



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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The Early Childhood Challenge

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.

Around 40,000 Australian children miss out on this vital educational opportunity each year, and it could be as many as 60,000 children – we don't know for certain. Children who are disadvantaged are more likely to be missing out on a quality preschool education.

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. As the OECD noted in 2001, the international trend is towards giving all children access to two years of free preschool education before school.¹ 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.²

Unlike other levels of education, the Commonwealth Government has provided no funding for preschool education since the mid 1980s.

The Current Situation

Children in Australia do not get equitable access to high quality preschool education.

In 2001, the OECD review of early education and care in Australia³ pointed to the fragmentation of ECEC in Australia. It noted that there was 'no overall national vision, plan, statement or strategy' for early childhood education and care to ensure that all young children would have the opportunity to reach their potential.

The 2004 Independent National Inquiry into Preschool Education⁴ 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 Howard Government's 2004 draft framework for the National Agenda for Early Childhood proposed access to 'an early learning program for all children, particularly disadvantaged children for a minimum of one year prior to school entry'.

Yet little has changed. The Howard Government has failed to provide funding to ensure that all children in Australia have access to high quality, free preschool education.

Australia's Early Childhood Education Structures

Access to and affordability of preschool education for families varies significantly across the states and territories. In five 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, 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 - although Victoria has now increased the subsidy for health care card holders so they will pay no or low costs and NSW has 100 preschools attached to government schools. Queensland is moving from sessional preschool provision in a quarter of schools, to the provision of a fulltime preparatory year in all Queensland primary schools.

In some systems too, younger children are offered access to preschool education. These different models lead to different levels of participation, equity, affordability and links to other services. There are no minimum national standards on group sizes, facilities and equipment, teacher qualifications and access to professional development.

It is of great concern that children's access to high quality preschool education depends on where they live.

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.

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

The AEU proposes six national goals to underpin national strategies for early childhood education and care.

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.

The AEU has welcomed the commitments made by the Australian Labor Party, the Australian Democrats and the Australian Greens which take steps towards the achievement of these goals.

Further Reading

<http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Ec/index2.htm>

¹ OECD, 2001, *Starting Strong, Early Childhood Education and Care*

² OECD, 2005, *Education at a Glance, OECD Indicators 2005*

³ OECD, 2001, *OECD Country Note, Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Australia.*

⁴ Walker K., 2004, *'For all our children': National preschool education inquiry report*, AEU.