



AEU Parliamentary Brief

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NATIONAL PRESCHOOL EDUCATION INQUIRY REPORTS: 'FOR ALL OUR CHILDREN'

The report of the independent national inquiry into preschool education was launched in Canberra on 25 May 2004.

This follows a six month process during which the independent inquirer, Ms Kathy Walker, has travelled to every state and territory and met with teachers, parents, government representatives, academics, unions, and a range of other early childhood stakeholders.

Ms Walker visited schools, preschools, childcare centres and held public forums and discussions in each state and territory. She received numerous written submissions from across Australia.

What is preschool education?

Preschool is a planned educational program for children in the year before the first year of school. Children are usually aged between 4 to 5 years of age. A qualified early childhood teacher, who has completed a degree in education, plans the program and is usually supported by a teacher assistant. (p. 15)

Preschool may take place in a range of settings including a purpose built building as a stand-alone model in the community, in a school, as part of a Long Day Care centre, a mobile or visiting service.

Major Findings

The inquiry reported many examples of high quality programs but that there is not equitable access to a high quality free preschool education across Australia.

From a national perspective, this inquiry found that preschool education is characterised by fragmentation, varying degrees of quality, no equitable access, and without a national vision, commitment or consistent approach. The number of different approaches, funding formulas, terminology, child ratios, curriculum, costs, delivery hours and models promote inequity across Australia for young children in their preschool year.

The enormous variation of preschool education in Australia results in more "luck of the draw" than a systematic, well-planned program. We need a vision and a commitment to preschool that is shared between the Commonwealth and the states and territories." (Major Findings pg 10)

Access to preschool education

The inquiry reported that most children in Australia have access to a preschool program. Available data suggests that in 2003-03, approximately 83.5% of children accessed preschool education in the year before school.

This means that over 40,000 children are missing out.

Through the inquiry process, it became evident that significant numbers of children are either not accessing or able to participate in a high quality preschool program. Equity of access differs between states and territories and differs in relation to various groups within the population.(p. 16)

Barriers to access

Lack of a national vision and commitment to preschool education is viewed as a major barrier to access of high quality preschool.

The report noted other barriers which need to be addressed.

Geographic location: significant differences in access to quality and number of preschool education programs in rural and remote areas of Australia.

Inadequate transport in some metropolitan rural and remote areas stops children from accessing preschool.

Costs to parents are a major barrier to preschool access, particularly in NSW and Victoria.

Lack of qualified early childhood teachers impacts upon the quality and number of preschool programs available in some areas of Australia.

Lack of adequate funding, resources and supports for preschool education for **children with special needs** are a significant barrier to equity and access.

Different government department responsibility for childcare, preschool and school is a challenge, particularly in Victoria and NSW. There are huge gaps in curriculum continuity for children, and transition from preschool to school is more challenging. Pay and award differences are significant and often create debate and division between services.

Lack of links between services adds complexity and difficulty for families and children in understanding what to access and how to access appropriate services and programs.

Differences in terminology for preschool and the first year of school are particularly problematic for families who move between states.

Differences in age of entry to preschool and the first year of school create confusion and inequity.

Significant differences in content and organisation of curriculum for preschool across Australia promote inconsistency. This also inhibits development of a national perspective about learning and expected outcomes for children in the preschool year.

Significant differences in government funding levels and models contribute to unequal access to preschool education across Australia.

The inquiry found significant barriers currently exist across Australia, which prevent universal access to preschool education. (pp.10-11)



Improving links

In six of the eight systems, preschool education is the responsibility of education departments. In Victoria preschool education is the responsibility of Community Services. This is true for the bulk of preschool services in NSW, although the Department of Education and Training is responsible for public preschools attached to government schools.

In Tasmania, South Australia and the ACT, children's services, including child care, are also the responsibility of the education department.

In a number of systems, notably in Tasmania, the ACT and the Northern Territory, community child care services are being co-located onto school sites as well.

The inquiry found that a number of strategies would strengthen the links between preschool education, early childhood education in schools and other early childhood services.

- *Formalised links between child care, preschool and school are needed. The most successful transition programs seen by the inquiry occur where the same government department takes responsibility for preschool, child care and school. This enables greater curriculum continuity and a shared knowledge of children and families.*
- *Parents reported high levels of satisfaction in communities where there are strong links between child care, 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 child care, preschool and school are all known to families.*

- *Common terminology between states and territories for the preschool year and the first year of school would reduce confusion amongst parents and educationalists across the country.*
- *Ensuring at least one free year of universal free access to preschool in the year before school was supported throughout the consultation process. In some cases, particularly for children with special needs, CALD children and Indigenous children, the option of access to two years of preschool was recommended. (p.12)*



The role of Commonwealth and state/territory governments

As a relatively wealthy country, Australia is one of the four lowest spending of 36 countries on preschool education for children aged three years and over. Since 1985 the Commonwealth Government has provided no support for preschool education.

The inquiry received significant numbers of written and verbal submissions stating that the provision of high quality free preschool should be the shared responsibility of the Commonwealth and state and territory governments and that the Commonwealth should inject significant funds to preschool education across the country.

Submissions also stressed the need for a national vision and framework for preschool education across Australia. (p.11)

‘For all our children’



Report of the independent Inquiry into the provision of universal access to high quality preschool education

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

It is recommended that:

- 1.1 a national plan for preschool education be developed between the Commonwealth and states and territories to ensure equity and access to high quality preschool;
- 1.2 a national framework and vision for preschool education is coordinated through MCEETYA and DEST.

Recommendation 2

It is recommended that:

- 2.1 the provision of high quality and accessible preschool education in the year before commencing school is free for all children across Australia and is acknowledged at a federal level as a universal right;
- 2.2 the Commonwealth reintroduce dedicated funding for preschool education and that Commonwealth and state and territory governments jointly provide the full costs of preschool education.

Recommendation 3

It is recommended that:

- 3.1 the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments give priority to ensuring access to high quality preschool education for Indigenous children across the country;
- 3.2 access to two years of preschool education be provided for all Indigenous children;
- 3.3 Commonwealth and state and territory governments provide additional funds dedicated to improving access for Indigenous children to preschool education;
- 3.4 current initiatives that link health, education and community programs be increased and expanded. Higher levels of coordination between services should be established between government and non-government organisations in direct consultation with Indigenous communities;
- 3.5 priority be given to increased employment of Indigenous teachers and other staff, particularly in Indigenous communities, and initiatives are introduced urgently to increase study opportunities for Indigenous staff in early childhood.

Recommendation 4

It is recommended that:

- 4.1 the term “preschool” be used across Australia to describe the year before school;
- 4.2 a common term for the first year of school be used across Australia.



Recommendation 5

It is recommended that preschool education programs be staffed by at least one qualified staff member with an early childhood teacher degree. In addition there be at least one teacher assistant for the duration of time children attend the program.

Recommendation 6

It is recommended that:

- 6.1 the Commonwealth and state and territory governments provide a significant and immediate increase in funding to provide adequate supports and resources for children with special needs;
- 6.2 group size and teacher /child ratios be reduced for each child who meet the criteria for special needs assistance.

Recommendation 7

It is recommended that:

- 7.1 the maximum size of preschool classes be limited to 20 children per group. For each group there be at least two staff, including one with an early childhood teaching degree;
- 7.2 in remote and rural areas of Australia, provision of preschool not require a minimum of 12 children. A group size of five and above is recommended.

Recommendation 8

It is recommended that preschools and child care centres across Australia come under the jurisdiction of the Departments of Education in each state and territory and provide continuity for children and families between child care, preschool and the first year of school.

Recommendation 9

It is recommended that funding for preschool programs be based upon enrolment rather than attendance.

Recommendation 10

It is recommended that the Commonwealth and state and territory governments jointly fund increased provision of transport for children to access preschool. This provision needs to be targeted at children with special needs, Indigenous children, CALD children and families in low socio economic group

Recommendation 11

It is recommended that:

- 11.1 culturally appropriate curriculum be provided in all preschools, with content that reflects cultural diversity for all children;
- 11.2 curriculum reflects and respects the specific groups within each program, particularly providing appropriate supports and content for children and families of CALD backgrounds, Indigenous children and children with special needs.

AEU response:

‘We urge all politicians to consider this report, and its recommendations, carefully. It provides a way forward, for all our children.’

Pat Byrne, Federal President

Report

The report can be downloaded from www.aeufederal.org.au/Ec/inquiry.html