



THE AEU'S 10 YEAR PLAN FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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The Early Childhood Context

Australian children do not have access to the same level of early childhood education offered in other OECD countries. Australia is the lowest spending of 24 countries in the OECD. Average country expenditure on education for 3-4 year olds is 0.5% of GDP, and Australia spends just 0.1% of GDP¹.

Commonwealth funding support for preschool education was abolished in the mid 1980s.

From a national perspective, early childhood education in Australia is fragmented, of variable quality and inconsistent. Children do not have equitable access to a high quality, free preschool education.

Facing up to the Challenge

International research, experience and the recommendations of the OECD review of early childhood education and care in Australia² indicate that it is time to break down the current divide between education and care and to develop a national vision and plan for early childhood education.

This will require a very substantial investment and a commitment to change from all parties. In particular, the Commonwealth and the states and territories must work in partnership to fund, support, and guarantee access to high quality, free early childhood education for all children.

It is recognised that there is no one answer or structure that will apply across all systems and communities. Early childhood education will continue to be offered in a range of settings. Change will need to happen from where systems and services are now. Change will not happen overnight – we need to develop a long term vision and plan.

Quality Preschool Education

Preschool education must be child focussed – it is primarily directed to the education and development of children. However, structures and supports must recognise the needs of the child within their family and community. Barriers to participation must be addressed with appropriate resources, support and information.

There has been a growing recognition across governments of the need for more 'joined-up' services and in many areas, schools are increasingly operating as a community hub, providing a centre point for access to a range of services and activities.

One of the most fundamental requirements for quality early childhood education is a qualified early childhood education teacher who has completed a degree in education, offering a planned educational program for children and usually supported by an assistant.³ Too many children in Australia who are currently enrolled in preschool education in a range of settings do not have access to a four year trained early childhood education teacher.

Quality early childhood education is also characterized by appropriate child teacher ratios and group sizes and enriching, well equipped, caring and secure environments in approved and accredited locations, all of which should be defined and enforced by regulation.⁴

The aim of a longer term strategy should be to ensure that all children have equitable access to early childhood education, but also that it is of high and improving quality.

While international emphasis is on the provision of preschool education for three and four year olds in the two years prior to school entry, an overall national strategy must encompass the whole of early childhood – from birth to eight years.

National Goals

The AEU proposes six national goals to underpin national strategies for early childhood education and care.

The Commonwealth and state and territory governments must work in partnership with stakeholders to develop a shared national vision and ten year strategy for early childhood education and care which is focussed on the educational needs and rights of every child.

1. Guarantee access to 20 hours of high quality, free preschool education for all three and four year olds in Australia.
2. Ensure that early childhood education is of high quality.
3. Give priority access to two years high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education to all three and four year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
4. Improve equity of access for children with special needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
5. Provide adequate levels of high quality early childhood education and care for 0 to 3 year olds to meet family and community needs.
6. Develop the links and coordination between early childhood services to provide a more seamless continuum of education and care.

National Strategies

The AEU has developed a 10 year framework to achieve the five national goals. The proposed strategies are outlined in the AEU discussion paper, *'Where there's a will, it's child's play: the way forward to quality preschool education for all'* and are reflected in the 2007 AEU Early Childhood Education policy.

The strategies include:

- A phased implementation to achieve 20 hours of free, high quality early childhood education by 2016, with priority access for Indigenous children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- All accredited settings to provide a qualified four year trained early childhood teacher for each group of children accessing preschool

education, supported by appropriately trained assistants;

- Increased funding to provide adequate supports and resources for children with special needs;
- Development of national goals, standards and a policy framework within an overall policy perspective on public education;
- Adequate levels of high quality childcare for all children including the years prior to two years free preschool education, co-located or linked to preschool and school services;
- Making preschool education the responsibility of education departments in each state and territory, with MCEETYA as the lead agency at a national level, supported by DEST;
- Establishing early education centres primarily on primary school sites but also in other areas to meet local demand, to provide integrated or at least co-located early years of education (school and preschool) and integrated or wrap around care and other services;
- Funding for the integration or co-location of early childhood education services which are school based and/or public or community/not for profit services through funding for facilities, infrastructure and qualification upgrades for early education centres;
- Resource and support quality improvement, including additional funding to support qualification upgrades, improved pay and career paths for staff, without additional cost to parents;
- Development of articulated qualifications that enable staff to upgrade and progress their careers;
- Increased access to out of school hours care.

Further Reading

<http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Ec/index2.html>

'Where there's a will, it's child's play: the way forward to quality preschool education for all' is at

<http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/ECdispap2006.pdf>

¹ OECD, 2005, *Education at a Glance, OECD Indicators 2005*

² OECD, 2001, *OECD Country Note, Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Australia*.

³ Walker K., 2004, *'For all our children': National preschool education inquiry report*, AEU.

⁴ AEU Early Childhood Education policy, as adopted at the 2007 Annual Federal Conference