



**AEU RESPONSE TO THE
CONSULTATION PAPER TOWARDS
THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NATIONAL
AGENDA FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD**

**Commonwealth Task Force on
Child Development, Health and Wellbeing**

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The AEU welcomes the proposal to develop a national agenda for early childhood. There is now almost universal recognition of the vital importance of the early years in children's development and life opportunities. It is our collective national responsibility to ensure that all children in Australia are provided with the very best start in life. This does require a national vision for early childhood education and services, the development of shared goals and priorities, and both short and long term action plans. It also requires a national plan for preschool education within the overall framework of a national early childhood agenda.

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Attachments;

1. AEU Early Childhood Policy
2. Revised Common Understandings from the third AEU preschool Roundtable
3. AEU, Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision: Report On Government Services 2003, Early Childhood Education 2003 Update
4. AEU discussion paper, Towards a National Plan for Preschool Education.

1. Introduction

The Australian Education Union (AEU) and its Associated Bodies represent 156,000 teachers and allied educators employed in education workplaces in all states and territories of Australia. These include public preschools, primary and secondary schools and colleges and TAFE colleges/institutes. In Victoria, it also includes all community, local government and other preschools except those in private schools.

The National Early Childhood Committee of the AEU comprises delegates from each state and territory, including practising early childhood teachers. The Committee has successfully undertaken policy development and framed the directions of the AEU in relation to early childhood education issues, for recommendation to the AEU's Federal Conference and Executive.

In December 1998, the AEU through the National Early Childhood Committee developed and released a discussion paper, *'Towards a National Plan for Preschool Education'*. Since that time, the AEU has been a strong advocate of the need for such a national plan, and for the Commonwealth Government to accept some responsibility for preschool education, in partnership with the states and territories.

The 2003 Annual Federal Conference of the AEU adopted a revised Early Childhood Policy, which is attached for your information. AEU policy is based on a commitment to universal access to at least one year of free, public preschool education for all children in Australia, as an integral part of the early childhood education offered by a high quality, properly resourced system of public education.

The policy advocates the need for a national plan for preschool education, to be developed by the Commonwealth Government in partnership with the states and territories, the AEU and other relevant stakeholders. It also argues that the Commonwealth must share in the responsibility for funding and planning public preschool education accessible to all children in Australia.

All education systems should have as their objective the achievement of participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early childhood education and have an obligation to provide for the intellectual, cultural, social and emotional development of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, recognising that central to learning for Aboriginal children is a focus on identity and self-determination. The AEU policy, which was reviewed by the AEU's national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Committee, addresses measures which should be part of the implementation of that objective.

During the past five years, the AEU has initiated a series of Roundtables of early childhood education stakeholders, including representatives of teachers, parents, employers, Departments and interested academics. The Common Understandings reached at these forums included support for a national framework:

It is imperative that attention be given to the establishment of a national framework within which the delivery of quality preschool provision can be sustained, nurtured and monitored. Part of this national framework must be the acceptance by the Commonwealth of a responsibility in the area (including funding) and the development of national goals based on the above characteristics of quality preschool programs.

(Common Understandings from the Third AEU Preschool Roundtable, October 2001)

In addition, the AEU has undertaken considerable research on the issues, benefits and structures of preschool education, much of which can be accessed on the AEU webpage, at www.aeufederal.org.au. This submission focuses on preschool education within the framework of early childhood education overall.

2. Overview

- 2.1 The AEU welcomes the proposal to develop a national agenda for early childhood. There is now almost universal recognition of the vital importance of the early years in children's development and life opportunities. It is our collective national responsibility to ensure that all children in Australia are provided with the very best start in life. This does require a national vision for early childhood education and services, the development of shared goals and priorities, and both short and long term action plans. It also requires a national plan for preschool education within the overall framework of a national early childhood agenda.
- 2.2 The AEU congratulates the Government and the Australian Labor Party for the bipartisan approach evidenced at the consultative forum held in Melbourne on 1 May 2003, recognising that there will be different approaches within the broad framework of a proposed national agenda.

The AEU notes that in the lead-up to the last federal election, the Australian Labor Party, the Democrats and the Australian Greens had all developed education policies which gave commitments to the development of national preschool programs within the education portfolio, including provision of Commonwealth funding for preschool education.

If the Commonwealth Government is willing, there is the opportunity to develop a national vision and plan for early childhood education which will be a central component of the national agenda for early childhood services.

- 2.3 This submission seeks to challenge some of the explicit and implicit assumptions which underpin the discussion paper.

Firstly, the discussion paper indicates that a national agenda 'will not seek to alter traditional areas of Commonwealth, state and territory responsibilities in early childhood'. It is more than time that the Commonwealth once again accepted some shared responsibility for preschool education.

Secondly, the discussion paper makes no comment about resourcing. If Australia is to achieve a national agenda that reflects the critical importance of early childhood education and other services, additional resources will be needed.

Thirdly, while the AEU welcomes the cross-portfolio approach that is being proposed, there is also a critical need to develop far greater coordination within portfolios as well as across them. This is the case in education, where national structures and agendas have largely ignored preschool education. If education and care services are to be equal partners in a whole of government approach, the lack of national coordination of early childhood education must be addressed.

3. Goals and principles

The goals that are set for a national agenda should be based on a recognition of the rights of children and the obligations of the nation to ensure that those rights are given expression for all children. Expressing goals within a deficit model framework lays the ‘blame’ on individual children and their families rather than recognising the structural barriers that impede their wellbeing and inclusion.

Australia’s obligation is to work to ensure the wellbeing of all children in Australia; that their rights are respected; they are physically and emotionally healthy; safe and secure; socially engaged; and not living in poverty. Social structures, including early childhood education and services, must acknowledge and affirm the cultural knowledge, language and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children from culturally diverse backgrounds.

All early childhood services must have as their objective the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and recognise that central to their learning is a focus on identity and self-determination.

All children in Australia should have equitable access to free, public, high quality preschool education for at least one year prior to attending school. Preschool education must be an integral part of the early childhood education offered by a high quality, properly resourced system of public education.

Discrimination and barriers to children’s participation in education and other social and cultural structures must be identified and addressed. A commitment to equity requires a national policy framework which ensures that no Australian child is disadvantaged because of the state or territory or location in which they live, or because of their family circumstances.

In addition to the proposed cross-portfolio and inter-sectoral collaboration, the Commonwealth Government, in partnership with the states and territories, must take a responsibility for funding and planning public preschool education accessible to all children in Australia.

All teachers and education workers in early childhood education and services have the right to appropriate recognition, remuneration, career paths and status and proper industrial representation through registered unions to ensure the protection of industrial rights.

Early childhood education, including preschool education, must be delivered by appropriately qualified early childhood teachers and education workers and appropriate registration and accreditation procedures must be adopted.

4. Preschool education in Australia

4.1 Overview

There is now almost universal recognition of the fact that investment in quality public education during the early childhood years reaps significant long term benefits for children, their families and the community. Early childhood education occurs within a range of settings. These comments focus on the provision of preschool education, irrespective of location or setting. Early childhood education must be a central part of a national early childhood agenda.

Preschool is a vital component of the education continuum and specific strategies are required to ensure that the links between preschool and school education are strong and supported. It must be an integral part of the early childhood education offered by a high quality, properly resourced system of public education.

A quality preschool education reflects a belief in the uniqueness of childhood by respecting children as they are now and who they are right now.

Quality early childhood education is characterised by appropriate child-teacher ratios and group sizes, appropriately qualified and trained teachers and education workers, and enriching, well equipped, caring and secure environments in approved and accredited locations, all of which should be defined and enforced by regulation. It should be coordinated and delivered by qualified early childhood teachers in developmentally appropriate, educationally sound, and culturally inclusive learning environments.

Quality preschool education actively engages parents in the expanding development of their children, in acknowledgement of their critical role, rights and needs in caring for and educating their children.

The creation of structures and processes to enable national coordination should include not only the development of national goals, but the negotiation of minimum national standards for preschool education, in areas such as group sizes, staff-children ratios, case loads and qualifications to promote quality service provision.

4.2 Participation

Across Australia, around 84.1% of 4 year olds attended preschool in the year prior to school in 2001-02. The participation rate has increased from 83.7% in 2000-01. In Western Australia, the move to fulltime pre-primary and the change in the entry age has meant that from 2000-01, a half cohort is moving its way through the system. For this reason, Western Australia is seen to have a significantly reduced enrolment and participation rate at this time. Were Western Australia to be excluded from the current figures, the participation rate would be 85.7% in 2001-02.

In NSW, Queensland, South Australia and the ACT younger children are also funded to attend preschool education. Around 26,100 3 year olds attended preschool in 2001-02, or about 16.3% of all 3 year olds. The fall from the 2000-01 participation rate of 23.2% is again due primarily to the adjustment of Western Australian data.

Although the number of 4 year olds in the Australian population has dropped by 8200, or 3.1%, since 1998, the number of 4 year old children enrolled in funded preschool education services has increased by 2581 students, a 1.2% increase. When Western Australia is excluded, enrolments have increased by 5434 or 2.9%, over that period. There were also 6500 more children aged 0 to less than two years. These increases are likely to affect preschool enrolments in 2004-2006.

Commonwealth policies in relation to Indigenous Education recognise that the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in preschool education is a critical objective. Some Commonwealth IESIP funding is provided but there is a general view that the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children needs to be increased. The participation rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remains significantly lower than those of other Australian children.

The limitations of the data make it fairly impossible to estimate the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are missing out on preschool education. However, within these limitations, it is perhaps worth giving some indication of the scope of the issues, based on the 2003 *Report on Government Services*. Extrapolation of actual enrolments and the population share of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the general 4 year old community enables at least rough estimations to be made of the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are missing out on preschool education. An analysis of three systems – NSW, Northern Territory and South Australia - on this basis suggests that in these three examples alone, some 8000 or so Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged three and four are missing out on preschool education opportunities.

The data limitations and the need to make a number of assumptions mean that these rough estimations must be treated with great caution. At the least, these estimates suggest that it is high time that more reliable and specific data is provided on the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and indeed all children, who are missing out on preschool education. Details of this analysis are provided in Attachment 3.

The 2003 *Report on Government Services* data on the representation of children from non-English speaking backgrounds in the general community has been revised upwards substantially. In the latest data, children from NESB backgrounds are under-represented in preschool education, relative to their representation in the community, across all jurisdictions for which there is data.

Data on the representation of children with disabilities in preschool education has also been revised. Children with disabilities are underrepresented in every preschool education system for which data is available, with the exception of NSW and South Australia.

Children from rural and remote areas are reported to be represented in preschool education in proportions higher than their representation in the general community where data is available, except for Queensland and the Northern Territory.

Where data is available the representation of children from single parent families are seen to be under-represented in preschool education relative to their representation in the general community. This category has little direct relevance in itself unless linked to family income: many single parent families live in poverty, which could well affect access particularly in systems which require parents to pay higher fees.

A more detailed analysis of the 2003 *Report on Government Services* data is attached as Appendix 3.

In general, the lack of a systematic research base means that participation data remains problematic. While it is clear that the vast majority of children in Australia do access preschool education, there is far too little analysis of who is missing out on preschool education, and why. There is however evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are under-represented in preschool education.

At the same time, there are some positive initiatives occurring. The mobile preschools in the Northern Territory are one example of coordinated services being provided to remote

communities which provide access to previously unavailable services. There needs to be additional resources provided to ensure that such initiatives are extended to every area in which they are needed. There also needs to be national structures which enable strategies and programs which successfully redress disadvantage to be systematically shared between systems.

4.3 Structures

Across Australia, different government policies mean that access to a quality public preschool education is not equitable, and is currently determined by location and, in some states, by family circumstances.

In six of Australia's eight systems, preschool education is clearly recognised as part of the public education continuum. It is administered, staffed and funded by the Education Department and preschool education is usually part of the school or staffed by Education Department teachers and there are increasingly moves towards co-location.

Victoria and NSW are the exceptions, in different ways. Fee structures in those two states reflect a far higher reliance on user pays, which disadvantages families with lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Structural changes are currently occurring in a number of states, which include moving more preschools into schools, moving childcare on to preschool/school sites and even increased numbers of public, school-based preschools in the two states dominated by private and community provision.

Curriculum frameworks in many states are being redeveloped to include preschool education: in Tasmania, the *Essential Learnings Framework* is for 0-16. Three systems have now moved all early childhood care and education services into the Education Department (however named).

The 2001 OECD Thematic Review report has identified an international trend towards full coverage of the 3 to 6 year old age group, '*aiming to give all children at least two years of free publicly funded provision before beginning compulsory schooling...often within the education system*'. (OECD 2001, p. 48,53)

From a national perspective, current provision of preschool education is inconsistent and uncoordinated. There is no national policy, no national infrastructure to provide the basis for planning and no coherent strategies to ensure that all children in Australia can exercise their right to a free, public, high quality preschool education. Nor are there minimum standards for preschool provision. This is why structures and processes need to be developed via MCEETYA to ensure coordination of early childhood education within the education portfolio as part of the move towards a national agenda for early childhood services as a whole.

4.4 Quality of teaching and the status of the profession

Early childhood education has a predominantly female work force. Equity issues relevant to the extreme sex-segregation within Australia's workforce are of paramount importance in this area. Emphasis needs to be given industrially and professionally to improving the recognition and status of workers in early childhood education.

Appropriate recognition, remuneration, career paths and status of early childhood teachers and education workers must be pursued. This includes parity of salary and conditions with other education sectors, irrespective of the location or centre type in which preschool education is provided.

All workers in early childhood education should be appropriately qualified for the roles and tasks that are performed in the settings in which early childhood education is provided. This includes attention to both initial qualifications and the provision of access to professional development and educator networks.

4.5 Funding of preschool education

Preschool education provision across Australia is inconsistent and under-resourced. Most countries spend between 0.4% and 0.6% of GDP on preschool education. Australia, at 0.3%, is 26th out of 28 OECD countries.

Commonwealth funding for preschool education was abolished in 1985, leaving preschool education as the only sector of education which does not receive any Commonwealth support.

While education is primarily a responsibility of the states and territories, the Commonwealth Government has maintained a strong role in all sectors of education, from schools to higher education, as well as in child care services. The Commonwealth funding contribution to the operation of TAFE institutes and government schools is based on cooperative partnerships with the states and territories that are aimed to achieve agreed national objectives for those sectors.

The failure of the Commonwealth Government to maintain a similar responsibility in relation to preschool education is inconsistent with this general pattern. Apart from the shortage of resources available to ensure universal access to preschool education, the current situation has exacerbated fragmentation and lack of coordination. The reintroduction of a shared Commonwealth commitment to the resourcing of preschool education underpins efforts to ensure equity of access, redress of disadvantage and greater national consistency.

4.6 The link between early childhood services

Preschool education is a vital part of the education continuum and national policy frameworks and structures should be framed within an overall perspective on early childhood education. The importance of the link between the provision of preschool and school education cannot be overstated. However, effective relationships between preschool education and other services for young children are also important in ensuring the best possible opportunities are provided for children and families.

Flexible transition arrangements from childcare to preschools and kindergartens, and from preschools and kindergartens to schools, should recognise various developmentally appropriate factors as they affect individual children. Care must be taken to ensure that the availability of flexible transition options does not lead to very young children being placed in services that could not provide appropriate programs normally provided to children of similar ages.

Where these do not exist, links must be established between preschool education and school education, including the development of transition programs, early childhood

curriculum guidelines, networks and, where possible, integration or co-location of preschools with primary schools.

Where the establishment of co-located or integrated models of service provision is proposed, whether they be preschool/childcare, preschool/school or a combination of both, the quality and integrity of preschool programs should not be compromised as a result of such models. Government agencies involved in the establishment of such settings must consult with the relevant stakeholders, particularly the AEU, prior to the establishment of such settings to ensure that the requirements of high quality preschool provision and relevant industrial conditions are met.

Provision of public preschool education programs must not be compromised by the introduction of competitive services, particularly those facilitated by public funding mechanisms which may be implemented to the detriment of public preschool provision for example, in terms of enrolments, staffing levels and public preschool education resource allocations.

All stakeholders should work together to ensure that the structures of early childhood education and children's services develop in ways which value, respect and meet the needs of children, families, teachers, workers in children's services and the Australian community.

As indicated earlier, there are a range of changes and structural projects occurring around the country, such as the co-location of community childcare services on school sites, the bringing together of education and care portfolio responsibilities and the development of shared projects between education and health departments. Structures need to be put in place which enables systems to share models and the outcomes of such strategies.

An appropriate advisory structure should be established which includes representatives from the various portfolios and the range of stakeholders, to provide advice and input in relation to cross-portfolio issues. Such structures need to be underpinned by portfolio-specific advisory bodies where these do not exist. Early childhood education, within the province of MCEETYA, is one example.

The funding and support of local networks of early childhood education and care teachers and workers would assist in ensuring that information and strategies can be shared and new strategies for greater coordination between services can be facilitated.

5. Early learning objectives

There must be a national commitment to providing universal access to at least one year of free, public high quality preschool education prior to school.

Early childhood education must recognise and affirm the cultural knowledge, language and values of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children from culturally diverse backgrounds.

More strategic support and interventions in early childhood education are necessary in order to give young children and their families the care and development they need. This early support

will ensure that potentially disadvantaged children are better prepared for schooling. It will prevent the costly remedial work that would otherwise have to be carried out in later years. Barriers to access for disadvantaged groups, children with special needs and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds must be identified and addressed.

In order for students with additional educational needs to participate in a full educational program it is essential that appropriate, and in many cases, additional resources are made available including: access to specialised multidisciplinary services; professional support staff; trained teachers aides/assistants; professional development; and appropriate industrial support. Additional resources should be maintained at levels commensurate with the needs of the child.

Curriculum frameworks and programs must be child focused and reflect the centrality of play in children's learning. A national policy framework for preschool education must be developed within an overall policy perspective on early childhood education. This should take into account both the pedagogy of preschool education and the curriculum frameworks of the early primary years and provide for articulation between them. A quality preschool education reflects a belief in the uniqueness of childhood by respecting children as they are now and who they are right now.

The creation and retention of partnerships with parents is a positive and important element in the provision of early childhood education. Quality preschool education actively engages parents in the expanding development of their children, in acknowledgement of their critical role, rights and needs in caring for and educating their children.

Early childhood education should be coordinated and delivered by qualified early childhood teachers in developmentally appropriate, educationally sound, and culturally inclusive learning environments.

6. A research and policy base

The current national data base in relation to early childhood education is limited and problematic. We cannot even see with certainty how many children in Australia are missing out, much less why or who they are.

The AEU supports the 1996 recommendation of the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee for the establishment of a National Centre for Research in Early Childhood Development, Education and Care and urges its establishment through the Minister for Education Science and Training. One of its urgent tasks would be to establish a consistent and reliable data base on the provision of and participation in preschool education and other early childhood services.

The development of early childhood education structures through MCEETYA would enable strategies and information to be shared between and across systems.

The creation of representative advisory structures within education and on an across-portfolio basis will also enable knowledge, experiences, strategies and policies to be shared and negotiated.

7. Key areas for action in early learning.

- 7.1 The Commonwealth and state and territory governments must clearly affirm a commitment and active priority to provision of universal access to at least one year public preschool education.

Policy should be developed to extend such access to two years, consistent with the 2001 OECD Thematic Review report's finding that the overall OECD trend is aiming to give all children at least two years of free publicly funded provision before beginning compulsory schooling. States and territories currently offering access to more than one year of preschool must at least maintain this existing provision.

- 7.2 A national plan must be developed for preschool education by the Commonwealth Government in partnership with the states and territories, the AEU and other relevant stakeholders.

Such a national plan for early childhood education would include:

- national goals and a policy framework for preschool education within an overall perspective on early childhood provision;
- minimum national standards and targets for preschool education consistent with good educational practice;
- strategies which enhance the quality of teaching and the status of the profession in relation to preschool/early childhood education, including qualification standards, professional development and equitable remuneration.

- 7.3 Defined Commonwealth and State and Territory roles should be negotiated within a new funding and policy partnership aimed at delivering universal, free, public preschool education of the highest quality for all children in Australia.

The Commonwealth Government should provide general recurrent funding to increase participation and quality via funding agreements which also require maintenance/enhanced effort by the states and territories and incorporate agreed targeted outcomes.

In addition, the Commonwealth should fund a national targeted equity program to guarantee equitable access and to redress educational disadvantage.

A more detailed model is outlined in the AEU policy.

- 7.4 Priority must be given to the achievement of participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early childhood education for a period similar to that for all children in Australia. In remote localities specific attention should be given to the provision of early childhood education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Achievement of this objective requires specific strategies that include the following:

- Ensure staffing policies give priority to appropriately qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are enrolled;

- Adopt measures to include and appropriately remunerate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members delivering cultural programs;
 - Provide professional development activities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness and counter racism for all staff;
 - Appropriate and sensitive cultural orientation to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is a prerequisite for all workers in all children's services;
 - Adopt teaching practices which recognise, value and utilise the student's first languages; and Aboriginal English/Kriol and Torres Strait Islander Kriol;
 - Provide environments in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents feel welcome and encouraged to be involved in the education program;
 - Adopt practices which maximise the co-ordination of early childhood education programs with health services and nutrition education programs; and
 - Ensure that the delivery of care and education must be culturally inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogies.
- 7.5 The development of a national framework for preschool education should be coordinated through MCEETYA and DEST, who can carry the coordination of the whole of education into the cross-portfolio national agenda planning and structures.
- 7.6 A national infrastructure should be developed by the Commonwealth and states and territories in partnership under MCEETYA/DEST auspices, including national education advisory structures, research capacities, and national programs eg professional development for early childhood educators.
- 7.7 Strategies must be developed to ensure that all workers in early childhood education are appropriately qualified for the roles and tasks that are performed in the settings in which early childhood education is provided.

This includes both pre-service training and access to professional development.

Immediate priorities include:

- Ensuring that pre-service teacher education programs include significant and mandatory units in the areas of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander studies.
 - Providing professional development in the areas of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies.
 - Funding and supporting networks of early childhood educators to ensure that information, strategies, experiences and resources can be shared and educational innovations disseminated.
- 7.8 The Commonwealth, in partnership with the states and territories, must investigate and make available to all systems information about existing links between early childhood education and child care, and provide models for how such links should ensure that the best possible educational practice is paramount in the early childhood education sector.
- 7.9 An appropriate advisory structure should be established which includes representatives from the various portfolios and the range of stakeholders, to provide advice and input in relation to cross sectoral matters. Such structures need to be underpinned by portfolio-specific advisory bodies where these do not exist.