



PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IS A NATIONAL ISSUE

The vital importance of early childhood education is almost universally recognized. However preschool education provision across Australia is inconsistent and under-resourced. We are underperforming by international standards and we need a national plan for preschool education.

Why preschool education matters

A quality preschool education sets the foundations for cognitive, physical, emotional, social and language development. While preschool education is an important experience in itself, it also provides children with an invaluable foundation for their entry into formal schooling. It is often essential in terms of the detection of impediments to learning, which if not attended to could affect a child's learning potential for the rest of their life.

Research has shown that the benefits of a quality preschool education can be long-lasting, through school and into adult life.

The 1996 Senate Committee report, *childhood matters*, noted that *numerous studies have repeatedly demonstrated that quality early education, and intervention where children experience disadvantage or disability, has a measurable impact upon their intellectual performance upon entry to school, their social achievements, self esteem and task orientation.* (p. 138)

The Senate Committee pointed to the results of the High Scope/Perry Preschool Project, which showed that for every dollar invested in an excellent preschool program for disadvantaged children, society received a return of \$7.16 by the time the children were 27 years old. (p. 137)

Quality preschool education is characterized by appropriate child teacher ratios and group sizes, appropriately qualified and trained teachers and education workers, and enriching, well equipped, caring and secure environments all of which should be defined and enforced by regulation.

The current situation

Australia has no national plan or structures for preschool education. Each state or territory has its own system and children in different parts of the country do not get equal access to a high quality public preschool education.

With no minimum national standards on group sizes, facilities and equipment, teacher qualifications and access to professional development, children's access to a quality preschool education varies according to their location.

In six of the eight Australian systems, preschool education is part of the public education system. In some systems preschools are an integral part of the local primary school. In others, they are linked but in nearby facilities. In NSW and Victoria preschool education is seen as the responsibility of Community Services. In Queensland kindergarten programs in are part of schools, but there are also some community kindergartens, which largely cater for younger children.

In some systems, preschool education, as part of the public education system, is free. In others, parents have to pay high fees which make access more difficult for lower income families. Some systems offer younger children access to preschool education as well.

We do not even know exactly how many children are missing out around the country, since there is no national data base or policy.

But we do know that around 30,000 children get no preschool education at all, and we also know that children who are disadvantaged are more likely to miss out. Some children attend preschool services without access to qualified teachers.

How do we compare to other countries?

Preschool education provision across Australia is inconsistent and under-resourced. Australia ranked 22nd out of 28 OECD countries in terms of the participation of children aged four and under in early childhood education, with a participation rate of 33.8% compared to an OECD average of 60%.

Funding of preschool education

The Commonwealth Government used to contribute about 60% of the funding for preschool education during the 1970s. Previous Liberal/National Governments began to reduce this effort and a Labor Government abolished Commonwealth funding support for preschool education in 1985. At that point, the Commonwealth had provided \$33 million per year for preschools.

Funding for preschool education is currently the responsibility of the states and territories. The last comparable data, from the Commonwealth Grants Commission, indicated that overall national expenditure on preschool education was falling in real terms.

The level of funding varies widely between systems. In NSW and Victoria, where preschool education is seen as the responsibility of community services rather than as part of the education system, government funding is lower and parents are forced to make a greater contribution.

A child attending preschool for 10 hours per week in 1999-2000 cost NSW parents an average of \$18.60 per week and Victorian parents an average of \$11.50 per week. A small proportion of children attending community based preschools in Queensland would also have cost \$19.50 per week. but the majority attend preschool free within Queensland government schools. In other states and territories parents may make small voluntary contributions, but as part of the public education system, preschool education is free.

A national plan for preschool education

Concern about this overall situation led the AEU to develop a National Plan for Preschool Education.

The Plan calls for the development of a partnership between the Commonwealth Government and the states and territories to ensure:

- C universal access for all Australian children to at least one year of high quality, free public preschool education;
- C development of national goals and a policy framework for preschool education within an overall perspective on early childhood education, including minimum national standards and targets consistent with good educational practice;
- C coordination of a national framework for preschool and early childhood education through the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA);
- C the development of national structures, including a capacity to undertake research and to develop reliable data bases;
- C development of funding agreements which move towards the achievement of national goals and standards and require the states and territories to maintain and increase their funding of preschool education.

The plan calls on the Commonwealth Government to contribute funding for preschool education, through a 15% base block grant, 7% for a National Preschool Equity Program and support for national structures. This would cost some \$74m in the first year and provide about \$285m over three years to ensure the implementation of the national goals.

Major Sources:

OECD 2001, *Education at a Glance, OECD Indicators*
Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee 1996, *childhood matters, The report on the inquiry into early childhood education*
Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision 2001, *Report on Government Services 2001*

Further reading: www.aeufederal.org.au

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