

The Independent Education Union (IEU) represents the interests and professional rights of teachers and support staff in Catholic and Independent schools, early education and care services and other non-government educational institutions Australia wide. It currently has a membership of approximately 75,000 members throughout its six branches. The South Australian branch has a membership of over 3600 and has active members in Preschool, Early Learning Centres and long day care services associated with Independent schools. The Independent Education Union of Australia believes that early childhood education and care services play a crucial role in promoting children's social, cognitive and personal development while supplementing parental care.

Purpose and aims

The IEUSA aspires towards a 3-year old preschool experience which is accessible, equitable and of the highest quality for all families and children in the state. We envision this opportunity as a means to promote meaningful, relevant and evidence-based education for children, recognising that education begins long before their Reception school year. We aspire towards a 3-year old preschool program which attracts, retains, consults, respects and celebrates early childhood educators, and reflects the critical role they play in the opportunities our children have to get the best possible start. This initiative supports both children and early childhood educators in our organisational vision for better jobs, better schools and a better society. This universal preschool opportunity sets all 3-year old children in South Australia up for academic, social and emotional success, whilst promoting health, well-being and developmentally appropriate challenges and supports.

This commitment changes the accessibility, opportunity and affordability of early childhood education for all South Australian families, including those with greatest need. This change promotes the 'close the gap' mentality for all children to participate in high quality education programs, including children in remote areas, children in Indigenous communities, children with migrant/refugee backgrounds and children with disability.

This initiative would change opportunities for early identification and intervention, opportunities to develop oral language and early literacy, opportunities for social competencies, opportunities for families to connect with specialist educators and opportunities for early childhood staff to receive secure and valued working conditions.

Through this change, many historical anomalies between 'childcare' and 'school' may be addressed, to extend the scope of 'education' to provide the highest quality opportunities for all families and children from 3 years of age. Changes would promote success in 'formal' schooling years, whilst bringing recognition, resourcing and ongoing commitment to early learning, an area of education not traditionally funded or regulated in the same way as schools. We believe universal 3-year old preschool changes the opportunity for South Australia to be a global player, a leader in educational excellence and for all South Australian families to have the best possible start to their child's education.

IEU believes that universal access to preschool funding must be provided to all 3 year olds to allow them access to high quality early childhood education in the two years preceding school entry.

Universal access means younger children will have access to a four-year early childhood education degree qualified teacher who provides a play-based program aligning with the Early Years Learning Framework.

Quality and Innovation

ECEC is both important and increasingly relevant. In past years, its primary purpose was seen as benefiting the economy. It was used as a tool to: increase women's labour market participation; reconcile work and family responsibilities; confront demographic challenges (decreasing fertility rates and an aging population); and maintain a high employment/population ratio (OECD, 2011).

More recently, however, Australian commonwealth, state and territory governments increasingly realise that ECEC is also a platform for children's development. High-quality ECEC programmes can effectively help children, especially from disadvantaged or immigrant backgrounds, build a strong foundation for the cognitive and socioemotional skills necessary to navigate through life's challenges. These programmes can also enrich the home learning environment, and combat linguistic and economic disadvantages that would otherwise hinder children's development and integration. As such, ECEC is a critical policy measure that can promote equity, support holistic and continuous development and improve child well-being.

Evidence from the new wave of PISA conducted in 2015 shows that the duration of ECEC also matters. Students who enter these programmes at a younger age perform better in PISA than those who entered at a later point. Across OECD countries, students who attended ECEC for three years or more scored 50 points or higher in reading, mathematics and science, compared with those who attended for less than one year. (Early Learning Matters OECD 2018)

Put another way, the students who attended ECEC for longer, benefited from an equivalent of more than one full year of schooling by age 15, compared with their classmates.

While all children benefit from attending high quality ECEC, research shows that children from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds can gain significant benefits from such programmes. For these children, intervention during the early years can make a critical difference in mitigating early disadvantage and help prepare them to enter primary school on an equal footing with other children from more advantaged backgrounds.

Yet compared to other OECD countries, Australia is lagging behind in early childhood education. Australia ranked in the bottom third for participation in early childhood education and care. Only 15% of Australian three-year-olds are enrolled in a preschool program, compared to the OECD average of 68.6% (Pascoe and Brennan 2017 Lifting Our Game).

Further, the recent 2021 AEDC national data shows a small but significant increase in the percentage of children who were 'developmentally vulnerable'. In 2021 the percentage of children developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain(s) increased from 21.7 percent in 2018 to 22.0 percent in 2021. The percentage of children who were developmentally vulnerable on two or more domain(s) also increased from 11.0 percent in 2018 to 11.4 percent in 2021.

In particular for South Australia, the 2021 AEDC results show:

- nearly a quarter (23.8%) of South Australian reception students had 1 or more developmental vulnerabilities; a 0.1% decrease since 2018
- a 0.5% improvement to 53.7% in the number of children who were on track across the 5 areas of development (physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge)

- despite the slight improvements in the 2021 collection, the proportion of our children developmentally vulnerable has increased since 2009 and continues to be higher than most other jurisdictions
- there are developmentally vulnerable children across all South Australian socioeconomic levels and geographic areas

Workforce

The supply of early childhood teachers does not meet demand. The current extreme shortage of early childhood teachers and other early childhood educators will greatly inhibit the ability to provide quality preschool program to three year olds. Unless there is a massive increase in training early childhood teachers or a recruitment campaign the likelihood of staffing the new preschool places is slim, especially in rural and remote Australia.

The IEU is wary of any fast track initiatives at the expense of qualifications. Caution is warranted in the use of VET-credentialed educators (with certificates and diplomas) as they are not qualified early childhood teachers. The use of non-teaching qualified staff, even temporarily should be resisted.

This shortage has been caused by the disparity of wages and conditions in the sector and the lack of investment into qualified staff. Teachers especially have job mobility and look to the school sector where wages and conditions can be substantially superior. Others have suggested one solution to this problem is to provide a three year teaching degree. Any attempt to water down Initial Teacher Education should be strenuously resisted. At best it may provide a marginal temporary increase in supply but emerging data shows that where teachers have been rushed into classrooms and teaching, where they have not had the preparation which a four year degree gives, the rate of teachers leaving the profession has increased.

Another suggestion has been to introduce a birth to 5 year old ITE program. While there may be merit to this there are many barriers to get such a program started and it certainly won't address the current acute shortage. The idea that this birth to 5 year old program would ensure that teachers stay in a pre-school setting is greatly misguided. Teacher mobility occurs now – schools nor the Teachers Registration Board make any distinction as to what age level a teacher's qualification covers. Indeed we have birth to 8 year old trained teachers successfully teaching in upper primary and secondary settings. That mobility will continue even with a birth to 5 year old ITE program and the movement to school based teaching positions will continue if pay and conditions do not greatly improve.

Many qualified teachers have left the profession, many because of unrealistic workload expectations and more because of the lack of part time work.

Incentives and decent pay and conditions can attract some of these teachers back to the profession.

Delivery and Administration

In addition to a universal funding for three year olds preschools, targeted funding must be introduced to assist ATSI children in remote areas and children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage to access early childhood education free of fees.

Barriers to participation need to be addressed, such as transport to reach early childhood services over significant distances in remote areas.

Targeted funding is needed to implement initiatives which assist the wider community to develop an understanding of the benefits of early childhood education and thus increase participation in early childhood services.

Certainty of funding is crucial. Preschools need to know exactly how much funding will be provided on an ongoing basis in order to determine staffing levels. The past situation under Universal Access to National Preschool program, where state and commonwealth funding was extended on a year to year basis did not provide preschools with certainty or the ability to budget for long term projects, such as capital improvements.

Capital funding must be introduced to establish and increase places in the not for profit services, particularly in remote and regional areas. Additional funding to attract teachers to these areas is also needed.

Funding for three year old preschool must be seen as an ongoing investment, not as a budgetary cost or imposition. Investment in early childhood education “...will make a significant, cost effective contribution to children’s lives in the present, their future school performance and their long-term outcomes, as well as to Australia’s economy and community more broadly. The benefits will flow to children and their families, the community and both the Commonwealth and state and territory governments” (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017, p. 8).

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