

Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Submission by Catholic Education South Australia into 3-year-old preschool

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Introduction

Catholic Education South Australia (CESA) commends the South Australian Government for its establishment of the Royal Commission to examine the case for providing universal access to preschool for 3-year-olds. As the largest non-government provider of schooling and early childhood services in South Australia, CESA welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the discussion and subsequent planning of ongoing developments in accessible and high-quality early childhood education and care.

Catholic Education South Australia – Aspirations for 3-year-old preschool children in South Australia

The mission of Catholic Education is to help create a more socially just, equitable and hope-filled future within communities and society. Ensuring successful educational outcomes for all children and young people is crucial to this mission, as is enabling the best start to learning, wellbeing, and spiritual development for every child. Therefore, in the context of the Royal Commission, we aspire for every child, from the age of three or earlier, to have access to a high-quality preschool program where they can flourish as capable, curious, creative and spiritual learners. Furthermore, the introduction of 3-year-old preschool should provide opportunities for children and their families to engage in encounters where their inherent dignity is honoured and where their uniqueness is celebrated through accessible high-quality education and care.

We believe in the dignity of all children and the right of families to choose a preschool that matches their beliefs and choice of school. Therefore, as an important partner of the State Government in the delivery of education, Catholic Education is preparing to increase provision of preschool education to 20% of all 3-year-olds in the state. This proportion of 3-year-olds reflects the proportion of South Australian children and young people in our 103 schools and includes children from all socio-economic backgrounds, especially those most marginalised.

Building on leading practice in Australia for 4-year-old preschool, new programs need to be universally accessible, culturally responsive, and inclusive for children especially those who are most disadvantaged including children with a disability, under Ministerial Guardianship, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children from non-English speaking backgrounds. We advocate for programs where our young people are deeply known by members of their community and where their families are offered support for better social and emotional outcomes. As such we believe there is value in providing a range of flexible options for families that maximise connection and belonging.

Access to high quality early years education is enhanced through the strong commitment to inclusion, with the provision of enhanced services and supports for children with disability and for their families as they enter preschool. Therefore, it is important that future models provide wrap around supports to children and families – encouraging family contribution in decision making along with equitable and accessible pathways to allied health services such as occupational therapy, speech pathology and psychology.

Nurturing effective partnerships with parents/carers, parishes, and the wider community are essential to ensuring high quality education and care for children. Local initiatives including playgroups, counselling, community outreach and parenting classes offer families further points of connection with the school community, practical tools and strategies they can implement within the home along with further support and information about the importance of brain development in the early years.

Purpose built or refurbished learning spaces for 3-year-olds

Preschool programs warrant high-quality facilities with both indoor and outdoor learning environments that are purpose built. Environments that are welcoming to families, that cater for and have wrap around services are essential. In many cases pre-existing infrastructure including outside learning environments will require significant upgrades to accommodate the increased number of children and the specific needs of 3-year-olds. As a system, CESA is committed to local schools and communities leading the design of their facilities and grounds in partnership with leading architects, builders and the planning and infrastructure team at the Catholic Education Office. This approach has served CESA well for decades and was instrumental in our successful delivery of nearly one hundred projects during the Building Education Revolution and many projects since.

High Quality and Optimal Program Delivery

The history of early childhood education and care in South Australia is a history of a diversity of providers and different types of early childhood education and care settings. With 60% of 3-year-olds currently accessing some form of education service in South Australia, it provides strong argument for ongoing support of multiple providers and diverse options for families into the future. When considering the possible benefits of providing universal access to preschool for 3-year-olds, CESA encourages the government to continue to support diversity of providers and modes of delivery as an intentional component of future initiatives.

CESA has always played an important role in the overall mix of providers for education and care in the early years. With our current agreement with the South Australian Government dating back over forty years, our commitment to early childhood education and care can be traced back to the earliest days of Catholic Education in South Australia in the 19th century, where young children of preschool age were often educated in religious schools of the day and often due to family tragedy or hardship. With such a legacy of providing high quality education to young children from all backgrounds, CESA is committed to expanding its provision of high-quality education and care in the decades ahead.

CESA's largest involvement in preschools is found in eight primary schools that were included in a state project over the last forty years targeting low socio-economic suburbs and/or suburbs with a high proportion of new migrants. With similar aims to the current investigation into preschool for 3-year-olds, this longstanding program has delivered access to high quality education and care for generations of 4-year-olds in addition to generating

many social benefits for families who have and continue to establish deep relationships with other families across these local communities. Given the success of this model of partnership, CESA welcomes an expansion of this type of program and commits to extending and improving our services in those areas identified as having the highest needs for better access to high quality early childhood education and care.

NAZARETH CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

A Case Study of innovation and excellence in the provision of early childhood education and care

Established in 2007 in response to emerging community needs in the western suburbs of Adelaide, Nazareth Catholic Community focuses on ways of engaging families in a whole life journey.

Nazareth Early Childhood Centre is an integrated service within the Nazareth Catholic Community offering long day care and preschool for children aged six months to five years old. The Universal Access funded preschool program is offered during school terms, with a holiday program operating for families throughout the term breaks. This demonstrates Nazareth's commitment to providing an educational program that is inclusive, equitable and accessible for all children particularly to families in need. It provides a useful model of what is possible when developing a whole of community approach to the provision of birth to Year 12 education, complete with wrap-around social and health services.

Nazareth Early Childhood Centre is well supported by an extensive and supportive team of personnel including allied health professionals that includes Speech Therapists, Nutrition and Dietetics and Occupational Therapists and student clinics through partnerships with Flinders University. As a result, allied health professionals are readily available for advice for educators and families, observations, and small group and 1:1 support for children, in addition to pastoral support for both families and staff in times of hardship and grievance. Nazareth works in collaboration with the supported playgroup that is run by a paid facilitator and provides a time and place for children and families to play, be and belong. Integration also occurs with staff from the College, particularly those who work in Wellbeing Coordinator roles that enhance transition processes into Reception.

The integrated model of Nazareth Catholic Community is not static and evolves as the needs of the community, young people and families change over time. Nazareth's commitment to working collaboratively and respectfully with families from diverse backgrounds and cultures has been instrumental in delivering outstanding educational outcomes for students including twelve consecutive years of 100% SACE completion.

The success of early childhood education at Nazareth is attributable in part, to the overall schooling model in that community, where the economies of scale provide access to greater financial reserves and management capability necessary to steward the development of this impressive service. CESA is well positioned to undertake similar developments to Nazareth in the extension of its facilities in developing suburbs in the north and south of metropolitan Adelaide, corresponding with recent South Australian Government announcements regarding future residential land releases.

New ventures in Catholic Education that respond to emerging community needs

CESA is committed to providing access to high quality education in new and emerging suburbs. Our growth over 2015-2023 provides strong evidence of our ability to partner successfully with government, private developers, and communities. At the same time, our renewed presence in older suburbs with high socio-economic needs demonstrates the advantages of having multiple providers combining to address inequality and disadvantage.

Catholic Education has schools and early learning services in almost all parts of the state and remains committed to ensuring accessibility for all. This is particularly evident in our most recent initiatives, which include:

1. a fee-free school for young adults aged 18-24 in Adelaide's north together with an accompanying early years' service for the students' own children; and
2. a state-wide scholarship scheme for children under the guardianship of the Minister to have the choice of attending a Catholic school.

The recent opening of our latest preschool at St Joseph's School, Port Lincoln provides strong evidence of what can be achieved through leveraging government funding through existing community partnerships. In the case of St Joseph's School, that partnership included the expertise and resources of St Joseph's School and its community, the Diocese of Port Pirie and the finance, planning and early years teams at the Catholic Education Office. In regional areas and other suburbs where it can be difficult to provide new services, partnerships across organisations are key to providing access to the high quality early childhood education and care services contemplated in this Royal Commission.

Workforce Development

Catholic Education is a well-organised, resourced, and agile education system with experience in tertiary education, schooling, and early childhood education and care. As such, CESA aspires for 3-year-old preschool to be led by passionate educators who possess appropriate qualifications for their roles in early childhood education and care settings. In this regard, there appear to be opportunities to recalibrate some Early Childhood Education tertiary courses to bring more educators online earlier than is currently possible, while providing clear articulation of postgraduate courses to support the ongoing professional development of educators throughout their career. CESA strongly supports initiatives that promote excellence in early years teaching and deep commitment to building authentic relationships and supportive environments essential for children's social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and physical wellbeing already outlined in the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).

Addressing workforce issues in the sector is critical to attracting qualified and experienced teachers and educators. CESA is proud of its ability to retain staff in its early years services and commits to addressing factors that cause inequitable working conditions for early years educators that undermine the development of a strong and stable workforce. At Catholic Education South Australia, we acknowledge the important role of early childhood educators as professionals and significant influencers on the learning and development of children. CESA has already commenced work in supporting tertiary students studying Early Childhood to develop self-efficacy and prepare for work beyond their university placements. Similarly, we believe there are further opportunities to engage with tertiary students employed casually

in OSHC services and to support their development as educators, with the intention of attracting and retaining a highly skilled teaching workforce once they graduate.

CESA values the opportunities created by the colocation of early childhood education and care services on or near existing schools as it offers many benefits to parents who are also early years educators, allowing them greater variety of employment opportunities while raising children themselves. We believe that such flexibility is an important strategic consideration for workforce planning in rural and remote schools.

Funding – The benefits of investing in the non-government sector

The long-term benefits of successive governments investing in early years education partnerships with CESA are readily appreciated in the ongoing success of the eight preschools established over forty years ago and the access they continue to provide to high quality preschool for 4-year-olds at low or no cost to families.

Capital costs and workforce development are considerable in any educational setting. Therefore, providing predictable long-term funding supports private investment in the development of new centres and refurbishment and expansion of others. Similarly, medium to long term funding agreements assist schools and school systems recruit and develop staff knowing that employment opportunities are ongoing, offering real career opportunities in the early years sector as an integral part of a larger system of education.

CESA notes the efforts of both the Victorian Government (The Best Start, Best Life) and NSW Government (The Early Years Commitment) that have recently made significant reforms and corresponding additional investments in early childhood education and care. In both states it is evident that early years education and care are key to future economic development and that strategic partnerships across sectors are valued and supported as critical to the success of planned reforms. CESA encourages the South Australian Government to consider developing its own package of reforms that include enhanced cross-sector funding arrangements with transparent and varied funding options that support parent choice and enhanced learning and care outcomes for all children in South Australia.

Conclusion

Catholic Education South Australia believes that much more can and needs to be done to improve access to high quality early years education for all South Australian children. We welcome the renewed consideration of the importance of early years education and care by governments throughout Australia and look forward to the publication of the findings of the Royal Commission. CESA also commits to partnering with the South Australian Government and other education providers in implementing those changes identified as having the greatest benefits to children throughout the state.

Dr Neil McGoran
Director

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