



SA Royal Commission Submission 2023

28 February 2023

Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care
Karna Country
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By email only: RoyalCommissionECEC@sa.gov.au

To the Proper Officer,

Submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care: development of universal 3-year-old preschool

Acknowledgement to Country

We acknowledge and respect the continuing spirit, culture and contribution of Traditional Custodians on the lands where we work, and pay respects to Elders, past, present and emerging. We extend our respects to Traditional Custodians of all the places that United Workers Union members live and work around the country.

About United Workers Union

United Workers Union (UWU) is a powerful new union with 150,000 workers across the country from more than 45 industries and all walks of life, standing together to make a difference. Our work reaches millions of people every single day of their lives. We feed you, educate you, provide care for you, keep your communities safe and get you the goods you need. Without us, everything stops. We are proud of the work we do—our paramedic members work around the clock to save lives; early childhood educators are shaping the future of the nation one child at a time; supermarket logistics members pack food for your local supermarket and farms workers put food on Australian dinner tables; hospitality members serve you a drink on your night off; aged care members provide quality care for our elderly and cleaning and security members ensure the spaces you work, travel and educate yourself in are safe and clean.

Executive Summary

“While there is no single way to define and measure the concept of quality in ECEC settings, its essence lies in the quality of interaction between adults and children, irrespective of the ECEC system in place... Of particular importance should be elements such as staff/child ratio, staff qualifications and continuous professional training.”¹

UWU members are policy experts in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in their own right and know that early education is important to all ages, not just for three-year-olds. We want to begin this submission by urging the Commissioner to consider **a holistic vision of ECEC for all South Australian children** and not limit their recommendations to three-year-old preschool programs. We cannot afford to focus on reforming only one aspect of a broken system for one cohort of children and see another Royal Commission in 2025 investigating high quality ECEC for 0–2-year-olds.

The sector is currently complicated, messy, and expensive, and after holding this sector together for so long, educators are leaving in droves. South Australia has the opportunity to lead the way for the rest of the country, by implementing a system that values educators and supports and educates children from the time they are born through to their school years. This means **avoiding a**

¹ European Commission (2022). Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care. P. 18.

disjointed system of preschool versus ECEC – which creates a problematic care/education divide; threatens the viability of existing and established Long Day Care (LDC) services in the community; and ignores the ongoing workforce crisis in early learning due to the undervaluation of feminised care work.

For too long, workforce has been a secondary thought in ECEC policy change, especially at the federal level, and the SA Government has the chance to rectify this and be an Australian leader in implementing holistic and much-needed reform across the entire spectrum of ECEC. UWU members urge the Commissioner to place **professional educator pay, conditions, and development at the centre of any policy reforms**. The presence of educator-child relationships that are stable, sensitive and ongoing is a key indicator of high quality ECEC, and this occurs in long day care (LDC) from the moment children come through the door, at 6-weeks-old and onwards. A disjointed experience where that relationship is broken, or not prioritised in reform, will have the opposite effect of what is desired. High quality ECEC makes all the difference for long-term outcomes, and a professionally paid, respected workforce is absolutely integral to that high quality.²

Moreover, research shows the setting is not as important as the quality of ECEC being provided. **Universal 3-year-old preschool must be available in different service settings, not only to be accessible, but to ensure the viability of LDC in South Australia and the participation of children that stand to benefit the most.** LDC is a crucial component in the mix of ECEC service types, and it will be disastrous for accessibility if 3-year-old preschool is only run in standalone preschools. An appropriately funded preschool program across service types would ensure long-term viability, remove the arbitrary division of education and care that has typified ECEC as ‘women’s work’, and ensure children especially in low-socioeconomic areas have access to ECEC. Over a quarter of SA children are considered disadvantaged, well above the national average. Accessibility must be taken seriously, and many LDC services are already doing the work of building networks in communities in their area – but need better State Government support.

The increasing dominance of for-profit services in the South Australian early learning sector is also a key concern for UWU members, both from a quality and workforce standpoint. For-profit centres are a drag on the quality of ECEC provided (as measured against NQS), invest less in their workforce compared to not-for-profit and publicly run centres, and are overrepresented in breaches and reports of compromised worker and child safety. This is a potent mix that shows taxpayer money (both Federal and State) is better spent providing services that are publicly run and are fit-for-purpose with modern Australian family life. With government data showing decreasing attendance in SA preschools and increasing attendance in LDC, **publicly-run high quality LDC with professionally paid educators is an obvious long-term policy solution.**

Indeed, funding high quality ECEC is calculated to return \$2 for every \$1 spent – not only improving outcomes for children in the long-term, but also reducing spending across other Departments in welfare and crime.³ As the Victorian Government has committed to, publicly run LDC centres are a way to create better return on expenditure for governments and create world class, best practice workplaces for educators and high quality ECEC for children. This also allows easier evaluation of ECEC, which, as the Royal Commission’s own literature review pointed out, is needed to fill research gaps in overall ECEC delivery. The issues are complex in the sector, and fixing one part of a broken system will not go far enough. There must be investment in the sector with a holistic vision of ECEC to achieve greater outcomes for SA’s children.

² 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. P. 31.

³ The Front Project (2019). A Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school in Australia. PwC for The Front Project. P. 6.

Recommendations

It is these key themes around a holistic approach to ECEC: workforce reform; the need for high quality early learning for the children who stand to benefit the most; the ongoing viability of South Australian LDC; and the limitation of the for-profit model in early learning that shape our recommendations to the Commissioner. South Australia's early educators recommend:

1. The Royal Commission take a holistic approach to ECEC that delivers universal 3-year-old preschool across multiple settings, including not-for-profit LDC, to ensure not only the viability of the South Australian LDC sector, but the needs of South Australian families and the delivery of the highest quality ECEC.
2. The Royal Commission retain a committed focus to workforce reform in line with the crucial role that early childhood educators' pay, conditions and professional development play in ECEC quality.
3. The Royal Commission investigate the introduction of publicly run, fit-for-purpose LDCs, that offer preschool programs, as a long-term high-quality model that, at the very least, should be trialled in lower socio-economic areas where children stand to benefit the most from ECEC. We note that Victoria, a leader in ECEC reform, has taken this approach.
4. The Royal Commission demonstrate a commitment to ongoing excellence in ECEC and recommend a structured data collection and evaluation process in any proposed reforms to fill the gaps in both international and Australian research on ECEC quality, dose, participation, workforce and children's outcomes.

High quality ECEC and participation for the children who need it most

Not only are educator-child relationships key to high quality ECEC, but there are benefits for young children aged 0-5. Care and education are happening concurrently in ECEC services, and educators rely on pedagogical practices embedded in an early learning framework to deliver high quality ECEC. However, without an intentional and concrete policy focus on workforce, high quality ECEC cannot be delivered. Experienced educators are leaving the sector, and those left are burdened by increased workload, stress and low pay. In fact, the age of the child and the setting are of lower importance than the care and education delivered by an educator. It is time policy and funding reflected the importance of the work being done by educators in LDC and across ECEC services with children 5-years-old and younger.

This is especially the case if the SA Government wants to ensure disadvantaged children, who stand to benefit the most from ECEC, are a priority. We note to the Commission that the evidence is clear: longer service hours, increased flexibility and lower costs are all factors that can improve access for low-income households.⁴ LDC services are already located in areas where ECEC is needed and can deliver high quality early education for children 0-5-years old, including preschool programs under the universal access partnership agreement. For many years now, year-before-fulltime-school (YBFS) preschool attendance has been decreasing. From 2016 to 2021, the proportion of enrolled children in SA Government preschool services dropped each year from 52.1% to 43.2%.⁵ The total proportion of children enrolled in preschool in SA has also been dropping since 2018. However, the number of children attending childcare subsidy (CCS) approved centres has been increasing steadily over the last decade nationally, and in SA currently 45.3% of children are enrolled in a CCS-approved service. LDC services equal or outnumber preschools across Adelaide suburbs, particularly in some of the lowest socio-economic areas where these services are desperately needed – for example in the Local Government Area (LGA) of Playford, in Adelaide's northern suburbs.⁶

⁴ Howells, S. et al (2022). P. 30.

⁵ Productivity Commission (2022). Report on Government Services, Early Childhood Education and Care. Figure 3.3b, found at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2023/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care>

⁶ In the Local Government Area (LGA) of Playford, the South Australian Education Department lists 18 preschools and 21 long daycare (LDC) centres. It is in the 1st quintile of most disadvantaged LGAs.

Indeed, the Royal Commission has heard that 27.4% of South Australian children under 5-years old were estimated to be living in the most disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances, compared to the 20% national average.⁷ The evidence “supports high quality programs as the most critical factor for positive outcomes, with the greatest benefits seen for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds.”⁸ However, ECEC services must be available for parent(s) that are employed in shift-work, work multiple jobs, live in lower socio-economic areas, or would otherwise find 9am-3pm preschool hours incompatible with their employment. Existing infrastructure, where community relationships already exist, is crucial in implementing successful reform especially around participation. The Commissioner’s literature review shows ECEC participation is complex and requires various policy levers to better ensure the developmental and social benefits of ECEC are provided to disadvantaged children in the community. Educators do play a key role in facilitating ECEC attendance; building relationships and communicating with families in their community, as well as having access to ongoing professional development and cultural competency training has a positive impact on accessibility.⁹ Moreover, as the case study of an LDC in Hillbank below shows, it is the workforce crisis that is preventing access to preschool programs at established and trusted centres.

Our members share a vision for ECEC in SA that doesn’t create a disjointed system for children, and rather places high quality programs delivered by respected and professionally paid educators at the forefront. The age at which ECEC starts for a child is not as important as the quality of education and care provided.¹⁰ Research supports the importance of education and care for 0- to 2-year-olds, finding high quality ECEC programs are beneficial. Whilst the pedagogical framework may differ for younger children who communicate differently to older toddlers and young children, stable (ongoing), the maintenance of responsive and sensitive relationships with educators was still highlighted as a key indicator of quality, and central to providing a safe, educational and beneficial environment for two-year-olds.¹¹



⁷ Child Development Council (2023). Session 1, Submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care: How are South Australia’s children going overall? How are they going in the early years? P. 11. Found at: <https://www.royalcommissionecec.sa.gov.au/documents/submissions/session-1/CDC-Submission.pdf>

⁸ Howells, S. et al (2022). P. 20.

⁹ Howells, S. et al (2022). P. 30.

¹⁰ Howells, S. et al (2022). P. 20.

¹¹ Mathers, S., Eisenstadt, N., Sylva, K., Soukakou, E., Ereky-Stevens, K (2014). Sound Foundations: A Review of the Research Evidence on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care for Children Under Three. The Sutton Trust with the University of Oxford.

Case study: Rebecca Stiles, Centre Director at Hillbank Community Children's Centre.

Rebecca has worked at Hillbank for almost 27 years, and the not-for-profit LDC centre is located right on the border between Hillbank and Elizabeth East, in the LGA of Playford in Adelaide's northern suburbs. Her centre is in a low socio-economic area and is an invaluable service as one of the few centres in the local area.

Rebecca unequivocally supports universal preschool access for 3-year-olds, however "it feels one-sided. More of the focus is on children and families – rightly so – but none on the workers, and how it will actually work. Universal access should be for all children. I know from the minute a child comes through our door, whether they're 6-weeks-old or 3-years-old, they're being educated. We're missing a massive gap beforehand by only focusing on 3-year-olds."

The centre used to run a preschool program for 4-year-olds – however, the centre has been unable to find or retain an ECT to deliver the program. So, whilst the curriculum and program is unofficially running, no support from government is available to ensure more children in the area have access to an official preschool program. "They have to make it work in LDC. They have to make it enticing for [early childhood teachers] ECTs to work in LDC. We've lost so many [ECTs], but they get paid more if working in a kindy and receive more support from government than LDC. There is also a massive shortfall in the workforce – we need quality educators. We can't deliver [education and care] unless something is done to address this. We are in a low socio-economic area, no other centres right near us, people come to us because they hear about us from word-of-mouth. We have single families, children under state care, from on-community. A lot of cultural diversity

the centre. We don't have a lot of space now, but if they bring in 3-year-old we might lose our toddler room. This is despite working hard to get to a wait-list, exactly the same, but people would move for the free preschool service. and regulations, run the same program but aren't recognised or supported.

"Why can't they fund our LDC services so we can educate children from 6-weeks-old until school age? It feels like we're being degraded: that we're only seen as delivering care and not education; that education starts when kids go to kindy, rather than as soon as they walk in our door."

Our members are already aware of these differences, are skilled and knowledgeable when it comes to providing high quality care, but do not have the resources or remuneration to stay in the sector. It is quality that determines outcomes, and segregating care from education in a preschool versus LDC divide undermines a professional sector of educators that teach young children of all ages in LDC and have done so for years. Creating a disjointed system by separating 3- and 4-year-olds is not a solution that prioritises evidence, accessibility, affordability, or the continuation of the relationship between educator and child. Indeed, as the 2016 Mitchell Institute Report on 3-year-old preschool found: "If there was a substantial reduction in the number of 3-year-olds in LDC because families chose to access a preschool program in other settings, there may be implications for affordability and financial viability. This would not achieve optimal outcomes for children."¹²

Further to this point, there are 406 LDC services in SA, compared to 349 preschools. LDC services are existing infrastructure in delivering high quality ECEC, and services just require more support to do the work in their communities of facilitating attendance and enrolment – work that is already occurring. Although, disadvantage does not just occur in low-socioeconomic areas. Many children living across more affluent areas also experience disadvantage, and by funding all LDC it would create equitable access for children with disability, First Nations children, and children already known to child protection services, and would also be a step towards changing societal perceptions of ECEC.¹³ Broad-reaching acceptance of ECEC would improve respect for educators and the work they

¹² Fox, S., Geddes, M. (2016). Preschool – Two Years are Better Than One. The Mitchell Institute. P. 83.

¹³ Fox, S., Geddes, M. (2016). P. 62.

do and build towards a professional identity. It would also improve the attendance of children that already have access but would otherwise not attend because families don't understand the benefits. Targeted services also run the risk of creating a steeper gradient of catch-up for children who are disadvantaged and are not captured by those services.¹⁴ LDC is a key component of the mix of ECEC services in SA and can be funded to create equitable services for SA children.

The impact of LDC becoming unviable, if 3-year-old universal preschool access were only in standalone preschools, would be considerable. ECEC would become inaccessible for children under 3-years-old and would send the entire sector backwards in SA. It would also likely impact any recommendations put forward on the Royal Commission's second focus of the first 1000 days of a child's life. There would be little continuity of the educator-child relationship through the early years of learning, and educators would be faced with job losses and LDC centre closures. As discussed above, flexible access, longer service hours and cheaper costs all facilitate ECEC access. LDC disappearing would be counterproductive to all three, and also be predicated on an assumption that LDC is not a suitable environment for education. This is false:

"While there is no single way to define and measure the concept of quality in ECEC settings, its essence lies in the quality of interaction between adults and children, irrespective of the ECEC system in place... Of particular importance should be elements such as staff/child ratio, staff qualifications and continuous professional training."¹⁵

The Mitchell Institute acknowledged "skilled and supported educators [are] one of the most important contributors to an effective preschool program".¹⁶ If we accept the growing body of evidence that educators are crucial to delivering high quality ECEC, the viability of LDC services in SA must be taken into consideration. The Royal Commission must also consider how the workforce is to deliver high quality ECEC and preschool when SA is in the midst of a workforce crisis.

Recommendation 1: The Royal Commission take a holistic approach to ECEC that delivers universal 3-year-old preschool across multiple settings, including not-for-profit LDC, to ensure not only the viability of the South Australian LDC sector, but the needs of South Australian families and the delivery of the highest quality ECEC.

¹⁴ As above.

¹⁵ European Commission (2022). Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care. P. 18.

¹⁶ Fox, S., Geddes, M. (2016). P. 34.

The South Australian ECEC Workforce Crisis

Despite increasing evidence indicating the importance of high quality ECEC and the role educators play, there is a workforce crisis in South Australia and nationally. Research shows that 30-48% of educators leave the sector each year.¹⁷ The average tenure of an ECEC worker is only 3.5 years.¹⁸ These rates are double the national turnover average and triple the average rate of turnover of primary school educators.¹⁹ Moreover, every time an educator leaves their position or the sector altogether, the impact is felt by dozens of children.²⁰ According to a 2021 UWU national survey of 3,800 educators, those who are upskilling are more likely to leave the sector; with 44% of those studying to become an ECT and 40% of those enrolled in a Masters degree indicating an intention to leave, compared to 33% of those currently not upskilling.

The same survey also found that 34% of SA educators intend to leave the sector, and that 73% of those respondents want to leave in the next three years. Over 40% of SA educators would not recommend a career in ECEC – citing understaffing, increased workload and concern about ‘under-the-roof’ ratios. Two-thirds of educators strongly agreed that increased workload compromised their ability to provide high quality learning to children and to provide them with the emotional support they need for their wellbeing. One SA educator said:

“It’s hard to give children and families continuous and consistent care with constant staff changes. It also places added stress on permanent educators within the centre to uphold quality and care.”

The European Union has recently recommended that “Member states should ensure fair working conditions for ECEC staff, in particular by promoting social dialogue and collective bargaining and by supporting the development of attractive wages in the sector”.²¹ A recent OECD paper is just as explicit: “In addition to initial education and continuing [professional development], working conditions for the ECEC workforce are important contributors to process quality... Relationships with children are embedded within and reflect the quality of relationships among staff members: a warm and mutually respectful work environment helps create such patterns of communication and interaction of ECEC staff with children and families.”²²

These are key recommendations that go to the heart of why Australian educators are leaving the sector; they cannot afford to stay, have no time to plan, and face chronic workforce shortages in their workplace, along with no ongoing PD or career pathway opportunities. A system that is appropriately funded and supports educators to deliver high quality care can ensure continuity and therefore ongoing and long-lasting benefits to children. Better pay and conditions can also contribute to attracting men to the sector and dismantling patriarchal notions of ‘women’s work’ that has left educators underpaid and undervalued. ECEC is one of the most feminised occupations; women comprising 92.1% of the educator workforce.²³

¹⁷ Thorpe, K, Jansen, E, Sullivan, V, Irvine, S, and P McDonald (2020). Identifying predictors of retention and professional wellbeing of the early childhood education workforce in a time of change. *Journal of Educational Change* vol. 21, p. 639.

¹⁸ McDonald, P., Thorpe., K., and S. Irvine (2018). Low pay but still we stay: retention in early childhood education and care. *Journal of Industrial Relations* vol. 60, no. 5, p. 648, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185618800351>.

¹⁹ Thorpe et al., ‘Identifying predictors of retention’, p. 639.

²⁰ Whitebook, M., D. Phillips and C. Howes (2014). *Worthy Work, STILL Unlivable Wages: The Early Childhood Workforce 25 Years after the National Child Care Staffing Study*. Centre for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. P. 6.

²¹ European Commission (2022). Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the Revision of the Barcelona Targets on early childhood education and care. P. 24.

²² Zaslow, M. (2022). Early childhood education and care workforce development: A foundation for process quality. Policy brief for the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills. P. 16.

²³ 2021 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census (2022). Prepared for the Australian Government Department of Education by The Social Research Centre. P. vii.

Recommendation 2: The Royal Commission retain a committed focus to workforce reform in line with the crucial role early childhood educators pay, conditions and professional development play in ECEC quality.

Publicly run centres are higher quality, and provide better return for taxpayers

Linked to the workforce crisis is the troubling level and influence of private-for-profit (PFP) ownership of ECEC providers and services. Publicly run ECEC services that are not subject to maximising dividends for shareholders or excessive CEO salaries are a way to ensure high quality education and care, accessibility for families, and maximum return for taxpayer money. UWU's report 'Spitting off Cash' highlighted just how much taxpayer money provided through the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) is transferred offshore, rather than providing quality care.²⁴

There is *no* requirement for service providers receiving the CCS to reinvest into their centres, workforces, or into improving the quality of education and care. Therefore, private investment in the sector is effectively encouraged, including offshore private equity, because it is a constant stream of government funding with minimal regulation to direct its use. Not only through minimising tax are Australians missing out; it is the poorer service quality that means educators are not able to deliver high quality care. This is evident through the lower employment costs across the largest PFP providers in Australia, compared to not-for-profit providers. For example, in 2019, 60% of G8's revenue was dedicated to employee expenses – compared to 70% of Goodstart's revenue.²⁵ Worryingly, this disparity also extends to workplace safety. From an analysis of enforcement actions and breaches nationally conducted by UWU, it was found that 70% of the 59 published enforcement actions reported by South Australia's Education Board between July 2015 and July 2021 involved for-profit centres. This is grave cause for concern, given PFPs make up *only* 26% of the sector in the state.

Do private equity and listed companies belong in early learning in South Australia?

- The largest for-profit provider in SA is G8 Education Ltd, who receives millions of dollars in taxpayer funding, while richly rewarding executives and their shareholders. Former G8 CEO Gary Carroll received \$1.3 million in total remuneration for 2021.²⁶ Driven by a profit motive, these and other owners – some based in overseas jurisdictions and controlled by private equity funds that evade full disclosure requirements – ensure profits are often going offshore, in some cases to tax havens.
- Guardian Childcare and Education, with 10 centres in SA, has been owned by private equity firm Partners Group since 2016. It is controlled by Zeuss Childcare registered in London and is part of a group structure involving Scottish limited partnerships, a form of ownership criticised for lack of transparency and facilitation of tax avoidance and money laundering.
- Busy Bees entered the Australian market in 2018, and owns 15 centres in SA. It has been majority owned by the Ontario Teachers Pension Plan (OTPP) since 2013. Reported revenue in 2020 was \$105 million, with underlying earnings of \$13 million. However, \$6.5 million in related party transactions and interest payments between the Australian operations and a British parent entity Eagle Superco in 2020 resulted in an 'on-paper' loss (and therefore no tax paid) in Australia. The prior year, the British parent declared AUD\$109 in losses, but only after transferring AUD\$137 million in interest payments to a related party of the ultimate parent, OTPP. OTPP has 333,000 members and net assets of over AUD\$250 billion worldwide.

²⁴ Big Steps Report (2021). Spitting off Cash: Where does all the money go in Australia's early learning sector? Found at: <https://bigsteps.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/spitting-off-cash-uwu-report.pdf> P. 12.

²⁵ Big Steps Report (2021). Spitting off Cash. P. 9.

²⁶ G8 Education Ltd Annual Report 2021-22. Found at: https://g8education.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/G8_Annual-Report-2021.pdf P. 55

Staffing waivers have increased dramatically since the start of 2020, with, once again, the issue far more pronounced among the PFP part of the sector. Nationally, almost 1 in 5 for-profit LDC centres are operating with a staffing waiver, meaning they are twice as likely to be operating with fewer mandated qualified staff than not-for-profit and state/territory and local government run services.²⁷ In SA, 18.5% of centres are operating with a staffing waiver, above the national average of 16.4%.

As a result, and perhaps unsurprisingly given the lack of investment in their workers, PFP providers have disproportionately proven to be a drag on the system in terms of broader quality, as measured by the Australian Children's Education and Care Authority's (ACECQA) National Quality Standards (NQS). In the latest ACECQA NQF snapshot for Q4 2022, 5% of centres that were 'working towards' meeting the NQS were local government/State/Territory managed, compared to 14% of PFP. And at the other end of the scale, 50% of LG/State/Territory managed centres were 'exceeding' standards, compared to only 15% of PFP-run centres.²⁸ Not only is there clearly a workforce crisis, but for-profit services are prioritising their bottom line over investing in high quality care. If for-profit services receive State Government funding through universal 3-year-old preschool programs, there must be transparency measures to ensure that expenditure is being used to invest in their workforces to deliver high quality care to an appropriate standard.

Educators are tired of holding together a system that does not value them, and it is little wonder so many are leaving the sector altogether. While the majority of ECEC funding comes from the Federal Government, there is an important role the states can play in providing services where they are most needed, and supporting the local workforce. Around the country we've seen state governments look at new models for the provision of services, as well as implementing policies to attract and retain workers. Publicly run centres are higher quality, as mentioned in the Royal Commission's literature review,²⁹ and there is growing recognition in other states, such as Victoria, that investment in publicly run LDC will improve outcomes and mean high quality early learning for children. The Royal Commission should replicate this approach and recommend, at the least, a trail of publicly run LDC in disadvantaged areas.

Lastly, there is still a paucity of Australian research into ECEC and the South Australian Government should not miss the opportunity to incorporate best practice evaluation and data collection with any reforms – as a priority, not an afterthought – so that we can properly measure quality and outcomes for children, and demonstrate what is needed for a world-class system on the world stage.

Recommendation 3: The Royal Commission investigate the introduction of publicly run, fit-for-purpose LDCs, that offer preschool programs, as a long-term high-quality model that, at the very least, should be trialled in lower socio-economic areas where children stand to benefit the most from ECEC. We note that Victoria, a leader in ECEC reform, has taken this approach.

Recommendation 4: The Royal Commission demonstrate a commitment to ongoing excellence in ECEC and recommend a structured data collection and evaluation process in any proposed reforms to fill the gaps in both international and Australian research on ECEC quality, dose, participation, workforce issues, and children's outcomes.

²⁷ ACECQA (2023). NQF Snapshot: Waivers data as at 1 January 2023. Found at:

<https://snapshots.acecqa.gov.au/Snapshot/waivers.html>

²⁸ ACECQA (2023). NQF Snapshot Q4 2022: A quarterly report from the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. P.17

²⁹ Howells, S. et al (2022). P. 20.


Conclusion

Our members are some of the most important people in a young child's development. However, much work needs to be done to ensure high quality ECEC because educators do not yet have the support or remuneration to deliver it. Instead, passionate educators have been forced to make do in under-resourced LDC, while profit that would otherwise increase worker and child safety, improve quality, and be reinvested back into the workforce, has disappeared offshore or into executives' pockets.

South Australia is already ahead of the curve with many state-run and not-for-profit services, but further investment in not-for-profit and state-run/community managed LDC already embedded in communities is needed to ensure accessibility for all families, especially those who struggle to access preschool services and would benefit most from more flexible service hours and lower costs. Educators play a key role in facilitating ECEC participation, and a workforce with access to ongoing professional development, professional wages and well-resourced centres can make a long-lasting change in a young child's life. Educators need to see as a result of this Royal Commission a comprehensive workforce strategy that addresses retention in the sector, along with a holistic vision of 0-5-year-olds' education and care that prioritises the educator-child relationships. Indeed, Uwu educators are passionate about children of all ages having at least two days universal access to ECEC and even more for First Nations children in line with Closing the Gap targets.

For too long, workforce issues and publicly-run LDC have been the priority in ECEC policy change, especially at the federal level, and the SA Government has the chance to rectify this and be an Australian leader in implementing holistic, long-term and pivotal reform across the South Australian sector. The educators who live ECEC everyday implore the Commissioner to be mindful of this pivotal opportunity.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Gibbons
Executive Director of Early Learning, United Workers Union