



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

**Michaela Kronemann  
Federal Research Officer**

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**Pat Byrne**  
Federal President

**Susan Hopgood**  
Federal Secretary

**Australian Education Union**  
Ground Floor  
120 Clarendon Street  
Southbank VIC 3006

Telephone: 61 3 9693 1800  
Facsimile: 61 3 9693 1805  
email: [aeu@aeufederal.org.au](mailto:aeu@aeufederal.org.au)

*In 1998 the Australian Education Union published a discussion paper, Towards a National Plan for Preschool Education. The need for national coordination and planning to achieve universal preschool education has since then been widely recognised. But there is little as yet to show for it. This new AEU discussion paper proposes a 10 year strategy to achieve free, quality preschool education for all 3 and 4 year olds in Australia.*

## **I**ntroduction

There is now almost universal recognition of the critical importance of early childhood education to children's development and life opportunities. All children in Australia have the right to be given the very best start in life.

Early childhood education is receiving increased international attention and many countries, such as the United Kingdom and New Zealand, have committed substantial additional resources to ensure that their children have access to high quality, free preschool education. Australia is falling badly behind – and this means that our children do not have access to the same level of early childhood education that is being 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 GDP.

The 2001 OECD report from the Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care, 'Standing Strong', noted that 'the trend in all countries is toward full coverage of the 3- to- 6 year old age group, aiming to give all children at least two years of free publicly-funded provision before beginning compulsory schooling...often within the education system'. The report inter alia supported the need for a clear vision for children from birth to eight, coordinated policy frameworks, a universal approach to access and substantial public investment. (OECD 2001a)

There is growing recognition within Australia that we need to do better for the sake of our children and a number of recent reports have reflected this recognition.

The 2001 OECD Country Note on Australia (OECD 2001b) described Australia's ECEC as 'at the crossroads'. The OECD pointed to the fragmentation of early childhood education and care in Australia and noted that 'there is a clear leadership role for the Commonwealth Government in forging [a national] strategy across jurisdictions and for ECEC sector communities to work toward collaboratively achieving more effective coordination across the education and care divide'.

The 2004 Independent National Inquiry into Preschool Education (the Walker report), sponsored by the AEU, found that 'from a national perspective, preschool education is characterised by fragmentation, varying degrees of quality, no equitable access, and without national vision, commitment or consistent approach' and made a number of recommendations for the way forward. These included provision of high quality, free and accessible preschool education for all children, the need for a national plan and for the Commonwealth and state and territory governments to jointly provide for the full costs of preschool education.

The Commonwealth Government's 2004 draft framework for the National Agenda for Early Childhood (DFaCS 2004) recognised that 'a national approach, developed in consultation with stakeholders, is essential to harness existing effort and guide future investment' and proposed access to 'an early learning program for all children, particularly disadvantaged children for a minimum of one year prior to school entry'.

A number of recent reviews within individual states and territories have also explored strategies designed to improve access to and the quality of early childhood education and care.

At the national level, however, little has changed.

In February this year, COAG (the Council of Australian Governments) recognised that 'high quality and integrated early childhood education and care services, encompassing the period from prenatal up to and including the transition to the first years of school, are critical to increasing the proportion of children entering school with the basic skills for life and learning', and determined that 'COAG will give priority to improving early childhood development outcomes, as a part of a collaborative national approach.' (COAG 2006)

This is a promising beginning – but there is much to be done.

### **Australia's early childhood education structures.**

In Australia, early childhood education and care are divided by history, structures, funding mechanisms, staffing levels and qualifications. Since 1985, the Commonwealth has provided no funding for preschool education, focusing on provision of childcare within a framework largely about labour force participation rather than the developmental needs – or educational rights - of children. Preschool education has to date been seen as a responsibility solely of the states and territories since the abolition of Commonwealth funding.

Across Australia, there were 257,000 children enrolled in preschool education in 2005, of whom 159,200 were four years old. (ABS 2006) The participation rate for preschool education in the year before entering school is 83.4%. (SRCSSP 2006) That means that more than 40,000 children are missing out altogether on this vital education experience and it could be as many as 60,000 children. In addition, around 11.2% of younger children (usually aged three years) across Australia also accessed preschool education. Access for some or all three year olds is funded only in some but not all systems. (SRCSSP 2006) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with special needs, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds, are more likely to be missing out. (Walker 2004)

Of all the 24,109 three and four year old Indigenous children in Australia in 2003, 9,051 were enrolled in preschool education and 15,058 missed out – an overall participation rate of 37.5%. (Kronemann 2005) Specific measures are required to ensure that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have access to high quality and culturally appropriate early childhood education.

In 2005, there were 71,000 children aged 4 who attended a long day care centre and another 15,300 who participated in family day care. On average, children use about 20 hours of childcare per week but 58% of children attend long day care services for fewer than 20 hours. (ACOSS 2006). A total of 62,500 children aged 0- to- 4 were reported to require additional long day care or family day care, with lack of places being the overwhelming reason, followed by cost.(ABS 2006)

Some children of course attend a mixture of formal and informal early childhood services. Children attending day care are far more likely to spend time in multiple settings than children attending preschool, although the majority of all children participate in a mix of formal and informal settings. Some children attending long day care would also be accessing a preschool education, either in the same or a different setting. (AIFS 2005)

Access to and affordability of preschool education for families varies significantly across the states and territories. In six of Australia's eight systems, preschool education is recognized as part of the education system and is the responsibility of departments of education. It is staffed and funded as part of the education system and families pay no fees, although as in public schools, may be asked to make voluntary contributions. In NSW and Victoria, preschool education is offered in a more diverse range of settings including long day care centres which may be either community owned or for-profit services.

Access to preschool education is generally for between 10 – 15 hours per week, and on average, 11 hours per week across Australia. (ACOSS 2006) While preschool education has traditionally been offered on a sessional basis, there is a growing trend to provide full day options where this meets community needs. More than a quarter of preschool students are attending for extended hours of 15 – 19 hours (19.2%) or 20 or more hours (8.2%) (ABS 2006). In some states, particularly NSW and Victoria, recognized preschool education can be accessed in long day care centres.

In NSW and Victoria, preschool education is seen as 'pre-education' rather than as the early years of the education continuum and there are limited links to schools. Responsibility for both early childhood education and care reside with departments of community services, rather than with education, Although subsidized, preschool education in these states is a significant cost burden for parents. Preschool education can be accessed in a range of settings, including stand alone community/local government preschools and in long day care centres. In NSW, child care and preschool operate under the same regulations, which, for example, require qualified teachers but only for services with 30 or more children enrolled – this means that children attending smaller preschool services in NSW are not guaranteed access to a qualified teacher. NSW does have 100 preschools attached to government schools which are funded and staffed like preschools in other systems, and the recent Vinson inquiry has proposed that this number be expanded in disadvantaged areas (Vinson 2006).

Queensland and Western Australia are systems undergoing significant change, involving substantial changes to staffing and resources. Western Australia has moved to a fulltime pre-primary year before Year 1 and has shifted both pre-primary (the preparatory/reception year) and preschool into the state education system and onto school sites. Queensland is moving from sessional preschool provision in a quarter of all primary schools, to the provision of a

fulltime Preparatory year in all Queensland primary schools commencing 2007. Access to a part-time preschool year prior to prep will not be provided by the state Education Department, although it is anticipated that Creche and Kindergarten services may expand to meet some of this need. This will depend on funding and the reality is that the for-profit sector will make up any shortfall in services available from the community/ public education sector.

The ACT, South Australia and Tasmania operate within more holistic views of early childhood education and care. Responsibility for all early childhood education and care services resides within departments of education. In each of these systems, efforts are being made to either co-locate or integrate preschools, child care and schools within a birth - to - 8 framework of early childhood education and care. This provides increasing opportunities for schools to become community hubs, offering access to a range of educational and other relevant services.

These different models lead to different levels of participation, equity, affordability and links to other services. It is of great concern that children's access to high quality preschool education depends on where they live.

### **Facing up to the challenge**

International research, experience and the recommendations of the OECD 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. Research indicates clear and long lasting benefits from quality early childhood education – every dollar invested will yield two and a half to seven times the cost. The benefits are even greater for higher-risk populations. (Senate Committee 1996, Hull and Edsall 2001, Vinson 2006)

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.

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. The labour force participation of parents must be considered but the fundamental focus of early childhood education is on the needs and rights of children. Barriers to participation must be addressed with appropriate resources, support and information.

The Independent National Inquiry found that parents 'reported high levels of satisfaction where there are strong links between childcare, preschool and school and they are viewed by

parents as “all working together”. These are shared sites or close locations where early childhood staff across childcare, preschool and school are all known to families’. (Walker 2004) These views are long standing: the 1996 EPAC review of childcare reported that parent focus groups wished for ‘a string of multifunctional centres, with the long day care centre physically linked to the preschool and then to the school and an OSHC activity centre’. (EPAC 1996)

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. (Walker 2004) 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. As the Federal Education Minister, Julie Bishop, has noted, a qualified early childhood teacher is necessary to the delivery of preschool education. (The Australian 23 March 06)

A quality preschool education reflects a belief in the uniqueness of childhood by respecting children as they are now and who they are right now. Curriculum frameworks and programs must be child focussed and reflect the centrality of play in children’s learning. Early childhood curriculum should be based on a developmentally appropriate model that responds to knowledge about how children learn; knowledge of the experiences of the individual differences of children; and the need to provide continuity of learning experiences across, between and within all settings of early childhood education.

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. (AEU 2004)

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. The national vision must be child focused and address children’s rights and needs within their family and community.

## **National goals**

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**

### **1. Guaranteed access to 20 hours of high quality, free preschool education for all three and four year olds.**

**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 (usually 3 and 4 years old) in the two years before school.**

**Governments in partnership should make a commitment to achieve 20 hours of free, high quality early childhood education per week for all 3 and 4 year olds by 2016.**

- **Universal free access guaranteed to all 4 year olds (year prior to school) for 12 hours per week by start 2008**
- **Phased introduction of 12 hours per week free preschool for all 3 year olds to be achieved by 2011, with priority given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.**
- **Priority access guaranteed to all 3 year old Indigenous children by start 2008**
- **Provision of 15 hours per week for 4 year olds by 2011**
- **Provision of 20 hours per week for all 3 and 4 year olds guaranteed by 2016.**

The UK and New Zealand have led the way in establishing this as a national goal. In New Zealand, the Government in 2004 allocated an additional \$307m over the next four years to ensure that by July 2007, all three and four year olds who attend teacher - led preschool programs will receive 20 hours free each week (NZ MOE 2004). The UK Government has decided to quadruple expenditure on free early childhood education and childcare, from £1.1 billion in 1996-97 to £4.4 billion by 2007-08 (HM Treasury et al 2004). The ten year strategy provides for continued growth in government funding, with a goal of 15 hours per week free high quality early learning and care to be reached by 2010 and an ultimate goal to provide 20 hours of free, high quality early learning and care for all 3 and 4 year olds in the UK.

Within Australia, children in all states and territories other than NSW and Victoria already have access to between 10-15 hours of free preschool education for at least one year prior to school entry. Some children, including Indigenous children, are able to enrol at three

years old. ACOSS (2005) has argued that 20 hours per week of state funded preschool education should be provided for all children in the year before school.

## **2. Ensure that early childhood education is of high quality.**

The Commonwealth and state and territory governments must provide the resources, national standards and regulatory requirements to ensure that preschool education for all children is of high quality, so that:

- It is provided by qualified four year trained early childhood teachers supported by appropriately trained assistants.
- All settings accredited to provide early childhood education must provide a trained teacher for each group of children accessing preschool education and meet other standards which will ensure quality.
- Preschool education is linked to primary schools and provides quality transitions by integrating into primary school or co-locating where possible.
- Regulations, guidelines, standards and support to providers enable them to upgrade the qualifications of staff as required.
- All preschool education provided operates within curriculum frameworks for 0-8 or 0-16 established by state governments.
- Teacher child ratios and group sizes are at internationally recommended levels.
- Facilities and resources are of high quality, supported by government funding.
- All teachers and education workers have the right to appropriate recognition, remuneration, professional development, career paths and status.

## **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.**

Commonwealth and state and territory governments must work cooperatively to develop strategies and provide resources which ensure that all three and four year old Indigenous children have priority access to high quality and culturally appropriate preschool education. This includes specific attention to provision of early childhood education for Indigenous children in remote localities and addressing of the barriers identified by the Independent National Inquiry and other reports.

Such strategies will include the following:

- Ensure staffing policies give priority to appropriately qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are enrolled;
- Adopt measures to include and appropriately remunerate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members delivering cultural programs;
- Provide professional development activities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness and counter racism for all staff;

- **Appropriate and sensitive cultural orientation to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is a prerequisite for all workers in all children's services;**
- **Adopt teaching practices which recognise, value and utilise the student's first languages; and Aboriginal English/Kriol and Torres Strait Islander Kriol;**
- **Provide environments in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents feel welcome and encouraged to be involved in the education program;**
- **Adopt practices which maximise the co-ordination of early childhood education programs with health services and nutrition education programs; and**
- **Ensure that the delivery of care and education must be culturally inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogies.**
- **Ensure that preservice teacher education programs include significant and mandatory units in the areas of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies;**
- **Provide professional development in the areas of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies.**

**4. Improve equity of access for children with special needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.**

Commonwealth and state and territory governments must work in partnership to ensure that programs and resources address the needs of children with special needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

- **A significant and immediate increase in funding is required to provide adequate supports and resources for children with special needs.**
- **Groups sizes and teacher child ratios should be reduced for each child who meets the criteria for special needs assistance.**
- **Early intervention programs must be expanded.**
- **Resources and support should be provided in a seamless manner between services, rather than the current breaks between eg resources provided for a child in preschool and in school.**

**5. Provide adequate levels of high quality early childhood education and care for younger children to meet family and community needs.**

Commonwealth and state and territory governments should make a commitment to provide adequate levels of high quality child care for all children, including the years prior to two years free preschool education, by providing resources, structures and support to:

- **Provide access that is co-located or linked to preschool and school services.**

- **Provide support and regulations to upgrade qualifications of childcare workers and to improve pay and conditions and career paths.**
- **Support the planned provision of the levels of child care services required by each community.**
- **Develop plans to extend free early childhood education to younger children.**

The UK has already begun to implement pilot programs to enable younger children from disadvantaged backgrounds (two year olds) to access preschool education.

**6. Develop the links and coordination between early childhood services to provide a more seamless continuum of education and care.**

**The Commonwealth and state and territory governments must work cooperatively to develop links between early childhood education and care structures and services and to provide a more seamless continuum of education and care. Such actions must address national, state and community links and recognize international trends.**

- **Preschool education should be the responsibility of the respective education departments in each state and territory.**

This in itself would require change only in NSW and Victoria. This is in line with OECD trends and the recommendations of various reports, including the Independent National Inquiry into Preschool Education (Walker, 2004) and the Education and Care of our Children: Good Beginnings (the Vinson report, 2006)

In ACT, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia and in the 100 preschools attached to government schools in NSW, all staff are funded and employed by the Education Department.

In the ACT, South Australia and Tasmania both early childhood education and care are the responsibility of the departments also responsible for school education.

- **MCEETYA should be the lead agency in line with international trends and the fundamental importance of education, supported by DEST and state/territory departments of education. MCEETYA should work with other Ministerial Committees and departments that provide services for the early years.**
- **Establish early education centres primarily on primary school sites but also in other areas that meet local demand, to provide integrated or at least co-located early years education (school and preschool) and integrated or wrap around care, and other services required by the local community.**

This could include extended hours care, long day care for 0-2 year olds, OSHC, and where appropriate, access to other services that meet local community needs (eg health, employment, parent services, community supports) especially in areas of disadvantage. In many areas schools are already developing as community hubs.

- **Provide support for school based and other early years facilities to be integrated into schools and/or be community based services (not for profit) in order to be able to access funding for facilities/infrastructure and qualification upgrades for early education centres.**

Facilities not on school sites (eg long day care centres) which provide both preschool education and extended care will need to develop links to local primary schools.

- **The cost of childcare to parents beyond the 20 hours free early childhood education for three and four year olds and for younger children to be supported by Family Benefits and other programs which make it affordable.**
- **Provide ‘wrap around’ or integrated child care at least for hours of 8am to 6pm on weekdays all year.**
- **Resource and support quality improvement including additional funding to support qualification upgrades, improved pay and career paths for staff and fund improvements without additional cost to parents.**
- **Develop articulated qualifications that enable staff to upgrade and progress in their careers.**
- **Provide capital funds to enable the building of new and/or refurbished centres on school sites.**
- **Provide increased access to out of school hours care for school aged children to meet parents’ needs, via schools and linked providers.**

**Michaela Kronemann  
Federal Research Officer  
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