



Brotherhood  
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

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Review of the Universal Preschool Access National Partnership  
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### **Review of Universal Preschool Access National Partnership**

#### **The Brotherhood works for systemic change to prevent and address poverty and disadvantage**

The Brotherhood of St Laurence is an independent non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s. Based in Melbourne, but with a national profile, the Brotherhood continues to fight for an Australia free of poverty. We undertake research, service development and delivery, and advocacy with the objective of addressing unmet needs and translating the understandings gained into new policies, new programs and practices for implementation by government and others.

The Brotherhood's contribution to this Review is motivated by the well-known link between childhood vulnerability and lifelong disadvantage. We believe a well-designed early childhood system, of which preschool is an integral part, would actively prevent and address vulnerabilities in early childhood before they accumulate and escalate over a person's life course. Our vision is for a system that breaks the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage that some children are born into, and severs the nexus between their family's socio-economic circumstances, where they grow up, and their early childhood outcomes. We want to see a systemic response that gives all children growing up in Australia a good start in life.

#### **The benefits of quality preschool for children experiencing disadvantage are well understood**

The Universal Preschool Access National Partnership together with COAG's recent Early Learning Reform Principles (Dec 2018) reflect a shared and bi-partisan understanding of the positive returns that participation in quality preschool yields – particularly for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. We approach our submission on the basis that evidence of the enduring impact of quality preschool on a child's subsequent life chances – at school, in the workforce, in relationships and in the broader community – is well appreciated.

Indeed, the Australian Early Childhood Development Census (AEDC) shows us that one in five non-Indigenous children and two in five Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are starting school developmentally vulnerable – but children who attend preschool are less likely to be vulnerable across all

five developmental domains of the AEDC. Further, children who attend preschool are better prepared when they start school and achieve higher test scores in NAPLAN.

### **The National Partnership is making a positive difference**

The National Partnership (and its predecessor agreements), together with joint investment by different levels of government investment into preschool education, is helping drive better access, significant increases in enrolment rates (now over 90%), greater affordability and quality improvements. It is *critical* that this strategic national effort be continued, or we risk losing ground on the gains made to date.

### **There is significant opportunity to build on our national progress**

There is huge opportunity to build upon this national progress, and further elevate early learning to prevent and tackle disadvantage, turbo charge investments in schools and further education, and yield strong dividends for the Australian community. Key areas the Brotherhood are keen to see improved upon in the next iteration of the National Partnership include:

#### **1. Invest in measures that increase preschool access and participation rates for children experiencing disadvantage and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children**

Despite having the most to gain from engaging in high quality preschool, children experiencing disadvantage are at most risk of missing out, or having limited engagement. Key groups who are under-represented include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from culturally diverse backgrounds with limited English spoken at home, children whose parents are long-term unemployed, children whose mother has not completed high school, children in low-income households, children with disability or significant developmental delay and children with a parent or sibling with a disability.

Common barriers identified by families we work with include cost, availability, transport, housing insecurity and transience, lack of awareness of services, a reluctance to engage for cultural or personal reasons, and feeling they are not welcome. For example:

- Families participating in HIPPY (now in 100 locations experiencing disadvantage across Australia, half of which have high concentrations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) teach us the importance of cultural safety and inclusion for family buy-in to early learning programs.
- Families with intergenerational disadvantage can harbour negative associations with their schooling, which impacts their engagement with early learning programs. They can also lack understanding and confidence in their role as their child's first teacher.
- Our experience of delivering the Early Childhood Early Intervention service under the NDIS in Melbourne's teaches us that parents of children with disability often do not understand they are entitled to participate in mainstream early learning opportunities. Furthermore, while there has been marked progress on inclusion, there is still a long way to go. Too often we hear of families feeling unwelcome at their local preschool, and being 'encouraged' by the provider to seek enrolment elsewhere. For households caring for a person with disability, the logistics of getting to a child to preschool – especially if only for short sessions, and if needing to travel outside of their local neighbourhood – can make it all too hard.
- Children from culturally diverse backgrounds with limited English spoken at home face discrete barriers including understanding what's available, how to navigate enrolment, diverse views about the value of early childhood education, concern about children being away from their families and

the cultural responsiveness (or lack thereof) of preschools. Children with refugee and asylum seeker experience, whose families have likely endured trauma, are at heightened risk.

The National Partnership needs to grapple with the inherent challenge of engaging harder to reach families. It needs to address the significant gaps that remain in effective outreach to those with no or low preschool engagement.

This will require dedicated investment in early readiness programs, outreach work, building cultural safety, strengthening inclusion, welcoming diverse families and eliminating financial barriers for those with low means. The 2018 report *Lifting Our Game* (Brennan & Pascoe) called for a '*range of additional, targeted interventions for both children and their families – both prior to and during their participation in early childhood education – including strategies to support early learning in the home environment and support parents in their educative role*'. Contemporary examples of this that the Brotherhood is involved in include:

- The Australian Government funded HIPPY program which is delivered in communities experiencing disadvantage. As well as working to strengthen the home learning environment, child-parent relationships and parental social and economic participation (all major factors in child developmental outcomes), HIPPY also actively builds a bridge to, and supports engagement in preschool and school.
- A project with the Victorian Government that aims to increase preschool participation among Afghan, Burmese, Iraqi, Syrian and Assyrian/Chaldean communities.
- Our (philanthropically and local government funded) Refugee Child Outreach program, which aims to support families with refugee and asylum seeker experience to connect with early childhood services, including preschool, strengthens to capacity of parents as first teachers and helps build their connections to community.

**2. Improve monitoring and reporting against targets to create greater transparency around cohort and place-based outcomes, and incrementally lift targets for participation of children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children**

The UANP's targets to lift the participation (via enrolment and attendance) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability are vital. Greater transparency in monitoring and reporting on progress against these targets is needed – particularly in relation to attendance rates which can be obscured by enrolment rates – we see this a lot in our ECEI work with children with disability. Performance against targets ought to be mapped across different regions and discrete groups experiencing vulnerability (e.g. children with disability/living in households with disability, children from families with refugee experience, children with families with precarious labour market attachment) to help inform where efforts are best placed. And greater transparency in relation to the impact on school transition would be instructive.

Targets need to be incrementally increased over time.

**3. Leverage the universal preschool platform to narrow equity gaps so that children experiencing disadvantage are better prepared for school**

Children living in low SES areas are twice as likely to be vulnerable on the AEDC domains as their peers

from more advantaged locations. One-third of children living in disadvantaged postcodes are developmentally vulnerable when they start school. Universal pre-school creates an opportunity to narrow the equity gap that is so starkly apparent at primary school commencement. The Brotherhood support progressive universalism – an approach that recognises some children, families and communities require different and greater support to achieve equitable outcomes. Accordingly, Gonski-inspired preschool funding design – with greater resources being invested in children with emerging vulnerabilities and locations of socio-economic disadvantage ought to be in the frame. To this end, we note the Victorian Government is introducing ‘school readiness funding’ for preschools, with provision of greater funding in locations of disadvantage to underpin investment in communication/language development, social and emotional resilience, and access and inclusion measures.

Any dedicated funding to tackle disadvantage would need to come with requirements for transparency and accountability, and an expectation that investment would be intentionally directed towards approaches demonstrated to lift a child’s learning and development outcomes. There is a need to document, learn from and scale up successful approaches in areas like building educator capacity, the use of allied supports, engaging parents and the broader community and strengthening parental capacity and family circumstances.

#### **4. Embed intentional approaches to strengthening parental capacity and advancing family circumstances**

Active engagement with parents and community could be embedded in the preschool system at multiple levels: through the National Quality Standards; workforce development; curriculum; pedagogy, commissioning processes and practice. To illustrate, the following practice examples are drawn from the Brotherhood’s current early years work.

Co-designed plans to support a child’s development and wellbeing: In partnership with Goodstart Early Learning and Whittlesea Council, the Brotherhood operates the Jindi Family and Community Centre in Melbourne’s outer north. Each child in the preschool program (for 3 and 4 year olds provided in a long day care setting) has an individual Education and Wellbeing Plan. The Plan is developed jointly by parents, an early childhood educator and the Jindi Centre Manager, who meet regularly to review progress. It maps the child’s development and wellbeing across the AEDC domains. Emphasis is placed on the parent’s aspirations for their child’s future development and actions that can be taken by the family, the Jindi Centre and through other services to realise the child’s potential.

The development of each child is considered within the family and community context, enabling identification of strategies to build family capability and to connect with activities and supports that can assist the child and their family. For most families the universal service system, the general offerings at Jindi and their own resources help give their child(ren) a good start. However, there are some families that require a modest level of additional support such as speech or occupational therapy, parenting programs and financial advice. In addition, there a small number of families that require more intensive support such as family therapy, employment assistance, referrals to family violence support or housing assistance. The interdisciplinary team at Jindi seeks to provide and connect children and families with the particular level of support they need.

Two-generation approaches: Universal early year’s services can provide a crucial soft entry point to enable families to improve their circumstances. The Brotherhood is trialling Two-generation approaches in Melbourne (including at the Jindi Centre in partnership with Goodstart) that bring

together a range of interventions to address the needs of both generations at the same time, informed by evidence of the factors that help the family overcome disadvantage. Core elements include:

- high quality early learning and care services
- family support and parent engagement to nurture the wellbeing of families
- career planning, training and access to employment opportunities
- financial programs to build economic participation and assets
- a focus on building civic engagement and community connections.

We seek to strengthen the Australian evidence base around this approach.

#### **5. Extend universal preschool access to the two years before school – prioritising communities and children experiencing disadvantage**

The Brotherhood supports calls for extending universal preschool access to three-year-olds. There is a strong social and economic case for doing so – particularly for children experiencing disadvantage – which is clearly set out in the 2016 report by the Mitchell Institute *Preschool – two years are better than one* (Fox S & Geddes M) as well as in *Lifting our game*. Victoria is in the process of rolling out three-year-old kinder, with some other Australian jurisdictions also moving in this direction.

We note that nearly two-thirds of three-year-olds in Australia are already attending some form of early education and care – albeit of variable quality and for different durations. Alarming, children from families experiencing disadvantage comprise the lion's share of those not attending. The Mitchell Institute estimates that of the three-year-olds currently not participating in ECEC, around two-thirds are facing barrier to access – financial and non-financial – principally children from low-income families and key equity groups outlined above.

Bearing in mind fiscal constraints, and the investment needed in other interventions to address early childhood disadvantage, we believe access could be extended with funding prioritised to those children currently not participating or disadvantaged in the current system.

#### **6. Sharpen the focus on quality improvements – particularly in locations experiencing disadvantage**

The introduction of universal access – along with the introduction of the National Quality Framework – laid the foundations of a strong early childhood education sector.

Quality of early education matters. High quality early education and care programs can provide a counter-balance for children growing up in circumstances that do not provide the support they need to learn and thrive. However, quality is variable across the country. The 2016 *E4Kids* study (Taylor C et. al.) revealed that while there are some high-quality services in disadvantaged areas (and vice versa), lower socio-economic areas tend to have lower quality services. Rather than tackling place-based disadvantage, the ECEC system risks perpetuating it. This place-based disadvantage is compounded further by the stark inequities in the distributions of vital early intervention supports, with private providers of key allied services such as speech and occupational therapy clustered in more advantaged areas.

A sustained national effort towards quality improvement, backed by investment – particularly in locations of disadvantage – is needed. The key importance of the National Quality Framework and intensive monitoring of the National Quality Standard (NQS) needs to be affirmed. This should include

incremental strengthening of NQS to include direct observation of the quality of educator-child interactions which predict learning effects, with further incentives for quality improvements.

**7. Develop a national early childhood education and care workforce strategy**

High quality requires a well-trained workforce. There is a large shortage of qualified teachers and educators, coupled with high turnover in this low-paid, highly feminised sector.

The Australian, State and Territory Government share key levers to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and enhanced professionalisation of the workforce. Victoria has notably introduced fee TAFE places in early childhood education and is actively seeking to recruit future educators from communities with lower participation in preschool.

**8. Address barriers in access to Early Childhood Education and Care which can translate into a barrier to preschool participation**

We welcome COAG's commitment to considering a national strategy for ECEC next year. Barriers to entry into long day care can translate into lower participation levels in pre-school. For example:

- Families who are precariously attached to the labour market – in seasonal, casual or short-term work – cannot consistently meet activities test requirements, making it financially risky to enrol in ECEC.
- Low-income families who fall below the income threshold for the activities test are eligible for just 12 hours of subsidised care per week (half of the previous base ECEC entitlement) – which in many services translates to just one day of care, which can make engagement challenging.
- Special measures for highly vulnerable children, despite some improvements, are reportedly difficult to access and sustain
- Children of asylum seekers and those on temporary visas (Temporary Protection Visa, Safe Haven Enterprise Visas) face ECEC subsidy eligibility barriers.

**The Brotherhood is ready to assist further with this reviewedit docuemtn**

The Brotherhood stands ready to assist further with this review. For further information please contact Nicole Rees, Senior Manager Public Policy, on 007-337-940.