

24 February, 2023

Royal Commission – Gowrie SA Response 3 year old preschool

General history

Gowrie SA is a leading community-based organisation with an 80-year history of supporting children, families and professionals through innovative child care, kindergarten, parenting and professional learning programs (including RTO). We are also the Inclusion Agency for South Australia.

Gowrie SA was established in 1940 as a demonstration and model child and family centre, delivering best-practice care and education. We are governed by a Board of voluntary members.

The programs we offer support the education, care, health and wellbeing of young children, their families and their educators, and promote understanding of evidence-based programs and child development in the broader community. We research evidence-based-practises in early childhood education to offer community-driven programs that give respect to social justice, sustainability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and reconciliation.

Our early childhood programs prioritised the application of attachment theory in early childhood education and care (1995-1999), promoting the importance of primary caregiving and adult/child relationships (Colmer & Ebert 2001), concepts that are now mainstream in Australian understandings of early childhood quality (ACECQA 2011; DEEWR 2009).

Children's wellbeing and their place in society are considered holistically at Gowrie SA, and our services are designed to support them as rights holders. We understand our role in safeguarding children's rights in all areas, including access to quality education, and programs that reflect their lifeworlds. Some children have additional rights, and our role is to undertake the thinking and planning, in consultation with children and families, which recognises these rights so all children can thrive in our early education and care program. Gowrie SA provides long day care programs and integrated kindergarten (our preferred term for preschool) programs.

Kindergarten specific history

Until the mid-1990s, Gowrie SA operated its kindergarten program for children aged 4-5 years, separate from the long day care program. Children would move from their long day care room to another, to access the kindergarten program. In 1997 we recognised that for young children, care and education were inseparable, and we began work to integrate the kindergarten and long day care programs. The impetus to ensure our kindergarten and long day care programs were integrated came from a strong belief that children should not have to experience a different quality of program based on their age. It was also disruptive to expect children to 'transition' from one room to another for short periods to access the kindergarten program.

Integration of the programs included the development of a shared philosophy, integrating policies and procedures, new staffing models and preparing staff and families for something 'different but better'. Common themes brought staff together to improve the quality of our programs, including the concept of primary caregiving and implementation of attachment theory, curriculum innovation and cultural inclusion.

Children now transition from our infant-toddler program to our integrated kindergarten program at around three years of age, remaining in a primary care relationship until school age. This means that children who are four years old do not move to another space to access kindergarten. During their time in the three rooms delivering kindergarten programs to children aged 3 to 5 years, children have 3 primary care staff available to them in each room, including 1-2 early childhood degree-qualified teachers, and diploma-qualified staff, to develop the foundations upon which a positive school transition can be achieved.

Some children only access sessional kindergarten in the Gowrie SA children's program, but the majority of children within our program attend a combination of long day care and kindergarten sessions.

Children who have attended Gowrie SA for their kindergarten entitlement have consistently demonstrated high levels of self-efficacy, wellbeing, and confidence in resourcing their own learning. As an example, one child who attended Gowrie SA was confident enough to lead a whole school at assembly in an acknowledgement of country during their reception year. They quickly connected their learning at Gowrie SA and the embedded research into respect for Aboriginal cultures and identified that the school needed an acknowledgement if they were gathering together. Another child was able to share their most important kindergarten learning in a powerpoint presentation for their peers at the end of their time with Gowrie SA. Their work with their teacher and primary educator in preparing this demonstrated their engagement in authentic learning over time and dispositions that would set them up well for their first years of school.

Gowrie SA statement

The primary consideration should be to consider what model/s will provide the most benefit to children and families. We believe the following should be key considerations:

- For continuity of relationships and learning, children should be able to access their early learning and care entitlements in one place rather than split across different places
- Funding arrangements should be equal so every family can afford preschool in the setting or location of their choice
- The entitlement for disadvantaged children and families should be a priority, recognising that levels of disadvantage exist across most communities as evidenced by AEDC data
- Resourcing for early childhood services in disadvantaged communities must be considered
- Teachers and educators should understand relational and educational pedagogies to effectively meet children's individual and group needs for social/emotional, educational and physical learning in holistic ways
- Recognition that many early childhood settings already have programs for children from 3 years to school age delivered by qualified teachers, and harnessing the potential and learning from these
- Implementation of funded evaluation of current and new model/s so these can be reassessed if proven to be ineffective.

Fundamental questions/issues for state and federal government

In order to consider a model for 3 year old kindergarten/preschool, we believe there are some fundamental questions and issues that state, and perhaps federal government need to address.

Currently 3 year olds can attend a long day care site, at a cost to families with Child Care Subsidy defined by parental income. This cost, and requirements such as the Activity Test, can be a deterrent for families. Within the current South Australian education system, 4 year olds in this state can:

- access a long day care site in the same way as mentioned above

- access a Universal Access program with 15 hours of preschool delivered in a long day care site by a qualified preschool teacher, with some funding provided toward the cost of a preschool teacher and to reduce out of pocket fees for families
- access a preschool program in an integrated site, with block grant funding provided toward the cost of a preschool teacher and to reduce out of pocket fees for families
- access a state government preschool program in a stand-alone state government preschool or integrated state government children’s centre

A 4 year old child does not have the same funding entitlement in each of the above preschool models, with the most funding attached to the state government preschool programs, less offered to preschool programs through block grant funding and even less offered to universal access preschool programs. For preschool programs offered in non-state government sites, the conditions for qualified preschool teachers are vastly different due to this funding discrepancy, including reduced salary, longer hours, fewer leave entitlements, and a lesser status. This does not create a level playing field, nor does it enable families to have a choice of setting with a standardised fee. In current arrangements, it is common for the long day care program to cross subsidise the costs of the preschool program, particularly if a service is trying to match salary conditions for its preschool teachers.

The current models of preschool provision have a variety of strengths:

1. family access when working;
2. local nature of preschool and as feeder to school;
3. support offered to families as a whole (social vs educational opportunity);

And challenges:

4. funding issues;
5. ECEC separated from state Department for Education (stronger since partnership model);
6. confusion for families, preschool is not compulsory, what is available, how they access it, different costs and times,
7. competition between preschool/kindergartens for the families in their area,
8. zoning.

With regard to point 4 above, the tables below demonstrate the preschool grant funding shortfall to the contribution of the salary of one preschool teacher, and some hours toward a director salary, for 2 preschool rooms at our Thebarton campus:

Year	% of teacher salaries covered by grant funding based on enrolments	Funding shortfall after parent fee contributions
2013-2014	53%	\$50,490
2014-2015	46%	\$95,740
2015-2016	37%	\$128,261
2016-2017	27%	\$164,935
2017-2018	30%	\$157,432
2018-2019	30%	\$155,628
2019-2020	27%	\$170,221
2021 (funding changes to calendar year)	21% (pandemic impact)	\$227,590
2022	19%	\$209,070



The grant amount per child has not kept pace with teacher salaries. We have not been able to access any other form of funding from the Department for Education except Preschool Support funding (of between one and 4 hours per week). We are unable to access capital upgrade funding, maintenance funding or professional development through the Department. In addition, services have reduced including access to an assigned psychologist. This creates an inequity for children and families in being able to access multidisciplinary services and early intervention.

Our Underdale campus offers the Universal Access program and the table below demonstrates the funding shortfall for one preschool room:

Year	% of teacher salaries covered by UA grant funding based on enrolments	Funding shortfall after parent fee contributions
Jan 2013-Dec 2013	10%	\$35,355
2014-2015	11%	\$39,100
July 2015-June 2016	19%	\$68,167
July 2016-Dec 2017	18%	\$102,325
Jan 2018-Dec 2018	15%	\$80,732
Jan 2019-Dec 2019	30%	\$63,203
Jan 2020-Dec 2020	18%	\$82,263
Jan 2021-Dec 2021	22% (pandemic impact)	\$69,413
Jan 2022-Dec 2022	14%	\$83,445

After the first two years of Universal Access funding, we made a decision to reduce Underdale family preschool fee contributions so they were the same as the Thebarton campus to provide greater equity for families. This program is eligible to access support through the Inclusion Support Program, but not from the Department for Education.

The tables demonstrate the funding per child offered to run a preschool program is inadequate. Further contributing factors are our decision to pay preschool teachers an equivalent wage to that which they would get if they worked in the government education sector, and keeping family fees low so that we are a genuine option for preschool attendance which supports children to reduce their transitions between services.

Societal values and quality considerations

There are ongoing issues with the separation of the terms education and care and the dichotomy this creates between state and federal government responsibilities, funding and policies, societal values and impact on parent understandings. There is also a dichotomy created between state programs for preschool provision, with a hierarchy evident in the funding models, historical use and beliefs.

It is not possible to compare the quality of state based preschool programs with early childhood education and care programs. The programs operate with fundamentally different resources and contexts. State preschool programs generally offer their program to a narrower age range of children, have fewer complexities and administrative requirements, employ teachers with a higher salary and fewer working hours, as well as offering more generous leave and programming provisions. State preschool programs also have access to professional development and learning programs, early career mentoring programs and other government investments. Should these be made available non state preschool programs, quality provisions may well be similar.

Who should be responsible for paying?

This questions gets to the heart of whether education is a universal right or a parent choice, whether it is a user pays system or an embedded entitlement. Who ultimately is responsible for education and what is education and how can it be separated from care? Some of these fundamental questions need to be defined before such questions can be answered.

In an ideal world, universal access to education and care programs would be seen as a right for all children, and funding and policies designed to facilitate this by addressing equal funding provision regardless of the setting, parental choice regarding setting, and clear definitions of what constitutes an appropriate educational program.

Defining Key Terms

While the use of kindergarten is a preferred term for the Gowrie SA program (acknowledging the importance of the outdoor spaces as much as the indoor spaces for children's learning), for the remainder of this submission we will use the term preschool.

If a universal preschool education system is being developed then universality needs to be applied to every layer of that system, not just parts of the system. There needs to be better integration of a currently fragmented system.

We believe the term 'universal' should mean access and participation **rights** for every child, no matter where they live, what their family income is, what school they go to, whether their parent/s work or not, abilities of each child, family lifeworlds.

Universal also means every child should be eligible to receive the same provision no matter what service type delivers the preschool program – this would include a qualified preschool teacher/s, equal funding amount per child, defined hours available, equal out of pocket costs to families. Families would therefore have genuine choice of preschool provision. This choice for families could then include locality to work or home, how the hours are offered across a week, whether there is need for or access to other programs in the setting, comparative NQS rating, and the overall 'feel' of the setting, relationships with the local school.

Universal also means appropriately qualified and suitable preschool teachers should be able to work in any setting offering preschool under the same or very similar conditions, including salary, hours of work, leave provisions, non-contact time. They should be able to access the same professional learning opportunities.

A universal system would benefit from common, well understood definitions of education, preschool and care. Currently definitions tend to be by service types rather than what is actually delivered to children.

Quality and Innovation

We don't see that a 3 year old preschool program would differ fundamentally to 4 year old preschool. Gowrie SA has essentially been offering preschool to three year olds for over two decades now. Our preschool rooms have qualified preschool teachers supported by Diploma qualified educators. The program draws on the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and each day supports the learning of children from 3years to school age through individual and group project based learning. The EYLF guides the curriculum, and play based learning opportunities which offer a balance of child and teacher

intentions, supporting strong foundations for learning within thoughtful, integrated, and well-resourced environments.

As part of our experience, there needs to be a focus on the induction of children into the environment, whatever the age, but in particular for 3 year old children. We work closely with families and educators from the infant and toddler program to understand children's physical, social and learning goals so the preschool program can be adapted to reflect these. Considerations are given for children's need to eat more frequently, support to ensure adequate water intake and toileting. The environment is a complex mix of routines, care and learning. We have worked with our educators and teachers over the years to ensure a responsive, relationship based program that provides a rich offering of learning experiences delivered in holistic ways. We view the relationship between children and teachers as one which is mutually beneficial and where each learns from the other.

Much like our research on the benefits of integrated infant and toddler programs, we have found that when children of different ages are supported to mix and learn together, younger children learn from older peers, and older peers learn empathy, nurturing and leadership skills as they engage with younger peers. Children's differing interests ensure multiple opportunities for small group interactions and use of a range of resources. Such an environment requires skilled and supported teachers and educators.

Ideally we would say that when we offered a preschool program for children aged 3.5 years, there was slightly less complexity with regard to the time needed for children's induction and care needs. Families are always interested in their child's development and learning. We have found these expectations can be more concentrated on children's physical and social needs when children are under 4 years of age.

For any child, attending a new program requires time to build relationships and become familiar with the environment. This takes longer to achieve when attendance is limited to under 20 hours (2 days) per week. We find that 3 year olds attend our programs on average 3 days per week (27-30 hours) and this is an ideal amount of time to build strong relationships, the foundation for learning.

Workforce

What are the most important competencies?

We believe all preschool teachers should be passionate about working with young children, hold high expectations for learning, and be capable of investing in and building secure and trusting relationships. We have always held the belief, which is supported by research, that when children feel secure in their relationships with adults then they are more open to learning. Teachers need to be flexible in their program offerings, having the ability to adapt to individual learners, current group learning interests, children's individual physical and social/emotional needs.

We believe programs should look and feel different for each group of learners so there would be no repeated themes from year to year. We believe the process of learning is more important than the product of learning, and work with families to align our expectations on this. We live and work in diverse communities so our programs need to reflect the different lifeworlds of children and families and all children and families should be able to see themselves represented in the preschool environment. Culturally responsive practices also include deep engagement and learning in first nation's histories and culture.

Recruitment of teachers from a diverse range of backgrounds and abilities also needs to be given due consideration to reflect the communities in which we live and work. This takes a planned process, culturally safe and responsive policies with induction programs that support cultural safety and culturally rich diversity in preschool settings. Recognition of unconscious bias, and anti-racism strategies



are key to delivering on this. Universities also hold a responsibility in this area, including recruitment of students as well as preparation of teachers to work with diverse children and families.

What are the highest value interventions to increase supply?

The importance of a salary which reflects the components and risks of the role, as well as the qualifications required is essential. Conditions which consider appropriate planning time and leave are also vital. Alongside these, job security and ratios should be prioritised as these make the role manageable, enjoyable and prioritise the needs and outcomes for children.

Resourcing and support to work with children and families with complex needs are also required. Currently many Directors and teachers in early childhood settings face a high emotional load supporting families without additional funding or support to do so.

Delivery and Administration

What is needed to support 3 year old preschool?

3 year old children have various physical (interoceptive awareness, sleep, meals, fluid intake, self-help skills, toileting) and social-emotional learning needs (turn taking, sharing, play entry/exit skills, self-regulation). These require sophisticated and attuned relational pedagogies. It is important to consider the flow of the day and how to meet individual needs if the day is longer.

The expectations of families can be higher in ECEC than preschool, including levels of information required regarding food intake, toileting, sleeping, and documentation of children's learning.

There will need to be updates made to current preschool data collection system, including consideration of the increased demand from more enrolments and the impact this has on administration processes.

What are strengths of current arrangements?

Gowrie SA currently offers an integrated preschool program for children aged 3 to 5 years, which has been developed across 20 years. The children attending receive a program that offers intellectual, social and physical stimulation in an environment that supports small group learning with qualified preschool teachers and educators.

Other considerations

Whatever model is adopted, there needs to be some consideration given to unintended consequences. For example, if the government continues to deliver state preschool, and extends it to include 3 year olds, as well as offering services outside of preschool hours, this will have a significant impact on existing early childhood sites if they are excluded from this, including their ongoing viability. This would fundamentally change the operating landscape, with education and care sites offering programs for 0-3 year old children only, at much higher costs given the ratios required to offer safe and responsive programs. While the state has consistently maintained that ECEC sites are the responsibility of federal government rather than state, a change of this nature could force the closure of multiple ECEC services, having a significant impact on families and their ability to work, including vulnerable families.

If the government delivers state preschool, and adds out of school hours services to support families, there should be a recognition that there are risks inherent in such 'wrap around' options. This includes increased safety risks, but also exposes children to more educators during the day, thus risking continuity and relationship development.

We believe many state government preschool sites are quite small and this could create financial issues if the staff needed to resource programs exceeds the funding and utilisation available to do so.

While early childhood settings that currently offer programs to 3 and 4 year old children have teachers with experience and the training to contextualise the education and care offered, teachers who have only worked with 4 year old children may need additional training to prepare to work with 3 year olds, again at additional cost.

South Australia has been considered a national leader in education, but this reputation appears to have diminished over time. As a state we have AEDC results that are not on par with other states, nor improving. There are increasing numbers of children in out of home care and there are increasing numbers of children living in poverty. The Royal Commission offers a unique opportunity to deliver education in radically different ways. For example, the state could choose to no longer run preschool programs (for 3 or 4 year old children) in separated stand-alone buildings, and both fund and work closely with the early childhood sector through long day care sites to deliver preschool. Early childhood education and care sites already have the infrastructure, experience, and extended hours to suit family needs and requirements. The state could then offer training and mentoring opportunities, placement of teachers in early childhood sites, provision of an intense focus in disadvantaged areas, and even add preschool teachers to school classrooms to support the youngest children starting their school education experience.

Grants could be offered to services in early childhood settings to cover the cost of preschool teachers and a director contribution, some overheads, maintenance, and resources contributions. Alternatively the state could employ the preschool teacher directly and allocate them to early childhood settings offering a preschool program across the state. There are likely to be cost savings to the state as the stand alone preschool infrastructure is sold off. State caps would then be applied to preschool fees. This supports family decisions as they can find a site that suits their needs and decisions are no longer about finance. We note that in other states, such as Victoria, the state does not have a large role in preschool education beyond funding. Gowrie Victoria have also had the opportunity to partner with Victorian state government to provide preschool services at a new inner city school, as well as provision of early childhood services on a school site in a highly disadvantaged area. The South Australian state government could be creating more opportunities to partner with high quality, experienced, established not for profit services.