



Submission to the Productivity Commission inquiry into child care and early childhood learning

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1. Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry into child care and early childhood learning. This submission reflects our role as a provider and broker, on behalf of our clients, of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services.

It is now widely acknowledged that the early years are crucial in laying the foundation for later learning and development. It is concerning, therefore, that nearly a quarter of Australia's children are vulnerable in one or more areas of child development when they start school, according to the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI). Children who aren't 'school ready' tend to do less well in school and are more likely to become teenage parents, and as adults be unemployed and welfare dependent, engage in criminal activities and have mental health problems.

To ensure all children are ready for formal schooling, children and their families must be supported during the critical early years. It is not surprising that the early years are so important as it's during this period that critical brain development takes place. We also now know that chronic, unrelenting stress in early childhood damages the developing brain architecture and can lead to life-long problems.

We must therefore provide services and supports early in life when there is the greatest potential to prevent health and wellbeing problems from emerging in adulthood. The benefits of intervening early are far reaching and range from reduced welfare expenditure, less contact with the juvenile and adult justice systems, reduced notifications of child abuse and neglect, through to improved school performance and higher earnings.

High quality early childhood education and care is the single most effective and cost beneficial early intervention strategy to enhance child developmental outcomes, in particular language and cognitive development, particularly for children from disadvantaged families.

Through promoting children's social, communication, physical and academic skills on a daily basis, and in partnership with families, early childhood education leads the way in building confident and resilient children.

Access to affordable, high quality early childhood education and care is also critical to workforce participation. This is a particularly important issue as Australia has one of the highest rates of family joblessness compared to other OECD countries.¹ We also know that family joblessness significantly increases the risk of children living in poverty and a range of poor outcomes.

Reducing barriers to workforce participation and getting more people into secure, reasonably paid jobs is therefore a critical step in breaking the cycle of disadvantage.

Please note, in this submission the term 'Preschool' is used to refer to the structured, play-based learning program, delivered by a degree qualified early childhood teacher. This is known as 'kindergarten' in Queensland, however, the umbrella term 'preschool' will be used in this submission for ease of reading.

2. Recommendations

The Benevolent Society recommends that:

Funding and quality

- early childhood education and care be funded via a single level of government, that is the federal government).
- funding be provided direct to centres and as a way of simplifying the complex system of fees and subsidies.
- the National Quality Framework continue to be implemented within the agreed timeframes.
- over the next decade government increase its investment in early childhood education and care to reach the OECD recommendation of 1% of GDP.
- the ECEC workforce be paid at the same level as comparable professions. Early childhood teachers, for instance, should have pay parity with primary and secondary teachers plus loadings for the extended hours and shorter holidays if working in long day care services.

Disadvantaged and vulnerable children

- universal access to 15 hours of preschool be extended to three year olds. At a minimum it should be provided at no cost to disadvantaged and low income families.
- the Government adopt a target to reduce the percentage of children identified as developmentally vulnerable on the Australian Early Development Index to 15% by 2020, in line with the target identified by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.
- integrated and co-located child and family centres be established in areas of disadvantage in Australia, in which early childhood education and care is delivered alongside wraparound health and welfare supports.

Workforce participation

- there is greater flexibility in the delivery of early childhood education and care so that quality early childhood education and care is available outside standard working hours to accommodate the needs of all families, for example shift workers.
- additional subsidies be provided to centres to deliver services outside standard hours to cover the wage costs associated with evening and weekend work.
- Jobs, Education and Training Child Care Fee Assistance (JETCCFA) be provided direct to services to increase low income families' access to this assistance.

Early childhood education and care subsidies

- early childhood education and care subsidies (child care benefit/child care rebate) be better targeted to disadvantaged and low income families.
- the threshold for the Special Child Care Benefit be lowered and the benefit cover a 52 week period/per year. Funding should also fully cover the cost of employing support staff.
- programs, such as Partnerships in Early Childhood, that support educators and preschool teachers to focus more on children's social and emotional development, be expanded.

Rural and remote communities

- incentives be available to encourage early childhood education and care professionals to relocate to rural and remote areas.
- eKindy be made available throughout regional and rural Australia.
- mobile preschools be funded in disadvantaged areas.

Workforce development

- the cost of upgrading qualifications, to comply with the National Quality Framework, be heavily subsidised.
- areas of disparity between early childhood education and broader education sector, such as access to funded professional development, clearly defined career development pathways, access to administrative support and provision of adequate paid preparation time, be addressed.

3. About The Benevolent Society

The Benevolent Society is Australia's first charity. We're a not-for-profit and non-religious organisation and we've helped people, families and communities achieve positive change for 200 years.

We help people change their lives through support and education, and we speak out for a just society where everyone thrives.

The Benevolent Society helps the most vulnerable people in society, and supports people from all backgrounds including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. We believe that building stronger communities will lead to a fairer Australia.

Our focus is to foster wellbeing throughout life – from infancy to older age with services that:

- prevent problems or reduce their negative impact
- tackle problems early before they become entrenched
- help people use their strengths to solve their own problems
- give priority to people experiencing social and final disadvantage.

Snapshot

- The Benevolent Society is a secular non-profit organisation with 992 staff and 722 volunteers who, in 2013, supported more than 76,800 children and adults primarily in New South Wales and Queensland.
- We deliver services from 64 locations with support from local, state and federal government, businesses, community partners, trusts and foundations.
- We support people across the lifespan, delivering services for children and families, older people, women and people with mental illness, and through community development and social leadership programs.
- Our revenue in 2012/13 was \$92 million.
- In 2012/13, 83% of our income came from government sources. Private fundraising, trust and foundation grants provided another 4%, client fees generated 7% and investment income contributed 6.5%.
- The Benevolent Society is a company limited by guarantee with an independent Board.

4. Government involvement in child care and early learning

Funding

The benefits of high quality early childhood education and care, both to the individual and society more broadly, have been consistently demonstrated.ⁱⁱ Governments have a critical role to play in promoting universal access to early childhood education and care and ensuring its quality remains high.

While there has been increased recognition of the importance of, and investment in, early childhood education and care within Australia there is still considerable room for improvement. For the benefits of quality early childhood education and care to be fully realised, it must have a strong and equal partnership with the education system. Just as with public schooling, investment in ECEC needs to be regarded as a public good.ⁱⁱⁱ Inadequate investment often leads to tensions between quality, affordability and accessibility.

In recognition of the importance of early childhood education and care, the OECD recommends a minimum public investment in early childhood services of 1% of GDP. However, Australia's expenditure on pre-

primary education relative to GDP is very low at 0.1% versus the OECD average of 0.5% (2009). New Zealand by contrast allocates 0.6% of GDP.^{iv}

Participation in early childhood education is also low in Australia compared with other OECD countries. According to a 2013 OECD report, only 13% of three year olds were enrolled in early childhood education programs compared with the OECD average of 67%. In fact, the proportion of three year olds who were enrolled in early childhood education in Australia decreased by four per cent between 2005 and 2011, compared with an average increase of four per cent for OECD countries. Enrolment rates for four year olds are also behind the OECD average with only 67% of four year olds enrolled compared with an OECD average of 84%.^v

Sustained public funding is needed to increase participation in high quality early childhood education and care. Funding must also be sufficient to ensure the recruitment of professional staff who are qualified to support children's cognitive, social and emotional development.^{vi}

Pay parity

To attract and retain highly skilled people in the sector, it is essential that they are appropriately remunerated. Early childhood teachers, for instance, should have pay parity with primary and secondary teachers as well as loadings for the extended hours and shorter holidays.

Government funding for ECEC services is currently provided through a range of different mechanisms. The Commonwealth Government provides both the means-tested Child Care Benefit and non-means-tested Child Care Rebate for approved child care services, while States and Territories generally fund (fully or partially) preschool programs in the year before school. In addition, both levels of government administer associated programs such as inclusion services, professional development and service improvement.

The separation of these funding streams creates complexity and constrains the efficient allocation of funding across the breadth of ECEC services. We strongly recommend that early childhood education and care is funded by a single level of government (ie. the federal government) so that there is:

- more effective allocation of funding
- less complexity and administrative burden for providers
- less risk of cost-shifting between different funding sources.

Funding ECEC services by the Federal Government would also ensure consistent funding, regulation and access to additional supports across jurisdictions as well as create a simpler system for parents to understand and navigate.

So that the funds available have the greatest impact and access to early childhood education and care is equitable, we also recommend that funding be provided direct to centres. It can be particularly difficult for families with poor literacy to navigate the system, understand their entitlements and the net costs to them. Providing funds direct to services removes the administrative burden on families and reduces their out of pocket expenses.

We suggest that the majority of funding go to not-for-profit providers with a base amount provided to for-profit organisations as is the case in the school system.

Ensuring quality

The Federal Government has a critical role in the ongoing implementation of the National Quality Framework.

The quality of ECEC services is essential to its effectiveness. The quality of ECEC is a critical issue because it can serve to either mitigate or exacerbate the impact of disadvantage. While good quality early childhood

programs have positive benefits for children and families in terms of both concurrent outcomes and outcomes over time, poor quality environments can lead to adverse outcomes and pose a risk to children's development.

The quality of the care and education available to children in formal ECEC is intrinsically linked to staff. The qualifications of staff, consistency and tenure of staff and staffing arrangements, and the relationships that staff are able to build with children, families and communities are central features of a good quality service.

Specialist training in early childhood learning and development, and early childhood teacher training, have a significant and positive impact on quality, giving staff the important skills and knowledge they need to work with children and families positively and effectively. These skills and knowledge also promote ongoing reflection and practice development.^{vii}

Similarly, the Federal Government must continue to play a leading role in the development and implementation of national partnership agreements to promote consistency across jurisdictions.

Priorities over the next decade

Government needs to acknowledge the importance of the early years of a child's life and the critical role of high quality early childhood education and care in promoting children's development and wellbeing, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage.

We recommend that over the next decade government increase its investment in early childhood education and care to reach the OECD recommendation of 1% of GDP.

While The Benevolent Society acknowledges that steps are being taken to increase access to preschool education through the commitment to provide universal access to 15 hours of preschool for four year olds, this initiative does not go far enough. This commitment should be extended to three year olds and provided at no cost to disadvantaged and low income families until the child reaches school age.

The Government should actively seek to reduce the percentage of children who are developmentally vulnerable when they start school. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is currently developing *The Nest* action plan, which is a national plan for child and youth wellbeing. The plan includes the goal 'Reduce percentage of children identified as developmentally vulnerable on the Australian Early Development Index to 15% by 2020'. They estimate that within Australia, the cost of early childhood vulnerability is between \$1.75 and \$2.7 trillion dollars. Reducing Australia's child vulnerability from 22% to 15%, as proposed in the action plan, would lead to an increase in Australian GDP of 7.35% over 60 years.

The Benevolent Society recommends that the Government also adopt this target.

Integrated child and family centres

As discussed, research shows that children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit the most from early childhood education and care. We also know that delivering supports to families via integrated and co-located services has many benefits.

As such, The Benevolent Society believes that one of the best ways to support disadvantaged families is to embed high quality early childhood education and care in integrated child and family centres where emerging issues within families can be identified early and a range of wraparound health and welfare supports provided.

Child and family centres offer families 'soft' entry points and seamless access to universal and targeted services. Getting support in one location is not only more convenient for families it also produces better

outcomes for children. Integration allows individuals and families to receive the help they need, when they need it, without having to go to several services and undergo multiple assessments.

The Benevolent Society runs three Early Years Centres (EYC) in Queensland, covering nine sites plus mobile outreach. The Centres are one-stop shops supporting the health, wellbeing and safety of families who have young children from conception to eight years.

Each EYC is located in a socio-economically disadvantaged area (according to the SEIFA index) with high numbers of children who are developmentally vulnerable in on one or more domains according to the Australia Early Development Index (AEDI). The centres are staffed by a multidisciplinary team through partnerships between The Benevolent Society, Queensland Health, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island social service providers, the Crèche and Kindergarten Association (C&K), and other local service providers.

The EYC model was deliberately designed to provide seamless access to a range of services to address families' needs, including:

- quality early childhood education and care services, such as long day care and approved kindergarten (preschool) programs
- parenting information, workshops and groups
- family support programs including home visiting
- counselling
- playgroups and supported playgroups
- toy libraries
- advice on child health and development
- health screening, assessments and immunisations
- pre- and post-natal support
- peer mentoring
- pathways to education and employment initiatives.
- referrals to other programs and specialist services, such as speech therapy and other allied health services.

In January 2013, the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment published the results of an evaluation of the Early Years Centre initiative.^{viii}

The results of the evaluation indicated that developmental, social and behavioural outcomes for children had improved, parenting skills and families had been strengthened, and outcomes for vulnerable families enhanced. In addition, it is reported that the EYCs helped to contribute to community inclusion, connections and supports.

Similarly, in NSW, The Benevolent Society runs an Early Years Centre which adopts a family focused approach whereby early childhood education and is delivered alongside parenting education, family support, child and family health services, as well as professional home visiting.

The Spilstead Model^{ix} on which this program is based is characterised by interdisciplinary team case management, single governance, and the use of evidenced based interventions and evaluation in child development (early education, child/family health, parent-child attachment relationship, parenting programs and family support). This parent-child model of practice enables families to flexibly tap into supports they need, and develop a partnership with a consistent team of professionals over a prolonged period of time.

The Benevolent Society recommends the establishment of integrated and co-located child and family centres in areas of disadvantage throughout Australia.

Several of the international models described below, further illustrate the benefits of delivering early childhood education and care, alongside health and family support services.

5. International models of early childhood education and care

Scandinavian countries have long recognised the value of prevention and early intervention and have invested heavily in this area. This investment has paid off as they consistently lead international comparisons in terms of child welfare and general wellbeing. It also results in greater productivity for society as a whole. Over 80 per cent of Swedish mothers with children aged three to five are in some form of employment. In Australia it is approximately 50 per cent.^x

In Sweden, early childhood education and care is seen as part of the formal education system. Fees are aligned with parents' income and are set at less than three per cent of their gross income. There are reductions for second and third born children. Families with four or more children do not pay for early childhood education and care for the fourth child.

Over recent years, the United Kingdom and New Zealand have similarly increased investment in quality early childhood education and care. Currently in the United Kingdom and New Zealand, all three and four year-olds are entitled to 15 and 20 hours a week, respectively, of early childhood education and care for 38 weeks a year at no additional cost to families. In the United Kingdom, this entitlement is gradually being extended to every disadvantaged two year old.

Below are a number of examples of longitudinal studies which clearly demonstrate the efficacy of early childhood education and the benefits into adolescence and adulthood.

High/Scope Perry Preschool Program

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Program is currently the benchmark for longitudinal studies examining the effects of targeted, high quality early childhood education programs. It was initiated in the U.S. in 1961 with a target population of three and four year old African-American children who were living in poverty.

The project involved two key components: (a) daily weekday classes for young children (aged 3–5) and (b) weekly teacher-conducted home visits with mother and child.

The program has strong evidence to support its effectiveness, with randomised experimental design studies demonstrating long-term benefits for participating children including higher rates of academic achievements and levels of literacy (early adolescence), higher rates of school graduation and more stable dwelling environments (adulthood).

A report on data collected when the participants were aged 40 concluded that the 'preschool advantage' includes 'higher lifetime earnings, greater employment stability and dramatically reduced involvement in crime' leading to a "public benefit of almost \$13 for every dollar invested in the program'. The private monetary benefit to program participants was estimated to be approximately \$14 for every dollar invested.^{xi}

Carolina Abecedarian Project

The Carolina Abecedarian Project operated at a single site in North Carolina for over ten years and involved low income families with high risk factors.

The Carolina Abecedarian Project involved the following three components: (a) full-time child care facility and preschool program, (b) home visits (school-aged program) by a specialist teacher with supplemental educational activities and (c) summertime supports (school-aged program).

The program has strong evidence to support its effectiveness with randomised experimental design studies demonstrating long-term benefits for participating children including lower rates of grade retention (early and mid-adolescence), better income and more years spent completing education (adulthood).^{xii}

Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) Study

The EPPE study, conducted in the UK, is a more recent, large, longitudinal study following 3,000 children, their parents, home environments and preschool settings. The study found that all children benefited from preschool with disadvantaged children benefiting most. It also found that preschools that also offered health and family support services were the most effective in promoting both intellectual and social development.

Programs that increased the take-up of preschool places by parents who usually would not send their children to preschool, provided those children with a better start to school.

Pen Green Centre for Children and Families

The Pen Green Centre for Children and Families began operating in the UK in 1983 and continues to operate today. It was set up as a multifunctional service for children and families, staffed by a multidisciplinary team. Set up in a disadvantaged area, Pen Green is both a nursery school (equivalent to 3 to 5 year old preschool in Australia) and an integrated centre for children and families. It seeks to ameliorate the impact of poverty on children and families.

Its policy and practice are rooted in a philosophy that gives consistent emphasis to working in close partnership with parents. Each staff member is assigned families whom they home visit a few times a year.

At Pen Green around 40% of current staff started off using the services as parents and it has been judged outstanding at every OFSTED inspection.^{xiii}

Nature or forest kindergartens

A unique approach to the delivery of early childhood education and care, which may be worth exploring in Australia, has been the establishment of nature kindergartens in a number of countries. Nature kindergartens, which were first introduced in Norway and Denmark, are held exclusively outdoors and encourage children to play, explore and learn in a forest or natural environment.

Research shows that nature kindergartens are beneficial to children's health and well being, self-esteem and confidence, perseverance and acquisition of knowledge and skills. Learning through play is child centred and enhanced with the freedom to explore using multiple senses.^{xiv}

6. Demand for and expectations of child care and early learning services

Children's development needs

Early childhood education and care has historically been seen as a labour force issue, enabling women to work, rather than for its educational and developmental benefits to children. However, with the increased awareness among parents and the wider community of the importance of the early years of a child's life and the benefits of being 'school ready', parents are now utilising ECEC services to positively promote their child's development.

In particular, many families believe that the opportunity for socialisation with other children in ECEC services will positively affect their child's social and emotional development. Parents also focus on the enhanced language opportunities these services may provide.

We know from longitudinal research, described above (High/Scope Perry Preschool project, EPPE study), that this type of early intervention increases the likelihood of children doing well at school, gaining employment and having successful and fulfilling relationships.

In contrast, not assisting all children to reach their full potential has significant social costs with higher unemployment, increased likelihood of crime and imprisonment, increased mental health problems and poorer physical health.

Workforce participation

It is important that the availability of early childhood education and care reflects the changing nature of families and employment patterns. To facilitate workforce participation and ensure children can safely be cared for in quality settings, it is essential that there is greater flexibility in service system.

While long day care offers some flexibility it still does not cater to the needs of shift workers. Preschools tend to operate for an even shorter period and can be particularly incompatible with workforce participation.

The capacity of the sector to deliver services outside standard hours needs to be enhanced to accommodate the needs of both parents and children. The hours spent in ECEC should, however, continue to be capped at 50 hours to ensure the interests of the child remain paramount and that children aren't in care for extended periods of time.

It is important to note, however, that attracting and retaining fully qualified staff is an ongoing challenge for the sector. To ensure it is economically viable for services to provide flexible hours of service delivery it may be necessary to provide service providers with additional subsidies to cover the wage costs associated with evening and weekend work.

Jobs, Education and Training Child Care Fee Assistance (JETCCFA) program

The JETCCFA program is an important means of making early childhood education and care affordable to parents receiving income support, while they work, study or train to enter or re-enter the workforce.

However, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a lack of awareness among job seekers with young children as to its availability. The Benevolent Society recommends that JETCCFA funding be provided direct to services to facilitate access to this assistance.

Nannies providing in-home care

We support the extension of funding to other forms of early childhood education and care so long as assistance is means-tested. The use of nannies, for example, is likely to be favoured by higher socio-economic families and given the finite funds available, expenditure should be directed at children who will benefit the most and for whom cost is likely to be a barrier to attendance, that is disadvantaged or low income families. Funding should only be available where workers comply with the National Quality Framework, in terms of qualification requirements and work within the principles and practices of the Early Years Learning Framework.

7. Availability and cost of child care and early learning services

Services for additional needs and regional and remote areas

Disadvantaged, vulnerable or other additional needs children

There are very few fully funded public early childhood and care services. The vast majority of long day care centres, preschools are operated by non-profit organisations or commercial businesses that charge fees.

These fees, even with subsidies from government, remain expensive for people on low and modest incomes.

The Benevolent Society works with disadvantaged children and families, many of whom cannot afford to pay ECEC fees. The implementation of the Child Care Tax Rebate has failed to improve access for the most disadvantaged families. Ideally preschool education be seen as part of the broader education system and funded in full for all children aged three years and up. At a minimum it should be free to disadvantaged and low income families.

Subsidies for families up to the age of three years should be weighted to support disadvantaged or low income families so that cost is not a barrier to access and workforce participation. A model could potentially be adopted whereby the cost of child care is calculated as a set percentage of a family's income.

The Productivity Commission's report on the early childhood development workforce (2011)^{xv} concluded that *'existing subsidy arrangements deliver disproportionate benefits to relatively well-off families. A move to alternative child care subsidy arrangements that emphasise targeting has the potential to enhance the impact of reforms by ensuring disadvantaged children continue to access quality ECEC services. At the same time, changing the structure of the subsidies is likely to deliver cost savings to the Australian Government.'*

The Benevolent Society strongly recommends that early childhood education and care subsidies be better targeted to disadvantaged and low income families.

The Productivity Commission also found that *'The proportion of children with additional needs appears to be increasing, and they are currently underrepresented in ECEC. To increase access for children with additional needs, further support is often required. This can include, for example, employing an additional 'inclusion support' worker or obtaining advice about including children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.'*

The Productivity Commission also concluded that *'Government funding to support access to ECEC services for children with additional needs is currently inadequate. In many cases, the limited funding that is available is provided on a short-term basis, does not fully cover the cost of employing additional support staff, and is onerous to apply for and maintain.'*

The process for accessing the Special Child Care Benefit by centres needs to be simplified and streamlined. The current paper based system is very time consuming and needs to be repeated every 13 weeks, if it can be repeated. The threshold for accessing this benefit is also too high.

The Benevolent Society strongly recommends that the threshold for the Special Child Care Benefit be lowered and that the benefit cover a 52 week period/per year. An online system should be developed to make applying easier as it is very often only a short term one-off solution. Funding should also fully cover the cost of employing staff.

Case study: Partnerships in Early Childhood (PIEC)

PIEC is a program run by The Benevolent Society in conjunction with early childhood education and care organisations in NSW, Queensland and South Australia.

Through staff development and support for parents, PIEC aims to improve the quality of early education and care and, in so doing, enhance children's social and emotional development. The focus is on building nurturing and supportive relationships between children and adults. It is based on research on attachment and early brain development that tells us how important it is for children's futures that they experience secure, nurturing relationships in their first few years.

PIEC comprises three main components:

- *attachment training for educators using the Circle of Security model*
- *playspaces – workers stay in one place during transition times providing a predictable environment for children as they know where to find workers if they feel upset*
- *developing reflective practice – educators are supported to reflect on children's behaviours and understand the behaviours from an emotional needs perspective.*

The Benevolent Society commissioned the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales to evaluate PIEC. The evaluation found that:

- *the social and emotional development of children attending participating centres improved*
- *peer problems (such as being picked on) decreased, as did conduct problems such as fighting*
- *there were improvements in the quality of care at participating centres*
- *children's prosocial behaviour (such as sharing and helping) increased.*

PIEC operates in 18 centres in NSW (funded by the Commonwealth Department of Social Services) and two centres in Queensland (funded by the Queensland Department of Education and Training, Office for Early Childhood Education and Care) and two in South Australia (funded by Goodstart).

Rural and remote communities

Access to quality early childhood education and care can be very challenging for families living in rural and remote areas. There are a number of issues such as distance and transport as well as attracting a qualified workforce.

To facilitate access to early childhood education and care, incentives need to be available to encourage the early childhood education and care workforce to relocate to rural and remote areas including such things as assistance with the cost of relocation, subsidised housing and potentially higher wages.

The government also needs to think creatively about how early childhood education and care is delivered. For example, a model which is operating in some areas of Australia and is proving successful is eKindy. eKindy is a comprehensive 'at home' preschool program for children the year before school. The program is teacher-supported and covers 15 hours per week for 40 weeks of the year. eKindy provides a flexible program that families are able to work through in ways that meet the needs of their child and family.

The Benevolent Society recommends that eKindy be made available throughout rural and regional Australia.

Mobile playgroups and preschools

The Benevolent Society has also had considerable success in accessing 'hard to reach' families using mobile playgroups and preschools.

TBS recommends that the government fund mobile preschools in disadvantaged areas so that we can take preschool to the people in order to promote the benefits of early education to disadvantaged families, increase attendance by their children and help strengthen the home learning environment. The viability of using mobile playgroups and preschools in rural and remote communities should also be explored.

8. Government regulation of child care and early learning

While regulation is important to maintain high quality standards, the current system is over-regulated and inconsistent regarding how regulations are applied. Efficiencies and cost savings could be achieved if the government worked in partnership with service providers to streamline operations thereby supporting accessibility for families. Transparency is also very important.

The New Zealand model of assessment and rating should be explored. It involves working in true partnership with centres to develop practice. Assessors develop meaningful and long term relationships with clusters of centres working together to develop practice.

It is also our belief that managers could be better supported in their role if assessors had an early childhood education and care background and experience in the sector.

National Quality Framework

The Benevolent Society supports the continued implementation of the National Quality Framework within the agreed timeframes. As discussed, research shows that early childhood education and care leads to a wide range of benefits including better child well-being and learning outcomes, more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty, increased intergenerational social mobility, more female labour market participation, increased fertility rates and better social and economic development for the society at large.

All of these benefits are, however, conditional on 'quality'. Expanding access to services without attention to quality will not deliver good outcomes for children or the long term productivity benefits for society. Furthermore, research has shown that if quality is low, it can have long-lasting detrimental effects on child development, instead of bringing positive effects.

Qualifications

Recent research found significant positive association between pre-school attendance and Year 3 NAPLAN scores, particularly in the domains of numeracy, reading and spelling. They also found that children whose pre-school teacher had a degree or diploma in early childhood education or children's services gained the most from attending pre-school.^{xvi}

It is important that every effort is made by government to facilitate workers upgrading their qualifications. This will entail government heavily subsidising training as the cost of upgrading may be prohibitive for many workers. In addition, staff should be provided with study leave and their positions backfilled. Staff upgrading their qualifications should then be appropriately remunerated as a further incentive and acknowledgement of the value of the profession.

Other areas of disparity between the early childhood education and the broader education sector include the lack of access to funded professional development, the costs associated with backfilling staff when they attend professional development during working hours, clearly defined career development pathways, access to administrative support and provision of adequate paid preparation time. All these factors must be addressed to ensure a viable workforce.

Consideration should also be given to acknowledging prior learning in other relevant professions as well as skills acquired on the job. This may enable the qualification to be completed in a shorter period of time without compromising the quality. It is essential, however, that quality is never compromised, for reasons stated elsewhere in this submission. There is also some concern in the sector that there is considerable disparity in the quality of training being provided by some private Registered Training Organisations resulting in some staff obtaining a qualification without having the skills to do the job. It is important that there is greater scrutiny of course delivery and that curricula reflect the core competencies needed to do the job.

Consideration should also be given to developing common curricula for health, welfare and education students. It can be argued that these professions share the same core knowledge and skills and by developing core competencies there would be greater flexibility for workers to move within the sector thereby opening up the workforce.

It is important to acknowledge that people from Aboriginal and CALD backgrounds can face additional barriers in terms of access to training, language barriers (in the case of CALD communities), and the cultural appropriateness of the training institution and learning environment.

There needs to be greater recognition of cultural competency skills demonstrated by Aboriginal and CALD educators in formal curricula and competency based equivalence assessments for skills learned on the job.

As discussed in the Productivity Commission's report into the early childhood development workforce '*To meet the goals of the Closing the Gap: National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development and the COAG ECEC reforms, more educators, and more highly skilled educators, will be required to work in Indigenous focused services. To support service level workforce planning and to provide for greater certainty to facilitate more effective attraction, retention and training of staff in Indigenous focused services, governments should:*

- *give priority to the provision of quality ECEC services for Indigenous children, without passing on extra costs to parents*
- *provide multiple year funding for Indigenous-focused ECEC services. (Rec. 14.3)*

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