

Key recommendations from three retired early childhood professionals to improve early childhood services

This submission is particularly relevant to the Inquiry goals of:

- Support for families in the first 1000 days
- Provision of universal quality preschool programs for 3 and 4 year olds

This information is provided by three early childhood practitioners who worked in the sector at many levels of service delivery and management for a combined total of 70 years, in many roles in many departments, including the Department for Education and Children's Services. One was the Principal writer for the 2005 Inquiry into Early Childhood Services in South Australia, two worked in the Children's Centres Implementation team, one established the Inclusive Preschool Program and one the department's Disability Discrimination Action Plans. All were involved in Equity and Social Inclusion planning, policy and programs.

We absolutely endorse the goals of *South Australia's Early Learning Strategy 2021-2023: All Young Children Thriving and Learning* which are remarkably similar to those of previous strategies and the findings of the 2005 Inquiry. However, while this indicates we are listening to families and service providers it also illustrates the degree of difficulty we have had in actually changing these services to better meet those families expressed needs.

There are major structural barriers that **must** be addressed to achieve this.

1 Create a structure that supports integrated service provision for the first 1000 days

Everyone agrees the structure and focus of early childhood services need to ensure the interests of young children and their families are at the centre of service delivery. Unfortunately this is not the case in practice. The historic development of these services within the silos of education, health, and child welfare/family support has continued to put the focus on differentiating the services families ask for and need, based on historic criteria such as hours of operation, service location, staff qualifications (a big one), criteria children must meet, criteria families must meet, model of leadership and governance, and ultimately funding responsibility (the biggest one).

Despite the theoretical acknowledgement of the importance of the first 1000 days for the child's development, the balance of service offerings and funding has remained firmly tilted towards what happens when the child reaches an age they can be eligible to attend a preschool program, at the age of four years, except for Aboriginal children and children with additional needs who may attend at three years. Aiming to expand preschool to include all three year olds will be a major benefit for many children. However this is a small win, given the 1000 days have already passed by then and we know the level of disadvantage many children and their families are experiencing in that 1000 days right now is even greater than in previous years, as their numbers and the extent of disadvantage have increased.

There have been many creative highly successful early intervention strategies for families from before birth to three years in South Australia that have come and gone, not due to a failure to deliver outcomes but the failure of governments to commit to ongoing funding and related to this,

the ability of departments to quietly cut funding for this age group in order to meet budget pressures for other age groups and services that are more visible.

2 Employ experienced early childhood practitioners as leaders

There is a need for leadership by experienced early childhood service practitioners who are familiar with and committed to services aimed at birth to three year olds and their families, rather than senior education staff or career managers from unrelated sectors. This is essential if we are serious about changing the focus beyond the existing traditional service models to services focused on supporting families to provide the development opportunities their young children need to feel safe, to grow and to learn.

An effective early childhood workforce would have leaders confident and supported to work across and between the health, education, child care and family support sectors. We need to grow and support early childhood leaders to work at all levels of service and organisation and value their knowledge by giving them power to make service decisions based on the needs of the families and children in their area. The issue of union restrictions on staff and facilities needs to be tackled rather than used as an reason to restrict use of school facilities and resources.

There are valiant attempts by many educators to focus on the child's wellbeing, but most interpret this in the context of educating that child from the beginning of their compulsory attendance, during school hours, during school terms. There is an expectation that special services staff from education or child care staff or preferably other agencies are responsible for anything more than this. As long as children's services remain embedded and dispersed in a large dominant organisational structure such as Education which sees its role like this, there remains a **major conflict of interest** between the needs of the compulsory schooling sector and the non-compulsory child care and family support services.

3 Resolve conflicts of interest in funding

This conflict of interest between compulsory services and the non-compulsory birth to three and other child care services becomes most evident when there is a funding crisis (ongoing it seems) and savings must be found. Non-compulsory child care services have continued to lose funding entirely or have it significantly reduced, often by increasing their costs for using schooling staff or premises that were originally included as part of the whole school offering to the community eg implementation of the Children's Centres and some Commonwealth funded child care services involved their budgets having to provide higher management loadings for school principals, deputies, facilities managers, and state office staff. The enormous disparity in wages between these staff and the actual child care workers was a major equity issue that could not be addressed. A similar issue exists for out of school hour care programs which is exacerbated by their access to school premises and support for their programs varying enormously in schools from being proudly included to merely tolerated or even hostile.

A related problem for integrated service provision is that funding for a cross agency service that is loaded into one department's budget may not be transferred to the partner agency, which creates a lack of trust and negative attitude towards integration. There is a need for greater Treasury assistance and oversight of these arrangements and for a structure such as an Early Childhood Cross

Agency Management Group to be funded to monitor, progress and publicise integrated or truly collaborative service provision. Many great examples have developed historically but have not come to fruition or have not been sustainable when staff move, priorities of one agency change or joint oversight lapses.

4 Fund Implementation Plans

Every department looks to achieve new outcomes using its existing service model with a no additional cost commitment. The deck chairs of early childhood services have been re-arranged so many times they are now floating next to the Titanic.

Targeted funding to achieve new outcomes is essential. Even with official endorsement of the policies and strategies outlined in the 2021-31 Strategy, little will be achieved without allocated funding, except for some version of a three year old preschool program. Precedents show there will be a lot of conscious and unconscious pressure from the schooling sector to keep it that way. Cabinet allocation of funding needs to be ring fenced for this initiative and maintained.

We know what families want. We know very young children benefit enormously from quality early childhood development programs, especially children from families that are struggling. We also know there is still enormous resistance to changing school models to accommodate these needs, except in some regional areas and in locations where passionate leaders and staff are trialling or sustaining various models eg Café Enfield over many years.

Your Inquiry will certainly hear of many more. Surely it is time to reduce the administrative demands on leaders and staff in early childhood services in each sector to free up their ability to provide creative solutions for children and families in their area? This is particularly essential if we are serious about meeting the diverse needs of families and also providing targeted support for children with additional needs when those needs become apparent, which for many is far earlier than when they walk through the preschool door at 4 or 3 years of age.

Thank you for your consideration.

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