



**PRESCHOOL DIRECTORS
ASSOCIATION OF
SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

**Preschool Directors Association of South Australia
Submission Two to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood
Education and Care**

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Preschool Directors Association
Education Development Centre

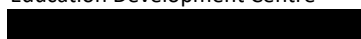


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Introduction

The Preschool Directors Association of South Australia (**PDA**) is the peak body for early childhood education leaders in South Australia working within government sites. We have been supporting Preschool Directors for 25 years. PDA is a not for profit, membership-based association. PDA works collaboratively with other public education associations and with the Department for Education (**DfE**) directorates to advocate for government preschool leaders and to contribute to the development of DfE policy.

PDA welcomed the Interim Report of the Royal Commission into ECEC and appreciate the opportunity to provide further feedback on the recommendations contained within the report, and to offer further information.

Our second submission responds to recommendations made in the Interim Report of the Royal Commission into ECEC, offers further thoughts on the delivery of out of preschool hours care for three- and four-year-old children and provides submissions for consideration in relation to the early childhood workforce.

In preparing this submission we have consulted with our members, preschool staff, and early childhood experts across the state. Consultation occurred through online forums, face to face interviews, site visits, written feedback, and ongoing engagement with preschool leaders. PDA has also connected with early childhood networks across Australia to understand how three-year-old preschool has been implemented around Australia and to explore benefits, issues, and concerns with their models of preschool.

Government preschools within South Australia

As an association of, and for, government preschool leaders we are clear in our position that government preschools have capacity to deliver universal 3- and 4-year-old preschool. We believe that as a State we must continue to build upon the foundation of the public preschool system. This is particularly so where there is strong evidence that quality preschool has been, and is continuing to be, delivered over a sustained period (as stated in the interim report at page 90). The purpose of preschool education is clear, and government preschools are clearly focussed on achieving the best outcomes possible for children's learning, development, and wellbeing.

A strong public provision of quality preschool future proofs access to preschool for all South Australian children, without the concern of market and quality changes in the childcare sector. Government preschools are firmly focussed on advocacy for each child's learning, development, and wellbeing. They address complex issues with families when there are concerns and provide support and referral to additional services for the child and family. While there is no doubt examples of quality private long day care programs or early learning centres exist, the provision of a preschool program within the context of a long day care session, or in an environment where financial considerations could influence delivery, are intrinsically less able to achieve these aims. Whilst PDA is not advocating for three-year-old preschool to only be provided by government preschools, the maintenance of strong and high performing government preschools creates an important competitive incentive for private operators to seek to match the quality that government preschools provide.

Government preschools in South Australia are embedded within the public education system and benefit from well-established networks of leaders, teachers, support staff and services, focussed on quality education from preschool through to tertiary education. This connection between government preschools and the schooling sector is highly valued by families and preschool staff.

The State government should ensure that government preschools are well supported to maintain high quality preschool programs, that are led by registered teachers with a four-year tertiary degree, to ensure a benchmark for quality preschool provision is maintained within a mixed market approach to preschool delivery. Government preschools should be considered as sites of research for best practice in preschool delivery.

Response to Interim Report Recommendations

Recommendation 2

Preschools can provide a 'backbone' service to enhance access to a holistic range of child and family services, however, an initial focus should be on establishing high quality preschool, so it has strength and the characteristics to support all children across all areas of early childhood development. We strongly believe that families should be able to access

preschools that suit each family's needs and interests. This should mean that if a family chooses to send their child to a government preschool from 3 years old, they should be able to do so, regardless of their previous or future use of long day care.

Recommendation 3

PDA is engaging with interest in the development of a preschool outcomes measurement and fully support the notion that such a measure is not published at a service level. Data analysis should inform the types of support that all preschools need to continuously improve and achieve good outcomes for children's learning, development, and wellbeing. The preschool outcomes measurement must consider the value that preschool attendance offers all children, and acknowledge the outcomes against social, cultural, and economic status of communities to identify communities that can benefit from additional preschool attendance and other wrap around services.

Recommendation 4

PDA does not support investment in trials of early learning programs delivered by Diploma qualified educators. Whilst PDA acknowledge the current workforce challenges, reducing the level of skill and education of preschool educators cannot be the answer. Instead, workforce retention and attraction measures should be fast tracked, and additional supports and resourcing put in place to keep quality educators engaged in the sector, and to attract new educators into the sector.

If a reduction in qualifications was to be introduced, rather than implementing the practice and then tracking quality outcomes, information relating to the quality and outcomes of these programs could be readily captured by analysis of current models of long day care operating in South Australia.

The recommended approach undermines the professional standards and quality that appropriately qualified and experienced preschool educators provide. It devalues the complex and highly skilled work of our current cohort of teachers and leaders in preschools and should not be adopted or considered unless significant evidence of a positive educational outcome is shown as a likely result. PDA firmly believes that we cannot risk experimenting on our children with what, in any reasonable view would reduce, rather than increase, the quality of preschool education in South Australia.

Recommendation 9

PDA support children at risk of development delay in accessing additional preschool hours and believe that this should also extend to children at risk of abuse and neglect. However, more information will be required to understand the implications of such a policy in the implementation phase. For example, in areas where capacity is limited by high enrolments, a priority of access would need to ensure that fair access to the first fifteen hours of preschool is provided for all children before additional hours could be provided. It should also be noted that while attendance at preschool is beneficial, it is not a replacement for therapy. A current frustration amongst PDA's members is the severe underfunding of

support workers and therapists for children at risk of developmental delays, with our members reporting having to lobby and fight to access even a minor level of support for severely developmentally delayed children, often resulting in such a little resourcing that it barely justifies their efforts. For preschool to be able to provide a quality learning experience for all children, well-funded supports will need to extend to any additional hours of preschool for children with additional needs and be available with a level of access commensurate to need.

Recommendation 10

PDA agrees that ongoing research, monitoring, and data collection can inform and enhance preschool outcomes for all children and assist in future planning for preschool delivery. Attention must be paid to ensuring that these processes do not inhibit innovative approaches to preschool curriculum or add unnecessary workload to preschool leaders, teams, and systems. Often the structure of preschool provision is a result of capacity limits, staffing availability and the requirement to allow for flexible working arrangements. Accordingly, mandating a particular mode of delivery across sites will create an additional strain that will need to be addressed. Additional workforce will need to be employed to support ongoing research and data collection and strategies employed in this area should be co-designed with preschool leaders.

Recommendation 11

PDA believes the definition of preschool currently being used, that is, delivered by a registered early childhood teacher is insufficient and does not acknowledge other elements that contribute to a high-quality preschool program. Our current government preschools offer much more than a teacher delivering the program and layered supports. Some of the elements that contribute to a quality preschool include:

- a higher ratio of registered, four-year degree qualified teachers to teach and lead preschools.
- educational leadership provided by an onsite registered teacher who guides the team in developing and implementing a preschool program that enhances each child's learning, development, and wellbeing.
- Preschool leaders who drive reflective practice so that multiple perspectives, current research, contextual information about each child, family, group, and community contribute to curriculum decision making.
- Preschool leaders who use an evidence-base to lead the team in developing curriculum.
- Preschool leaders who ensure the team and preschool community develop a shared understanding of their purpose and identify shared goals and strategies to achieve that purpose.
- Preschool leaders who embed a culture of learning and ongoing improvement through critical reflection with their teams, children, families and with other educational leaders.
- oversight of site leadership, management, and educational programs through a local education team.

- system support for ongoing professional development, educational leadership, capacity building, administration, and human resourcing, ICT support and facility management.
- strong connections with primary schools to support continuity of learning.
- programs that focus on educational outcomes for young children.
- Teachers and support staff who work together to identify each child's strengths, interests, and potential barriers to participation in the learning program and design and implement strategies to ensure each children learning, and development is supported and progresses over time.

In addition to the above, preschool leaders frequently act as advocates for the community they serve and offer assistance in making connections to allied health professionals (often in circumstances of service scarcity). This generally involves preschool leaders working outside of hours, and taking on duties beyond those for which they are employed, due to their commitment and care for the children in their care. This additional work should not only be encouraged, but acknowledged, rewarded, and appropriately compensated.

Recommendation 11b & 11c

PDA acknowledges the early identification of a child's developmental needs can improve outcomes for children and therefore supports the recommendation of child development checks being carried out in preschool sites. Information gained from these checks should be shared with families and the preschool to support a partnership approach between families and the preschool. Of equal importance is what happens after the development check and the identification of clear pathways for referral to support and timely access to specialists and allied health will be critical in intervening to promote children's development and wellbeing and capacity to engage with the preschool curriculum. Timely and effective and efficient specialist support services, including that of special education teachers, allied health and additional staffing is essential to ensuring each child can access the preschool curriculum.

In some instances, intervention strategies being delivered on a preschool site can be challenging if there are different theoretical approaches being applied to interventions. At times there can be complications in managing consent from all families for allied health staff to work within the group setting. Additionally, in some sites physical space will not be adequate for onsite assessments and interventions.

Recommendation 12

Educators' capability building as a standalone model of support and inclusion for children with additional needs contributes to work complexity and workload for educator teams. Timely access to special educators and allied health staff to assist with observations, referrals, and planning for inclusion of children with special needs is critical to supporting preschool teams to ensure each child can access the preschool curriculum.

It should be recognised that Preschool educators are expert in the field of education and child development, and that in developing and implementing curriculum, they are making

use of these skills. To expect these professionals to additionally provide therapy that, in itself, is a specialty requiring intensive study, is likely to result in not only a poor level of therapy, but also a diminution of the quality of education that is being provided.

Consideration could be given to expanding the Preschool Speech and Language programs offered in some government preschools that see a teacher and speech therapist working alongside each other in a mainstream preschool setting to work with individual and small groups of children with delays in speech and language. It could also be useful to consider replicating this type of focussed small group preschool offering with other disciplines, including occupational therapy and physiotherapy.

Cross government agreements that enable allied health professionals to be employed in the health sector and work part of their time in preschools could increase access to allied health professionals within education settings while providing the clinical support these professionals require.

The state government must ensure that processes for seeking support for individuals and groups of children is not onerous and should acknowledge teacher professional judgement about how a child is managing within the preschool and what types of support may be helpful.

Recommendation 13

PDA supports an increase in resources to the Education Standards Board (ESB) and recommend that this contributes to improving the range of qualifications and experience of authorised officers. Teachers with experience in preschool settings are rarely attracted to these roles due to the significant difference in salary. Authorised officers who understand the context of the setting they are assessing is critical to fair and accurate assessment and rating processes. Authorised officers should, at minimum, hold qualifications in the setting they are seeking to assess, as to do otherwise is unfair to all parties.

A review of the legislation and processes of the ESB and how it interacts, assesses, and rates services that are part of an established system (such as government preschools) could reduce regulatory burden on individual sites with the Approved Provider assuring ESB about systems and policies in place and how compliance with these are monitored, rather than individual services needing to replicate these at a site level.

Recommendation 18a

Families value the offering of government preschools, and it is to be expected that they will continue to do so and will want access to government preschool for their three-year-old. All families should have choice of which preschool provider to select for their 3- and 4-year-old children to ensure that children are enrolled in a service which meets the needs of each child and supports each family to manage the range of responsibilities they hold in a manner that respects their personal values. PDA fear that the introduction of this

recommendation would result in an incentivisation in families keeping their children at long day care in preference to government preschools, thus disincentivising uptake in government preschools. We also note that Recommendation 18a somewhat conflicts with Recommendation 2d.

The further difficulty with the model proposed by this recommendation is that it will likely create a stratification of the three-year-old cohort into those whose parents can afford long day care (who will continue in that day care setting) and both those who cannot afford long day care, and those who can afford individualised care options. This is likely to create high concentrations of disadvantage in certain cohorts, as opposed to the current model where there is a mix of socioeconomic and developmental levels in each site. The loss of this mix will be to the detriment of all and could create an unhelpful divide between preschools and schools.

Recommendation 19

The agreed markers of preschool quality for South Australian preschools must address the quality of the educational program and pedagogical practice along with structural elements that contribute to quality. The state government should ensure that the quality markers address the support needed for preschool teams, including how preschool teachers and leaders are supported to engage with colleagues, within their own site and across sites, to support and grow the profession and build shared understandings of what high quality preschool is. All preschool teachers and leaders should be provided with opportunities to regularly reflect on their preschool program and practice with knowledgeable and experienced preschool teachers and leaders. Adherence to quality measures will need to be monitored to ensure the desired outcomes for children are achieved. In addition, monitoring the quality and financial accountability of the preschool provision in non-government sites will be required to ensure state funds for preschool provision allocated to for profit providers, are invested in delivery of a high-quality preschool program and support services and are not used as a tool to increase profit.

Preschool curriculum as a marker of quality

Preschool curriculum is a key element of effective preschool education, and as such should influence decisions about individual service capacity to deliver a quality preschool program. Curriculum development is a complex task and requires high cognitive skill, interpersonal skills, academic and curriculum knowledge, and professional judgement to be considered high quality and to be effective.

Preschool curriculum in government preschools is created by qualified, registered, early childhood teachers and is based on interconnected elements including:

- Contextual curriculum development guided by the principles, practices, and outcomes of the Early Years Learning Framework, supported by critical reflection, professional development, current and emerging research and engagement with colleagues and families.

- Use of evidence-based pedagogy to inform curriculum development and teaching strategies, including the review and adoption of best practice models of education within South Australia, other Australian jurisdictions, and high performing overseas education systems.
- Holding high expectations for each child’s learning, development, and wellbeing.
- Using a child centred approach.
- Understanding theories of play and how play supports children’s learning, development, and wellbeing.
- Building on each child’s prior experience and current understandings.
- Providing opportunities to challenge, extend and deepen each child’s understandings, knowledge, and capabilities.
- Promoting in each child a self-identity as a capable learner and fostering dispositions that support learning and skill acquisition.
- Fostering a sense of belonging for each child and family.
- Promoting learning as a group and within a group.
- Valuing each child’s uniqueness, and the richness of diversity this brings to the preschool setting, the community, and the learning experiences of children.
- Supporting children to develop executive functions, including self and co-regulation, vital for relating to others, decision making and problem solving.
- Offering children experiences to support their successful transition to school settings and celebrating who they are now.
- Adults taking responsibility for ensuring responsive and reciprocal relationships are promoted and developed between each child and their teachers and with their peers.
- Teachers recognising that learning is dynamic and holistic.
- Teachers intentionally designing learning environments to:
 - ensure accessibility;
 - be culturally inclusive and responsive;
 - foster children’s curiosity and engagement with learning experiences;
 - promote understanding of and engagement with the natural world;
 - support children to be active participants in the preschool and their community;
 - develop agency; and
 - develop a positive learner identity.
- Ensuring each child’s learning is monitored and documented in a meaningful way to inform a responsive approach to curriculum development.
- Preparing a summative assessment of each child’s learning, development and wellbeing throughout their preschool years and sharing this with families and schools to support transition to school.

Recommendation 25

PDA supports additional funding to preschools in areas where there are high concentrations of developmental vulnerability to support engagement with community, encourage and support attendance and manage complex cohorts. The Government should

also consider strategies to attract and retain experienced teachers and leaders for services in areas of higher disadvantage and in regional and remote areas.

Recommendation 29

In areas of high developmental vulnerability, integrated service hubs (under the leadership of a registered early childhood teacher) can provide a holistic and proactive response to support children's learning, development, and wellbeing. PDA has a strong preference that these are government sites and that where possible these sites be co-located on (but not managed by) school sites to ensure continuity of service provision, facilitate continuity of learning, accessibility and to enable resource and information sharing across the site.

Workforce (Recommendations 5, 15 & 32)

The education sector, and early childhood education is experiencing both workforce shortages and retention of experienced staff and leaders due to systemically unsustainable excessive workloads. These factors combine to deter new entrants to the workforce and lead to current employees leaving the profession. Workforce shortages and workload both require immediate strategies to be put in place to maintain and grow the workforce without the untenable risks of reducing qualification requirements for educators.

Workforce stability in the government preschool sector can be enhanced through increasing the number of permanent positions available, addressing workload concerns, and developing strategies to support casual, contract and relief staff to match with preschools and to be supported in their professional development.

Of significant importance is the lack of recognition of the role of a preschool leader being comparable to that of a primary or secondary principal. The current expectation on government preschool leaders to manage all administrative functions associated with a standalone site, lead their teams providing both pedagogical guidance and general management, and engage in a full teaching load is a fact seldom recognised. Preschool leaders in government sites should be appropriately remunerated in line with their primary and secondary school equivalents and be provided with similar levels of administrative support and teaching resources so that they can fulfil their roles to the greatest of their potential.

PDA supports the development and recognition of Birth to Five years initial teacher education courses in South Australia provided that such a course:

- Has a minimum duration of four years
- Students meet the graduate level of the professional teacher standards and can be registered with the Teachers Registration Board
- The degree maintains its status and parity as a quality teacher education program in line with primary and secondary teacher training.

PDA would support a review of teacher training courses to increase the practical experience students receive and enable them to 'earn while they learn'. Sites that provide such practical experience should be appropriately resourced to account for the additional workload that this will entail.

The State government should work with the Commonwealth, Australian Institute for Teacher and School Leadership (AITSL) and the Universities to understand the barriers for students selecting and completing teaching degrees, including early childhood degrees. A review of the LANTITE requirements should commence to ensure it is fit for purpose or if there are alternative methods of assessing literacy and numeracy standards for tertiary students.

Capacity should be built into the TAFE Diploma and Certificate 3 Children's Services courses to support students to gain practical experience within government preschool settings to build the early childhood worker (ECW) and support staff pool and ensure ECW's have the skills required to work within the preschool system. Pathways for ECW and Diploma/Certificate qualified educators to transition into a recognised early childhood teaching degree should be promoted.

Out of hours care for government preschools

PDA acknowledges that workforce participation of parents sometimes makes access to government preschool challenging. Despite this, many families find a way to access government preschool for their four-year-old. We believe this indicates a high degree of trust in government preschools. Families value the educational program provided by government preschools and the connection between government preschools and primary schools.

Out of school hours care (OSHC) services in some sites do cater to preschool children, and this can be beneficial in supporting children as they transition from preschool to school. In the main this has occurred where preschools are co-located with school sites or a physically proximate to a school site. Most physical spaces in current OSHC settings are not appropriate for children aged three to five years and supervision and interaction with a broad age range of children in a recreation program is challenging.

OSHC staff are not likely to be qualified to work with children under 5 years and already find it difficult to staff their services. Some preschools have trialled models of OSHC for preschool within their site, either by providing it themselves or negotiating with a local school to provide an outreach OSHC in the preschool. These programs have not been maintained partly due to regulatory requirements, workload issues for leaders, and lack of take up from preschool families.

PDA members expressed an interest in exploring ways to offer out of preschool hours care within a preschool setting to support children's participation in government preschool but noted several barriers to implementation of this including:

- Potential to increase workload and responsibilities for preschool leaders
- Legislative barriers that would see a separate service approval required with its own governance structures and potentially a second nominated supervisor for the out of hours care program
- Securing the workforce
- Employees working across the preschool and the Out of preschool hours would need to be employed by two different employers and result in tax implications for these staff
- Financial viability if utilisation is low or not stable
- Providing physical space for the program without compromising space for preschool teams to plan together and develop and maintain learning environments
- Transporting preschool children to another preschool/school for OSHC requires significant risk management and additional staffing.

Conclusion

South Australia has a good opportunity to embed high quality preschool as part of each child's education pathway from birth to adulthood and must ensure that preschool is maintained as a right for every South Australian child now and into the future. Government preschools must be supported to provide leadership and quality benchmarks for educational practice in the early years.

Despite current workforce shortages efforts must be made to establish and maintain a highly qualified and experienced workforce of preschool teachers and leaders who have equivalent status and remuneration with primary and secondary school teachers and leaders.

PDA is happy to continue our engagement with the Royal Commission into ECEC and with the implementation phase of the roll out of 3- and 4-year-old preschool to all children in South Australia.



President
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