



National preschool education inquiry report

'For all our children'

by
KATHY WALKER
Independent Inquirer



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Preschool Education Inquiry

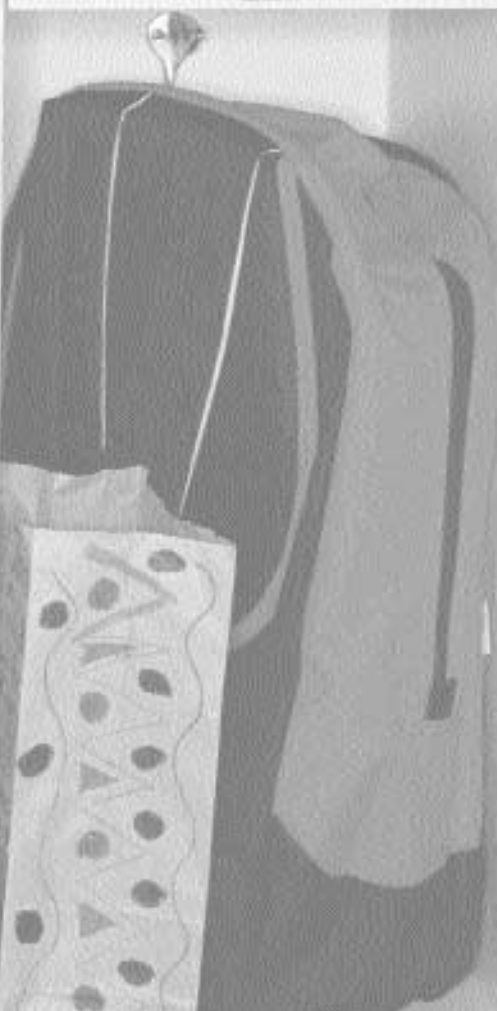
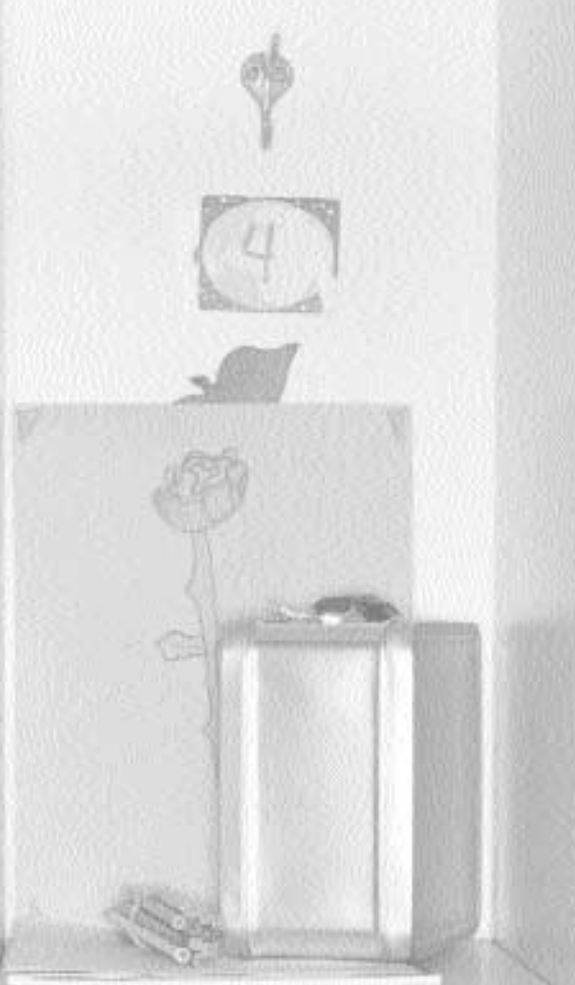
‘For all our children’

**REPORT OF THE
INDEPENDENT INQUIRY
INTO THE PROVISION OF
UNIVERSAL ACCESS
TO HIGH QUALITY
PRESCHOOL EDUCATION**

**Kathy Walker
Independent Inquirer**







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Foreword



Parents and researchers agree that the best start a child can have in life involves love, care and early education. Children who attend preschool have a better chance of succeeding at school and in later life.

Yet more than 40,000 children in Australia miss out on preschool education every year. Children from the most disadvantaged families are more likely to miss out, including many Indigenous children.

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. The Commonwealth government provides assistance to all other sectors of education, but since 1985 has provided no support to preschools.

This national under-resourcing of preschool education underpins many of the barriers that currently prevent universal access to high quality preschool education. Within it, different systems are providing different levels of commitment to preschool education, leading to inequities in the cost to parents and the level of support and resources provided to services.

However good provision may be in particular states and territories, from a national perspective, current provision of preschool education is inconsistent, fragmented and uncoordinated. There is no national policy, no national infrastructure to provide the basis for planning and no coherent strategies to ensure that all children in Australia can exercise their right to a free, public, high quality preschool education.

The AEU initiated this independent inquiry because of our concern about the children who continue to miss out on such access. The inquiry is underpinned by a commitment to equity and the belief that all children in Australia should have access to a high quality free public preschool education.

We congratulate Kathy Walker on her commitment to the undertaking of this Inquiry and to listening so thoughtfully to the views of parents, teachers, government departments, early childhood organisations and other stakeholders. Their voices are reflected in her report, which in our view makes a significant contribution in its research and in its recommendations about the way forward for Australian preschool education.

We wish to thank the hundreds of people and organisations who gave so freely of their time, their expertise and their views about what needs to be done.

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

Acknowledgements

The inquiry visited many key stakeholders across Australia during this inquiry. Teachers, parents, government representatives, academics, and a range of other key organisations and personnel provided time for me. I visited schools, preschools, childcare centres and held public forums in each state and territory. I had the opportunity to hold many discussions with a wide range of people involved in preschool education.

Everyone I met across Australia was generous with their time and committed to preschool education. I was struck by the passion and high level of commitment of the preschool teachers I met.

I was impressed that so many people took time to meet with me, attend forums and provide time for me to visit actual programs, but to write submissions. There is no doubt in my mind as to the respect and importance that parents and the community in general hold towards preschool education across Australia.

I wish to thank all those who participated in this inquiry process, particularly the parents and teachers, and to acknowledge the energy and commitment reflected in preschool programs across the country.

I wish to congratulate the AEU for this initiative and for providing the means and support for this inquiry to occur. The assistance provided by the AEU, and particularly by Federal Research Officer Michaela Kronemann and the Branches and Associated Bodies of the AEU around the country in organising the consultations, is very much appreciated.

I trust that the findings of this report will provide some directions for ensuring equity and access for all children in Australia.



KATHY WALKER
INDEPENDENT INQUIRER

Major findings

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.

The inquiry considered a range of issues within the Terms of Reference and received input from hundreds of stakeholders from all states and territories. Meetings with key stakeholders and visits to preschool settings across Australia occurred between late 2003 and early 2004. (Appendix 3)



Term of Reference 1:

The degree to which Australia is successful in ensuring that all children in Australia have equitable access to a free, high quality, preschool education.

A lack of clarity exists in all states and territories regarding actual numbers of children accessing preschool programs. Many submissions from organisations actually stated that it was “*impossible to ascertain accurate data within a national perspective.*”
(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

Data provided by state and territory governments does not appear to reflect the findings of this inquiry. There appear to be significantly higher numbers of children not accessing preschool than current data indicates, particularly for children with special needs, children from lower socioeconomic groups, children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and Indigenous children.

The inquiry found many examples of high quality programs across the country, which are funded to greater or lesser degree by state and territory governments. *However, the inquiry found that there is not equitable access to a high quality free preschool education across the country.*

Term of Reference 2:

The current barriers that prevent all children from accessing preschool education and the challenges that need to be addressed.

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

Geographic location impacts upon children’s access to preschool education. The inquiry found 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. Bus programs that transported children to preschools were for many families the only means by which their child could access a preschool program. Such services were highly valued by teachers and parents and viewed by this inquiry as an important contributor to preschool access across Australia. Bus services were particularly noted as significant and important for Indigenous communities.

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 reflect a fragmentation of preschool programs across Australia and are particularly problematic for families who move between states.

Differences in age of entry to preschool and the first year of school create further confusion for families and inequity for children across Australia.

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.

Term of Reference 3:

The roles that the Commonwealth, state/territory governments should play in ensuring universal access to preschool education.

Major findings include:

- The federal government currently provides minimal direct funding to preschool education and only to support programs and access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- The recently announced federal government early childhood years package does not include preschool.
- There is currently no national plan for preschool education across Australia, other than to leave it to the responsibility of each state and territory.
- There is currently no national vision for preschool education across Australia.
- The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) does not apparently view preschool education as a priority.

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.

Term of Reference 4:

Initiatives that would guarantee that all children have access to high quality preschool education.

A number of initiatives were suggested during the inquiry.

- Greater links and higher levels of coordination between childcare, preschool and school
- An expansion of programs that involve a “whole of government” approach
- Curriculum and early childhood pedagogy links between preschool and school
- Availability of transport for children to access preschool, particularly for children with special needs, CALD and Indigenous groups
- Higher levels of funding for children with special needs and coordination of services as children move between programs
- Higher levels of funding to support Indigenous children and programs, and a priority to employ Indigenous staff in preschools
- Flexibility in delivery models of preschool, particularly in rural and remote areas
- No fees
- A tertiary degree qualification in early childhood teaching for preschool teachers
- Smaller group sizes in some states such as Victoria
- Common terminology for preschool and first year of school across the country



Term of Reference 5:

Strategies and arrangements that would strengthen the links between preschool education, early childhood education in schools and other early childhood services.

- Formalised links between childcare, preschool and school are needed. The most successful transition programs seen by the inquiry occur where the same government department takes responsibility for preschool, childcare 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 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.
- 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 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.

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 childcare 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 childcare, 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 socioeconomic 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.

Introduction

“I can’t help feeling like it really is just the luck of the draw as to whether or not you receive a preschool education. It seems to depend upon where you live in Australia and not that you are Australian that provides you with equitable access to a free quality preschool education.” (SCHOOL PRINCIPAL)

“I know if I had a car and enough money I would take my child to preschool, but trying to get there, to look after the other kids and to be able to afford it is just too hard.” (VICTORIAN PARENT)

The importance of the early childhood years for children’s development and learning both in the short and longer term is acknowledged widely across the world. This inquiry and report come at a time in Australia when early childhood is receiving a higher profile at the federal level. Providing appropriate programs and ensuring adequate funding and resources are amongst the most significant contributions that governments can make to children in their early years. It is widely acknowledged by researchers, economists and educationalists that high quality programs for children and families in a child’s early years are a sound economic and social investment for future generations.

This inquiry was established to consider the provision of universal access to high quality preschool across Australia. Whilst a number of key reports have considered aspects of early childhood education in Australia it is important to note that it is the first inquiry specifically considering preschool education at a national level.

Throughout this inquiry, many people participated in discussions, contributed verbal and written submissions and shared their experiences of preschool education. All of them were generous with their time. I had the opportunity to visit schools, preschools and childcare centres. I met with government representatives and organisations involved with children, families and teachers.

This report reflects the fact that it is the parent and teacher voices that I found most powerful. They are the people who experience what is really happening in preschool education across Australia. Parents and teachers who live the experience of preschool spoke outside the official rhetoric and provided current and realistic experiences of access, equity and quality of preschool programs.

The inquiry did not attempt to enter into or resolve debates, about the differences between childcare and education. This is based upon the belief that the early childhood years require a range of programs and that preschool is one of many important programs children have a right to access. The brief of this inquiry was to consider children’s access to preschool education.



Definition of Terms

Defining preschool education

One of the first and continuing tasks during the inquiry was to define the term preschool education. This is challenging as in each state and territory a range of terminology is used to define a preschool program.

It is important to clarify and to articulate what preschool education is and its purpose. Discussions across the country at the present time highlight the importance of the early childhood years. However, preschool is not specifically acknowledged. Adding to the complexity of defining the term, programs in each state and territory, including long day care, government schools, independent schools and other early childhood programs use a variety of terms to describe their preschool programs. What may be viewed as preschool in one state may be called something else in another state.

Actual differences in preschool programs between states and territories include:

- different salaries, award structures and career options for preschool teachers
- different staff qualifications and required years of study
- different state or territory government departments responsible for preschool education
- different terminology for preschool
- differing program hours and modes of delivery
- varying costs and fees
- different group sizes
- different locations and models including on school sites, stand-alone, and mobile.

“The terminology, the age differences, the different hours and types of programs between each state make it really confusing and stressful for parents. Especially for those of us who move interstate a lot. How am I supposed to know that what was called kindergarten in one state is called preschool in another, and that different cut off points and ages apply. How do I know the difference between staff qualifications and training between states and what quality is supposed to look like and most importantly, how come I have to pay in some states and not in others.”

(PARENT WHO MOVED BETWEEN THREE STATES, WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

This inquiry acknowledges that the traditional sessional stand-alone preschool program is not the only type of preschool program, nor the model that has been used as a basis for this inquiry.

I am using the following definition for the purpose of this inquiry.

Preschool is a planned educational program for children in the year before the first year of school. Children are usually aged between 4 and 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.

In some states and territories options also exist for a 3-year-old preschool program, two years before a child commences school. This is varyingly available to some or all children.

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, or a mobile or visiting service.

High quality preschool

The terms of reference (Appendix 1) include the term ‘high quality’ preschool. In determining how to define high quality, the inquiry consulted with a range of people including academics, teachers, assistants, parents, and government representatives. Research indicates a number of factors that impact on the quality of a preschool program. For the purposes of this inquiry, I considered the following factors:

- qualifications of staff;
- group size and child staff ratios;
- curriculum planning and continuity of curriculum from preschool to school;
- links to other children and family services;
- parent involvement and participation;
- cultural relevance in staffing and program content;
- effective transition between preschool and school; and
- adequate funding for staff and resources

Access

A number of people throughout the inquiry queried the term ‘access’ rather than ‘participation’. Without the ability to access a preschool program, participation is impossible. Whilst a range of issues are integral to both access and participation, it is the ability to access a preschool program that was the focus within the terms of reference for this inquiry.

Access to preschool education in Australia

Across Australia, state and territory data shows that most children have access to a preschool program. Available data suggests that approximately 83.5% of children accessed some form of preschool education across Australia in 2002-2003. 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.

A number of key factors arose and recurred throughout the inquiry process regarding equity and access to high quality preschool education. The major issues raised through the inquiry regarding access and equity will be discussed in detail in this report but can be categorised as:



- **Geographic location**

Differences exist between rural, remote and metropolitan areas in equitable access to preschool.

- **Transport**

Many families are not able to access preschool due to lack of transport both within metropolitan and rural and remote areas of Australia.

- **Cost**

In some states and territories, access to a preschool program is free and in others fees are charged. Fees and costs impact upon families' capacity to access.

- **Children with special needs**

Many children with special needs have greater difficulty in accessing high quality preschool programs.

- **Indigenous children**

In some areas the percentage of Indigenous children not able to access a preschool program is significantly higher than non-Indigenous children.

- **Links between schools and preschool programs**

In some states and territories, continuity of curriculum, links and support services to parents exist between preschools and schools but in others this does not occur.

CALD children have significantly lower access to preschool programs in many areas around the country.

- **Links between preschool programs and other related health and community service programs**

Some preschool programs are linked directly with other childcare, health and community service supports.

- **Resourcing**

A significant lack of adequate funding and support structures exists for some preschool programs, particularly for children with special needs and for Indigenous groups.

The inquiry process

Between October 2003 and March 31 2004 I visited a diverse range of preschool settings.

Visits to preschools

- stand-alone community based;
- within long day care centres;
- within schools, funded and administered by state and territory departments of education and no fees;
- stand-alone funded and staffed by departments of education;
- those funded and administered by state departments of health/community services;
- preschools which incurred a fee or cost to parents other than a voluntary contribution.

Visits to schools

- schools with a childcare centre and preschool on campus;
- schools where preschool was part of the school and within the school buildings;
- schools which had a preschool on site or as part of their school but off-site.

Visits to childcare centres

- Multi-functional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) centres;
- long day care;
- occasional care.

Public forums

Key stakeholders across a range of sectors and organisations

Teleconference

With rural and remote teachers in Western Australia.



Meetings

- academics;
- government representatives;
- curriculum advisers and designers;
- special needs advocacy groups;
- parent associations and representatives;
- parents at local schools, preschools and childcare centres.

Discussions

- preschool teachers and assistants;
- school principals;
- childcare staff and childcare coordinators;
- professional associations;
- group employer associations;
- parents of children at preschools, schools;
- parents of children with special needs;
- Indigenous parents and teachers.

Verbal submissions

From organisations, parents and teachers who attended the forums.

Written submissions

From the range of stakeholders.

Context

The importance of preschool education

“Longitudinal studies, some of which have followed preschool graduates all the way into adulthood, have identified many positive and significant relationships between preschool participation and task-related, social, and attitudinal outcomes.”

(COTTON AND CONKLIN 2001)

In recent years, significant reports and studies from across the world have highlighted the importance of the early childhood years. For example, the *Effective Provision of Preschool Education Project (the EPPE Project)*, identified four key findings on the impact of attending a preschool centre:

- preschool experience, compared to none, enhances children’s development;
- the duration of attendance is important with an earlier start being related to better intellectual development and improved independence, concentration and sociability;
- full-time attendance led to no better gains for children than part-time provision;
- disadvantaged children in particular can benefit significantly from good quality preschool experience, especially if they attend centres that cater for a mixture of children from different social backgrounds.

The EPPE research indicates *“Preschool can play an important part in combating social exclusion and promoting inclusion by offering disadvantaged children, in particular a better start to primary school.”* (EPPE 2003)

Other key studies from across the world indicate a range of benefits for children and society in the provision of preschool education.

These include:

- significant reduction in poverty;
- significant reduction in later behavioural and learning problems;
- lower levels of absenteeism;
- fewer referrals for remedial classes or special education;
- fewer retentions. Preschool students are less likely to repeat grades;
- greater social and emotional maturity. Those who attend preschool received higher teacher ratings on measures of social and emotional maturity;
- significant gains for early intervention for children of lower socioeconomic groups within communities.

(CANADIAN EARLY YEARS STUDY, TREMBLAY 1999, US EARLY YEARS STUDY 1998, EPPE UK 2003)

“A year of preschool is about two thirds of the cost of being retained in the early years of school or secondary school, and about one third the cost of special education placement.”

(REYNOLDS 1995)

“Economic conditions in early childhood may be far more important for children’s ability, behaviour and achievement than conditions later in childhood.”

(SHONKOFF 2001)

Preschool helps establish the foundations of early literacy and numeracy for children in their early childhood years. Professor Bridie Raban in her report *Just the Beginning*, DETYA Research Report 2001, stated the importance of literacy for young children within the preschool program:

“Services for preschool children should be available for each and every child, not only those identified as ‘at risk’. This is because of what we know about brain development during the first years of life and the ‘critical’ periods for the establishment of crucial human behaviours, both cognitive and social.” (RABAN 2001)

Empirical and anecdotal evidence suggests strongly that children who have not had the opportunity to attend a preschool program may be disadvantaged when they begin school. Children without a preschool experience have greater levels of difficulty in making the transition to the first year of school, take longer to settle into the routines of a classroom and find it harder to respond appropriately to tasks and expectations.

Children with additional needs who have not attended preschool may also be disadvantaged. Examples include hearing, sight, nutrition, and behavioural problems. It was noted by a number of professionals and teachers across Australia that many children who do not attend a preschool program are less likely to have been screened for particular hearing, sight and health issues. These children are at more risk of not receiving the necessary early intervention before entering school.

“Early intervention services for children living in poverty that are provided during the first years of life can reduce subsequent rates of grade retention and use of special child services in middle childhood.”
“In suburbs where there is a high level proportion of vulnerable children the prognosis for these children if no intervention occurs, is likely to be poor.”

(HART ET AL 2003)

The OECD thematic review of early childhood education and care report states:

“Integrated and coordinated approaches with strong and equal partnerships with education are key elements which are likely to promote equitable access to quality early childhood programs. A systematic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation calls for a clear vision for children from birth to 8, and coordinated policy frameworks at a centralised level. A lead ministry that works in cooperation with other departments can foster coherent and participatory policy development. A strong and equal partnership with the education system supports lifelong learning, encourages smooth transition and recognises early childhood as an important part of education.” (OECD 2001)

It is evident that access to a high quality preschool education program provides a significant basis from which important foundations of literacy, numeracy, learning, behaviours, and future life opportunities can be developed.

Preschool education in Australia

At the current time preschool education in Australia is the responsibility of each state and territory.

In 1974 72% of Commonwealth funds for children’s services were spent on preschool education. From 1997, the Commonwealth began the process of transferring responsibility for preschool education to the states. (AEU 1998)

Prior to 1986, the Commonwealth had contributed block grants to each state and territory towards the cost of preschool. These were stopped in 1985. The Commonwealth does provide some funding towards preschool education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

In October 2003 the Commonwealth government released its paper, the *National Agenda for Early Childhood*. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Larry Anthony, wrote in the introduction:

“Developing a national agenda for early childhood is a major government initiative. The first of its kind in the history of Australia, the National Agenda will set directions and actions for how we can best support parents and respond to young children’s needs in the years to come.”

The report indicates that the majority of comments received through the consultation period stressed that *“Early childhood should be a priority for government investment.”* It also stated that *“Service providers and non-government organisations commented on wide disparities between early learning and care services—in terms of operation, quality, affordability and accessibility...the current system is confusing and unworkable for some families, and particularly disadvantages those children most in need...parents agreed.”*

In terms of preschool education, the following comments were included in the Commonwealth report:

“There was an equally strong view, especially from the education sector, that the year before school is extremely important to child development. For many, the ideal solution is a free, quality early learning program in the year before school for all children, or at least for disadvantaged children.”

However, the national agenda indicated that the federal government did not propose to alter existing funding or traditional areas of national and state government responsibility. The report acknowledged that, *“Some expressed disappointment that no changes were to be made.”*

In April 2004, the Commonwealth government launched a new early childhood strategy. In this initiative, preschool education was not identified as part of the federal government’s plan. This reflects the earlier position that responsibility for preschool would remain within each state and territory.

Childcare and early intervention are critical aspects of early childhood in Australia and this is reflected in the federal government’s recent announcements. It appears a great anomaly that whilst the federal government is now recognising the importance of the early childhood years, preschool education continues to be left to individual states and territories to support, fund, manage and administer.

Preschool education needs to be part of the federal government’s commitment to early childhood years.

Snapshot of preschool experiences in the states and territories

Overview

Each state and territory across Australia has developed and refined its preschool program independently. The structures that preschools work within have been influenced by historical beginnings in each system. Subsequent political and economic decisions in each state and territory have influenced the development of preschool education across Australia.

During the inquiry, the diversity of preschool programs across the country became obvious. Each state and territory has a range of initiatives and local programs that are responding to the needs of children, families and local communities. Challenges in preschool education across systems centred predominantly on resources, funding, staffing, program delivery and working with special needs and Indigenous children.

I have included official data on children's participation rates for each state and territory. The inquiry noted that in many cases, the number of children not accessing preschool as reported to the inquiry appear significantly higher than the data suggests, particularly in Victoria.

The following snapshots provide examples of some of the common issues that were identified. In each state and territory I visited centres, talked to stakeholders and received written and verbal submissions. The snapshots describe some of the strategies that are working successfully for the provision of access to free, high quality preschool education as well as providing examples of the inhibitors, challenges and frustrations experienced by teachers, parents and others involved in preschool education.

I have decided to provide a snapshot rather than a full listing of history, data, services and funding details. Specific details can be found in the range of reports and investigations that have been undertaken in each state and territory during the past two to five years. In this inquiry, I want the experiences of parents and teachers to lead the discussion and to demonstrate what preschool education is like across Australia at the present time.



Tasmania

'Kindergarten' is the term used for preschool in Tasmania.

'Preparatory' is the term for the first year of school.

It is reported that the 2002–03 preschool participation rate in the year prior to school was 99.6%.

Since 1998, childcare, preschools and schools have been within the regulatory authority of the Department of Education. Prior to 1998, only preschools and schools came under the Department of Education. The overwhelming majority of preschools are situated on school sites. Many preschools are within the actual school building with their own defined outdoor play area and other dedicated amenities. Kindergartens are part of the school, and even where a stand-alone preschool still exists, it is annexed to a school. Many off-site centres have been closed in recent years, to be replaced by a new kindergarten or early learning centre at the school.

I visited a number of schools, preschools and childcare centres. During these visits I had the opportunity to meet with teachers, principals, assistants and parents.



Initiatives and structures that provided access to high quality preschool.

Links for children moving between childcare, preschool and school occurred in most cases as a natural progression for children and families. This is attributed to structures both within local communities and at a government level.

These structures promote:

- Easy accessibility to same campus or close proximity for childcare, preschool and school;
- Access to transport;
- Shared curriculum between birth and 8 years. This enables continuity of curriculum as children move between childcare, preschool and the early years of school.

Preschool teachers, alongside all teachers from the school, work together in professional development programs, sharing information and planning. In some examples seen during the inquiry, staff from childcare centres also participated in professional development or other planning with preschool and schoolteachers. This continuity and professional liaison between staff working in the early years appears to provide a solid base from which curriculum, pedagogy and local community initiatives are significantly enhanced.

Families felt that the links between the programs provided a useful and logical link for them and their children as they used and moved between the services. A policy of co-location of childcare on school sites provides greater links between children's services and strengthens supports and continuity for children and families.

“Our kids see the big kids through the fence, sometimes the big kids come and read and play with the kinder kids. It’s all just natural and at the end of the year, they just make the transition across to the big school with no worries. The teachers already know us all and we know most of them”.

(PARENT OF PRESCHOOL CHILD)



Bus transport enhanced children's access to preschools in some communities and is rated by parents and teachers as very important, particularly for Indigenous children. A number of written submissions and discussions with staff and parents reiterated how important transport is in accessing preschool.

“We had a wing at school not being used, we put the kinder here with a parent room with a one way mirror, this encouraged other groups to come in. Kid Safe moved in, other things in the community, parents with babies, etc. feel comfortable then to ease into kinder. In partnership with the school, the kinder teacher and I looked at young parents’ needs, there were lots of young mothers and single parents, some hanging around, wanted something they could do. So we extended our school so we catered for everyone. Parents’ rooms, lounge where they would relax, coffee, even sleep and we had Internet facilities.”

(VERBAL SUBMISSION AT FORUM)

A significant element of preschool education in Tasmania is the links in curriculum for children as they move between childcare, preschool and into school. *The Essential Learnings Framework and Essential Connections* (Tasmanian Government, Department of Education 2003, 2004) has been developed in consultation with a range of stakeholders including groups of early childhood educators from childcare, preschool and early years of school. These groups have worked together to share the fundamental and integral elements of an early childhood curriculum. This curriculum *Essential Connections and Essential Learnings* is a significant and impressive initiative.

“The essential connections project has been an exciting undertaking that has brought together professionals from both schools and children’s services to research and describe young children’s learning. It is the first time, nationally that the learning of very young children in the birth to age five group has been captured in such detail. One of the great benefits of the project has been the collaborative research between professionals based in different settings.”

(MINISTER FOR EDUCATION, TASMANIA)

Another initiative is the introduction by the Department of ‘clusters’, which are designed to bring together all people involved in children’s learning. Early years school teachers, childcare workers and preschool teachers are able to meet and discuss issues together, helping to build greater levels of understanding between all sectors and to provide strategies for increasing continuity for families and children.

“The model is fantastic, we have people from childcare, school meeting and talking together.” (CHILDCARE WORKER)

Some staff however commented that *“this needs to be formalised, as some schools won’t let the early childhood staff attend.”* (PRESCHOOL TEACHER)

Issues identified as requiring further improvement or possible barriers to equity and access to preschool.

“There still seems to be a lack of understanding not only by government but parents and other stakeholders as to the importance of early childhood education. Kindergarten should be federally driven and funded to help achieve a national consistency and ensure the states work collaboratively towards best practice.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“Children with special needs are still underfunded, while the teacher aide time is inadequate often due to not enough understandings of the child’s needs before they start the program. Careful evaluation of the new potential of special education students needs to occur prior to the commencement of the school year so that appropriate funding can be sought for aide support for these identified students.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

In Tasmania, children with special needs are integrated into the mainstream program. A number of submissions expressed a belief that there is an inadequate support structure for these children, in particular providing appropriate resourcing for preschool classrooms and teacher aide assistance. Parents, teachers and school principals consistently raised this matter.

Additionally the need for a process of evaluation and provision of support structures before the child commences the program was highlighted. The degree to which appropriate levels of support, equipment and resources are available to ensure equity to a high quality pre school experience was raised during the inquiry.

Access to preschool does not include a fee in Tasmania. However, families are encouraged to make a voluntary contribution. A number of submissions highlighted the need to ensure that parents and school principals understand that the contribution in preschools is voluntary. Concern was expressed in a number of submissions and in discussions that inconsistency exists between some schools who place pressure upon families to pay the voluntary contribution and others who do not.

“Access should be free with voluntary levies as appropriate and Commonwealth and state funding for kinder enrolments as for children in the compulsory years. Commonwealth funding, especially through disadvantaged schools programs should be extended to include the preschool years.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

It appears that significant numbers of Indigenous children are accessing preschool in Tasmania. However, a greater range of flexible delivery models, transport and increased programs to further build relationships between preschool teachers is the recommendation of many submissions and discussions.

“Indigenous families are among our most mobile. This calls for the need for a strong, continuous supportive relationship between family and school.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

Summary

The Tasmanian government has established a structure within the Department of Education that places childcare, preschool and school under the one regulatory and management body. This structure appears to provide a solid basis for access to preschool education.

It appears that there is a commitment to and recognition by government that childcare, preschool and school programs are interlinked. These services provide an integral part of early education and care to families and children and this is reflected within local communities.

These structures at the government level provide and promote systems by which some key elements of preschool are enhanced:

- continuity for children as they make the transition from preschool to the first year of school;
- flexibility in the types of program model for children in their preschool year;
- early childhood professionals share a consistent curriculum for children from birth through the early years across childcare, preschool and the early years of school.

Specific issues were raised through discussion and submissions, indicating that further improvement is needed in relation to the provision of equity and access to high quality preschool programs.

- Improved resourcing and support structures for children with special needs and greater links between services.
- Clarification and reassurance to parents that a school levy for preschool is non compulsory.
- Extending bus and transport services to all children who require access to preschool.
- Opportunities for higher levels of parental support and participation, particularly for Indigenous families.
- Recognition of the importance of early childhood teacher degree qualifications for teachers in preschool programs.
- Further community education about the importance of and purposes of preschool across Tasmania.



Victoria

Preschool or kindergarten are the terms used for preschool in Victoria.

Preparatory (prep) is the term used for the first year of school.

It is reported that the 2002–03 preschool participation rate in the year prior to school was 99.8%.

The Department of Human Services regulates preschools in Victoria. Schools are regulated by the Department of Education. The majority of preschools are 'stand-alone' sites within local communities. A handful of preschools are on school sites. However, regulatory responsibility rests with DHS for these preschools.

Parent committees manage the majority of preschools. A number of different group employer models provide support for management and administration to some preschools. These include local government, church and private organisations.

Some preschool programs are offered in long day care centres in 'for profit' and 'not for profit' centres with a qualified preschool teacher. Parents reported some confusion where some centres advertised a preschool program but a qualified preschool teacher was not running the program.

Fees are charged to parents to access preschool in Victoria and they vary between preschools. In addition to fees, most preschools undertake fund-raising activities to provide additional equipment and fund various elements of the program. There is great variation in preschools' financial status.

The inquiry received over 40 written submissions from Victoria, the highest number of written submissions of all states and territories, predominantly from parents and teachers. These submissions indicated that there is a high level of concern about preschool education in Victoria.

Parents value preschool highly, and raised issues of access, quality and flexibility of program delivery. It is worth noting that in 2001 the Kirby Report on the *Review of the issues that impact on the delivery of preschool service to children and their families in Victoria* stated:

“Victoria’s preschool centres and related services, once among world’s best practice in early childhood development, are now in disarray. A substantial proportion of preschool teachers are demoralised by the conditions and uncertainties in their employment arrangements, parents find the burdens of the management and administration of the centres, and the liabilities to which they are exposed, increasingly unacceptable, and many centres struggle to be viable. Children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds and those who have special needs are least likely to have access to preschool education and the support services provided by government are patchy in their coverage, mostly inadequate and sometimes give rise to inconsistent application across regions.” (KIRBY 2001)

Initiatives and structures that provide access to high quality preschool.

Since the Kirby Report, a number of government initiatives are promoting links between government departments, agencies and organisations. The *Best Start Program* is being supported jointly by the Departments of Human Services and Education. This program, coordinated by various organisations including local government and church organisations, is working towards making stronger links within communities, including links between preschool and school. One *Best Start* program indicated to the inquiry that through the program they have identified many children, particularly from low socioeconomic areas and children of CALD backgrounds, who are not currently accessing preschool.

Some schools and preschools organise transition and orientation sessions to help make the link for children and families. Some local governments have in recent years instigated 'education expos' where schools, preschools, childcare centres and other community groups provide information to parents about services and programs within a particular community.

The provision of mobile preschools in parts of rural and remote Victoria provide access to preschool, but the inquiry did receive a number of submissions indicating that this service is under-resourced.

The inquiry visited one location where the links between childcare, preschool and school are strong. Whilst not co-located the childcare centre and preschool work closely together and the childcare children are brought to the preschool for sessions each week. The local school includes the preschool and school in a range of information sessions and visits the programs regularly.

In Victoria a number of childcare centres employ a preschool teacher and this enables some children to access a preschool program.

The inquiry received a submission from one preschool teacher who works in a school.

Smooth transition, professional relationships between the preschool teacher and prep teachers and the links in learning and teaching were listed as significant elements in promoting access to high quality preschool.

Issues identified as requiring further improvement or possible barriers to equity and access to preschool.

“The current barrier that prevents all children from accessing preschool education is the high fees. In a small country town like ours, not all parents can afford the high fees and so don’t send their children. You will find that in my country town there will be at least 5 children who will attend prep without having been to kindergarten.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PRESCHOOL TEACHER, COUNTRY VICTORIA)

Many teachers and parent committees informed the inquiry that fees are a significant barrier for many families. The inquiry received numerous submissions highlighting the inequity of preschool and how it was dependent upon which area you lived in as to what the fees are. Fees quoted to the inquiry ranged from \$175 a term to \$650 a term.

“It is actually cheaper to go to school than to go to preschool. If preschool is so important, why do we have to pay?”

(PARENT SUBMISSION)

“Access is not equitable because fees are too high for many low income families using stand-alone preschools and also long day care fees are too high for low income families.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, VCSA)

A number of preschools have large group sizes and these have been increasing in recent years. Some preschools have up to 30 children with two staff. Many submissions indicated that this does not help provide high quality preschool education.

“There is tremendous pressure placed on parents each year to participate in fundraising activities merely to provide the preschool with essentials such as paint and paper for the children. There is certainly no money to buy new equipment or to replace old and damaged toys.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PRESCHOOL TEACHER, OUTER URBAN VICTORIA)

“We actually asked the local charities if they could contribute to some of the children’s fees as they just couldn’t afford them and the preschool couldn’t afford it either. We felt like we were in a third world country asking for handouts but what can you do when the families want their children to come but can’t afford it.”

(VERBAL SUBMISSION, PRESCHOOL TEACHER)

A large number of submissions suggested that there are an increasing number of qualified preschool teachers who are choosing not to work in preschool education.

Disparity of pay and award conditions between preschool teachers and primary teachers in Victoria is significant and this was highlighted many times as impacting upon the quality of preschool.

“The level of stress amongst preschool teachers is high and many are choosing to give up their careers due to increased workloads, higher numbers in groups and lousy pay compared to primary teachers. Young graduates are just not choosing to work in preschool anymore.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PRESCHOOL TEACHER AND UNIVERSITY ACADEMIC)

For children with special needs the inability to provide high quality programs in group sizes of 30, and often without additional support, was stated as a significant barrier to quality preschool. Overwhelming numbers of submissions were received highlighting the difficulty in obtaining appropriate levels of funding, insufficient teacher aide/integration aide support and inadequate assessment procedures for children with special needs once they are enrolled in preschool.

“Victoria still spends less than any other state on preschool education. As a result of the underfunding, preschool centres and parents are afflicted with increased fees. Burgeoning group sizes, teacher shortages, and a lack of resources for children with additional needs, excessive workloads for parent committees of management and more.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PRESCHOOL TEACHER)

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are less likely to access preschool because of the fee structure and lack of understanding about preschool education. A number of submissions raised these issues and highlighted that families in poverty, families who have recently arrived in Australia, families where English is not their first language, often do not understand the Victorian system of preschool and school. Assumptions are sometimes made that if preschool is not part of school, then it isn't important. At times, there are other priorities for families, particularly those living in low socioeconomic areas or in poverty.



“Trying to juggle some type of income, three young children without transport and learning English become the priorities, they have to, and so preschool is not on the list of priorities.”

(VERBAL SUBMISSION, AGENCY)

“Recently the number of children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds has declined in preschool, due mainly to increased costs of fees. The Inquiry into the Needs of Families for Early Childhood Services (Parliament of Victoria, 1995) reported that the children who were most likely to benefit from preschool services were most likely to miss out on their provision. Families most likely to not be attending in Victoria included low income families, children from CALD families and Koorie families.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

Families and teachers are confused by the range of organisational structures and management systems for preschools in Victoria. One example of this complexity was cited in a written submission where a group employer incorporated public company, the local government authority, the individual preschool parent committee and the Department of Human Services all had responsibility for different aspects of the preschool.

As one teacher said:

“I don’t know who I work for anymore, who I am answerable to, who is there to support me, what roles each of the different players have and who to send parents in need to. This hotchpotch arrangement only inhibits our abilities to provide high quality programs and to ensure some consistency across the state.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PRESCHOOL TEACHER)

A number of submissions raised issues related to the significant gaps in understandings between preschool and primary school teachers. This often resulted in lack of clarity between the two regarding the expectations of children’s learning, and fragmentation which inhibited a more ‘seamless’ approach to children’s learning from occurring across the preschool and prep year.

“Prep teachers and preschool teachers are mostly ignorant of each others’ roles and little or no communication between them occurs. Children and families moving from preschool to school must go through completely new systems, funding, curriculum, etc. It is just so hard for us to work our way through the systems.”

(PARENT, WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

Lack of transport to preschool is a factor in some rural areas of Victoria and the inquiry received submissions indicating that there has been a reduction in mobile preschool services in some areas of the state.



Summary

Apart from Victoria and NSW, in all other states and territories the majority of preschools are under the one education department. This anomaly was highlighted in many submissions.

There were an overwhelming number of submissions, both written and verbal, that highlighted similar issues relating to access and quality preschool for all children in the state. Apart from parents and teachers, many organisations including the FKA, Mackillop Family Services and the Brotherhood of St Laurence, stressed the difference in access to preschool. Despite what data may indicate, in low socioeconomic areas, for children of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Indigenous children, children in rural areas of Victoria and children with special needs, access to preschool across Victoria is significantly lower than for other members of the population.

The inquiry was overwhelmed by the heartfelt submissions sent by parents and teachers. These submissions stressed the difficulties and challenges of working in conditions where there was inadequate funding, confusion about management and regulatory structures, lack of support structures and differences in salary and award conditions for preschool staff. Many submissions acknowledged the difficulty in maintaining a high quality preschool program under these conditions.

The inquiry noted with interest that Victoria was the only state where there was little understanding and no formal links between the curriculum used in preschool and school and no formal links between preschools and schools. Transition between preschool and school relies upon goodwill or local initiatives; there is no system to support a consistent approach.

South Australia

Kindergartens and child parent centres (CPCs) are the terms most commonly used for preschool education in South Australia.

The first year of school is called Reception.

It is reported that the 2002-03 preschool participation rate in the year prior to school was 95.1%.

Preschool in South Australia operates within two strands, kindergartens and CPCs. Kindergartens are predominantly stand-alone preschools within the community and managed by parent committees. Approximately three-quarters of preschools are this model. CPCs are on primary school sites and constitute approximately one-quarter of preschools.

All preschools are regulated by the Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS). However, there are two strands. Stand-alone kindergartens come under the Children's Services Act and CPCs come under the Education Act, but both are funded and staffed by the Department.

There are no fees to access preschool. However, a voluntary contribution is charged to preschools across CPCs and kindergartens.

A number of issues were raised in meetings and through written submissions during the inquiry.



Initiatives and structures that provided access to high quality preschool.

The availability of transport to preschool is a vital factor in access to preschool, particularly for Indigenous children. In two MACS Indigenous centres, parents and staff highlighted the importance of the bus service. The bus services collect children from a wide catchment area and without them, many children would not attend preschool or childcare. The bus services also provide a link between the program and the home, meeting parents and family members as the children are collected along the way.

“Without the bus we wouldn't get nearly as many. For example, we had 21 this morning; when the bus breaks down we only get 12-15 at the most. Transportation is very important to our community. We have a phone on the bus and parents can ring to say if they're not coming or in a different place. Parents would often have kept them at home if no bus.”

(DISCUSSION WITH INDIGENOUS PRESCHOOL ASSISTANT AT INDIGENOUS PRESCHOOL)

Two MACS centres with preschools emphasised the importance of employing Indigenous staff in Indigenous programs. Staff reported that this provides an important cultural link for families and children and that families have opportunities to participate in the program. The inquiry was told that some of the staff currently working in the programs had become involved when their own children attended and then had gone on to study and become staff.

There is provision in South Australia for Indigenous children and children of CALD backgrounds to access additional time at preschool. This is viewed as beneficial for children by building on experiences and strengths gained over a longer period of time.

“83% attendance in Aboriginal children attending preschool compared to 87% non-Aboriginal attendance.”

(ABORIGINAL EDUCATION DATA COLLECTION SA)



The links between childcare, preschool and school are a significant strength. This was evident particularly in the MACS programs visited. A number of submissions also highlighted the fact that when services are in one location, parents reported high levels of satisfaction. Staff indicated that the links between the services provide a greater sense of community and build meaningful relationships between families and staff.

“The links between us all are very important. We aim to provide a bridge to mainstream. Our programs are very important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. They get to know about literacy and numeracy and what we do in the program. We have good interaction with school staff, a chat and smoke with them. We talk about the kids and what they need.”

(COORDINATOR OF MACS CHILDCARE CENTRE)

“We need to teach my own people—that’s why I’m here. I value education. My kids used to say, ‘Can I stay home it’s my birthday’. I’d say, ‘Best birthday present I can give is to make you go to school and get a good education.’ That needs to start at preschool.”

(COORDINATOR OF CHILDCARE CENTRE AND SCHOOL TEACHER)

“Word of mouth gets around. Been here for 25 years, this centre. I was encouraged to come with my daughter in the kindy, that’s how I got started here and been here ever since.”

(INDIGENOUS TEACHER ASSISTANT)

Currently, South Australia is developing a “unified professional association, 0–8”. This is viewed by many teachers and childcare staff as an important step in recognition of the importance of the early years. It is a significant step in unifying those professionals who work across the early years and provides an opportunity to form a unified voice around the issues of early childhood.

The increase in the number of co-located sites is also seen as a positive step to increase links for families and children and improve access to preschool.

The inquiry received a number of submissions that highlighted the importance of this initiative. Staff regard it as a positive step in forming stronger links for families and children when the services are more unified and understand each other’s roles.

“Summative” reports are another initiative that promotes greater continuity for children and their teachers as they move from preschool to school. These are a collection of children’s work, examples of skill and development collected during the preschool year. Families are encouraged to hand them on to their child’s primary school.

Issues identified as requiring further improvement or possible barriers to equity and access to preschool.

Between the CPCs and kindergartens a number of differences were reported to the inquiry. Whilst the two preschool structures do not compete, a number of issues related to staffing, career options, support processes, funding and structures, were raised. For example, in some kindergartens, the need for additional fundraising by parents was highlighted, whereas at a CPC the funds were available through the school.

Teachers and parents raised a number of issues that they believe impact upon access to preschool.

A number of submissions mentioned that, for rural children, fewer places on Education Department buses limit their access to preschool. Only school-aged children are used in calculations for the numbers of buses required and some preschool aged children miss out.

“Education departments need to change their policies to allow for preschoolers to be included in the figures used to calculate the need for school buses. Sadly, students who do not even use the public system may use the bus ahead of a preschooler wanting to attend a preschool on a public school site.”

(PARENT, WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

In discussions with teachers and parents, the need for more supports and resources for children with special needs was a significant issue. One example was given to the inquiry where it was necessary for the local preschool to undertake additional fundraising to employ a part-time occupational therapist for a small group of children. A number of examples were cited where hours of teacher aide support were limited and some children with special needs are not able to attend full-time programs. Some teachers informed me that long waiting lists limit access to screening, dental and hearing checks. It was felt that stronger links, with an injection of funds, are required to enable these children to be successfully included in preschool programs.

“Children with mild special needs are lost in the system when transition between therapists is delayed or staff are only employed for six month contracts. This means some children who would benefit from early assistance do not get any and begin school with a developmental difficulty that could well have been either reduced or alleviated.”

(TEACHER, WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“More resources are required in SA for children with additional needs. There are not enough speech and language places for the need and there are often long delays in assessment after referral and in the level of support available.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, LADY GOWRIE CENTRE)

Submissions highlighted the difficulties for some single parents and families from lower socioeconomic areas in accessing preschool. Teachers indicated that some parents from these groups don't know about the importance of preschool and even if they did, had difficulty knowing how to access a preschool program for their child.

“I have to look after three under 4 and there isn't any way I am going to troop back and forwards to preschool with two other little ones as well. It just isn't important enough.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PARENT AND TEACHER)

“Many lone parents have difficulty accessing preschool for their 4-year-old regularly due to either their own ill health or that of other younger/older siblings, which can create transport problems.”

(TEACHER, WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

The need for greater flexibility in length of preschool sessions was recommended in many submissions. Many teachers and parents indicated that longer day sessions rather than half-day sessions suited a lot of families.

Another issue raised through the inquiry is that transition for children from preschools that are not on school sites is problematic for some families. Some schools enrol children from a number of preschools from around the community, not just the closest preschool. There is little continuity for children as they move from the preschool to the school. This is significantly different for children and families where the preschools are on the school site.

“There needs to be consistency about approaches to transition and policy guidelines about such processes. Our current experience as an early childhood setting transitioning children to several schools is that there is incredible diversity in approaches.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, LADY GOWRIE CENTRE)

“If you are saying Aboriginal children attend preschool, what the hell is happening once they transit to school? Why is it when kids as young as Reception are being suspended, having behaviour problems. The schools need to involve our parents more, like we do here in preschool.”

(INDIGENOUS TEACHER)

Financial supports need to be provided to families who are unable to pay the voluntary contribution. A school card system exists for families within the school system. A number of teachers and parents suggested that this same system would be helpful to families of preschool children.

“Within our schools, a school card process is available for families who are economically disadvantaged and would thus suffer financial strain without this provision to assist with the cost of schooling. Preschools are currently without the support of this financial system that covers the cost of materials and services.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, TEACHER)

“It is strongly recommended that the parity currently existing in SA among teachers, irrespective of the educational settings, be maintained. An early childhood teacher is someone with a four year early childhood teacher qualification.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, LADY GOWRIE CENTRE)



Summary

Preschool education is highly valued in South Australia by parents, preschool and school teachers. There is a growing trend to establish preschools on school sites, some co-located with childcare centres, and this makes access to preschool easier for families.

The provision of transport to preschool for families from lower socio economic areas, for Indigenous families and those in rural areas of South Australia needs to be better resourced so that access is more equitable.

Transition between preschool and school appears to lack a consistent approach across South Australia. It appears to depend upon individual local communities, initiatives from local preschool teachers or school principals. Many submissions and discussions recommended a more consistent approach to transition.

Data provided to the inquiry indicated that only a slightly lower percentage of Indigenous children are attending preschool compared to non-Indigenous children in South Australia. The inquiry noted in visits to a number of MACS centres the high quality of programs. The participation of Indigenous staff who provide culturally relevant curriculum and encourage parents' involvement was impressive. Provision of a bus to transport children is an integral aspect of these programs.

Queensland

Preschool is the term used in Queensland. However, with the introduction of 13 years of school between 2003–2007, preschool is being replaced with a year called prep, “preparation for school programs”.

It is reported that the 2002–03 preschool participation rate in the year prior to school was 101.0%.

The majority of preschools are part of primary schools and operate within the Department of Education. In addition, there are a smaller percentage of preschools which are known as community kindergartens and affiliated with the Creche and Kindergarten Association of Queensland (C & K centres). These preschools are usually stand-alone within local communities. The C & K long day care centres, approximately 11 in total, employ a qualified preschool teacher to operate a preschool program in the centre.

Preschool and school education in Queensland is currently undergoing significant change. In 2003 the Queensland government introduced 13 rather than 12 years of schooling into Queensland schools. A trial program of a ‘preparatory year’ was introduced for children in the year before year 1. It is expected that by 2007, all preschools within state schools will have become a preparatory class model, thus not continuing the current preschool program.

“This would bring Queensland in line with other Australian states. Preparatory students will attend classes five full days a week and will undertake play and creative activities that help them learn about communication, develop a sense of self and others, and become responsible and independent learners.”

(GOVERNMENT MEDIA RELEASE, DECEMBER 2003)

This initiative has brought Queensland into line with all other states and territories across Australia in relation to 13 years of school. Initially 22 schools in the state sector trialled the preparatory year in 2003 and are continuing in 2004. At the time of this inquiry, an evaluation of the 2003 trial had not been released.

Initiatives and structures that provided access to high quality preschool.

The discussions of preschool education in relation to access and quality were complex given the changing nature of preschool in Queensland. General comments made by teachers, parents and other stakeholders highlighted a range of factors, which were either seen to promote or inhibit access to preschool and the provision of quality preschool education.

“Currently Queensland has an excellent preschool program that should be maintained and extended for all children aged 4 years to access part-time preschool if parents choose.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PARENT)

Parents of children attending preschools on school sites or in close proximity to schools reported high levels of satisfaction with the preschool program. Opportunities to include and involve parents were viewed as an integral part of a quality preschool program and parents who talked with the inquiry identified the fact that their preschool staff “got to know” them and this was viewed as an important part of their child’s preschool experience.

One preschool the inquiry visited had a number of Indigenous children and families with an Indigenous teacher. A discussion with parents and staff at this preschool highlighted the importance of being able to access a centre and staff that reflected culturally appropriate programs.

The local school and preschool provide links for families and work together to provide supports and continuity for families and children as they move from preschool to school. Flexibility in delivery of hours for preschool programs also enables greater access for some children. It was reported that the links between local childcare and preschool are also important in enabling access to preschool for children in long day care programs.

“I hope that there will be a commitment to the provision of resources that continue the types of communication with and involvement of parents and carers in school based prep which is currently a feature of preschool education programs.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, TEACHER)

“Some parents would like a longer day than we have here. Luckily the childcare centre picks up the kids but overall we like the session times and don’t really want to change. Our local school is great and our kids know all about school before they even start.”

(PARENT DISCUSSION)

“They all go to the library swimming and art council. There is a buddy system with the older children. Music group comes over to perform. The hearing team come over and the dental service too.”

(PARENT AND TEACHER DISCUSSION IN INDIGENOUS PRESCHOOL ATTACHED TO SCHOOL)

A new play based curriculum is being developed for the preparation for school year. This is viewed as a positive initiative for children and staff, which will help to maintain the play emphasis that already exists within the preschool.

It was commented to the inquiry that in one area where the trial prep program is operating, more children are accessing the new prep year.

“More children are turning up for school. It’s more consistent re time, it’s a full day and they (parents) view it as real school.”

(DISCUSSION WITH ACADEMIC)

Particular initiatives with Indigenous children and families provide specifically targeted programs that include education, health and welfare needs. One example cited to the inquiry is the *Early Years Family Support and Access Program*, (EYFSAP). It is funded under the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). It aims to achieve increased attendance rates of students attending early childhood centres and preschools; effectively address hearing, health and nutrition; and train professionals and paraprofessionals to be effective in working with Indigenous communities and schools. (WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“We are fortunate and proud to declare that the current team is entirely Indigenous, comprising both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

Issues identified as requiring further improvement or possible barriers to equity and access to preschool.

“Even though the curriculum for prep seems fantastic and still play based and we can now offer free access five days a week instead of two which makes us feel quite comfortable, there are a number of issues we are really concerned about. Issues re facilities, space and resources; will we end up just being squashed into a regular classroom without appropriate equipment, space and outdoor play areas for children?”

(DISCUSSION WITH TEACHER INVOLVED IN PREP TRIAL)

A number of submissions raised concerns as to how the quality of the new preparatory year will be maintained. Fears were expressed that regular classrooms rather than specific early childhood playrooms and inappropriate equipment may be used.

“Currently Queensland has an excellent preschool program that should be maintained and extended for all children, not lost for the sake of a full-time prep year.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, TEACHER)

The reduction of teacher assistant time in the trials of the new preparatory year is also of major concern to many teachers, assistants and parents. A number of submissions raised this issue.

“The teacher assistant time is not only invaluable for child/staff ratios, which facilitate the quality of our programs, but they allow for teachers to connect with and catch moments to talk with parents as they arrive and leave the program. I have had to totally reorganise my program and teacher assistant time to attempt to provide those times which are invaluable in terms of including parents in the education of their child. I have even had to change how we organise outdoor time and play, given I don’t have my teacher assistant at those times.”

(DISCUSSION WITH TEACHER IN PREP TRIAL)

“Our preschool provides a full day program five days a week from 9am to 1pm and then teachers and aides have a home visiting program in the afternoon. Children’s attendance and outcomes have greatly improved compared to when only sessions and no visiting was done. This program would be totally compromised without the support of a full-time teacher aide. Our teacher aides are our lifelines to the community and an invaluable source of knowledge.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, INDIGENOUS PRESCHOOL TEACHER)



It was also raised that in preschool programs which are not part of schools, fees are charged to access the program. This often causes difficulty for some families who are not able to afford a preschool program and are not able to access a school preschool.

A major issue raised during the inquiry by parents and teachers is a lack of resources for children with special needs and inconsistent processes for assessment of needs and supports. This is viewed as impacting significantly upon the quality of a program that a child with special needs may receive. Submissions stressed the lack of teacher aide time and difficulties in categorisation processes for funding and support as major challenges.

“One of our most frustrating roles is trying to place children with disabilities into free preschool environments. Much of the discussion around attempted inclusion of these children falls in the areas of safety, resources, staffing and curriculum. Aide time is inadequate and again is greatly under-resourced.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, TEACHER)

Discussion also included the need for improved and increased free preschool programs for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Inadequate housing and accommodation for teachers as well as general safety issues were raised in relation to low retention of preschool staff in some communities. An opportunity for local community members to be part of the programs was raised as an initiative that needed to be expanded.

“These programs need improved teacher accommodation, safety and combined services for staff working in the centres and communities, with programs to encourage capacity building for community members to take active roles and run programs. Support for material and resource preparation that is culturally appropriate made for and by community members.”

(TEACHER SUBMISSION)

A number of submissions noted that with the introduction of the prep year, a preschool year will not actually be provided by the state school system.

Once the new prep classes have been fully implemented, parents wishing to access a preschool session outside of the new prep classes will have to find a preschool program outside the state system and most probably will incur a fee.



Summary

Prior to the introduction of the trial prep program in schools in 2003, preschool was provided mostly by the state system within schools and some C & K preschools. The inquiry discussion was dominated by the move into a prep year and the potential repercussions for the quality of programs. Fears were expressed that prep might lose the highly valued play based curriculum in the future and teachers may not be early childhood qualified. The most controversial change was the reduction to teacher assistant time.

Transport to preschool was raised as essential for some children to access a program. Where bus programs operated this significantly increased access to preschool. In some areas, only public transport was available and parents were often reluctant to put their child on a public bus without adult supervision.

Many submissions endorsed the move to introduce a prep year into the school system but expressed significant concerns as to the loss of a state funded preschool year.

The inquiry acknowledges the step forward in the provision of 13 years of school. It notes the potential challenges to the state in not providing a designated preschool year within the state school system. There is a perceived risk that as a consequence, access to a preschool year will incur costs to parents if they choose a preschool program in the year before the prep year.

Northern Territory

The term preschool is used in the Northern Territory for the year before school.

The term transition is used for the first year of school.

It is reported that the 2002-03 preschool participation rate in the year prior to school was 82.6%.

The Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) has responsibility for preschools and schools.

“I have been working in Arnhem Land for the past 20 years in the early childhood field and am concerned that an informed voice regarding the provision of preschool programs in the bush is heard. There are many sites in Arnhemland where there are not programs available. Some areas are serviced by a mobile preschool run. While this is an excellent program it only scratches the service re providing ‘universal’ access.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, TEACHER)

The inquiry received many verbal and written submissions reflecting a significant lack of access to quality preschool programs across the Territory, particularly for Indigenous children in remote areas.

In 1999 the Learning Lessons review stated:
“The review has established that there is unequivocal evidence of deteriorating outcomes from an already unacceptably low base, linked to a range of issues, led primarily by poor attendance which has become an educational crisis. There is a need for management systems in the Department of Education to be organised to ensure that Indigenous education is a critical core business of the department.” (LEARNING LESSONS 1999)

Since then initiatives supported by Commonwealth and Territory governments have been implemented to address the issues raised in the 1999 report. The initiatives are designed to bring a whole of government approach to services and programs for children and families.

These initiatives have resulted in significant improvements. However, the inquiry found there are still large gaps in the provision of equity and access to quality preschool education in the Territory.

Initiatives and structures that provided access to high quality preschool.

Sites where childcare, preschool and school are on the same campus are highly advantageous to families and teachers. The inquiry visited a site where childcare, preschool and school are co-located. Children from the childcare centre attend the preschool, which is accessed through what is known as the “magic door”. The preschool and childcare staff share resources and equipment and work together to provide supports to families and children. The principal of the school has a commitment to promoting and supporting the childcare and preschool programs and children from the school often participate in the preschool program.

“There is the capacity for children to get together across age groups. Kids dressing up the babies, toddlers visiting the preschool pool, year 6 and 7 reading to the preschool kids. There are links every day. Resources are shared between the childcare, the preschool and the school. The principal of the school is down here every day—very enthusiastic, new things are happening, professional development with the transition and year 1 teachers is a good idea.”

(DISCUSSION WITH COORDINATOR OF PRESCHOOL ON CO-LOCATED SITE)

“The childcare links the children to preschool which then moves them into transition. What makes it work? Well trained people, excellent relationships between creche, preschool and school, good PD for preschool staff and an open door between preschool and transition.”

(PRESCHOOL TEACHER, VERBAL SUBMISSION)



In some preschools where childcare centres are not close by, flexibility in hours provides greater access for some children. Parents who work indicated that they find the longer hours of preschool better accommodate their needs than half-day sessions.

The provision of transport to access preschool is also valued highly by parents and teachers. It was noted in a number of submissions that for some families who did not have their own transport, the bus to preschool is the only means by which children could access the program. It was also noted that where transport is not available children are not able to attend preschool.

In some remote areas of the Territory, links between different government departments and between Commonwealth and Territory governments are developing a number of community models which are linking services together for families and children.

These include health, education and programs in remote communities, which situate services in one building or community site. These initiatives provide opportunities for local community members to be involved in identifying the types of services and programs they require as well as the most appropriate means of provision and delivery.

Issues identified as requiring further improvement or possible barriers to equity and access to preschool.

“The Commonwealth and NT governments have to acknowledge that children who are remote have the right to access and that this will be costly. There is no way out of spending that money. It’s not good enough to say, ‘Sorry they are too far out’. Children who are remote should have access.”

(TEACHER, VERBAL SUBMISSION)

A number of submissions focused upon the vast distances of the Territory and the related challenges to providing access to high quality preschool. Submissions mentioned that in rural and remote areas, continuous turnover of staff disrupts program continuity. In these communities, there is little consistency or knowledge of local families and children. As one Indigenous teacher said, *“This has the potential to diminish trust between families and services.”*

It was reported to the inquiry that 12 enrolments are required before a preschool teacher is employed. The need for such enrolment figures in small remote communities stops access to quality preschool programs. The inquiry visited one school where the teachers and principal had planned for and organised a preschool program but had not received funding for the program due to low enrolment numbers. These children often visited the school or attended class with their older siblings rather than have access to nothing.

The inquiry was informed that in some remote areas staff without early childhood qualifications might end up attempting to provide a preschool program. One example cited to the inquiry was of a secondary trained teacher in a one-teacher school attempting to provide a program for the preschool children alongside the other school children. This was not viewed as a satisfactory alternative.

“As Arnhem is very expensive to service, e.g. no road access for lots the year to mainland sites and lots of island sites, it tends to be put in the too hard basket. In small communities where staffing fluctuates due to attendance, a point five position for preschool is difficult to maintain. It also means that in some cases, schools have chosen not to fill the preschool position as it is considered too difficult.”

(ARNHEM PRESCHOOL TEACHER FOR 20 YEARS, WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“Smaller Aboriginal communities, (one-teacher schools) have no formal preschool service-often 3 and 4 year olds attend school with older siblings. Depending on the capabilities and desire of the teacher there may be something for little kids to do or else they will follow older kids around until they fall asleep in a corner. In some small communities the teacher may simply not allow younger children to attend at all. The needs of Indigenous children are barely if at all being met.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PRESCHOOL TEACHER)

“There’s one girl sitting there after school. She’s keen, comes every day. Three years before she’d been learning numerals one to 10. The teacher had no idea she could already do that. The visiting teacher said she couldn’t do it but they’d been doing it for years.”

(TEACHER IN REMOTE SCHOOL)

“One barrier is the number of teachers sent to Indigenous communities, often as their first teaching position, often from interstate and often with no idea of where they’re going or what they’re getting into. They often don’t stay long. Indigenous communities need our best and most experienced teachers to help boost education levels and school and preschool attendance.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, TEACHER)



A number of submissions suggested that because preschool is not a compulsory part of school, and often not available or simply held on the verandah of a school, it is not always regarded as important or understood by some families.

Lack of access to preschool for itinerant families is a significant issue in the Northern Territory. The inquiry heard from a number of teachers who commented that local communities are not always accommodating or welcoming of visitors and that often families feel reluctant to access local services.

“This lifestyle does not sit well with the current education system where it is expected that children will attend the same school for an extended length of time. Teachers in communities rarely encourage visitors to communities to send the kids to preschool or school and we have no way of tracking these families. Perhaps there could be a community-designated officer to follow up on new arrivals within a community to encourage/ensure school attendance.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

A number of issues were raised through the inquiry regarding children with special needs. Teachers reported that it is more difficult for these children to access preschool. In some instances, particularly in remote areas, programs for screening and early identification of needs such as hearing were insufficient or non-existent. A number of submissions stated that children in rural and remote areas of the Territory who are not accessing preschool will begin school with unidentified specific learning or development needs. Transport to preschool for children with special needs was also raised during the inquiry. Some children are transported by taxi but there is no transport in most rural areas.

“Children with special needs or learning disabilities often slip through the cracks of the education system.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“The caseload is too high. We’re finding more and more kids coming to school with speech problems and it takes at least 10 months in some cases to be referred.”

(TEACHER, VERBAL SUBMISSION)

“Lack of recognition by the Department, teachers and parents that early intervention is important. The dichotomy of segregation/inclusion is past its use by date. Primary teachers are often not equipped to deal with kids with high support needs. By age 6-8 years the problems are often embedded. We need to get these kids into preschool even earlier.”

(TEACHER FROM SPECIAL SCHOOL, VERBAL SUBMISSION)

There was a level of frustration expressed by some that specific programs which had been deemed valuable to local communities, such as PAT (Parents as Tutors), were not always maintained. There appeared to be dissatisfaction that some initiatives were continued and others were replaced without consultation with the key stakeholders associated with the programs.

“A teacher was seconded to provide preschool and early childhood. It worked really well, but was then suddenly dropped. Sometimes these wonderful programs that play a big part in educating children are suddenly dropped.”

(TEACHER, VERBAL SUBMISSION)

Summary

The inquiry visited a number of preschools and saw evidence of effective links for families between services, particularly where preschools are on school sites and childcare centres are co-located or nearby. It was reported that schools are often viewed as a major part of the community in urban and remote areas. Initiatives that continue to build upon links between services within local communities where schools play a significant role seem to be advantageous to families in the Territory.

A number of initiatives shared between the federal and Territory governments are attempting to strengthen these links and provide access to a range of early childhood programs. However, the inquiry heard from many parents and teachers that a lot of children did not have access to quality preschool programs, particularly Indigenous children in rural and remote parts of the Territory and children with special needs.

Australian Capital Territory

'Preschool' is the term used for children in the year before school.

Kindergarten is used as the term for the first year of school.

It is reported that the 2002–03 preschool participation rate in the year prior to school was 79.2%.

In the ACT, preschool education is within the Department of Education, Youth and Family Services. Preschool Services are in the division of Children's, Youth and Family Services, alongside Childcare, Early Intervention, and Policy and Programs. Within the same Department responsibility for schools comes under the School Education division.

Preschools are usually situated close to or on school sites. In established areas of the ACT, most preschools are 'stand-alone' models that are sometimes not as close to schools as some parents and teachers indicated they would like them to be. In newer estates, preschools are built on the school site and childcare centres are also being co-located.

The government funds preschool employee costs and maintenance of buildings and grounds. Parents and parent committees have been responsible for other costs including equipment, cleaning, and insurance. In 2004, a new government contribution to operating costs has been provided to all preschools in order to defray these costs. There is a voluntary contribution levy in ACT preschools and the rate is set by individual preschools.

A number of issues were raised throughout the visits and forum in the ACT.

Initiatives and structures that provided access to high quality preschool.

The co-location of preschool and school sites for all new areas of the ACT is promoting links between staff of schools and preschools. These sites are providing greater continuity for children and families as they move between preschool and school and providing opportunities for staff across the two sectors to develop professional links. A number of sites had childcare and preschool co-located either on or close to schools and teachers reported that this promotes greater flexibility for families requiring longer hours than the sessional preschool model.

Some sessional preschools had responded to local community needs and shifted from a sessional model to the provision of two long days. The choice of sessional or long day provides a greater range of choices for parents.

Specific roles from within the preschool division and the schools division such as the Preschool Principal and Executive Officers support preschool teachers and maintain links between the education system and children's services.

One example of these support structures is the "preschool clusters". Teachers regard these as important as they provide opportunities for staff to support each other. They provide links with schools, which have led in some cases to the initiation of particular projects shared between the preschools and schools. One example given to the inquiry is the Health and Nutrition project that commenced in 2002.

"Our cluster preschools embarked on a joint Schools as Communities Health and Nutrition project in 2002, sharing a grant with programs involving the community, a nutritionist, a dental therapist and speech therapist. We also attend meetings with the principal, preschool teachers and Schools as Community liaison officer each term, which promotes the links for us all and benefits families within our community."

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, TEACHER)



The Indigenous preschool program in ACT provides access to preschool for Indigenous students and this was raised during the inquiry as providing an important element of high quality preschool which reflects culturally appropriate programs for children and builds strong links with families. Families can also apply for early entry to a mainstream preschool for approximately five hours per week in the semester prior to the preschool year.

An initiative that was raised during the inquiry as promoting greater links for children as they move from preschool to school is the development of a curriculum from birth to 8 called Contours of Learning (Department of Education, Youth and Family Services). This is providing an important link for staff across childcare, preschool and school and provides opportunities for discussions and shared understanding about each sector.

Another government initiative in recent years is The Good Neighbourhood Links Strategy Plan, which promotes a range of links and supports for families. The inquiry noted that the government has a proactive strategic plan for linking children's services within communities as well as a strategic plan for preschools.

Issues identified as requiring further improvement or possible barriers to equity and access to preschool.

“One of the big issues I've found is a growing need for families to have access to longer preschool sessions.”

(VERBAL SUBMISSION, PRESCHOOL TEACHER)

A number of parents and teachers highlighted the importance of providing more flexible options in preschool hours. Some parents mentioned they did not wish to use childcare but would like the option of having longer session times at preschool. Some preschools now provide two long day sessions as opposed to four half-day sessions and this is viewed as appropriate by many parents.

A growing number of preschools are part-time in the ACT. This is causing concern amongst some preschool teachers. A number of submissions suggested that enabling some of the part-time preschools to introduce a full-time program would help remedy the concerns of part-time employment for staff as well as assisting parents with the provision of the longer hours they requested.

“By the time I get everyone loaded into the car, drive to the preschool, drive home again, it's almost time to come back. It doesn't really give much time for doing anything in between and it must be hard for parents who work.”

(PARENT COMMENT)

“People on farms are not going to come in to the preschool and school, drop their oldest at school, then go backwards and forwards from a few hours of preschool and then back again to collect the other one from school. The hours need to be flexible.”

(PRESCHOOL TEACHER COMMENT)

“So many have gone part-time. The jobs simply do not exist in a preschool environment. With longer hours it could bring more opportunities for full-time employment. We want worthwhile meaningful employment that is permanent and ongoing.”

(TEACHER COMMENT)

A number of teachers raised the issue of transition between preschool and school being more challenging for the stand-alone preschools. Some preschool teachers, in preschools not on school sites or in close proximity, commented on their sense of isolation from the school. Parents commented that not knowing about the local schools made it more difficult for them to select a primary school and more difficult for their children making the transition. The inquiry noted that transition programs are provided but vary between local schools and preschool programs. A number of submissions stressed the importance of close proximity between school and preschool as being an important factor in providing links for families and children.

“Close proximity and liaison helped children who had opportunities to go the primary school, become familiar with the school grounds.”

(PRESCHOOL TEACHER)

“The co-location works well. I had the opportunity to talk with the principal once a week, I was invited to staff meeting, etc. It worked because the principal was so supportive.”

(PRESCHOOL TEACHER)

A number of submissions highlighted that there are currently no Indigenous preschool teachers in the ACT and this was raised as a concern. In addition, a number of submissions stressed the importance of providing culturally appropriate programs in order to reflect and respect the children’s family and culture. Transport was also raised by a number of parents and teachers as a possible barrier to access in the ACT. This appeared to occur particularly for families who were from CALD backgrounds, recently arrived in Australia, or Indigenous families.

“The Koori preschools are not spread evenly across Canberra. Some Indigenous families are not able to access preschool sessions.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“We need quality well-trained Indigenous educators to staff Koori preschools who will promote the educational development of children through the provision of culturally appropriate programs and enhance self-esteem and reinforce the cultural heritage of all children.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“I often come in contact with people who are non-English speaking, parents in crisis, single parent, Indigenous families, and they have no transport. They cannot get to preschool because their local preschool may be full and they cannot get to the one in the next area.”

(TEACHER COMMENT)

The voluntary contribution for parents was raised in many of the discussions throughout the inquiry in the ACT. The voluntary contribution rate differs between preschools and at times appears to cause conflict and anxieties for some parents. Some parents are unable to afford the voluntary contribution and the inquiry received submissions from some teachers indicating that this often placed those families under pressure.

“There is lots of animosity in parent groups towards those that don’t pay. Working parents pay childcare fees and sometimes tend not to pay the voluntary fee as well. It affects the dynamics of parent groups as well as resources.”

(PARENT COMMITTEE MEMBER)

For children with special needs, there is access to preschool. However issues of adequate resourcing, continuity of supports and funding between sectors were raised as areas that need improvement. Some submissions indicated that a lack of adequate funding for teacher assistance or the need for specific equipment often impacted upon the quality of the experience for the child.

Summary

Parents who have children in preschool reported a high level of satisfaction with the quality of their preschool programs. Some parents and teachers raised a particular local issue of enrolment processes and families’ access to their closest preschool as a challenge. The enrolment process has recently changed to a central enrolment system and this had been confusing for some within the community. Apparent inconsistencies between the rates of the voluntary contributions and the levels to which they are enforced was also noted as a concern for some families.

Where childcare, preschools and schools were co-located, relationships and liaisons between staff seemed to work well. In some instances links for families and children between the services are actively promoted. However, it was commented upon by a number of teachers that co-location itself does not necessarily ensure a productive liaison between the preschool and the school or between the preschool and the childcare centre. Understanding each sector’s roles and a “proactive and supportive principal” were viewed as integral to the effective linking between programs.

Western Australia

Kindergarten is the term used in Western Australia for preschool education.

Pre-primary is the first year of school in Western Australia.

It is reported that the 2002–03 preschool participation rate in the year prior to school was 71.7%.

In 1995, the Western Australian government announced through its Good Start Program that it would “*place fresh emphasis on the importance of early learning in government schools and aims to guarantee that all children have access to kindergarten and pre-primary schooling*”. (WA GOVERNMENT REPORT 1995)

Since 1999, preschool programs have been within the Department of Education and moved from the Department of Family and Children’s Services to “*ensure continuity of education in single settings and ensure that the discrepancy that exists in charges will be removed*”.

(WA GOVERNMENT REPORT 1995)

The inquiry visited a range of programs including schools with preschool classes, Indigenous MACS centres, childcare centres, with preschools attached or co-located and on school sites in outer and inner metropolitan Perth. The inquiry also spoke to rural and remote preschool teachers in south, mid-west and north Western Australia through teleconference.

Initiatives and structures that provided access to high quality preschool.

A number of key initiatives contribute to a significant number of children accessing preschool in Western Australia.

In metropolitan Perth, the availability of transport to access a preschool is viewed as important and necessary. A number of communities have established transport programs, or ‘bus run pick up’ around certain zones or areas. Parents who utilise this service described the importance of the bus for children’s access to the preschool program. Particular Indigenous centres operate a bus pick up and reported that this had significantly increased access for Indigenous children.

“At our school the children are provided with a bus service to travel to and from school to enable parents easier access as our school facilitates such a wide catchment area. We feel this is appropriate not only to our school but to other schools whether they be in the metropolitan area or in the country, so that all parents have the same opportunities to access preschool.”

(VERBAL SUBMISSION, TEACHER)

Preschool and pre-primary are within the Education Department and co-located. This provides a number of benefits for children and families. Children and teachers in preschool and pre-primary are able to work together and share some learning experiences. Teachers reported that they knew each child as they moved from preschool into the pre-primary class and this helps with transition. Shared curriculum between preschool and pre-primary promotes continuity of children’s learning across the early years of school. The K–3 curriculum provides shared learning outcomes and objectives for children across this age range and links between children and teachers are strengthened by this approach. Relationships between parents and staff continue beyond the preschool year. Staff from preschool and pre-primary often share common professional development and are able to access the same

support structures. Staff working in preschool and pre-primary who talked to the inquiry all commented on these positive relationships and structures and believe the quality of the preschool program is enhanced by these links

One example of a school visited during the inquiry is where the preschool and pre-primary classes are next to each other in the same building and often share excursions, visitors and special events. In another school, the preschool is on the school site and children from the school visit the preschool, and at times during the year, share the play area. Another school visited is in a low socioeconomic school area of Perth with Indigenous and non-Indigenous children as well as recently arrived families to Australia. The school has recently established a parent resource room. In discussion with parents, they highlighted the convenience of having preschool on the same site as the school. *“We just wouldn’t be able to take our kids to preschool and school. It’s through word of mouth that we know that the preschool is here at the school.”* (PARENT DISCUSSION)

There are no fees for preschool. Parents commented that this is a significant factor in children being able to access their preschool. A voluntary contribution is charged, as it is for the children in pre-primary and the rest of the school.

Many parents mentioned the importance of having flexibility in the hours of the preschool program. One group of parents mentioned the importance of having the ability to access two full day programs and others appeared happy with the sessional model.



Issues identified as requiring further improvement or possible barriers to equity and access to preschool.

“Early childhood education is where the key is. If we get it right early on then the system will function better later on. We have attempted to address many of the above issues locally, however resources and support are thin on the ground, often it means the K/PP teacher giving a great deal of goodwill.”

(PRINCIPAL OF SEMI-ISOLATED RURAL SCHOOL)

One of the major issues raised during the inquiry, particularly in rural and remote areas of Western Australia, was access to transport. It was reported that when buses are unavailable children are not able to access the preschool program. In some areas, weather conditions such as flooded roads also prevented children from being able to access preschool.

In some remote areas there are staffing shortages. It was reported that there is a high staff turnover in some remote areas, which can impact upon the quality or accessibility of preschool.

A lack of appropriate buildings and/or space for preschool children within a school site was raised in a number of verbal and written submissions, particularly in remote areas. In some metropolitan areas the use of ‘transportables’ for preschool reportedly does not provide adequate play and indoor space for children. A number of submissions discussed the importance of having specific space and building requirements indoor and outdoor for the preschool program and felt that this was an area that could be improved and that impacted upon the quality of the preschool.

“Most of the transportable buildings erected over the past 10 years have had verandahs added by parent committees, fundraising for playgrounds, shades erected.”

(TEACHER)

Some teachers suggested there is a need to raise awareness of the importance of preschool education in some rural and remote areas and that local community groups and schools have a role to play.

There is a lack of adequate support programs and links with other services in remote areas. These include occupational health, speech and hearing, general nurse and dental checks. It was felt that greater links between government initiatives is important in providing access to a range of services for each child and assisting families to understand the importance of preschool.

A number of verbal submissions suggested increasing coordination between services such as the departments of Health and Education. This would enable children's health records to be transferred from one program to another.

In discussion with teachers funding and supports for children with special needs were raised. Teachers indicated that whilst inclusion was an important part of the preschool program, there is not enough funding to provide the range of supports or teacher aide assistance that may be required. A number of submissions also raised these issues and a number of parents sent written submissions from remote areas describing the difficulties of access, transport and adequate funding for their child with a special need.

“Allowance for an education assistant relies upon a variety of differing factors depending upon the district level allocation and school level allocation for children with special needs. There is a lot of inequity throughout the system for allocation.”

(TEACHER SUBMISSION)

“For some families in our low socioeconomic area, many of the children that miss out are those that truly need to be given every opportunity to experience the richness of early childhood education.”

(PRESCHOOL TEACHER)

At the beginning of 2004, a new enrolment process was introduced and it was reported to the inquiry that this had left some children without access to their closest preschool. Whilst this appeared to affect accessibility, it was reported that these issues had been acknowledged and worked out early in the year.

Summary

Parents and teachers in metropolitan Perth report a high level of satisfaction with preschool. In rural and remote areas of Western Australia, transport, buildings and difficulty to recruit and retain appropriate staff were raised as significant factors impacting upon access to high quality preschool.

The majority of preschools are on school sites and this has resulted in smooth transition for children as they move between preschool and pre-primary. Continuity of curriculum, K-3 and shared knowledge of children contribute to high quality preschool programs. This was attributed in part to preschool and pre-primary being part of the one government Department of Education. Specific issues of increased funding for children with special needs and an increase in transport for children to get to preschool were also identified as significant elements that would improve access.



New South Wales

In NSW preschool is the term used for the year before school.

Kindergarten is the term used for the first year of school.

It is reported that the 2002–03 preschool participation rate in the year prior to school was 61.9%.

The Department of Community Services (DOCS) has responsibility for the vast majority of preschools in NSW. By the end of 2004 there will be approximately 100 preschools within the Department of Education and these preschools are attached to government school sites. Significant differences exist between these two preschool programs.

In DOCS preschools, parents must pay a fee on average of about \$60.00 per week. In DET preschools, no fees are charged although some preschools have a voluntary contribution.

The inquiry received a number of submissions and held discussions with many teachers and parents. Issues of inequity, costs and the complexity of the various preschool systems in NSW were raised. The submissions received by the inquiry reflected considerable dissatisfaction with preschool education across the state of NSW.

“The current situation is NSW for preschool education is bleak.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“Neglect of state funded children’s services over the past 10 years means that many families and their children now cannot afford to access a preschool place and that the children who are missing out are, on the whole, the children who would benefit most from early childhood education. We would argue that the most significant problem facing children services in NSW is the failure of the government. There is neither consistency nor fairness in the funding arrangements of preschools, and families across NSW face variable fee rates depending on the historical level of funding received by the service with the variable levels of operational costs related to location and staffing”.

(NSW CHILDREN’S SERVICES FORUM 2002)

Initiatives and structures that provide access to high quality preschool.

I saw examples of programs where links between the preschool and school are strong and where there is an acknowledgment of the importance of access to free preschool at the schools that the inquiry visited. These included preschools on site in low socioeconomic areas of outer urban Sydney. These preschools provide an important part of the children’s education and reflected flexibility in their delivery models. Some children attend for full days and others for half-day sessions. Parents reported in their discussions that they were happy to have the choice.

In discussion with a principal at one of these schools, it was acknowledged that without free access to preschool the majority of children would not be able to attend the program. Important links are being formed between the preschool and school, and this encourages stronger relationships with the families of the preschool children. A parent reported how she would not have been able to afford to send her child to preschool without access at the local school. In fact she travelled out of her own area to access the preschool for her child.

“I actually drive here so we can go to this preschool. I can’t afford the fees at the other one and because I work, the longer hours suit me. I love it that when he’s finished here he can just go straight onto school. Everyone already knows him and I know the teachers at the school.”

(PARENT DISCUSSION AND WRITTEN SUBMISSION)



The inquiry also visited a childcare centre where a qualified preschool teacher was employed. This was a high quality program and provided strong links and supports for families and children as they moved through the centre. However, fees were charged and even with a subsidy for families who qualified, access to preschool is costly.

A number of preschools provide flexibility of hours in order to accommodate specific local community requirements.

A number of submissions stressed the need for all children's services in NSW to be within the one government department. Issues such as being able to provide higher levels of consistency between the services, build greater links and promote equity in the provision of access for children to preschool were raised as being more likely within the one government department and would significantly reduce the current levels of fragmentation.

“One way of enabling greater equity in NSW would be to link all early childhood services under one state government department namely the Department of Education.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

Issues identified as requiring further improvement or possible barriers to equity and access to preschool.

“There is no equity in providing access to preschool education in NSW.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“The major barriers that prevent children from accessing high quality preschool in NSW are shortage of places and cost.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, COMMUNITY CHILDCARE COOPERATIVE)

Costs to access preschool across NSW were identified in all submissions as the major barrier to access of high quality preschool. Inadequate state funding for building maintenance and associated costs was raised in many submissions and this is lowering the quality of preschool environments. Many examples given to the inquiry cited the need for a significant increase in fees to cover basic building and general maintenance costs as well as for equipment and materials.

“In NSW preschool education in fact is not free. We have watched the steady increase of fees over the last few years and believe it is now out of the reach of many families. For instance in our area, fees for a day at preschool go as high as \$40. This certainly makes it inaccessible to many families.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PRESCHOOL CLUSTER GROUP)

“NSW has the greatest number of children per capita in Australia but only a small number of children are able to access free preschool. The Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services 2004, indicates NSW has the lowest rates in Australia of attendance at government funded preschool, approximately 61.9%.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“Equity of access is a central issue. All of these families are living in poverty, often with no breadwinner in the home for months on end. The high cost of preschool education means it is never an option for such communities.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PRESCHOOL TEACHER)

Another issue is that access to preschool for children with special needs is not equitable across NSW. It appears that differences exist in access to and amounts of funding between DOCS preschools and DET preschools, which directly impact upon resources and supports for children with special needs. Other differences include procedures for referral and criteria for funding children with special needs. As well as significant differences between the DOCS and DET preschools, submissions indicated that significant differences exist between DET preschools and the rest of the school in relation to referral procedures and supports for children as they move from the preschool into the kindergarten year.

One parent stated;

“I just wanted some opportunity for my child to attend preschool like every other child. Just trying to work through the paperwork and then realising that it’s different depending on which preschool they are in. Then it changed all over again as she moved into school and that was a nightmare.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PARENT.)

“We need to ensure that those students with disabilities who are enrolled in DET preschools receive equitable funding, as for students in K-6 settings and those students who attend community based preschools.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, NSW PRIMARY PRINCIPALS ASSOCIATION)

“The existence of the three distinct service types has also resulted in competition between the service types. Families sometimes have to choose the service type they can afford, rather than the one they would prefer.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, CCCC)



A recurring theme during the inquiry in NSW was the fragmented approach to preschool in NSW. There are different systems across long day care centres, DOCS and DET preschools, resulting in greater levels of inequity.

As one parent wrote:

“Why should we have to pay out so much money or try to get into a school where they have a free preschool? How do we know which is better and what is what. It’s a disgrace.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PARENT)

An inadequate number of places available in preschool was recorded in a number of submissions as a barrier to accessing preschool. It appeared that regardless of whether the preschool was in long day care or community based, a significant number of children are not able to access preschool because there are not enough places.

“In some parts of NSW, especially metropolitan areas, demand for preschool places outstrips the available supply. This is true of all components of the preschool system, from long day care centres to community based preschools.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

The inquiry heard from a number of teachers and community groups that children of CALD backgrounds make up a high percentage of children not accessing preschool. The reasons why these children are not accessing preschool are complex and include location, management and funding responsibilities but most significantly, the cost of preschool.

“Some children never attend preschool. Most are born to families with very little English and without knowledge of preschool or how to access it. For those families who do know about preschool in most cases they cannot afford it.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, TEACHER)

“Children with additional needs are identified as a group who do not have ready access to a quality preschool of their choice. Often these families are paying out for other therapies and services for their child and whilst they are told and they believe that a mainstream setting is beneficial for their child, it is often difficult to get their child into the service or to afford the ever increasing fees along with other expenses that they incur.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PRESCHOOL)

The inquiry received submissions concerning the issue of non-qualified early childhood staff within some preschool programs. Regulations state that a teacher with an early childhood degree must work within a preschool program, but this does not apply for groups of 29 or under. This means that large groups of 30 are the only preschool programs that must have an early childhood qualified teacher.

Summary

There are significant and disturbing issues related to the ability of children in NSW to access high quality preschools. A number of recent reports within the state have highlighted these issues. A lack of appropriate funding from the state government is seen as a significant reason for the increase in fees and the inability for many children to access preschool. A system with two different preschool models operating under two different government departments results in significant differences in equity of access.

Children from lower socioeconomic groups, Indigenous children and CALD children are the groups with the highest levels of inequity of access to a preschool program.

Preschool and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

At the current time Indigenous children in Australia do not have equity of access to quality preschool education. It is most disturbing that in a society that prides itself on 'giving everyone a fair go' such inequities continue to exist.

In 1964 a report titled *An investigation into the curriculum and teaching methods used in Aboriginal schools in the Northern Territory* was released.
(GALLACHER 1964)

Despite the fact that we are living in a different world to 40 years ago and that many factors in education have changed since that report, it is interesting to read some of the recommendations that were made at the time. Submissions to this inquiry raised many similar issues to those of 1964.

Recommendations from 1964 Report

Recommendation 90

“That consideration be given to the establishment and support of parent teacher committees and communication to support families.”

Recommendation 93

“That preschools be established as soon as possible on all settlements and missions.

That action research programs be instigated in Aboriginal preschools with a view to evolving programs appropriate to the needs of Aboriginal preschool children.

That every endeavour be made to erect suitable buildings, which can be equipped and furnished to meet the specific needs of preschool children.

Given the difficulties in recruiting and attracting preschool teachers, suitable teachers be appointed to these positions but that there be continuing efforts to recruit specifically trained and experienced preschool teachers.”

(GALLACHER 1964)

Many hundreds of reports, recommendations and discussions have taken place over the past 50 plus years about the needs and rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

A number of initiatives are currently being implemented across the country and the inquiry witnessed a range of quality programs for Indigenous children and families.

However, the inquiry was struck by the level of fragmentation of programs for Indigenous children and the number of factors that continue to act as barriers to Indigenous children in accessing high quality preschool. The inquiry also noted that Indigenous children are still the most likely to be unable to access a high quality preschool education in Australia.

This inquiry received many submissions regarding access to preschool for Indigenous children across Australia. One of the major issues raised in discussions with Indigenous groups and included in written submissions is the issue of “cultural relevance” for Indigenous families and children.

As one submission stated:

“We continue to believe that a ‘white values system’ preschool is the norm, and we all have to fit into that model. That in itself will continue to be a significant barrier to children accessing high quality preschool.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

A number of key initiatives and reports in recent years have raised the issues related to cultural relevance and the importance of local members of the community being involved in preschool. The inquiry witnessed a number of MACS childcare and preschool centres that provided high quality programs which did reflect cultural relevance and the employment of Indigenous staff. Parents and teachers in these programs stressed the significance and importance of having access to a preschool that reflected the local community’s values and experiences and was inclusive of all families. In relation to issues of cultural relevance and understandings, a number of associated issues were identified as barriers to access.

A review undertaken by VAEI noted:

“Centres themselves often are not culturally sensitive to the needs of the Indigenous community, some parents have felt unwelcome from their first steps in the door of the service, lack of cross cultural communication, children are affected by racist remarks of some teachers, and the programs themselves are very often not culturally appropriate, some teachers have made dismissive comments about dreamtime stories.”

(VAEI REPORT)

The Aboriginal Best Start Status Report Victoria noted:

“Generally, Aboriginal parents want their children to attend some form of early education and care because of its recognised value in giving children a good start in primary school. However, Aboriginal 4 year olds in Victoria are less likely than non-Aboriginal 4 year olds to attend preschool. Aboriginal parents perceive many of the services as culturally insensitive. An additional factor for parents highlighted is the cost of preschool.”

(BEST START 2004)

Another issue that was raised in relation to cultural barriers is that of the structure, times and models of preschools. A number of submissions stated that traditional type models of preschool did not necessarily accommodate the specific needs of local Indigenous communities. Expectations of particular times and structures within the models were listed as a barrier to access. In some cases parents often felt ashamed or simply ‘not used to’ certain expectations which often resulted in withdrawing their child as they “didn’t feel the program suited the child or family needs”

(TEACHER, WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“Session times are sometimes not appropriate, others have to be on the road the whole day, going to and from the service. Preschools are generally too structured and teachers do not realise that some Koori children are confronted by the rigid attitude to time for the first time at preschool.”

(WRITTEN REPORT)

In relation to cultural relevance a number of submissions raised the importance of pre-service teacher education ensuring that aspects of diversity, and in particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies be a mandatory aspect of study embedded within degrees of early childhood and primary education.

Some submissions and reports highlighted the importance of cultural diversity and sensitivity and stress the need for additional supports and professional development opportunities for all teachers working in preschool and most especially for those preschool teachers who work within Indigenous communities.

“Strategies must be developed to ensure that all workers in early childhood education are appropriately qualified for the roles and tasks that are performed in the settings in which early childhood education is provided.

This includes both pre-service training and access to professional development. Immediate priorities include:

Ensuring that pre-service teacher education programs include significant and mandatory units in the areas of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Providing professional development in the areas of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies.”

(AEU SUBMISSION)

Specific barriers to access for children and families in rural and remote areas of Australia were raised in a number of submissions. Geographic isolation in some remote areas and a lack of preschool qualified teachers continue to be significant barriers.

“The mobile playgroup services half a million square kilometres of rural and remote Northern Territory. I do not believe or see that all children have access to high quality early childhood education. Most smaller Aboriginal communities have no formal preschool service and often 3 and 4 years olds attend school with older siblings.” (WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

The difficulties in the recruitment and retention of qualified preschool staff were also identified as barriers, particularly in remote areas. The recruitment of new graduates often with little or no experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and inadequate or no facilities for the preschool, were cited as examples of barriers to access of quality preschool. The importance of continuity of staff for children and families was also highlighted in the submissions.

“Indigenous people are well aware of the constant and continuous turnover within services in their communities.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“We need purpose built preschools or at least a specific room for preschool children rather than them having to just sit out on the verandah. We need a community place for these children so their parents and aunties and members of the community can feel part of the whole deal.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, SCHOOL PRINCIPAL, WA)

“We have great trouble recruiting appropriately qualified and experienced preschool teachers. Often teachers from other states come out here thinking it will be an adventure. They soon realise it’s a nightmare and don’t stay that long.”

(VERBAL SUBMISSION, TEACHER, NT)

An example provided to the inquiry of one service attempting to provide quality preschool experiences and to overcome some of the isolation problems is a program that has been running for over 15 years in isolated areas of the Northern Territory. It is a mobile service that caters for children from birth to 5 years and the team travels 500,000 square kilometres providing playgroups for children. Its success is based upon a consistent field staff team that are known and trusted by local communities; and because it is mobile, children and families moving between communities still have access to a program regardless of where they may be living. (WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

Many submissions and discussions indicated the importance of services and programs being linked together within communities. This was reflected in rural, remote and urban communities. Some of the most successful programs seen by the inquiry that were offering high quality preschool were those where links between services were established and accessible to the Indigenous community. These links were strongest where Indigenous community members were an integral part of the programs. Throughout the inquiry, parents and teachers commented on how important is to have Indigenous staff working, coordinating and participating in the programs.

The inquiry was provided with information about a new initiative in the Northern Territory currently underway where a ‘whole of government approach’ is working with local Indigenous communities to identify and establish services and models that suit each local community. This is a joint Territory and Commonwealth government initiative and is aiming to promote local community decision making and participation regarding a range of children and family programs.

“We need our own people teaching our preschoolers and we need others who do to be culturally aware and respectful. We also don’t need to be patronised but we do expect that services provided actually link together and don’t have us going from one place to another looking like fools.”

(PARENT, WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

Lack of transport to preschool was another major issue highlighted as a barrier across the country for Indigenous children. In rural, remote and metropolitan areas there were significantly higher numbers of children accessing preschool where transport was provided. The inquiry visited a number of programs where a bus would pick up children from their homes and take them home, which both enabled access and provided a connection between the program and the child’s home. It was noted that many children did not have access to transport and many teachers and parents viewed this as a major reason for low access to preschool in some areas.

Summary

The major issues relating to barriers to access to high quality preschool for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children raised in this inquiry are:

- In many rural and remote areas of Australia, access to preschool programs is minimal or non-existent.
- In many preschool programs with Indigenous children, staff are often short-term and inexperienced teachers, often ill-prepared for isolated communities and under-supported.
- Staff may not have preschool qualifications. Often in one-teacher schools, the teacher is unlikely to have an early childhood qualification.
- Programs may not reflect culturally relevant curriculum.
- Insufficient numbers of Indigenous staff are working in Indigenous communities.
- Many one-teacher schools have inadequate or inappropriate space, resources and equipment to provide a quality preschool program.
- Funding and resources to remote and rural preschool programs are insufficient and result in children in remote areas of Australia attending as little as one preschool session per term or none.
- Providing transport to a preschool program in rural and metropolitan areas is often an imperative to access. This inquiry was given data to show that double the numbers of children accessed a preschool program when transport was provided.

“Statistical evidence from DEST shows no real increase in the participation of Indigenous children in preschooling over the last 10–12 years. Previously ways to address access have been to provide buses as transportation and the employment of Indigenous staff (more likely to be Aboriginal assistants) and to encourage parents in decision-making forums. The cost of fees is an issue for some families, fees for equipment, excursion, etc.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“Historically, preschool education is a ‘white’ construct. Programs have often been very assimilationist in nature and intent.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

The inquiry found evidence of the success of a number of early childhood programs, both childcare and preschool programs for Indigenous children. These successful programs were characterised by a number of common factors.

- Staffed predominantly by Indigenous staff from the local community.
- Managed by Indigenous organisations and community members.
- Transport (buses) provided for access.
- Parent and local community members welcomed and encouraged to participate in the program.
- Appropriate and adequate resources and supports for families.
- Strong links between childcare, preschool and school.
- Strong links between associated health and education programs.
- Culturally appropriate curriculum.
- Flexibility in hours of attendance.

It was pleasing to witness a number of successful high quality preschool education programs within Indigenous communities. However, it is alarming to note that fewer Indigenous children in comparison to any other group in the population have access to a quality preschool program

This inquiry acknowledges that Commonwealth, state and territory governments and non-government organisations are providing a range of initiatives that attempt to promote and provide equal access to education for Indigenous children. It also acknowledges the work that Indigenous Australians and organisations are doing in order to promote equity of access to preschool for all Indigenous children. However, specific factors continue to act as barriers to access of preschool for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. These barriers reflect the lack of a coordinated approach across the country to the provision of equity of access to preschool. A number of recurring themes and issues have been identified as significant for Indigenous children for more than over half a century.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have a right to access high quality preschool education. Despite the range of initiatives witnessed during the inquiry, the fact that Indigenous children have the lowest levels of access to preschool reflects that Australia continues to lack a comprehensive vision for preschool education.

The inquiry found significant levels of fragmentation across the country exist for Indigenous children in relation to access to preschool. Funding, resources, appropriate buildings, flexibility in the range of delivery modes and models, experienced staff, culturally appropriate programs, and transport are not new issues in relation to Indigenous education. A significant change is urgently required in the provision of appropriate resourcing and a coordinated approach between Commonwealth, state and territory governments to ensure the right of all Indigenous children to access high quality preschool education in Australia.

As one submission stated:

“Of course it is more costly to fund and staff programs in rural and remote areas of the country. However, that is one of the realities of this huge country of ours. We are diverse, we are spread out and it shouldn’t matter where you live and who you are. Every child has a right to a good start and a right to a free preschool education. Governments just need to acknowledge that the right to an education is the most empowering and important thing a government can provide to anyone and if it costs a lot, so be it! We have to stop this nonsense of balancing budgets, and just get on with providing equal access to education for everyone.”

(VERBAL SUBMISSION, FORUM)



Preschool and children with special needs

The principle of inclusion, which provides the opportunity for all children to participate in education within their local community, is a significant and positive initiative of each state and territory in Australia. It provides opportunities for families and children to access a local preschool if that is their wish.

“An inclusive preschool is one that educates all students in the mainstream. It means that all students are provided with appropriate educational opportunities that are geared to their capabilities and needs; they are likewise provided with any support and assistance they or their teacher may need to be successful. An inclusive preschool also goes beyond this. It is a place where everyone belongs, is accepted.”

(SOUTH AUSTRALIAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION 1999)

In written submissions, discussions and at the public forums, across the country issues relating to access to preschool for children with special needs was one of the major issues highlighted. It appears there is a significant gap between the theoretical principles of inclusion and the realities for children and teachers in preschools in Australia. Systems, procedures and funds do exist in each state and territory to support access for children with special needs, but across the country, complex systems and lack of adequate funding and resources were reported to the inquiry. Links between government departments for children with special needs appear to be minimal.

“Children with special needs have less equity of access than many other groups. There are few places and often, long waiting lists. Some are offered places without teacher assistants, some are included into a program with 30 children and often do not have quality experiences. Often these families must work their way through a quagmire of paperwork, different government departments, a range of processes and maybe if they’re lucky, get access. That may take considerable months. Then, as they move from preschool into school, the whole rigmarole for families starts again.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PARENT OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILD AND TEACHER)

The inquiry received many examples of inequity for children with special needs who are trying to access high quality preschool across the country. There is little or no recognition that group sizes for preschool programs may need to be adjusted depending on the number and needs of children with special needs.

“It is very difficult in my situation. I have 27 children in my 4 year old group. Three with challenging behaviours, two with ‘high functioning’ autism, one in a wheelchair and I receive no additional supports. The assistant and I feel like crowd controllers rather than professionals offering a quality program.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, TEACHER, VICTORIA)

The inquiry received many letters from parents expressing concern that their children with special needs did not attend a full-time preschool program. Funding for additional supports for the child were only provided for half of the time. In some instances, teachers and parents were caught in a juggling act, trying to decide if the child would attend full-time for half a year, or part-time for a full year.

Some teachers are attempting to use local charities to supplement funding and others are undertaking additional fundraising in order to provide teacher aide time or specific programs such as occupational health workers.

“We want our young daughter to have a preschool experience just like every other little girl and boy. We have been shoved from one government department to another, we have filled in endless forms, we have spoken with six different support organisations and five different bureaucrats. We have been trying to get some funding for a teacher assistant even for one day a week and keep being told she doesn’t quite meet the criteria and seems to fall through the gaps. Meanwhile the preschool teacher and assistant soldier on with another 25 children in the same group. We don’t know whether to feel grateful or guilty that our little girl is there.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, PARENTS, NSW)

A number of submissions noted that some parents were opting to send their child with special needs to school instead of preschool, because funding within the school system was more accessible.

“Despite the increase in the number of children with additional needs attending preschool and an increase in the complexity of their needs, there remains a dearth of resources to support and assist preschool teachers in their work with these children and their families. Access to speech pathologists, occupational therapists, audiologists, psychologists, etc. through the public health system present lengthy delays.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, AEU VICTORIA)

A number of submissions raised the fact that in rural and remote areas, access to preschool and associated supports is difficult and at times impossible. Access to referrals, screening and follow up assessment and supports for some appeared to be lengthy, complex and in some cases non-existent.

“In rural and remote areas, there is a lack of early intervention programs for children with special needs and young children in particular. Families with young children in isolated areas have to travel long distances to access services for children with special needs.”

(REPORT: SOUTH AUSTRALIAN PRIMARY PRINCIPALS ASSOCIATION 2003)

“Many children would benefit from additional support in an inclusive program but under current guidelines they do not qualify if they are mobile. Preschool teachers are struggling to provide support and an educational program for these children without adequate support.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, TEACHER, NSW)

A range of factors were consistently raised throughout this inquiry and to varying degrees reflected in all states and territories.

- Complexity and inconsistency in processes and procedures to apply for funding.
- Differences in criteria and tightening of criteria for eligibility to funds.
- Large group sizes despite the number of special needs children within a program.
- Difficulty in accessing referral information and support.
- In some areas of Australia, complete inability to access related health, screening or allied health supports.
- Lack of understanding of the diversity and complexity of children with special needs.

As one submission noted:

“Access to a quality preschool experience for children with special needs should not depend upon the endurance level of parents or teachers in attempting to access appropriate supports and funds.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

A national system that sets consistent and clear guidelines and processes for all preschool children and contributes to the funding of these children is urgently required.

Conclusion

“Perhaps the greatest barrier that prevents all children from accessing free high quality preschool in Australia is the lack of commitment at the national level.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

This inquiry found that there is no universal provision of accessible and equitable preschool education in Australia.

The inquiry was struck by the frequency and pattern of issues across the country particularly in regard to children with special needs, children of CALD backgrounds, Indigenous children, children living in poverty, and children living in some rural and remote areas of Australia. There are significant differences in access to high quality preschool programs for these children.

The fragmentation and differences across the country regarding terminology, costs and organisational and departmental structures cause confusion for parents and teachers and result in inequity.

The inquiry notes that childcare, including a range of other early childhood and family programs, the tertiary, primary and secondary education sectors all receive some federal funding. Yet the Commonwealth government provides no dedicated funding for preschool education except for support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education programs.

There has also been a significant reduction in funding to preschool at the federal level. It is disturbing to note that the OECD report in 2001 places Australia's expenditure of GDP towards preschool education as 26th of 28 countries.

“Compared to the OECD average expenditure of 0.4% of GDP, Australia spends 0.1%. As a relatively wealthy country, Australia is one of the four lowest spending of 36 countries on preschool education for children aged 3 years and older.” (OECD 2003)

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, AEU)

Submissions and discussions with a range of stakeholders from all states and territories during the inquiry emphasised the importance and urgency of a Commonwealth commitment to preschool education

“We need a shared vision and shared resources between the Commonwealth and states or else preschool will continue to crumble. It is already in danger of becoming more lost than it already is and it is totally unacceptable that many of our children who most need and could benefit from preschool are missing out.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“Governments should provide free preschool education, accessible to all eligible children in Australia irrespective of their location or background. ACSSO proposes that MCEETYA in conjunction with the National Agenda for Early Childhood and other key stakeholders, develop a nation plan for preschool education, including national goals, standards and a policy framework to ensure universal access to a high quality, free, public preschool education within an overall framework of public education.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION, ACSSO)

To ensure universal access to high quality preschool education across the country, regardless of where a child lives, from which socioeconomic group, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, with special needs or not, a federal approach to preschool education is urgently needed in Australia.

It is interesting to note the Economic Planning and Advisory Commission stated in 1996:

“Under the auspices of COAG, the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments should develop a nationally uniform system of funding preschool programs for children in the year prior to school entry.” (EPAC 1996)

A system is needed where all early childhood services including preschool are valued, acknowledged, funded and supported at a federal level.

The need for federal intervention is urgent because:

- Children across the country have a right to access a preschool program that is equitable, of high quality, which reflects similar outcomes and provides a consistent framework; currently significant groups within the community do not have equitable access.
- In Victoria and NSW fees are considerable.

- In some states, the significant increase in group sizes is affecting the quality of programs. Many preschool teachers reported high levels of stress and burn out.
- Preschool is an integral part of education in Australia and is in danger of becoming lost when discussions at a federal level tend to use the generic term 'early childhood'.

“I believe that because quality education is the building block for the Australian populace, the federal government should take responsibility for national consistency of education, and this includes preschool.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

“It appears to me that funding is the overriding concern, and to alleviate a lot of problems it would have to be Commonwealth funding, as most states are cash strapped already.”

(RELIEF TEACHER FOR REMOTE WA AND EXPERIENCED TEACHER FOR 30 YEARS)

Debates in some states continue to focus on the differences between care and education, or attempt to define which is the more important, long day care or preschool. These debates inhibit the major issues of access and equity being addressed.

A coordinated approach to the early years, which includes preschool, school and childcare within the same government department, appears to provide the most effective way of meeting the needs of children and their families. The inquiry found this coordinated approach in the Tasmanian, ACT and SA models.

A strong conclusion of this inquiry is that formal structures and systems that link childcare, preschool and school together within the same government department of education is the most desirable.

“Preschool education is a vital part of the education continuum and national policy frameworks and structures should be framed within an overall perspective on early childhood education. The importance of the links between the provision of preschool and school cannot be overstated.”

(WRITTEN SUBMISSION)

Summary

From a national perspective, this inquiry concludes 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/teacher ratios, curriculum, costs and 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, states and territories.

As noted in many submissions and discussions, the Commonwealth must acknowledge that preschool should be a shared responsibility of the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. Without this, levels of inequity and fragmentation in the provision of preschool will continue. Many children, particularly the most vulnerable children in the community, will continue to have less access to high quality preschool.

This inquiry believes that a national body, such as MCEETYA and DEST, should begin immediately to develop a coordinated approach to preschool in Australia. This must include the development of a national vision and commitment to preschool education as well as dedicated funding from the Commonwealth to preschool education.



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Appendix 1

Terms of reference

Independent inquiry into the provision of universal access to high quality preschool education

The inquiry will seek to ascertain and report on the views of early childhood education stakeholders in relation to the following issues:

1. The degree to which Australia is successful in ensuring that all children in Australia have equitable access to a high quality free preschool education.
2. The current barriers that prevent all children from accessing preschool education and the challenges that need to be addressed.
3. The roles that the Commonwealth and state/territory governments should play in ensuring universal access to preschool education.
4. Initiatives that would guarantee that all children have access to a high quality preschool education.
5. Strategies and arrangements that would strengthen the links between preschool education, early childhood education in schools and other early childhood services.



Preschool Education Inquiry

Appendix 2

Written submissions

AEU Victorian Branch	Early Childhood Australia	NSW Children's Services Forum
Alfred Nuttall Kindergarten	Early Childhood Education Council of NSW	New South Wales Primary Principals Association
Alice Springs AECA Inc	Edward Street Pre-School	Pat Plozza and Helen Fowler
Alison Elliott Professor	Elizabeth Millington	Patricia Richards
Anne Armstrong	Felicity de Plater	Rose Brades
Australian Council of State School Organisations	Fenwick Street Kindergarten	Russell Court Kindergarten Committee of Management
Australian Education Union	FKA Children's Services	SA Lady Gowrie Child Centre
Averil Piers Blundell	Geelong Kindergarten Association	South Australian Association School Parents Clubs (SAASPC)
Ballarat & District Kindergarten Teachers Association	Gillian Styles	South Australian Primary Principals Association
Balnarring Pre-School	Helly Avard, Rowellyn Pre-School	St George Community Based Pre-schools
Brandon Park Pre-School	Jenni Connor	St Peter's Pre-School
Brisbane Kindergarten Teachers College Graduates & Friends Association Inc	Jenny Branch	Susan Dockett and Bob Perry, Starting School Research Project, University of Western Sydney
Bruce Fraser	Jenny Mayo	Susan McKinnon
Catie Morris	Karen Anderson	Trish Dell'Oro
Cherbourg State Preschool	Karen Martin	Vanessa Witton
Commission for Children and Young People	Karen Watson	Victorian Children's Services Association Inc
Community Child Care	Kath Robb	
Community Child Care Co-operative Ltd (NSW)	Sharon O'Brien	
Coinda Preschool	Katherine Isolated Children's Service (KICS)	
Country Children's Services Association of NSW Inc	Ken Van der Heyde	
Diane O'Dwyer	Lesleigh McCloy	
	MacKillop Family Services	
	Margot Prior Professor	
	Melissa Timms and Cathy Dagostino	
	Melodie Bat	
	Mildura West Kindergarten	
	Municipal Association of Victoria	

Appendix 3

Consultations

Attendees at national forum

Alison Elliott Prof.

ACER

Amanda Rothwell

Dept of Human Services
(Victoria)

Anne Roantree

Principal Preschool Services
ACT Dept of Education,
Youth & Family

Brenda Tkalkevic

ACTU

Brian Newman

CEIEC, University of Melbourne

Bronwyn Goodman

AEU SA Branch EC Rep

Carolyn Ho (for **Shane Williams**)

Indigenous & Transitions Group
Dept of Education Training &
Science Canberra ACT

Cathy Smith

Early Childhood Representative,
AEU ACT Branch

Collette Tayler Prof.

Head of School, School of Early
Childhood, QUT

David Kelly

SSTUWA

Dawn Osman

NZEI

Dr Race Matthews

Senior Research Fellow,
Faculty of Business &
Economics, Monash University

Edmund Misson

Executive Officer to Premier's
Children's Advisory Group

Eileen Newmarch

Dir. Early Childhood Ed Sect.
Dept of Ed Science & Training
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Eraine Johnston

Early Childhood Representative,
AEU Tasmanian Branch

George Nutton

NT Dept of Education

Gerry Mulhearn

Learning Futures,
Early Years Dept of Education &
Children's Serv. SA

Heather Lawrence

Equity & Innovation Dept,
Melbourne University

Helen Cooney

Children's Adviser to Senator
Jacinta Collins

Howard Spreadbury

Early Childhood Representative,
AEU, SA Branch

Helen Hazard

NT University
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Jan Duffie

Principal Research Fellow,
Australian Institute of Family
Studies, Victoria

Janet Edmondson

Early Childhood Representative
SSTUWA

Jenni Connor

Principal Project Officer,
DET Tasmanis

Jenny Newcombe

for Michael Kane
DEST Victoria

Joan Brown

ACOSS

John Ainley

Deputy Dir.
ACER, Victoria

Judy Bundy

President, ACSSO - South Australia

Karen Martin

Project Manager
NIELNS, QLD

Ken Davies

NT Dept of Education

Kevin Fell

Laura Eiszele

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North Lindisfarne Primary School
TAS

Leah Mertens

Early Childhood Representative,
QTU

Linda Frow

NSW Council of Social Services

Lyn Fasoli

Northern Territory University

Margaret Reynolds

Prof. UNNA, Tasmania

Marilyn Fleer

Monash University, Victoria

Michaela Kronemann

Federal Research Officer,
Australian Education Union

Pam Cahir for Judy Radich

Early Childhood Australia, Victoria

Prof Margot Prior Prof

Consultant University of
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Richard Lawson
Aust Dept of Family &
Community Services, ACT

Robert Durbridge
Federal Secretary,
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Roland Finette
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Rose Bamblett
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Rosalie Kinson
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Rosie Sandow
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Rosslyn Noonan
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Te Kāhui Tika, Human Rights
Commission, New Zealand

Sally Edsall
Early Childhood Representative
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Sharon Perkins for
Phil Lambert
Exec Dir EC Primary & Rural
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Sharryn Brownlee
P & C Association, NSW

Shayne Quinn
Early Childhood Representative,
AEU Victorian Branch

Sheila Byard
Australian Union of Women
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Susan Grieshaber
Associate Professor, School of
Early Childhood QLD Univerity
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Suzanne McManus
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Attendees at ACT branch forum

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ACT Government

Pauline Armstrong
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Liz Barfoed
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Chris Bateman
Waramanga Preschool

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Steve Pratt
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Anne Roantree
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Chris Thornton
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Attendees at New South Wales forum

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Kara VanDer Heyck
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Wheelers Hill

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Rosalie Brades
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Caroline Kilken
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Balwyn

Marg Pekin
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Tanya Franse
Catholic Education Office

Carmel Maloney
Edith Cowan University

Caroline Barratt-Pugh
Edith Cowan University

Red Berson
Xavier Catholic School

John Day
MP Shadow Minister for
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Cathy Dagostino
Marri Grove Primary School

Melissa Timms
Marri Grove Primary School

Danielle Mant
Rockingham Primary School

Louise Studds
Rockingham Primary School

Michelle Smith
Goollelal Primary School

Teresa Cinanni
Banksia Park Primary School

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Dept of Education and
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Jean Rice
Dept of Education and
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Anne McCormack
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Susan Barton
Meerilinga Young Children's
Foundation

Yvonne Carnellor
Curtin University

Sharon O'Brien
Belmay Primary School

Judith Whitfield
East Hammersley
Primary School

Meetings and visits

Australian Capital Territory

Amaroo Preschool—
Parents Group

Preschool Services Dept of
Education

Griffith Bannister Gardens
Preschool

Red Hill Preschool

Ngunnawal Preschool &
Childcare Centre

O'Connor Cooperative School,
O'Connor

Youth & Family Services,
Tuggeranong (Robyn Calder,
Anne Roantree, Pauline
Armstrong)

Canberra Preschool Society
(Karen Neil, Matt Morrissey,
Dianne Thornton)

Liz Barford, Executive Officer

Janet Alison, Executive Officer

AEU ACT Branch

New South Wales

Linda Frow, Coordinator
Early Childhood Services Forum,
NSW Council of Social Services
Whalan Public School

Preschool, Madang Avenue
Public School, Whalan—
Parents and Staff

Frances Newton Preschool

Cook & Phillip Park Long Day
Centre

New South Wales Teachers'
Federation

(Continued over page)

Presentations made at forums

Rosslyn Noonan,
Chief Commissioner, Human
Rights Commission
Te Kāhui Tika Tangata, New
Zealand

Professor Margaret Reynolds,
President, UN Association of
Australia

Jenni Connor,
Principal Project Officer,
Department of Education,
Tasmania

Ken Davies,
General Manager School Services
and

Georgie Nutton,
Program Manager Early Years
within the
Curriculum Services Branch,
Department of Employment,
Education and Training,
Northern Territory

Susan Hill,
Associate Professor Early
Childhood, University of SA.

Michaela Kronemann,
Federal Research Officer, AEU

Meetings and visits (cont'd)

Northern Territory

Jingili Preschool & Childcare centre
Mobile Preschools team
Dept of Employment Education & Training
Early Years Team Personnel
Amoonguna School
Larapinta Preschool
Ida Stanley Preschool
John Gaynor,
Regional Manager Indigenous Policy and North Australia Office, FACS

Queensland

Goodna Prep Primary School
Dunwich Primary School
Parents and Staff
Prof. Colette Taylor,
Prof. Karen Thorpe,
Karen Martin
John Spriggs
QLD Independent Education Union
Queensland Teachers' Union

South Australia

Kaurna Plains Preschool & Childcare—Parents and Staff
Kalaya Child Care Centre—Parents and Staff
AEU SA Branch
Teachers' forum

Tasmania

Illawara Primary School
Blackmans Bay Children's Services
Howrah Beach Child Care Centre
East Moonah Kindergarten
Penny Anderson,
Dept of Education
Goulburn Street Primary School
AEU Tasmanian Branch



Victoria

Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Inc.
(Roland Finette & Rose Bamblett)
John Forster
Early Intervention Association of Victoria
Dept of Education & Training
(Dawn Davis & Carol Kelly)
Kindergarten Parents Victoria
(Gerard Mansour & Annette Mutimer)
Brotherhood of St Laurence
Barbara Romeil
Community Child Care
AEU Victorian Branch

Western Australia

Teleconference with country teachers
Tranby Primary School
East Kenwick Primary School
Banksia Primary School
State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia



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Preschool Education Inquiry



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