

SUBMISSION TO ROYAL COMMISSION INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

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via submission portal

Australian Community Children's Services South Australia (ACCS SA) is pleased to present the following submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

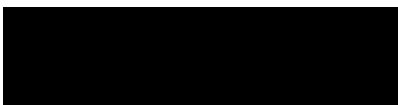
ACCS SA represents South Australia's not-for-profit community owned children's services and those who support the right of children to access these services. ACCS SA builds on the strong history of the South Australian Association of Community Based Children's Services (SAACBCS).

Community children's services are operated as social enterprises, delivering high quality financially viable services which deliver public infrastructure for the long term; they are operated by a range of not-for-profit providers including local government, churches, educational institutions, parent associations/co-operatives and other non-government organisations.

They include centre based early childhood education and care (long day care/ kindergarten/ preschool) and occasional care, outside school hours care, and home-based care such as family day care and in-home care. Community children's services include emerging models of integrated child and family centres, and flexible innovative models for rural communities and for children and families with additional needs.

These services foster children's development, support their families and build the community.

Your faithfully



Carrie Johnson
Convenor ACCS SA

Australian Community Children's Services South Australia (ACCS SA) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission which recognises the importance of the early childhood education and care sector by the current government. The services that ACCS SA represent have been providing high quality education and care to South Australian children for decades.

We welcome conversations and policies to provide increased accessibility to quality education and care, particularly for families experiencing vulnerability. We have advocated for this for many years.

Proposals:

- Based on extensive research the optimal time is a minimum of 12-15 hours per week delivered over 2 equal consecutive days for all 3-year-old South Australian children, with additional evidence that children experiencing vulnerability will access more hours.
- The Preschool Reform Agreement is extended to include a broader range of service types including long day care, with equal funding to all service types.
- Provide all Registered Early Childhood Teachers, regardless of the service type they are employed in, with the same level of professional development and support opportunities provided to employees in the Department for Education.
- The State Government should be responsible for 3-year-old preschool, as they are with 4-year-old preschool, while the fees for long day care should remain the responsibility of the Federal Government and families.
- South Australian Government provide funding investment in capital upgrades to support the implementation of the 3-year-old and 4-year-old preschool in long day care services.

It is ACCS view that every 3-year-old child in South Australia should have access to a fully funded high quality education and care program regardless of ability, family experience socio-economic status, geo-location or serviced type.

Currently, 4-year-old preschool is delivered universally in South Australia. This is offered via Government funded preschool or Universal Access in an early childhood setting with a degree qualified teacher delivering the program, and our view is that 3-year-old preschool should be no different.

An extension of the Preschool Reform Agreement funding to include other service types could support the provision of 3-year-old preschool in a range of early childhood settings including long day care. Under the current funding structure, non-Government sites are unable to compete when families make the choice to move children to department sites, based on financial considerations.

ACCS SA strongly recommends a review of the funding structure to support families to have genuine choice about where their child attends pre-school. This will support children and families to maintain relationships with existing services, educators, and peers, thereby minimising the number of transitions that occur in a young child's life, which is disruptive and can negatively impact on their health and wellbeing.

The equal funding across service types will support the parity of Early Childhood Teachers' salaries and conditions across the sector, this in turn will encourage increased stability of the workforce for services and provide early childhood teachers with choices in their employment. Early Childhood would be viewed as a viable option for a career path for pre-

service teachers, which anecdotally it currently is not. The school system is the preferred career path which is reflective of the limited time allocated in the qualification to the importance and benefits of education for children aged under 5 years.

With equal access to professional learning, mentoring and leadership programs, teachers will be able to maintain their knowledge relevant to the sector and child development and it will support the provision of programs and practices based on research and evidence. It has been shown that passionate highly qualified educators contribute to the successful outcomes for children, removing the barrier of access to quality opportunities is beneficial for all.

Highly skilled and knowledgeable educators who are intentional and responsive in their pedagogy are key to the success of a high quality program. They understand how children develop, support each child's learning through scaffolding, and extend children's thinking through play as well as through the learning experiences themselves.

A curriculum that provides holistic learning opportunities is the foundation for early learning and develops the dispositions and skills to support children to become successful lifelong learners. A play-based curriculum provides opportunities for children to work together with their peers in play-based learning situations, to develop key skills such as communication, problem solving, negotiation, emotional regulation and empathy.

Inclusive play-based learning for 3-year-olds provides them with opportunities for risk-taking and challenge every day. It supports children to develop their capacity to self-assess risk, for persistence, intrinsic motivation and mastery of skills. It supports positive and responsive relationships between educators and children, creating a balance between child-initiated and educator-initiated play and learning, including inquiry based learning, supporting children's strengths and interests and viewing the child as capable and competent with existing skills and abilities.

For some three-year-olds it may be their first experience in an early childhood setting. Providing a space with educators who create a safe, nurturing and supportive environment will underpin the success of the child. The curriculum will support children to learn how to negotiate and participate in the world around them, to learn, practice and refine their social skills, while developing their sense of agency and resilience.

To support the success of the learner, the learning environments should be rich in language and 2-way conversations. In addition to having access to the developmentally appropriate physical environments which cater for 3-year-olds, there will be a responsibility to meet their needs for toileting and nappy changes, and to support children to advocate for their sleep and rest needs.

Educators who understand how to support a 3-year-old's emotional development and how they learn to recognise, understand and regulate their emotions, will be important to the success of the curriculum. Educators must be empathetic and have the ability to support children to work through conflict together, and to be consistent in their approach.

A challenge faced by educators, particularly early in their career, is how to respond to children with challenging behaviours, so knowledge about emotional development, and the underlying reasons for the behaviour is crucial. Professional development and mentoring do support this, however more focus of the development of children under 5 within pre-service qualifications will strengthen the knowledge and capacity of recently graduated educators.

ACCS SA believes that the provision of 3-year-old preschool in a variety of settings with appropriate levels of funding through the Preschool Reform Agreement and access to further supports is possible. It will support educators in having expertise in engaging with curriculum

documents and the National Quality Framework (NQF) to support effective documentation and planning of children's current and future learning regardless of age or service type.

The model for delivery should not differ from 3-year-olds to 4-year-olds. The curriculum will differ to ensure that it is appropriate for the age and level of development of 3-year-old children. The learning opportunities for children that arise out of everyday routines such as toilet learning, mealtimes, rest and relaxation, and the ways that children can contribute within these times must be viewed as important parts of the curriculum. This is in keeping with the Early Years Learning Framework and National Quality Standard.

ACCS believes that quality should not differ for different cohorts of children, and that every child is entitled to consistently high-quality education and care regardless of age group or learning environment.

Reducing the barriers for children and families to access high quality early learning at an earlier age supports an increase in the number of children who are developmentally on track by the time they start school in South Australia, thus helping to minimise the inequalities experienced by young children and families before they have even started school.

Early intervention is acknowledged to be a highly successful strategy for achieving high quality outcomes for young children, by accessing services and support from within the early childhood setting the family chooses to use for their child.

Long day care currently provides those supports and services for all children regardless of their age, thus supporting the continuity of relationships with providers and practitioners and reducing the need for families to tell their stories repeatedly in a fragmented system. Increased connections with allied health and parenting support services operating from early childhood education and care services, will improve outcomes for both children and families, and will support the child as they move through 3-year-old and 4-year-old preschool programs.

The focus of the early years should be supporting a child's right to high quality education and care in a setting that also supports families workforce participation. The current program and operational hours provided by Department for Education sites limits, workforce participation, or results in children having to access yet another care environment in one day if before/after preschool care is not provided on site.

However, if access to 3-year-old and 4-year-old preschool were in fact universal, families could access these programs within an early childhood education and care service, thereby reducing the number of settings young children need to navigate and minimise their transitions through different settings each day or week. Increased continuity and predictability for children with familiar educators will further promote better long-term developmental outcomes.

ACCS SA's position is that:

- every child living in South Australia regardless of residential status has a right to access high quality preschool programs delivered by appropriately qualified Early Childhood Teachers.
- children in rural and remote areas have the same access to quality as their metropolitan counterparts,
- the focus is on supporting children to become lifelong learners.
- 3-year-old preschool should not be a 'push down' curriculum focussed on literacy and numeracy activities aimed at improving 'school readiness'.

Strategies for implementation to be successful across service types, beyond our proposals.

- Services to re-structure age groups from current age groups.
- Services consider operating the 3-year-old preschool within the existing environment, with a broader age range without compromising the quality of care and education all children receive.
- Review capacity of current layouts of buildings, and what resourcing would be required to change this.
- Additional space for 3-year-old and 4-year-old preschool programs to operate in, on the existing site, if possible.
- Access to resources, ensuring all environments are well resourced with age and developmentally appropriate resources.
- Full support of approved providers when considering financial implications.

Further considerations:

- If the Preschool Reform Agreement was not extended to include other service types equitably, there will be significant and devastating consequences for early childhood education and care services, who are not Department for Education sites. The removal of the 3-year-old cohort will significantly undermine the viability of early childhood education and care services, particularly those single site service providers, as there is no way to recoup the income without negatively impacting on families.
- Workforce participation will be negatively impacted, as more families juggle the limited hours of preschool versus paid hours of employment. If early childhood education and care services fail to survive and thrive, workforce participation will also be impacted negatively.
- Are the current preschool facilities adequate to provide education for 3-year-olds? Our preference would be to re-furbish and upgrade existing long day care sites to support an increase in 3-year-olds accessing the preschool program.
- How can the Early Childhood Education degrees offered by South Australian universities include more units specific to the development of under 5-year-olds? This would support preservice teachers to understand the complexities of working with a broader age group and promote the learning and development that occurs rapidly in the first 1000 days.
- Will the Teachers Registration Board acknowledge the revised degrees?
- How will the program be implemented in rural and remote parts of the state? Are they going to offer incentives for Early Childhood Teachers to move to areas of need?
- The ECEC sector have regulatory bodies that oversee the quality of programs being delivered, and whether programs are contextual to suit the service's community. This local context is a key point of difference between community-based services (which

are managed by parents, educators, and members of the local community) and other service types. Therefore, there must be improved funding and conditions for the regulatory bodies by State and Federal Governments to ensure consistent quality and strengthened outcomes for children.

- The current workforce crisis will not be 'fixed' by 2026 when the program has been announced as commencing, particularly if early childhood education and care settings are not included in the plan.
- Provision of incentives and streamlined pathways, including increased Recognition of Prior Learning for diploma qualified educators to complete an appropriate Degree, will support them to use existing knowledge and skills gained by working with the age group already. Government must work with the tertiary institutions and Universities to make this happen.
- Having set times and hours for the 3 year old preschool program will help to ensure that all children can access a consistently high-quality program delivered by a degree qualified teacher, with support from other skilled educators, for the minimum number of hours per week that research recommends to have a significant and ongoing impact on learning and development. This is different to the current model of early learning for 3 year olds in which some children may attend a large portion of their hours when the early childhood teacher is not present.
- There is significant disparity in the non-instructional-teaching time (NIT) for preschool teachers and those working in other early learning settings, due to different employment instruments, such as awards. Unfortunately, this results in huge inequities in the amount and quality of planning, documentation, engagement with families, and the ability to put in place all the learning and developmental supports for children with additional rights.
- Addressing these disparities (as well as pay & conditions) would greatly reduce the educator turnover and burn-out being experienced currently, which have such a negative effect on service, families and children.
- Employment of additional Early Childhood Teachers, or re-deploy the teachers employed within the service to different learning environments. What will be the impact on family fees?