

Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Submission from the South Australian Government in relation to
3-year-old preschool

February 2023



Universal preschool

The South Australian Government's commitment to two years of preschool from 2026 is one of the most comprehensive reforms in a generation to South Australia's education system. In recognising this, the South Australian Government established a Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care to undertake a comprehensive inquiry into what can be done to better support families in South Australia so that children are ready for future success.

Preschool is the foundation of a child's education. Evidence shows that a child who has attended two years of a quality preschool program will, on average, have better cognitive and social skills when they start school; have higher exam scores at age 16, including better grades in English and Maths; have better social and emotional outcomes at age 16; and be more likely to take final year exams and go on to higher academic study.¹

Preschool is not only a social lever; it is well known that investments in education yield the highest return when they occur in the early years.² Early education, such as high-quality preschool, contributes to brain development, social skills, and learning capacity that can enhance employability, earnings, and life chances throughout the rest of a child's life. An additional year of preschool is an investment not only in our children but in the future of our state.

Australia is one of the few OECD nations not to universally offer at least two years of preschool. As a result, only 15 per cent of Australian 3-year-olds are in a preschool program, compared to the OECD average of nearly 70 per cent.

Workforce participation

Australia has fewer women in full-time work than most other OECD countries. There is a strong link between mothers being supported to get into the workforce and having high quality support for children from the earliest years. Nations that perform better in school results tend to have lower rates of part-time female workers.³

Access to quality early childhood education and care for children increases opportunities for parents, especially mothers, to participate in the workforce. Women's disproportionate responsibility for caring for children, combined with the lack of appropriate, affordable early childhood education and care, is a significant barrier to women being employed or to working more.⁴ The government considers that, for the introduction of an additional year of preschool to have the most impact and to support women in the workforce, wraparound care at preschools must be made available in parallel to the implementation of 3-year-old preschool.

Quality preschool

Evidence demonstrates that, to achieve the best outcomes for children, preschool needs to be of high quality. The quality of preschool should be enhanced, not diminished, by the introduction of up to two years of preschool. For this to occur, the government considers that there should be a responsive and stable workforce, qualified staff delivering preschool programs, quality on-site leadership, effective engagement

¹ Fox, S., & Geddes, M. (2016). Preschool – Two years are better than one: Developing a preschool program for Australian 3-year-olds – evidence, policy and implementation. Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 03/2016. Melbourne, Victoria: Mitchell Institute. p7

² Heckman, J. (2012) Invest in early childhood development: Reduce deficits, strengthen the economy

³ <https://data.oecd.org/emp/part-time-employment-rate.htm>

⁴ Pascoe S, Brennan D, Lifting Our Game, Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions, Australian Government, Dec 2017, p.35

with families, and appropriate professional development available for staff. These factors need to be considered within the context of affordable education and care across all sectors delivering these services.

Quality preschool is an important lever for lifting education outcomes. The government considers that there should be consistency in high-quality delivery across the sector to ensure that preschool has its greatest impact.

Preschool as a means to address vulnerability

Whilst all children benefit from attending two years of a high-quality preschool program, there is significant evidence that vulnerable children have the most to gain. In general terms, children experiencing disadvantage tend to have less access to and lower attendance at preschool, receive lower quality services, and achieve poorer outcomes in both early education and throughout their lives⁵.

Where children experiencing disadvantage are able to access high-quality early education and care, evidence shows that this can help close the gap relative to more advantaged peers. This effect is particularly strong for minority groups.⁶

Recognising the benefits of two years of preschool for vulnerable children, implementation of 3-year-old preschool is an opportunity to leverage the Government's investment to greatest outcome. The rollout of the additional year of preschool could commence in communities that are experiencing high levels of disadvantage, such as those in regional South Australia. Alongside this, capital investment could be directed to the communities of high disadvantage where there is not existing physical capacity.

Implementation could reasonably be staged as follows:

- Regional areas where children are experiencing high levels of disadvantage and are at risk of developmental vulnerabilities, where there is existing capacity in departmental sites and across the non-government sector (noting government tends to be the main or only provider of preschools in regional areas due to the size of the community and associated viability issues for non-government providers)
- Metropolitan areas where children are experiencing high levels of disadvantage and are at risk of developmental vulnerabilities, and there is existing capacity in departmental sites and across the non-government sector
- All areas where children are experiencing high levels of disadvantage and are at risk of developmental vulnerabilities and which need capital solutions to build capacity in government preschools
- All areas where children are experiencing lower levels of disadvantage and there is existing capacity in departmental sites and across the non-government sector
- All areas where children are experiencing lower levels of disadvantage and which need capital solutions to build capacity in government preschools.

Noting that delivery across all regions and sectors will be reliant on having a reliable pipeline of suitably qualified early years educators.

Analysis of Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data, Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), and Australian Bureau of Statistics data can be used to identify regions with children experiencing high levels of disadvantage and at risk of developmental vulnerabilities.

⁵ Australian Early Development Census (2021)

⁶ Howells, S., Lam, B., Marrone R., Brinkman S.A. (2022). Rapid review of the literature and results of an academic pulse survey to determine the evidence behind pre-school for 3-year-old children. Commissioned report for the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care, South Australia pp26-28

In addition, government preschools are ranked by categories to give an indication of the degree of social disadvantage and geographical isolation a centre may have. There are 3 levels of ranking, with category 1 reflecting the highest need, and category 3 reflecting those with the lowest need. Most government preschools in regional areas are ranked as category 1. Government tends to be the main or only provider of preschool in regional areas, due to the size of the community and associated viability issues for non-government providers.

Infrastructure development within government preschools could commence concurrently with a staged roll out and could be prioritised in areas of low social-economic status and high developmental vulnerability, such as in the north or south of metropolitan Adelaide.

Managing sector capacity and growth

Rapid expansion of the preschool system may place a strain on the sector due to the need for additional teaching staff and differing levels of site readiness. Infrastructure upgrades are likely to be required at a range of centres and this needs to be managed in a sustainable manner, including having regard to funding capacity and the construction sector's capacity to deliver given the significant infrastructure program over the next few years.

The design and implementation of 3-year-old preschool is an opportunity for a new approach, that has regard to current and future working arrangements and community requirements, and that doesn't just replicate the existing system.

It is important that the model for 3-year-old preschool can be implemented and managed across both the government and non-government sector.

To reduce the impact and risks associated with rapid expansion and growth, the government considers that the implementation of 3-year-old preschool could be phased in over time and structured in a way that strengthens the system and allows for the principles of high-quality preschool to be embedded across both the government and non-government sectors.

Learnings from other jurisdictions already implementing 3-year-old preschool highlight the importance of a balanced implementation approach to ensure that workforce and infrastructure requirements can be met without compromising the quality of the service or putting the sector under undue strain. The right supports and change management strategies need to be provided to manage expansion and growth.

Successfully introducing universal 3-year-old preschool in South Australia is likely to require co-operation across the whole community: government preschools, private early learning centres, community early education and care centres, and for-profit long-day care services. There is an opportunity to leverage capacity across the sectors to deliver 3-year-old preschool and the associated long day care services to ensure that there is place for every child who wants or needs to be there.

National early years funding and reform

The government acknowledges the significant reform of the early childhood education and care sector being undertaken at the national level as well as by other states and territories. The Australian Government is a critical partner in the regulation and funding of the childcare sector as well as making an important contribution to funding preschool in the year before full-time school.

Noting the benefits of an additional year of preschool to both state and national economies, the government would welcome consideration of the way in which the Australian Government can be a funding partner in delivering an additional year of preschool. This could include consideration of a more equitable funding model that is blind to the mode of delivery and recognises the significant benefits of high-quality early childhood education and care.