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Name: *Clare Crew*

Interest in the Royal Commission: *Early Childhood Teacher & Preschool Director*

Views on policy settings/services: *this submission relates to **three year old preschool***

I am an Early Childhood Teacher with 18 years' experience in South Australian Schools, Preschools and tertiary institutions (UniSA). I have previously worked in two Early Learning Centres (ELC) as a teacher of children aged three to five years (co-located with a Catholic/independent school). My current position is as a Preschool Director with the Department for Education (DfE).

I agree that children's access to quality and equitable early childhood education is critical to addressing many issues within our society. However, there are many concerns and limitations that I envisage regarding implementation of three year old preschool within DfE kindergartens:

1. The early childhood sector is at breaking point with staff shortages and has been for some time. Fulfilling requirements for additional staff may prove to be incredibly challenging, especially in country areas. Staff turnover is increasing, which is detrimental to children's attachment relationships and their experience of 'quality' care. This is the most pressing and urgent consideration worthy of attention, both within public education and the private sector.
2. Many sites are at capacity already, with not enough vacancies to offer children in their local catchment area in the year before commencing school. Where will the additional children go? Will the suburb a family lives in determine accessibility? There's potential for the gap of socio-economic disadvantage to widen if this is the case (i.e. there's many full sites in the northern suburbs).
3. Children aged three are not developmentally ready for the learning environment we offer in a DfE preschool. Changes will need to be made which will reduce the scope of learning offered. For example, our Bush Kindy and woodworking programs are highly valued by our community and would likely need to discontinue. An increasing number of children aged three still 'mouth' resources, wear nappies and require a day sleep. These differences can be accommodated in a long day care environment more easily than in a kindy setting, where nappy change facilities and sleep rooms often don't exist. For example, in a private ELC I was required to do nappy changes multiple times a day, crouching in a toilet cubicle where the child stood. Like

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my current site, no nappy change facilities were available, nor the space to add them.

4. In independent ELC's, with mixed age groupings of children aged three to five, I was not able to offer children the same intellectual stretch or personalised learning. Children were less 'school ready' upon leaving as a result (regarding their language development, social skills, focus and concentration, resilience, phonological awareness, independence etc.). In a DfE kindy, children's increasing developmental maturity means a significantly lower proportion of my interactions are supporting children's separation from families, emotional outbursts and toileting challenges. Intentional teaching times can be more targeted and lengthier, matching children's deepening focus, concentration and curiosity for learning with and from each other.
5. Many sites, such as mine, will be limited in their capacity to offer additional spaces to children due to the number of toilets available. For example, the capacity at my site is 44 children per session, however this is capped at 33 currently, as national regulations dictate that one toilet must be available for every 15 children. We are already in excess of this (by three children). Significant costs would be necessary to upgrade our facilities and add the additional toilet required.

My guiding questions are:

- How will sites equally offer access to kindy to three year olds?
- Where will the additional staff be sourced from?
- What infrastructure and site rejuvenation will be offered to ensure children's daily care needs and WHS requirements are met?
- How can we continue to offer a learning program which offers risk, challenge, the nurturing of lifelong dispositions for learning and intellectual rigour?
- Is this in the best interests of children's learning and wellbeing long term? Or driven by the economic agenda of growth and workforce participation?
- Will we be doubling the learning opportunities for children by doubling the length of enrolment at kindy, or offering a more watered down version than the current one year model?
- Will there be a significant volume of experienced Preschool Directors retiring early in response to this change? (impacting on the increasing number of hard-to-fill leadership roles)
- What research will be done to assess the effectiveness of this significant change to preschools? If it does not increase outcomes for children, what then?

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I'm disappointed that the introduction of three year olds to preschool has already been announced by the State Government as commencing in 2026. The Royal Commission appears to be an afterthought, designed to address the how rather than an investigation of its potential effectiveness and limitations. We need to ensure that this matter is child centered. Early childhood education in Australia cannot continue to be secondary to matters of the economy and the workforce participation of parents. If we're going to focus on workforce, lets at least pay attention to the crisis currently existing within the workforce of the early childhood sector.

In conclusion, I believe the only way to offer equitable access to preschool for three year olds across South Australia, is to provide Universal Access funding to long day care centers (in the two years before school, instead of the current one year provision). This also provides families with the flexibility of accessing longer days in lieu of kindergartens offering an OSHC service. Even then, there will need to be clarity and discernment to ensure this is a financial investment which supports children's education, rather than the profit margins of child care centres.