

TOWARDS A NATIONAL PLAN FOR PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

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Context

The Australian Education Union represents teachers and other education workers in preschool education, schools, TAFE , Adult Migrant English Services and Disability Services. The AEU has 160,000 members throughout Australia, with a branch or associated body in every state and territory and a federal office in Melbourne. It is also a member of Education International, which brings together education unionists from around the world.

The framework and the brief for the development of a national plan for preschool education came from the Federal Early Childhood Committee of the AEU, which is made up of early childhood representatives from every state and territory.

This discussion paper about the development of a national plan is one of a set of inter-related documents, including a national AEU policy statement on preschool education and an action plan which aims to raise the profile of early childhood education and the status of early childhood teachers and education workers, and to campaign for the resources and structures which would ensure that all Australian children have access to preschool education of the highest quality.

In that context, the Committee found that there was no clear picture about the provision of preschool education across Australia. I was commissioned to prepare this discussion paper both to begin the process of mapping what we currently know about preschool education across Australia and to discuss how we might develop a national plan and what this involves.

There are a couple of things that should be said here about the starting points and parameters of this paper.

Underlying this project is a commitment to universal access to at least one year of preschool education for all Australian children and a view that the Commonwealth Government will have to accept some responsibility for the realisation of this vision, in partnership with the states and territories. Similar perspectives have been reflected in national reports, such as reports by EPAC and the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee.

Having seen the impact of privatisation in all sectors of education, both in terms of actual transfer of services and in terms of user pays, the paper - and AEU policy - is based on a belief that this vision can best be achieved within the framework of a high quality, properly resourced public education system.

The AEU as an education union has a focus on and constituency within education, so this discussion paper is clearly focussed on preschool education and its place within the education continuum, as an integral part of the early childhood education offered by a high quality, properly resourced system of public education. The paper recognises that preschool education is delivered in increasingly diverse locations and settings in some Australian systems and this is reflected in many of the recommendations. It is fair to say, though, that not all of the implications for early childhood services as a whole are fully worked through at this point, and that's one of the reasons that this is a discussion paper.

The focus is on ensuring not only that all children have access to preschool education, but that it is of high quality. Quality is characterised in AEU policy 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. All Australian children should have the right to access a quality preschool education, irrespective of their location or family circumstances. From a national perspective, this raises issues about both resources and structures.

The current role of the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth Government plays a significant role in all sectors of education from higher education to schools. It also plays a major role in funding child care - although not preschool programs offered in child care settings. But it takes no responsibility for preschool education.

The Commonwealth used to play a major role in funding preschool education, about 60% by the mid 1970s. After a period of declining contributions, Commonwealth involvement ended abruptly in 1985 as a budget cut measure. At that point, the Commonwealth provided just over \$33 million.

Given what we know about the importance of a preschool education experience, the current failure by the Commonwealth Government to take any responsibility for preschool education is not only inconsistent but illogical.

From a national perspective - however good preschool education is in individual states and territories - the current situation is inconsistent and uncoordinated. There is no coherent policy, there are no national goals, there are no coherent strategies to ensure that all Australian children are able to exercise their right to a free, public, high quality preschool education. And preschool education is badly under-resourced, in some systems more than others.

So that's the starting point for arguing that it's time that the Commonwealth again took its share of responsibility, both in terms of funding and in working with the states and territories to develop a national framework for preschool education.

Participation

We cannot even be certain of the proportion of Australian children who access a preschool education. Not only are there inconsistencies of structure and nomenclature but existing figures are inconsistent and incomplete.

At the time that this report was written, the best figures appeared to be those in the 1998 *Report on Government Services*, which seemed to suggest that about 70% of 4 year olds attend preschool and in most systems, participation is around 90%. That report suggested that the NSW participation rate for children in the year prior to going to school was very low, about 30.7%. The 1999 report has thrown this into complete confusion, with the figure that last year was claimed to be total enrolments in funded preschool services now being cited as the figure for children enrolled in the year prior to school in all preschool services while for the following year, there are two inconsistent figures for preschool enrolments that specifically exclude programs in long day care centres.

The 1996 ABS Child Care survey showed that about 76% of all 4 year olds attending formal care are at preschool. The other 24% are in long day care, family day care and occasional care. Moreover, this doesn't even address the fact that in Western Australia the 5 year olds are the main focus of preschool. Nor does it address the issue of preschool education programs offered in child care centres.

Yet at the same time the Senate Committee noted that most states and territories were suggesting preschool education participation rates of between 83% and 97%.

So, the reality is that we have no true idea of the participation rate. On the basis of the data available at the time, this report estimated that about 80,000 children are missing out on a preschool education. But even if only 10% of children are missing out, that's close to 30,000 children. The reality is, particularly if our definition of preschool education incorporates a requirement for qualified teachers and education workers, the proportion missing out is likely to be much higher than that.

Evidence from Victoria, where cuts and unit funding have led to massive fee increases, is that children from low income and disadvantaged families were most likely to be missing out.

Structures

While there is no national consistency about which Department is responsible for preschool education, across Australia it is most commonly the Education Department.

This is true for the ACT, Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia and Queensland. (But in Queensland, community kindergartens are funded by Education, operate under the umbrella of the Creche and Kindergarten Association of Queensland, and are licensed by the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care.)

In Victoria, preschool education is the responsibility of the Department of Human Services, while in NSW the Department of Education is responsible for 75 preschools, usually attached to primary schools, and the Department of Community Services is responsible for community providers.

While it is true that community providers form the largest group of providers, this is largely due to the structure of preschool education in NSW and Victoria. If you leave NSW and Victoria aside, across the rest of Australia preschool education is by and large seen as an integral part of the education system, with Education Departments as the dominant providers. In most systems, there are clear structural links to government primary schools.

In the Northern Territory and Tasmania, preschool education is usually located in primary schools and part of the school. Staff are employed by the Department, funding is via the school budget, resources are shared. That is the dominant model in Queensland also, with about 34,000 children in preschool programs in government schools, and about 6000 in community kindergartens that also cater for younger children. In the ACT, the most common model is a purpose built facility close to a primary school although a small number are located within schools. They are funded and staffed by the Department and administered by parent management committees. In new suburbs preschool and child care facilities will be co-located in the same building on primary school sites.

In South Australia, there are about 100 centres located within schools but most are located in community facilities. They are nonetheless funded and staffed by the Department. New preschools will be built on school sites.

In Western Australia, preschool education has undergone a fundamental change that began with the introduction of voluntary full-time pre-primary education in 1993. As a result, the Education Department is the major provider of both pre-primary and kindergarten programs. The transfer of kindergarten programs to the Department began in 1997 and programs offered by both schools and remaining community providers are linked to government schools, with staff provided by the Department.

Only in NSW and Victoria is the picture quite different. In NSW, the dominant community preschool providers operate under the same arrangements that apply to long day care centres. All centres with more than 30 places must employ a qualified early childhood teacher, and about 44% of preschools and 41% of child care centres are not required to employ a teacher. It is not however known how many long day care centres actually run a preschool program.

In Victoria, too, community providers are the largest group, although the growth area is in the provision of preschool programs within long day care centres and a recent change has enabled schools to provide preschool programs.

It would appear that the two larger states, with their lack of structural linkages between preschool education and schools, have less structured focus on the issues of educational transition and on the need to build connections between the educational experiences of preschool and school. The greater reliance on user pays also creates greater inequities in access and provision in those states.

The linkages and networks for teachers, particularly in those systems which have a clear focus on early childhood education that allows early childhood teachers to move across year levels, obviously assist in the development of curriculum links. The Western Australian approach, for example, is one which sees early childhood programs as an integral part of the school and values the role of early childhood teachers in whole school policy development and collaboration. Where preschools are part of a school, or co-located, there is the potential to share resources and facilities, including, as in Tasmania, access to specialist teachers or as in Queensland, provision for non-contact tie with the support of other teacher. It is also important to note the parity of employment conditions that preschool teachers employed by Education Departments have with school teachers.

None of this is to deny the need to ensure linkages also between child care services and preschool education. The ACT is clearly heading this way and Tasmania is also moving in this direction, with the transfer of child care to the Department of Education and with many schools developing links with child care providers, including in a few cases, co-location. Clearly there are major issues which need to be thought through in this. But the reality is that across most of Australia, systems are moving closer in their linkages to the school system. And if there is to be any form of national framework developed, it is going to be a lot easier if there are at least some broad commonalities in structure, whatever precise form preschool education takes in each system.

So, our recommendations to begin that part of the debate are these:

Overall responsibilities:

- C that the Department of Education in each state and territory be responsible for preschool education. (It is up to others to determine whether this should also apply to all early childhood services).
- C that the national framework be developed through MCEETYA
- C that a representative national Education Commission be established to provide advice on education, including early childhood education.

Preschool provision within the states and territories:

- C that a national policy framework for preschool education be developed within an overall perspective on early childhood education, which takes into account both the developmental needs of preschool education and the curriculum frameworks of the early primary years. Be very clear on what is meant here: preschool teachers would be the first to riot if they thought that preschool education was to become an introduction to primary. But there is a clear need for greater smoothness in continuum, and for teachers in preschool and school to understand each other's perspectives, priorities and strategies. In making a similar point, the 1996 Senate inquiry argued for the need to review the K-2 curriculum so that it could then be carefully articulated with curriculum developed for the pre-compulsory years.
- C That where this doesn't exist, links be established between preschool education and Departments of Education, including the development of transition programs, early childhood curriculum guidelines and where possible, integration or co-location with primary schools.
- C That recognized models of exemplary practice in relation to quality preschool curriculum and transition programs be investigated and shared, and that networks of early childhood educators be resourced to ensure that information, strategies, experiences and resources can be shared and educational innovations disseminated.
- C That all preschool programs be delivered by qualified early childhood teachers and education workers, and that the Commonwealth, States and Territories develop a strategy for ensuring this is done.

And last but not least-

- C that the Commonwealth, in partnership with the States and Territories, investigate and share 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.

These recommendations are not about one size fitting all. They are about ensuring that dialogue and sharing is possible both within systems and across the nation, so that every system can strive for the best possible outcomes on the basis not just of its own particular history and emphasis, but in knowing what is happening elsewhere too.

Let me just very quickly give you a few more aspects of the concerns that arise from a national perspective.

Hours of attendance

	1995-6	1996-7
NSW	5.9	6.2
VIC	[10]*	[10]*
QLD	12.5	13.1
WA	15.5	17.2
SA	11.0	11.0
TAS	10.0	10.0
ACT	11.0	10.5
NT	[10]*	[10]*

Source: Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, 1998 Report on Government Services, Vol. 2, pp.699-780

Information for Victoria and Northern Territory not available via ROGS, and the table uses information from the relevant state/territory

Average attendance hours vary markedly from system to system but with the exception of NSW, 4 year olds in other systems are getting at least 10 hours per week and sometimes considerably more. In seeking to establish the right of all Australian children to have access to a preschool education, suggesting 10 hours per week as the minimum entitlement for all Australian children for at least the year prior to school is a very modest claim. Clearly any greater provision than this minimum should be maintained.

Moreover, the national policy framework should include determination of the optimum weekly attendance time and develop strategies and time lines to move towards that optimum.

Special needs

While the national data is very patchy, there is evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are under-represented in participation in preschool education. The participation rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, for example, remains significantly lower than those of other Australian children. In the NT, children from remote and rural areas are under-represented. In Victoria, the introduction of cuts and unit cost funding have led to evidence that families from lower socio-economic backgrounds are likely to be missing out.

A commitment to equity requires a national policy framework which ensures that no child is disadvantaged because of the state or territory in which they live, or because of their family circumstances.

In addition, additional resources and support must be equitably provided to ensure that the educational needs of all Australian children with special needs are met.

Whatever successful programs are operating within individual states and territories - WA, for example, has developed a comprehensive state strategy to identify gaps and resources and to develop programs targeted at children with particular needs/circumstances which require support - at a national level, there is neither consistent data nor the capacity to identify successful models and programs and ensure their adoption elsewhere. In the interests of equity, there must be a coherent framework for the redress of

disadvantage and the special educational needs of children who do attend preschool programs.

What's needed here is:

- C Development of a national data base which gives a particular focus to the identification of barriers to access for individual children with special needs and for disadvantaged groups. The proposed National Research centre could perform this function.
- C Development of a national picture of current programs and supports currently offered by individual states and territories with a view to identifying gaps and under-resourcing as well as exemplary models which have the potential to deliver quality education.

There is currently no mechanism to enable all of us to share the successes and the problems we face and that is clearly absurd . But there is also a resource problem in most if not all systems.

We argue that the Commonwealth Government in partnership with the states and territories should develop and fund a Preschool Equity Program to ensure both that all children have access to high quality preschool education and that their special educational needs are addressed. Within that framework, the Commonwealth should retain its current responsibility to provide targeted funding for preschools places and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Affordability

	1995-6	1996-7
	\$	\$
NSW	37.0	30.0*
VIC	9.50	9.76
QLD	0	28.00*
WA	n.a.	0.23*
SA	n.a.	3.70
TAS	n.a.	0
ACT	4.5	4.0
NT	n.a.	n.a.

Notes: NSW fees are provided on an hourly basis and have been listed on the basis of ten hours attendance for comparative purposes; this does not necessarily reflect hours attended.

Queensland fees do not apply to preschools in government schools, which are free; the increase is due to the inclusion of community kindergartens for the first time.

In WA, the average includes preschool services for younger children, primarily 4 year olds.

Source: Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth /State Service Provision, 1998 Report on Government Services, Vol. 2, pp. 699-780

Information from the 1998 Report on Government Services indicates that there are widely different barriers to access across Australia, based on capacity to pay.

Fees are higher in those systems relying on community providers, although there is a question of cause and effect here. In both NSW and Victoria, subsidies are lower than the rest of Australia, and thus parents are forced to make a greater contribution. In Queensland, the high fees listed for 1996-97 reflect the charges of community kindergartens, since preschool education in schools, where the vast majority of 4 year olds are enrolled, is free.

Funding levels must be increased to end the reliance in some systems on parent fees and fundraising in order to provide basic services. Part of the national plan should be to endeavour to reach agreements that those states and territories will reduce and eventually eliminate their reliance on parental contributions for public preschool education.

Staff-student ratios

Table 3 STAFF- STUDENT RATIOS IN AUSTRALIAN PRESCHOOL GROUPS		
	Staff-student ratio	Qualified teacher -student ratio
NSW	DSE preschools: multiple unit 2:20 single units 2:25 DCS services: 1:10	multiple units 1:20 single units 1:25 1 if more than 30 children
VIC	1:15	1:30
QLD	2:25	1:25
WA	4 y.o. 2:20 4 & 5 y.o. 2:20 5 y.o. non purpose built/transportable 2:25 5 y.o. purpose built perm. centre 2:27	1:20 1:20 1:25 2:27
SA	<15 children: 1:15* 15-25 children: 2:25 26-36 children 3:36	1:15 1:25 2:36
TAS	2:23 (0.5 centre) 2:25	1:23 1:25
ACT	2:25	1:25
NT	2:20	1:20

Notes: * The staff ratios for South Australia are complex, being based on average attendance rather than on enrolments.: see explanation below.

Sources: Moyle et al 1996, AEU branches and associated bodies.

The national standards for long day care centres provide a primary contact staff-student ratio of 1:11 for children aged 3 and over, and in 5 systems the licensing regulations provide for a lower ratio.

Despite the significant body of research which shows the importance of group or class size and staff-student ratios to the outcomes of early childhood education, there are no national standards for preschool education staff-student ratios.

The South Australian ratio is actually complex, being based on average attendance rather than enrolments. The staffing ratio of 1:10 or 1:11 translates into about 2:25 on an enrolment basis. You will

note both the differences between systems -with Victoria being a particular scandal- but also that, in general, the ratios are too high across the country. It is the AEU's policy that preschools be staffed on a ratio of one trained teacher for every 10 children. Given the priority of ensuring access for all children, such a ratio would need to be phased in over time. In the immediate, some national standard must be set as part of the strategy of moving towards high quality and universal preschool education. A ratio of 2:20, for 4 year olds, which already applies in WA and the NT, should be achievable in the near future.

In addition, it is suggested that preschool programs for 3 year olds should be based on a minimum national standard of 2:15, comprising one qualified early childhood teacher and one aide/assistant. Group sizes for 4 year olds should be restricted to a maximum of 20 where they are staffed by a teacher and assistant, and there should be standards set for case loads also: initially 50 and moving to 40 as the national staff student ratio is implemented.

Such national standards should apply to all locations in which preschool programs are funded and/or receive state registration/licensing.

Qualified preschool staff

A critical characteristic of a quality, focussed preschool program is that it is planned and provided by a qualified Early Childhood Education teacher who has specialised skills in developing and providing an educational program for young children.

While all systems require qualified teachers in all preschool education -apart from NSW where this is only for centres over 30 - not all systems at this point require specific early childhood qualifications although it is at least deemed desirable in every system. The Senate inquiry accepted the view that early childhood education requires a specialist qualification.

In addition, regular professional development is critical to the maintenance of quality programs that are relevant and linked to the changing developmental needs of children. In some systems, such as WA, both teachers and ancillary workers access five days professional development a year. In Victoria, perhaps the other extreme, responses to a 1996 AEU Victorian Branch survey indicated that the majority of preschool teachers received up to one day of staff development, with 25% receiving no work time at all.

All workers in early childhood education should be appropriately qualified, and they should also have access to a minimum of five days professional development. The AEU supports the 1996 Senate report call for the development of a draft set of national goals and guidelines for best practice in the pre-service education and training of early childhood practitioners, which should highlight the importance of working closely with parents and should be developed in consultation with all stakeholders by the proposed Education Commission. Early childhood practitioners should be included in a renewed National Professional Development Program. And they should be entitled to fair and reasonable employment conditions, which means opposing the trend to increased casualisation and precarious employment in at least some systems. Preschool teachers and early childhood education workers should also be entitled to the same rates of remuneration as their colleagues in schools, irrespective of the location or setting in which they work. That applies already where preschools are linked to Departments of Education.

And in relation to issues to do with employment conditions, it is worth noting that parents want to be involved in their children's education, and systems should structure and nurture partnerships between parents and teachers. Exemplary models should be investigated and disseminated and, where this doesn't exist, employment functions should be undertaken by the appropriate central agency on behalf of all public and community providers in each state and territory. Structures which demand that parents act as employer, personnel manager and chief fund raiser are inappropriate and distract from the education of the child. Structures and programs which encourage the development of partnerships between educators and parents in democratic and inclusive decision making and in the education of young children must be encouraged and actively supported.

Funding of preschools

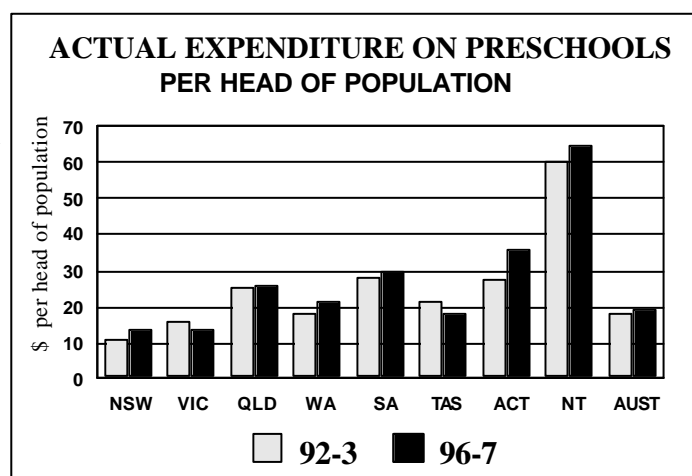
Table 4: ACTUAL TOTAL EXPENDITURE ON PRESCHOOLS			
	92-3 \$m	96-7 \$m	CHANGE
NSW	66.0	86.2	30.7
VIC	70.4	62.4	-11.3
QLD	79.1	88.5	11.9
WA	30.4	38.7	27.1
SA	41.7	44.1	5.7
TAS	10.1	8.7	-13.6
ACT	8.2	11.2	35.6
NT	10.1	12.0	18.6
AUST	316.0	351.8	11.3

Source: Commonwealth Grants Commission, *report on General Revenue Grant Relativities 1998 Update*, AGPS

The Commonwealth Grants Commission (CGC) tells us that in 1996-97, a total of \$351.8 million was spent on preschool education around Australia. This is an 11.3% increase on the \$316 million spent in 1992-93 in nominal terms.

When calculated on the basis of expenditure per head of population, an average of \$19.10 was spent on preschool education, up 6.2% on what was spent in 1992-3. Victoria and Tasmania actually cut their expenditure in money terms over that time.

Expenditure per head of population varies substantially across the states and territories. In 1996-97, it ranged from \$13.62 in Victoria and \$13.82 in NSW - the two lowest spending states - to \$64.96 in the Northern Territory. While some differences are to be expected as a result of geographic and other differences in cost factors, the reality is that the lower costs of both Victoria and NSW reflect a higher expectation of parental contributions within a more user-pays oriented framework.



The CGC calculates the standardised expenditure that would be required in each state and territory to provide an average level of service, taking different costs factors in each system, such as the degree of urbanisation, geographic or socio-economic factors, into account. Anything defined as a policy difference is not taken into account. On that basis, NSW is spending 72.8% and Victoria 74.7% of what the CGC calculated they would need to spend to provide an average level of service. That is just based on what is now spent, not on any assessment of need.

If we accept the premise that up to 80,000 children are missing out on a preschool education, it would cost about \$150 million to provide them with such access on an unchanged policy basis. The real costs would vary from system to system.

This does not take into account the need to improve resourcing in a number of areas, including group sizes, pupil staff ratios and employment conditions. Nor does it take into account the need to provide supplementary funding to meet both the special needs of children not currently accessing preschool education and to reduce excessive fees and fundraising which exist in some systems and act as a significant barrier to access.

Towards a national model of preschool education

So, how do we pull all this together?

We face different structures and models. We lack a coherent and consistent national data base. There are no agreed national goals for preschool education. In this context, it is not possible to provide a detailed national model for preschool education but it is possible to give a sense of such a framework.

The most critical and first step is the achievement of a commitment from both the Commonwealth Government and the States and Territories to develop a national policy and funding framework for preschool education, based on cooperation and partnership between all stakeholders. Given that the paper has argued that preschool education must be seen as an integral part of early childhood education, responsibility for its management must rest with the States and Territories. The Commonwealth would thus make its contribution in partnership with the States and Territories and within that base framework. The development of national research and data bases as well as national goals and policy frameworks, and the structures to achieve them, would be part of this process.

The recommendations contained within the AEU report provide a starting point for the development of that national framework. In broad terms, such a national framework would include an active commitment to universal access of at least one year preschool education as an integral part of early childhood education. It would include the development of national standards to provide the basis for proper resourcing mechanisms and levels. (This would include, for example, **minimum** standards in relation to hours, to staff student ratios, to case loads, to qualifications, to professional development). It would include an active commitment to equity and redress of disadvantage. And it would include a national infrastructure to facilitate cooperation.

Such a framework would not impose a single model on preschool education across Australia. But it would impose some minimum national standards and it would provide the structures and resources to enable us to share the best of what we offer.

Such a framework involves both cost and non-cost items but it would clearly require a substantial funding commitment from both the Commonwealth Government and from the states and territories, some more than others. The Western Australian experience has shown that, with commitment, it can be done.

Given the absence of coherent data, one cannot provide a detailed costing, but it is possible to get some idea of the scope of the investment required.

The 1998 ACT Audit report provided information about the per capita costs of preschool education in the ACT. It is a system in which preschools are linked to primary schools although only rarely located within the school. It recognises and supports the need for transition programs and curriculum support. ACT participation rates are reasonably high, and children attend for 10.5 hours per week. Teachers in preschools are employed by the Department of Education, have salary parity with teachers in schools, and are required to have specialised early childhood qualifications. Staff ratios are currently set at 2:25 children, which is greater than the 2:20 recommended as a national standard in this paper. Parents make contributions equivalent to 10.8% of government funding and teachers expressed views that there were insufficient resources to support the full inclusion of children with disabilities and those for whom English is a second language.

Using the ACT data as a base, it was possible to calculate an estimated cost per child across Australia. The total estimate is about \$2372 per child, or \$712 million in total. While this is a very broad brush figure, it takes into account the need to provide staff student ratios of 2:20, to provide salaries commensurate with those in schools, to address special needs and to remove the needs for parents to part pay for their child's preschool education through fees and fundraising. It assumes that all 4 year olds will access a preschool education, which is probably an over-estimate even if it is free and resourced better to meet special needs.

Of the total \$352 million spent on preschool education in 1996-97, it is estimated that about \$260m is spent on 4 year olds. Funds spent on 3 year olds should at least be maintained.

So while it is a very rough estimate, this suggests that to have all 4 year old children in Australia catered for on the basis of the partial framework outlined here would incur an additional \$452 million than was spent in 1996-7.

An additional \$450m or so is not of course an insignificant sum, even if it overestimates the number of children that would be enrolled and underestimates the number of groups that would be required, given the reality of population dispersion. It is an ambitious but achievable goal. There would be some additional costs to develop a national infrastructure for research and participation, for professional development programs and the like. If existing provision for 3 year olds is maintained on an unchanged basis, the total cost of preschool education would thus be about \$800 million in 1996-7 price terms.

The AEU discussion paper suggests one possible framework for a three year funding arrangement that would get us a considerable way towards the achievement of this vision:

- C provision by the Commonwealth Government of some 22% of current total funding as additional funding: 15% as a base block grant and 7% for a National Preschool Equity Program;
- C a commitment by the States and Territories to increase their total funding by 5% in each of the three years, with the contribution from each system negotiated on the gap between current provision and the proposed national standards;
- C negotiated commitments to form part of the funding agreements in relation to movement towards the proposed national standards and frameworks and for enhanced participation rates: and
- C an additional 3% of funding on a cost share basis to provide for national infrastructure such as a National Centre for Research, inclusion of preschool education as part of the brief of a representative Education Commission, inclusion of preschool workers in professional development programs and the development of early childhood networks.

Clearly more detailed costing and policy development will need to be undertaken. It is hoped that the AEU discussion paper will be a useful beginning both in the development of our knowledge and policy base and in the encouragement of wider discussions about the creation of a national plan for preschool education, within the context and knowledge of each of the current systems..