation on behalf of the day-to-day service operation. It is critically important to agencies that the Commonwealth Funding remains quarantined, and the funding or the quarantined proportion, is increased significantly. There are many factors that combine to increase the pressures on agency funding that need consideration by the Commonwealth.

These include:

- **CORE FUNDING** Agencies are in the peculiar position that no funding body has primary responsibility for contributing to these services. Like the Commonwealth, at present all funding bodies regard themselves as providing supplementary funding only.
 - There is now substantial evidence of the critical importance of the early childhood period as a foundation and platform for later health, behaviour and learning (Rima Shore, 1998, Hommell, 2000) and of the efficacy of early childhood intervention (Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000) Evidence indicates that early childhood intervention services make an average increase of half a standard deviation in skills in communication, thinking and movement.
 - The combined funding from the Federal and State governments provides an average of approximately 1.2 hours of service per week per year. This includes all services - all special education, all therapies and all family support. Since the children have complex needs which impact on family functioning significantly this is insufficient for their requirements.
- **MANDATED SERVICES** In the USA the power of early childhood intervention to provide a sound base for life through impacts on children's health, educational and behavioural development has been acknowledged for over a decade through legislation mandating the provision of these services by the States and tying funding to accreditation of services and service elements. The

Commonwealth of Australia has a history of providing leadership to demonstrate the value of initiatives to the States. Legislation to mandate the right of children to these services would acknowledge their importance in the children's and families' lives appropriately.

- **SERVICE WAITING PERIODS** Agencies are not able to provide places to all applicants within a reasonable time period. According to the Victorian Department of Human Services in March 2000 (the lowest time for agency waiting lists as children transfer to commence school and to other services at the end of the year) the waiting list for places was approximately a quarter of the funded places. By the end of the year it is at least twice as long. Many children are waiting 6-18 months for service. It is unacceptable for children and families to wait – for families because waiting increases confusion, distress and anxiety and for children because they lose the opportunity for establishing optimal neural networks and for developing skills.
- **STAFFING** Agencies are unable to attract and retain staff because they are paid at present up to 25% below others undertaking similar work in hospitals and similar settings and have no career structure for senior staff. The State government is recognising the need for salary equity but agencies have core funding from both the Commonwealth and State. They need complementary increases from the Commonwealth, at least. Otherwise, the agencies only option in appropriately paying staff would be to decrease services to clients.
- **OPTIMAL SERVICES** It has not yet been established what services are critical to the progress of children and families. Agencies are attempting to experiment with changing service models, intensity, location and timing to establish what combinations are optimal for different client groups. This is greatly hampered by the paucity of funding available. This stage is essential to the ultimate development of the most effective and efficient services possible. Whatever support services are optimal the goals are for family well-being and children's competence, self-regulation and inclusion.
- **PRESCHOOL INCLUSION** The Commonwealth CSEP program provides for a maximum of 4 hours of integration aide support for children with severe disabilities attending preschool. Until 2003 in Victoria when the State government will add to funding, this means that many children were not able to attend preschool for the full 10 hours unless the preschool was able to fund raise the difference. Any advice to the preschool staff or aide must be provided from the agencies' 1.2 hours of service per week.

We would be happy to provide more detailed commentary about any of these issues should they be required.

Janene Swalwell
Convenor