

➔ **Briefly**

- **Australia urgently needs a cohesive, national approach to preschool education.**
- **Many children are missing out on quality early childhood education.**
- **The preschool sector belongs in the education department.**

# Early days

National leadership is required if preschool education is to provide advantages for all children, reports **ANGELA ROSSMANITH**.

**T**here are two barriers to high-quality and integrated early childhood education and care services in

Australia: “the lack of national leadership and unwillingness to invest in our most precious national resource”, says Tony Vinson, honorary professor in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney.

Professor Vinson delivered a report in May, commissioned by the NSW Teachers’ Federation, following a study of 20 preschools across NSW, mostly located in disadvantaged communities. In the report he calls for Australia to follow the example of “other enlightened countries in making early childhood education and care a national priority”.

Vinson believes that education and care services should be universally available for all three and four-year-olds, and such services should be offered at an even earlier age to more vulnerable or disadvantaged children.

This is no eccentric idea, he says, and in many countries it is mainstream policy. In fact, most of the 12 countries involved in an OECD survey are committed to providing at least two years of free education before the start of compulsory schooling.

Sadly, these ideas are not new. In 2004, the AEU commissioned an independent inquiry into the state of preschool education in Australia. Following consultations with parents, teachers, academics, government representatives and early childhood professionals, report author Kathy Walker made 11 recommendations for ensuring access to quality preschool education for all children.

Two years later, little has changed. “There was no response from the federal government to the recommendations I made,” says Walker, “and very little has happened at the state level.”

The critical problem is that Australia has no national vision or commitment to preschool, says Walker. It remains the responsibility of individual

states and territories, and the provision of quality programs across the country is fragmented and inconsistent. The enormous variation in preschool education promotes inequity for children in their preschool year.

Unlike the rest of Australia, in NSW and Victoria, preschool education is not part of the state department of education. What is needed is a vision and commitment to preschool that is shared between the commonwealth and the states and territories, Walker says.

**children [who] participate...are better equipped for success at school and later in life**

There is no reason for the federal government to refuse to take any responsibility, says Rosalie Kinson, chair of the AEU National Early Childhood Education committee. “They provide support to primary and secondary schools and to TAFE but they’ve walked away from preschool education, despite all the evidence of its importance.”





## Your say

**Karen Marega, principal,  
Oxley Park Primary,  
St Mary's, NSW**

"We have a preschool on the grounds, with 40 children enrolled. It's wonderful. Once they begin their first year of school, their skills are already developed because they've participated in school programs. The preschool children are very much part of our whole school environment, and their parents are involved too."



**Debbie Lappen, director/  
teacher, Glen Waverley South  
Preschool, VIC**

"A child's learning is continual, but how can we effectively meet their needs when our current education system disrupts this learning by operating under two different government departments? They're often separated geographically from primary schools, but distanced even more by two departments that operate in a disjointed manner."



### At a disadvantage

The latest research from around the world confirms that, when children participate in a quality preschool education program, they are better equipped for success at school and later in life (see box on page 22).

And the research is unequivocal that preschool is particularly critical for children from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds. "They are the ones most in need of it," says Victorian AEU president Mary Bluett. "So when there are significant costs associated with preschool, the very children who benefit most are missing out. In some cases it takes three to five years for these children to catch up, and some never do."

The main reason that at least 4,000 children are missing out on preschool education in Victoria is that their families can't afford it, says Kinson. The average cost to families for the average length of time children attend, which is 10 hours a week, is close to \$700 per year. ▶

Debbie Lappen  
with students from  
Glen Waverley  
South Preschool.

JAMIE MURCIA



**...preschool is particularly critical for children from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds.**

**Lifelong benefits**

Preschool experience enhances children's cognitive development and social behaviours such as independence, concentration, cooperation, conformity and sociability. These are the findings from the Effective Provision of Preschool Education project (EPPE, 1997–2003), Europe's largest longitudinal investigation into the effects of preschool education on children's developmental outcomes.

The project confirmed that the proportion of children at risk of developing learning difficulties at the start of preschool dropped significantly by the time they began primary school, suggesting that preschool can provide effective intervention in reducing special education needs.

In a 1999 survey of prep year (first year of school) teachers in Victoria, 63 per cent said they could identify those children who had, or had not, attended preschool. They reported that children who had not attended preschool performed below or well below average in fine motor, cognitive, literacy concept, and communications skills.

"Sometimes the issue relates to geography because, in remote areas, services may not be available," she says. "Some rural communities are severely affected by the drought, and they can't afford the travel with the current cost of fuel, or the preschool service itself. And we also know that there are children from some cultural backgrounds not accessing preschool."

**Uneasy transition**

A central issue emerging from the independent Vinson inquiry was the importance of linking the curriculum of preschool education into the early years of school. Research indicates that early childhood programs and school programs should be part of a continuum. One Australian study showed that the preschool year is vital for literacy development, and that the literacy curriculum from preschool to school needs to be seamless.

"That seamless transition from childcare to preschool to school is only possible when they are all under the auspices of the

education department," says Bluett. Transition is a significant problem in those states where preschool sits in a different government department from primary school.

"Linking the curriculum makes for a smoother transition, and it's a more consistent teaching and learning approach," Walker says. "Some states, such as Tasmania and South Australia, do it very well, but in NSW and Victoria there are gaps and holes."

The AEU has long campaigned for one government department to manage and administer children's education from the very start. When preschool and primary are in separate departments, there are privacy issues preventing a preschool teacher from handing over information about a child to the primary school. "That means that the school teacher has to start from the beginning to assess where each child is developmentally," says Bluett. "If preschool and school were in the one department you could simply pass the information over." ►

# APHEDA AD



## ...it is a ludicrous situation that preschool teachers don't use the same language as primary school teachers.

Then there's professional development and collegiate support. There is no shared experience for preschool and school teachers, which Bluett believes is an enormous loss for both sides.

What's more, says Walker, it is a ludicrous situation that preschool teachers don't use the same language as primary school teachers, and that, even when they are just doors away, they don't know each other or each other's curriculum. It makes the transition from preschool to school so much more problematic for the child and the family.

### Victorian alliance

In May 2004, the AEU in Victoria organised a protest rally as part of a campaign for significant improvements in preschool education in that state. During the rally, parent Lisa Vagg invited other parents to contact her if they felt as frustrated as she did with the state's preschool system. She received more than 300 emails from all over Victoria.

So began Parents for Preschool Education, an extensive network of parents who are campaigning for real structural reform to Victoria's preschool education system. It works closely with the AEU.

"Preschool education in Victoria is a shambles," says Vagg. "The system is failing our children. The Bracks government continually says education is their 'number one' priority. This is outrageous when they can't even get the critical first step right."

There are more unresolved issues in Victoria than most other states and territories because of the continuing legacy of the Kennett government, says Bluett. "Preschool was handed over to parents to run and organise and simultaneously budgets were cut by 20 per cent. Parent committees and management responded to the cut in budget by reducing the hours of preschool education."

Bluett applauds Parents for Preschool Education. "This is a genuine community group giving the parents' perspective," she says. "They have become a very strong advocacy group, and have been central in broadening the message and lobbying politicians for critical change. Politicians can't now dismiss what the union has been saying."

In fact, the Liberal Opposition in Victoria recently promised to place preschool education with the Department of Education and Training if it comes to power at the next election, and announced a preschool grant that will effectively cover fees.

### A cheap, lesser option

Preschool provision is poor in NSW, with guaranteed access for only about 60 per cent of children, says president of the NSW Teachers' Federation Maree O'Halloran. Most preschools in NSW are the responsibility of the Department of Community Services (DOCS), and there are 100 preschools within the Department of Education and Training (DET) in the grounds of government schools.

"Bluntly speaking, it's cheaper for the government if DOCS looks after preschools. The DET preschools are fully funded by state treasury," she says. The federation is campaigning for an increase in the number of preschools attached to schools.

The Vinson Report documents the sorry state of preschool education in NSW, says O'Halloran. Having two preschool models under two different government departments leads to inequity, and no appropriate funding from the state government means higher fees, so that disadvantaged children are further disadvantaged.

Kathy Walker believes it is inevitable that preschool education will become the responsibility of the education department in Victoria, "but it will be a long, hard fight". For NSW, the fight might be even longer and harder. ●  
**ANGELA ROSSMANITH is a freelance writer.**

## Resources

### ● Parents for Preschools

<http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/pfps/index.html>