



## Preschool Education Inquiry

# Independent Inquiry into the provision of universal access to high quality preschool education

The AEU is sponsoring an independent inquiry into the provision of universal access to high quality preschool education across Australia.

Underpinned by a commitment to equity and universal access, the inquiry will focus on the role of the states/territories and the Commonwealth in ensuring that all children in Australia have access to a high quality, free preschool education. It will identify the current facts and challenges and focus on initiatives that can move the national agenda towards the achievement of that objective.

### **Inquiry process**

The AEU has commissioned an independent researcher, Ms Kathy Walker, to undertake this important research. The researcher will participate in a national early childhood education forum, to be held on 21 October 2003, in order to hear the views of national stakeholders in early childhood education. Organisations and individuals will be invited also to make submissions to the inquiry in writing.

A series of forums will be held in capital cities around Australia, to provide further opportunities for stakeholders to make input to the process and to highlight issues in their state or territory which are relevant to the national picture. Meetings with key stakeholders are also planned.

The researcher will report back to national stakeholders on the findings, including proposals for initiatives and/or further action, at a further national forum, likely to be held in April 2004.

### **Terms of reference**

The terms of reference and other information including suggested areas of focus are at:

[www.aefederal.org.au/EC/Inquiry.html](http://www.aefederal.org.au/EC/Inquiry.html)

The Inquiry will seek to ascertain and report on the views of stakeholders in relation to:

1. the degree to which Australia is successful in ensuring that all children in Australia have equitable access to a high quality free preschool education;
2. the current barriers that prevent all children from accessing preschool education and the challenges that need to be addressed;
3. the roles that the Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments should play in ensuring universal access to preschool education;
4. initiatives that would guarantee that all children do have access to a high quality preschool education;
5. strategies and arrangements that would strengthen the links between preschool education, early childhood education in schools and other early childhood services.

### **National forum**

The first national forum will be held for invited participants on 21 October 2003 at 120 Clarendon Street, Southbank, Victoria 3006.

### **State and territory forums**

The dates and locations will be announced on the inquiry website at

[www.aefederal/EC/Inquiry.html](http://www.aefederal/EC/Inquiry.html)

and key stakeholders will receive a letter of invitation.

### **Submissions**

The forums will provide an opportunity for national and state/territory bodies, as well as individuals, to make an input to the inquiry. In

addition, written submissions can be sent to Ms Walker by mail or email.

### **Researcher**

Kathy Walker is a lecturer at RMIT University in the Faculty of Education and a consultant in education.

She has had extensive experience in education for over 20 years. She works as a consultant with teachers, parents and other professionals across early childhood, primary, secondary and adult sectors.

Her publications include *Teaming Up*, a book for teachers on multi-age classrooms and curriculum and socialisation. Other publications include *putting children first* and journal articles about philosophy and curriculum, children's development and social skills and play therapy.

In 1995 Kathy won the University Teaching Award at Swinburne University and in 2001 Kathy won the RMIT University Teaching Award for Student Centred Learning.

### **Reference Group**

A reference group will be established to provide support to the researcher and the project. It will include:

- Dr Helen May, Professor of Early Childhood Education, Victoria University of Wellington;
- Professor Margaret Reynolds, President, UN Association of Australia;
- Ms Rosslyn Noonan, Chief Commissioner, Human Rights Commission, New Zealand;
- Ms Susan Hill, Associate Professor, delissa Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies, University of South Australia.

Other members of the Reference Group are still to be finalised.

### **Why an inquiry?**

There is now almost universal recognition of the critical importance of early childhood education.

Recent consideration of a National Agenda for Early Childhood has focussed on the need for a national approach involving collaboration and cooperation 'to ensure that Australian children get the best start in life'. Early learning and care is one of the action areas in the framework. The National Agenda framework under discussion began from a premise that 'it will not seek to alter traditional areas of Commonwealth, state and territory responsibilities in early childhood'.

There has been little specific national policy focus on preschool education since the abolition of Commonwealth funding for preschool education in the mid 1980s.

At the July 2003 MCEETYA meeting, Ministers noted a report on the National Agenda and agreed to consider the early years as a strategic priority when the structure of taskforces and working groups is reviewed in 2004.

It seems timely to focus on the degree to which Australia is currently successful in ensuring that all children have equitable access to a high quality free preschool education; the barriers; initiatives that would guarantee access; and the roles that governments should play to ensure universal access for all children in Australia.

In that context, it is also useful to look at strategies and arrangements that would strengthen the links between preschool education, early childhood education in schools and other early childhood services.

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