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Project



SOUTH AUSTRALIAN

ROYAL COMMISSION INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

An opportunity to create a future where every child, family and community can benefit from a universal ECEC system through deep inquiry into considerations of accessibility, affordability, quality and need

ABOUT THE FRONT PROJECT

The Front Project is an independent, national enterprise working to improve quality and create positive change in Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. We work with government, business and the early education sector to address disadvantage, improve outcomes for children and increase the short and long-term gains for Australia. We find innovative solutions that create impact in all parts of the system so that all children can thrive, regardless of the different challenges they experience.

We know high quality early education lays foundations for children that can last a lifetime, and at the same time provides significant benefits to our society and the future prosperity of Australia. Our society will see the full benefits of investment in the early years when the system is geared toward ensuring all children can access high quality education and take advantage of the opportunities this presents.

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Front Project respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and learn, and pay respect to First Nations Peoples and their Elders, past, present and emerging.

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The highest form of public inquiry into what is one of the highest priority investments in children's futures – Early Childhood Education and Care.

The last five years have seen waves of positive reform in the Early years (EY) across Australia – reforms that have been built from some of the most evidence-based policy agendas to have permeated our modern nation.

Federally, Child Care Subsidy changes, the ACCC Childcare Inquiry and Paid Parental Leave expansions have put the importance and prioritisation of investment in the early years firmly on the table. Across the States and Territories, actions to universalise preschool education in the year before school (including work in Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory and South Australia) are forming a national movement of opportunity for all children – regardless of the jurisdiction of Australia they call home or the families into which they were born.

ECEC serves as a critical foundation for determining a child's trajectory in life, and for supporting families to work, study and participate in their community. A key pillar of supporting children in the early years is ensuring that all children have access to affordable high quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). To quote the Federal Minister for Early Childhood Education, Dr. Anne Aly, at the recent National Early Years Summit, "No child born into disadvantage should have to carry that disadvantage through their life. If we get the first five years right, we can change the trajectory for children" (Aly, 2023). Research shows that children, families, governments and communities all benefit from the social and financial returns that ECEC provides. (The Front Project, 2019).

With access, affordability and equity in opportunity building as priorities for all Australian Governments, the ripples of change are evident across the ECEC system.

The Front Project congratulates the South Australian (SA) Government on their recent incumbency and their ECEC reform platform. We commend the commitment to deliver universal three-year old preschool and the opening of the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care. This Commission has already begun its deep inquiry into considerations of accessibility, affordability, and quality. It holds the potential to add to the evidence base to deliver this important policy agenda. There is clear drive across the ECEC system to facilitate the best outcomes for the South Australian context.

The Front Project greatly values the opportunity to provide a submission into the Royal Commission universal three-year-old preschool submissions stage. This Commission offers the timely opportunity for collective evidence gathering processes that look forward to ECEC's future. The outputs of this Commission can also stand to benefit the wider ECEC system, including Governments in all jurisdictions as they pave similar reform agendas. The ECEC sector can utilise emergent data, evidence and proposed solutions to build the momentum of possibility and visions for the future – across all levels of the system.

Executive Summary

The outcomes of this Royal Commission will put the SA Government in a unique position to analyse and consider what best practice 'universal' early education might look like for children, families, providers and the ECEC system more broadly. This commission will allow a breadth of system voices to be heard and to play a part in shaping the ECEC future. From a governance and policy perspective, SA is also able to capitalise on the learnings from Victoria as Australia's universal three-year-old preschool pioneer. In the context of this Royal Commission and the existing policy landscape for ECEC, this submission seeks to identify some of the key conditions to see the greatest benefit from investment in the early years in SA.

These conditions can be built from the opportunities of access and universality, data and evaluation, a well provisioned, confident and valued workforce and an unwavering focus on quality in policy and program design and delivery. In building these foundations, the Front project makes seven recommendations:

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS



Recommendation 1:

Provide at least 15 hours per week of free, high-quality, universal preschool to all children in South Australia in each of the two years before starting school and make universal preschool available in public, community and Long Day Care (LDC) settings, with more support made available to children who need it.



Recommendation 2:

Influence the Federal Government to expand funding in the Preschool Reform Agreement to include funding to support children in all states and territories to attend preschool in each of the two years before starting school.



Recommendation 3:

Commit to an independent long-term evaluation of the implementation of preschool reform in South Australia (similar to the Education and Development Gains in Early Childhood (EDGE) study in Victoria).



Recommendation 4:

Work with the Federal Government to fully fund and implement the National Workforce Strategy and investigate SA Government levers to address attraction, retention and growth in the ECEC workforce.



Recommendation 5:

Improve the rating and assessment cycle and develop processes to ensure services are rated at least every three years to lift quality more rapidly, providing appropriate support for under-performing providers and assessing services that are rated as 'working towards' every 12 months.



Recommendation 6:

Integrate ECEC with services such as health, school education and family services, including through exploring integrated community hubs.



Recommendation 7:

Influence the Federal Government to adopt a systems stewardship framework of leadership in ECEC.

Preschool in South Australia – state of learn and play

South Australia, alongside their Australian state and territory counterparts, has seen the significant participation increases that can emerge from a universal approach to preschool provision. As a signatory jurisdiction to the Universal Access National Partnership Agreement (UANP), South Australia contributed to lifting national enrolments in preschool in the year before school with the proportion enrolled for the target of 600 hours increasing from 12 per cent in 2008 to 96 per cent in 2018 (Nous, 2020). In 2021, 87 per cent of Australian children were enrolled in a preschool program in the year before school (Productivity Commission, 2023). South Australia performed above this national rate with 90 per cent of children enrolled in a preschool program in the year before school in 2021 (Productivity Commission, 2023).

In their 2020 review into the UANP, Nous determined that it was reasonable to conclude that the UANP funding contributed to improving quality of preschool in Australia – with its funding of Early Childhood Teacher (ECT) salaries and workforce initiatives contributing to this domain. This funding occurred alongside the creation of the shared learning framework of the National Quality Standard.

This is significant as we know it is the ‘quality’ ECEC that holds the most potential benefit for shaping children’s future (Tayler, Cloney and Niklas, 2015).

Furthermore, the Front Project’s 2019 economic analysis of early education provided to children in the year before they start school (preschool or kindergarten programs) found significant return on investment. For every dollar invested, Australia benefits to the value of two dollars over a child’s life (The Front Project, 2019). These benefits are reflected in outcomes such as higher earnings and workforce participation, increases in tax revenue and considerable budget savings to portfolios of health, education and justice – early education plays a key role in furthering Australia’s, and indeed South Australia’s, prosperity.

Fifteen years on from the introduction of the UANP, the new Preschool Reform Agreement (PRA) continues to support and bolster year-before-school preschool education provision across South Australia.

With the commitment of the SA Government to deliver another year of preschool access to children from 2026, a path can now be forged to extend the impacts of quality early childhood education and care to three-year-olds in a crucial period of their first five years of life.

This commitment is backed by evidence. Two years of preschool access, rather than one, can have more impact on children, especially in those most likely to be developmentally vulnerable (Fox and Geddes, 2016). Children can experience additional opportunity in preparations for formal schooling and in early intervention to support them to start alongside their peers. As the Early Years Education Program (EYEP) showed, children experiencing the most vulnerability would benefit from intensive ECEC for more hours from an early age. Indeed, evaluation of the EYEP showed large positive impacts were found on children's cognitive and non-cognitive development – primarily IQ, and protective factors related to resilience and social-emotional development (Borland, 2019).

In navigating the next steps for this important reform, South Australia can draw on the strengths of the existing mixed market ECEC system. We know that approximately 45 per cent of South Australian children aged 0-5 years attended an Australian Government Child Care Subsidy (CCS) approved childcare service in 2022, a figure that has risen by approximately 7 per cent since 2013 (Productivity Commission, 2023). Current funded preschool hours deliver some, but not all, of the necessary supports needed to boost access and flexibility and drive workforce participation for families. There is opportunity to continue to unite system actors (public, community, not-for-profit and for-profit services) in delivering quality ECEC universally, especially in tackling existing disadvantage and risk of vulnerability.



RECOMMENDATION 1

Provide at least 15 hours per week of free, high-quality, universal preschool to all children in South Australia in each of the two years before starting school and make universal preschool available in public, community and Long Day Care (LDC) settings, with more support made available to children who need it.

South Australia's ECEC system can provide children the best foundations for a happy and successful life, supporting broader workforce participation for the State's prosperity, through three-year old preschool policy reform. These reforms should form a wider commitment to deliver at least 15 hours per week of free, high quality, universal preschool to all children in each of the two years before starting school. More support should be made available to those who need it.

We know that more than one in five children (60,000) begin school developmentally vulnerable (The Front Project, 2022). We also know that these figures are even higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (The Front Project, 2022; CPD, 2021). Nearly half (46.2 per cent) of all children from very remote areas, and more than one quarter (26.4 per cent) of children from outer regional areas start school developmentally vulnerable, compared to one in five (20.8 per cent) of children in major cities (The Front Project, 2022). More than 90 per cent of children from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) who are not proficient in English start school developmentally vulnerable, compared to 17.8 per cent of children from LBOTE backgrounds who are proficient in English, and 20.8 per cent of English-only speaking children (The Front Project, 2022).

The language skills that children hold at five years of age are strong predictors of lifetime pathways, such as being four times less likely to have reading difficulties in adulthood, three times less likely to have mental health problems and two times less likely to be unemployed when they reach adulthood (Law, Charlton and Asmussen, 2017).

We also know that before children start school, there are crucial high-quality education, health and social service interventions that can shift trajectories not only in school education outcomes, but also throughout life – with most benefit to those facing disadvantage.

High quality early education can deliver substantial impact on children's lives, particularly when extended beyond one year of provision. For instance, Mostafa and Green (2012) found attending more than one year of preschool is associated with a 33-point gain in international OECD test scores for 15-year-olds. They also reported that a child who had no preschool was almost twice as likely to perform poorly in international tests compared with a child who attended more than one year of pre-primary education. A quality preschool experience for all children ahead of primary school can contribute to improving school readiness and educational attainment (Joo, Magnuson, Duncan, Schindler, Yoshikawa & Ziol-Guest, 2019; Oberklaid and Moore, 2007).

Increasing the number of children who start school without experiencing developmental vulnerabilities means South Australia can provide the best opportunity to reduce the gap in achievement and life chances that markedly differentiate advantaged and disadvantaged cohorts.

Furthermore, a universal approach to preschool in each of the two years prior to school offers efficiency and equity in the existing preschool system, continuing the successes built from the UANP (Fox and Geddes, 2017). Some of the opportunities that can be gleaned from a universal approach include but are not limited to:

- Access for *all* children (including children from vulnerable and disadvantaged cohorts)
- The establishment of shared community norms
- A non-stigmatising approach
- Building equal partnership in the education sector
(Fox and Geddes, 2017)

Moreover, an analysis of international policy settings found that free and universal entitlement for all children to stand as the most effective strategy in ensuring population-wide access citing near universal attendance rates in the UK and France (Gambaro, Stewart and Waldfoegel 2014; Fox and Geddes, 2017).

Alongside universal provision, SA should work to ensure funding for children to attend both years of preschool can be accessed in the setting which children attend. There are a variety of factors which can contribute to a family's choice of service type such as flexibility of hours and workforce participation. Funding for both years of approved preschool should be made available regardless of the setting and work to ensure cost is not a barrier for any child's attendance and participation (CPD, 2021).

RECOMMENDATION 2

Influence the Federal Government to expand funding in the Preschool Reform Agreement to include funding to support children in all states and territories to attend preschool in each of the two years before starting school.

The success of the Universal Access National Partnership (UANP) agreement and the Preschool Reform Funding Agreement shows that collaboration across governments can bring about meaningful outcomes for children in their first five years of life and beyond.

The new Preschool Reform Funding Agreement (2022-2025) has updated the ways in which funding can be used by the states and territories with the aims of delivering funding equity for families and children a key objective. States and Territories must now pass on the Federal Government's per child contribution to benefit children in the setting which they attend (Department of Education, 2022). States and Territories have also agreed to pursue new aims around lifting preschool enrolments and attendance and maximising preschool benefits (Department of Education, 2022).

The experience of lifting preschool attendance in the year before school across Australia shows us the impact of collaboration and shared funding agreements by lifting the opportunities reflected for every child universally, no matter which jurisdiction they call home. Such National Agreements can lock in funding sustainability and look to achieve national aims to support prosperity.

With South Australia joining states such as Victoria in committing to deliver universal three-year-old preschool, it is timely that our Federal Government support and enable consistency in preschool opportunity nation-wide. Collectively, the findings from this Royal Commission, South Australia's future three-year old preschool planning and implementation outcomes, and the Victorian rollout experience will provide a wealth of knowledge for other jurisdictions, and other countries internationally, to inform their preschool policy agendas and reform. These learnings can provide crucial insight to developing a national approach that has data, evidence and shared vision and objectives for children front and centre. We therefore urge the SA Government to influence the Federal Government to expand funding in the Preschool Reform Agreement to include support for all Australian states and territories.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Commit to an independent long-term evaluation of the implementation of preschool reform in South Australia (similar to the Education and Development Gains in Early Childhood (EDGE) study in Victoria).

High quality data and evidence play a fundamental role in getting early childhood education and care (ECEC) reforms right. This Royal Commission will compile a wealth of evidence, perspectives and case studies in the early year's domain which, coupled with the evidence base that already exists, will create a compelling case for the benefit of investment in ECEC for the 2 years before school. However, currently, there is limited Australian evidence about the impact of universal preschool on outcomes for children and on how we best achieve an equitable and impactful ECEC system.

The Front Project, in partnership with the University of Melbourne and working closely with the Victorian Department of Education and Training, is currently evaluating the roll-out of universal three-year-old kindergarten in Victoria. With funding from the Paul Ramsay Foundation and the Ian Potter Foundation, the Education and Development Gains in Early Childhood (EDGE) study will provide independent evaluation of the Victorian government's reform. This partnership reflects a multi-disciplinary commitment to an evaluation that will deliver rigorous evidence, insights for policymakers, and practical information for early childhood teachers, centre leaders and providers.

The EDGE study will work to fill the gap in Australian evidence highlighted above by:

- Measuring the **impact of two years of universal kindergarten** on children's learning and development and, in doing so, contribute to the international and Australian evidence base for early childhood education.
- Evaluating the **effectiveness of implementing** universal three-year-old kindergarten across Victoria and opportunities to improve/revise implementation at each stage.
- Highlighting **insights for policymakers and decision-makers**, reflecting the cycle of policy design, implementation and the evaluation of outcomes, with a focus on equity and quality.
- Providing **practical information to the early childhood sector** – teachers, educators, centre leaders and providers – on the programs, practices and learning experiences that encompass three-year-old kindergarten programs across Victoria.
- Demonstrating the **return on investment** of two years of early childhood education, considering the educational, social and economic benefits of the policy, and building a case for future investment in children – particularly children experiencing disadvantage – and society.

The ambition of this study is to take advantage of a natural experiment and the real-world scale-up of three-year-old kindergarten, and build rigorous evidence around the design, delivery, impact and return-on-investment of universal provision of early childhood education. Demonstrating the impact on children's developmental outcomes and the impact for children experiencing disadvantage is globally significant and can influence policy and practice in Victoria and inform similar initiatives nationally and internationally.

Every state and territory, including South Australia will face their own unique circumstances and challenges in designing and implementing ECEC reform and may have specific needs regarding children's development and vulnerabilities. With each reform agenda, new evidence, learnings and consequences (intended and unintended) will emerge. It is therefore crucial to capture those in an independent evaluation.

South Australia has a unique opportunity to capitalise on the future learnings of the EDGE study as they work to formulate their own roll-out of three-year old preschool. In addition to these learnings, we urge South Australia to ensure that all preschool reform is accompanied by their own independent evaluation of at least five years to build a rigorous evidence base of the implementation of the policy and capture children's developmental outcomes because of policy reform. Such evidence could compliment the Victorian experience and build the national and international evidence base toward facilitating broader reforms for all children domestically and internationally.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Work with the Federal Government to fully fund and implement the National Workforce Strategy and investigate SA Government levers to address attraction, retention and growth in the ECEC workforce.

A strong early childhood education system requires a well-provisioned, skilled and motivated workforce. Reforms to universalise another year of preschool education in states like Victoria and South Australia further establish and heighten this need. However, challenges in attraction, retention and building a quality workforce persist. Wages and conditions in particular are seen as a barrier to attracting and retaining staff.

The inability to retain workers in ECEC has a significant impact on quality experiences for children in ECEC. High workforce turnover and a lack of retention of skilled and experienced ECEC teachers and educators was cited as a key barrier to services exceeding the National Quality Framework (NQF) and maintaining an excellent rating. This acknowledges the vital importance of educator and early childhood teacher (ECT) to child relationships and experiences. ECTs and educators provide crucial value-add through the learning opportunities they create and the way they talk with children and stretch their thinking (Wall, Litjens, & Taguma, 2015). Furthermore, the Front Project's 2021 research with families found that parents valued quality and strongly associated it with the workforce, and the workforce being well supported (The Front Project, 2021).

Demand for ECTs will increase significantly over the coming decade. A 2021 report co-authored by several peak ECEC bodies estimated that the national demand for educators is expected to increase by 11 per cent and for ECTs by 17 per cent by 2025 (Investing in Our Future, 2021). Additionally, preschool reforms across the eastern seaboard in Victoria and NSW have been estimated to require an additional ~14,000 teachers and ~7,000 educators (Dandolo Partners & Gowrie Victoria and NSW, 2022).

Furthermore, it is not only attracting potential students to enrol in ECT courses that will alleviate workforce shortages. In 2020, 13,526 students enrolled in Teacher education: early childhood courses (ACARA, 2020). In this same year, 2,234 students completed these courses, a stark reduction from the 3,106 completions in 2015 (ACARA, 2020). Support and guidance to upskill are fundamental to a student's ability to complete their degree.

ACECQA's National ECEC Workforce Strategy and Implementation and Evaluation Plan sets a ten-year blueprint for ensuring a sustainable, high-quality education and care workforce that will drive the wide-ranging reform in the sector and boost equity, accessibility and quality for all children. The Federal Government must fully fund all initiatives under all focus areas of this plan including in attraction and retention, professional recognition, leadership and capability, wellbeing, qualifications and career pathways and data and evidence (ACECQA, 2021;2022). As ACECQA plan illustrates, there are a range of responses needed to address these workforce challenges.

Engagement and support programs help students who are upskilling their qualifications from Diploma to Degree that include structured scaffolding of support, such as mentoring, and peer-to-peer support have been proven to be effective in the workforce domain. For example, the Front Project's Upskill program that addresses barriers to upskilling and provides educators with the support they need to complete their journey to becoming an ECT. The program blends support between the university, the employer and the Front Project and is designed to help educators move confidently through their early childhood teaching. The Front Project is not a registered training provider, rather we work with universities and the educators directly to provide students with wrap-around support while they are undertaking their degree. Since 2019, the Upskill Program has supported 389 students into an ECT career. The Upskill Program has also seen a consistent retention rate of 72 per cent over four years.

With the reform agenda underway for three-year old preschool in South Australia and in the context of existing challenges for the ECEC workforce, the SA Government must work with and influence the Federal Government in fully funding and implementing all the activities and initiatives in the National ECEC Workforce Strategy Implementation Plan. In ensuring the plan's collective implementation, the SA Government should also explore their own levers to address attraction, retention and growth in the ECEC workforce – such levers may include financial incentives and scholarships (such as the Early Childhood Innovative Teacher approach taken in Victoria).



RECOMMENDATION 5

Improve the rating and assessment cycle to ensure services are rated at least every three years and develop processes to lift quality more rapidly, providing appropriate support for under-performing providers and assessing services that are rated as ‘working towards’ every 12 months.

High quality ECEC matters – if quality is low, investment in preschool will not produce impacts that are positive and sustained (Fox and Geddes, 2017). Furthermore, we know that children in low socio-economic areas are less likely to have access to quality ECEC (Torri, Fox & Cloney, 2017). Lifting quality in ECEC across the system must be a priority for all Governments as they shape reform agendas.

Therefore, adequate resourcing and investment in assessment and rating processes form crucially important elements in achieving service quality improvement and in delivering accountability and transparency to children and families.

The quality of preschool programs in South Australia have been lifted alongside the National Quality Framework – approximately 97.3 per cent of pre-schools/kindergartens and 82.4 per cent of long day care services meet or exceed the National Quality Standard (NQS) as of January 2023 (ACECQA, 2023). However, for assessment and rating processes to be an effective instrument toward maintaining and improving quality in ECEC, they must be proactive, regular, well-resourced, and be accompanied by tailored responses, communications and planning. The current South Australian Education Standards Board January 2023 to June 2024 (1.5 years) performance measure is: “15% of services rated against the previous NQS are assessed and rated under the current NQS” (Education Standards Board, 2023). There is also expectation that between January 2023 and June 2024 (1.5 years) “Services rated ‘working towards’ NQS three times or more require a tailored approach to develop their commitment to continuous improvement.” (Education Standards Board, 2023).

The Victorian Government Department of Education and Training’s (DET) Quality Assessment and Regulation Division (QARD) has a performance measure that “25% of eligible services are assessed and rated under the NQS per annum” and that “95% of services receiving an overall rating of ‘working towards’ NQS are inspected within 12 months of the final rating notice being issued” (Stitt, 2022).

Performance measures alone are not sufficient in ensuring regular and followed up quality assessment and rating processes. Adequate resourcing, training, communications, networks and connectivity are all essential elements of such seeing measures met, exceeded and meaningful improvement enabled.

The SA Government must ensure they establish a pro-active and more regular quality and assessment rating processes – ensuring services are assessed and rated at least every three years, investing in staff and effective processes and ensuring services that are rated ‘working towards’ NQS are provided assessments and ratings every 12 months. Beyond this, South Australia should also ensure that they develop tailored supports and processes to lift quality more rapidly by exploring additional targeted quality improvement programmes such as the Kindergarten Quality Improvement Program in Victoria of which early findings from an independent program evaluation have indicated favourable impacts on the quality of participating services – measured via changes in NQS ratings (Department of Education and Training, 2021). This program works with services needing quality improvement support and program participants with a ‘working towards’ rating were found approximately four times more likely to improve their NQS Overall ratings than non-participating ECEC services in Victoria, and almost three times more likely than other Australian ECEC services (Department of Education and Training, 2021).

Quality must be a central focus and priority for all ECEC services, including those who are or will be delivering a preschool program with the upscale to funded preschool in South Australia, in all settings where children attend.



RECOMMENDATION 6

Integrate ECEC with services such as health, school education and family services, including through exploring integrated community hubs,

As this Royal Commission will further establish, a child's experience of their early years is impacted by a variety of systems that can work to the support or the detriment of a child's health and wellbeing, development and opportunity to experience the best start in life. The ECEC system forms a crucial intervention in this mix but without the right investment, alignment and integration with other support services the level of disadvantage and vulnerability experienced by children and families can be exacerbated. It is when we see children's services work together, rather than apart, that we see significant beneficial outcomes for families (Hubs Strategy Group for Hume Communities for Children Initiative, 2017).

In designing the three-year old preschool reforms and the necessary upscale in workforce, capacity and infrastructure that follows with this commitment, the SA Government should consider opportunities to integrate early childhood education and care with health, school education and family services.

Integrated services can offer significant benefits to all children and families, especially those relying on social support services (Wong and Press, 2012). Integration can enable the children's services system to respond efficiently and effectively to the diverse and complex needs of children and families in the one place, community or system and address service fragmentation (particularly for families with children with multiple needs who may need to navigate a complex array of diverse services in medical and allied health, education and social work) (Wong and Press, 2012).

The 'Our Place' case study in Doveton, Victoria provides significant insight into potential benefits of an integrated approach in practice, and an important example for the SA Government to consider in their own ECEC system.

'Our Place' provides tailored education, health and wellbeing services in a single location as a resource for the local community (Victorian Government, 2023). 'Our Place' Doveton delivers joined-up services including quality early learning, primary school education, wrap around health supports, adult volunteering, educational, training and job support and out of hours activities for children and families (McKenzie, 2019). This case study has shown the benefits of its integrated model on children's school preparedness and readiness to learn (language and self-regulation) (McKenzie, 2019). For instance, 2017 data analysis showed that children attending the Doveton Early Learning Centre achieved significantly higher performance at prep entry testing in reading in comparison to those children who did not attend (McKenzie, 2019). These children achieved significantly higher performance in measures of reading and numeracy again at Year 3 level (McKenzie, 2019). Furthermore, the 'Our Place' Doveton playgroups and high-quality early learning have contributed to a reduction in the number of children identified as developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains (measured through AEDC data) from 55 per cent to 37 per cent since 2012 (McKenzie, 2019).

Furthermore, the Centre for Community Child Health which is within the Murdoch Children's Research Institute completed research for Community Hubs Australia which explored the impact of community hubs model (a place-based and citizen centric approach to providing refugee and migrant families support in their local communities) in Hume City Council (Victoria) on school readiness (Rushton, Fry, Moore, Arefudib & West, 2017). Rushton et.al (2017) highlight examples of positive changes in children that these hubs contributed to, for instance in smooth transitions to school, greater awareness from teachers in schools of the circumstances of migrant and refugee families and positive changes in families' social and emotional environments.

In facilitating the preschool reforms in South Australia, it will be crucial to consider the opportunities for service integration that will avail with the need to build capacity and partnerships in communities, particularly communities facing disadvantage. We urge the SA Government to explore these opportunities, including through integrated hubs, to ensure all children are supported in all health, wellbeing and family domains to fully participate and benefit from high quality preschool education.



RECOMMENDATION 7

Influence the Federal Government to explore a systems stewardship framework of leadership in ECEC.

The current ECEC system is a mixed-market model of provision. However, the unique nature of human services, such as ECEC, means their system-wide management and delivery requires different approaches and capabilities, compared to a more conventional market. As such, there is an opportunity to consider another approach to governance in the ECEC system, such as that of ‘system stewardship’.

System stewardship is a holistic approach to governance. It acknowledges the complex and adaptive nature of developing policy and delivering human services in a system’s context. At its core, it involves a steward or collection of stewards steering all system participants, including service providers and users, towards high quality, long-term outcomes.

Research from the Front Project in 2022 found that stakeholders across the ECEC system felt that moving to a system stewardship approach could be an opportunity to unite system participants through a common vision and support sustainable positive change. In this context, movement towards a system stewardship approach – to the extent this is characterised by a united vision, a cohesive decision-making environment, and a clear articulation of how actors are expected to work together – may help to mitigate these ECEC system challenges.

In the context of South Australia’s significant reform agenda that is pipelined for three-year old preschool, and those in other eastern seaboard states and territories, we recommend influencing the Federal Government to explore a systems stewardship framework of leadership. Some of the opportunities this may present for the broader ECEC system include:

- Uniting the sector towards a common goal or goals
- Mitigating system challenges – including access, quality and workforce – through clear responsibilities and mandates for intervention
- Growing the quality and reach of delivery through increased use of data and evidence, and
- Encouraging innovation and flexibility to meet children and family needs through more collaborative and empowering relationships between funders and service providers, and between other actors in the system.

The vision and future delivery of three-year old preschool reforms in South Australia, in conjunction with the data and evidence gathering processes of this Royal Commission, will help shape the future of ECEC nationally. There is opportunity to unite our broader ECEC system to a shared vision, particularly on universal access and boosting participation in high quality preschool for two years before children start school. As an actor in the system, we urge the SA Government to influence the exploration of a system stewardship approach to governance.

Supporting a bright future for children in South Australia

From 2026, funded provision of another universal year of preschool education has the potential to progressively see all children in South Australia access the crucial learning, developmental, social and cognitive gains that quality ECEC can deliver. The ECEC system is at a crucial window to steer universal three-year old preschool reforms toward enabling the best opportunities for access, quality, sustainability and the best start to life for all children, including those facing vulnerability and disadvantage. The leadership demonstrated by the SA Government in committing to, gathering evidence on, and investigating these reforms in full is to be commended. Children and families have all to benefit from an evidence based, considered and collaborative system wide approach.

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