

NCEC Submission: Review of Early Childhood Education and Care

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) welcomes the Productivity Commission's inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care commissioned by the Australian Treasurer, Dr Jim Chalmers, and is pleased to contribute to the discussion about how the sector can improve and increase the delivery of quality and accessible early childhood education and care which acts as a powerful incentive for increasing workforce participation and improved education outcomes for children.

Background

As the peak body representing Catholic schooling across Australia, the NCEC advocates on behalf of 1759 Catholic schools which educate one in five, or more than 794,000, students, and employs over 104,500 Australians. NCEC also represents thousands of children and their families in our early childhood and early learning centres. In the Catholic Early Learning landscape, the total number of approved services under the National Quality Framework is 693 of which 417 are early childhood education and care (ECEC) services (excluding OHSC). NCEC is well placed to respond to the question of how the Australian Government can increase participation in quality ECEC and address cost and availability factors which continue to be barriers, and which the Government has identified as a "powerful lever for increasing workforce participation".¹ NCEC works closely and collaboratively with state and territory Catholic Education Commissions and has consulted with those jurisdictions in the formulation of this submission. Their contributions, often with a local jurisdictional focus, are incorporated in this NCEC submission.

Since the 1820s, Catholic Church agencies have provided a range of services including schools and orphanages to meet the education and care needs of children. ECEC has been directed to supporting families in the years prior to their children start compulsory schooling with a focus on developing each child holistically, physically, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. The Church assists government, as it does in many other areas including schools, health and social services, to achieve the aims of early childhood provision in the years prior to formal schooling by conducting services efficiently and effectively.

Introduction

In Attachment A – Inquiry terms of reference, Treasurer Dr Chalmers writes "*Participation in quality ECEC ... can assist with positive early childhood development and provides a foundation for our children's future well-being and success.*"² Given the extensive research that detail the strong benefits of quality ECEC and the need to promote those positive outcomes in the community, NCEC urges the Productivity Commission to adopt a strong position in advocating for quality ECEC across the country. Reinforcing that in quality ECEC *does* assist, *significantly*, with positive early childhood development and providing a foundation for our children's future well-being and success. The benefits of early childhood education are widely accepted internationally and the evidence is

¹ Productivity Commission Early Childhood Education and Care Call for Submissions, Attachment A, p4
<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/childhood/call-for-submissions/childhood-call-for-submissions.pdf>

² IBID

extensive and consistent. Studies show the greatest return on educational investment is made during the first five years of life and hence the government must embrace every opportunity to show leadership in this area by proclaiming its importance and benefits.

In his background notes, the Treasurer also states that *“the Government believes more accessible ECEC is one of the most powerful initiatives it can pursue for increasing workforce participation, particularly for women.”*³ Dr Chalmers also writes that ECEC *“is integral to Australia’s economic prosperity.”* NCEC recognises that much of the Australian Government’s motivation for requesting the Productivity Commission to undertake this inquiry is an economic one, given the benefits to the national economy and individuals of the government’s policy priority of boosting people’s participation in the paid workforce, particularly women. However, it is important to emphasise that our priority is quality ECEC and the implementation of policies to make ECEC more available and accessible, to promote children’s wellbeing, while still encouraging the flow-on benefits to the economy and individuals from a boost in workforce participation, particularly for women, that the Australian Government desires.

The Productivity Commission has been asked to make recommendations that will support *“affordable, accessible, equitable and high-quality ECEC that reduces barriers to workforce participation and supports children’s learning and development.”*⁴ That has been the focus for NCEC in formulating this submission on behalf of our state and territory education offices, with a particular focus on identifying barriers that exist across the ECEC landscape that could be reduced to ease the load on families and in particular women and enable them to enter the paid workforce or increase their participation.

Given the government’s policy priority of boosting workforce participation, NCEC encourages the Commission to adopt an approach of viewing the early childhood education landscape through the lens of families, particularly women (mothers/carers), and what needs and priorities must be addressed so they can move to a position where they have the freedom to pursue paid work or consider increased hours.

NCEC urges the Commission to examine the Catholic model of ECEC where a significant number of early childhood services are co-located with Catholic schools which provides significant logistical and cost benefits to parents/women as well as enhanced educational and social opportunities for children and educators. NCEC suggests that this is an optimal model government should consider, particularly as policy makers seek to increase women’s workforce/economic participation.

Greater accessibility and affordability

The Productivity Commission has been asked to consider, among other matters, interactions between Commonwealth, state and territory ECEC policy settings and funding, including recent commitments by the New South Wales and Victorian governments to expand access to 30 hours of preschool for children in the year before full time school and support more three-year-old children to participate in preschool. NCEC supports expanding the number of early childhood education and care hours before compulsory schooling to support children’s transition to school.

³ IBID

⁴ Productivity Commission Early Childhood Education and Care Call for Submissions, p3
<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/childhood/call-for-submissions/childhood-call-for-submissions.pdf>

The provision of universal access to preschool offers improved equity for children and opportunities for increasing the workforce participation rate of women especially. NCEC encourages the Commission to understand why some families do not access existing ECEC options and any links to the workforce participation rates in these communities.

NCEC believes there is a strong role for the Commonwealth in ensuring that all children, including vulnerable and disadvantaged children, have equal access to early childhood education and care opportunities. One of the things that makes Australia such an envied country around the world is our shared belief that every Australian should be able to access affordable, reliable healthcare. So too, NCEC would like to see Australia embrace the principle that all children should be able to access affordable, quality early childhood education.

In Queensland, about half of Catholic sessional kindergarten services are in regional and remote areas, including on Palm Island. A number of these services provide kindergarten programs to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. The provision of inclusive, culturally safe environments that provide families with confidence for their children to attend an early education service is essential to drive economic and workforce participation. Ensuring young children in regional and remote areas are offered the same opportunities as their counterparts in metropolitan areas should be a priority.

NCEC aspires for every child from the age of three or earlier to have access to a quality preschool program where they can flourish as capable, curious, creative and spiritual learners. NCEC welcomes federal and state/territory government support to enable families to access preschool programs for their children, particularly government subsidies to families and services which allow Catholic providers to offer services at lower fees, and advocates on behalf of state and Territory offices for preschool to be as accessible for all Australian children.

NCEC suggests to the Productivity Commission that it may be an opportune time for governments to give consideration to reframing the notion of compulsory education ages. With extensive research into the importance of the early years and the potential impact on workforce participation rates, this inquiry could be an opportunity to thoroughly examine the principle of preschool attendance as a right for every child and therefore compulsory. Compulsory preschool has the potential to act as a strong lever to reduce the developmental gap for children who currently do not attend any preschool, which must be a high government educational and social priority. This should focus on play-based learning and need not represent the 'schoolification' of ECEC. A system of compulsory preschool would also work to counter perceptions of early childhood education from a service that is 'nice to have' to an educational offering with significant benefits that should not be missed. It would also address the limited understanding in the community about the value and professionalism of the ECEC workforce as well as enhance Australia's economic growth and prosperity.

Flexible options and choice

NCEC believe there is value in providing a range of flexible options for families that maximise connection and belonging and strongly advocates for the right of families to choose a preschool/ECEC service that matches their beliefs and values as well as their choice of school. Catholic Education South Australia (CESA) is preparing to increase the provision of preschool education to 20 per cent of all three year olds and four year olds in the state. This proportion of children reflects the proportion of South Australian children and young people in CESA's 103 schools and includes children from all socio-economic backgrounds, especially those most marginalised.

A strong commitment to inclusion should also inform the provision of a range of flexible options and choices for families and parents/carers, including supports for children with disability and for their families as they enter preschool. It is important that future models provide wrap-around support to children and families, encouraging family contribution in decision-making along with equitable and accessible pathways to allied health services such as occupational therapy, speech pathology and psychology.

An over-emphasis on the 'long day care' model should be considered, as many families seek more varied and flexible arrangements for their children.

Multiple and diverse ECEC providers

NCEC urges the Productivity Commission to seek to understand how the requirement to access multiple ECEC providers negatively impacts on workforce participation for parents/carers, particularly women, and contributes significantly to family anxiety and stress as well as imposing greater financial burdens. One issue that merits consideration is, whether increasing the quantity of ECEC time while reducing the need for families to access different providers, leads to greater workforce participation and improved social outcomes for families? The Commission is also encouraged to examine how altering the mix of early childhood education providers might adjust the balance of access and equity in favour of improved outcomes, particularly for low socio-economic and vulnerable families.

The ECEC landscape across the country reveals a diversity of providers and different types of early childhood education and care settings. This is a positive in terms of providing parental choice and leads to a higher uptake of ECEC services which provides a strong argument for the ongoing support of multiple providers and diverse options for families into the future. NCEC encourages the government to continue to support a diversity of providers and modes of delivery as an intentional component of future initiatives.

The logistics of when and what times ECEC services are provided also merits examination. For example, 15 hours of three year old preschool and 30 hours of a four year old preschool could be offered to create blocks of employment opportunities which would deliver a more sustainable model for families.

Catholic ECEC services co-located with Catholic schools

As stated in the Introduction, a significant proportion of Catholic early childhood services are co-located on Catholic school sites providing significant benefits to families, particularly women, such as removing the daily challenge of the 'double drop-off' in multiple locations and often at different times. The stress and time pressures this adds to a 'working woman's' day cannot be underestimated, as she already faces considerable challenges seeking to balance her paid work participation and career with the ever-increasing demands and costs of children and family. For example, of the 59 services offering kindergarten programs (sessional kindergartens and LDC services) affiliated with the Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC), 48 are co-located with a Catholic primary school. The benefits of the kindergarten/school co-location includes the continuity of learning providing children with opportunities to participate in the life of the Catholic school community by visiting the school, the local Catholic church, art/science/'buddy' programs, school sporting events, assemblies and special celebrations as part of a planned and intentional transition to school process. Co-location can help to generate smoother transitions for students by offering opportunity to foster familiarity with the school surroundings and teachers and facilitating knowledge transfers between educators.

From the perspective of parents/carers, co-location significantly reduces logistical complexities for families with children of different ages, as referred to earlier (ie: ECEC age and school age). Having a 'one stop shop' reduces the transport and time costs and stress associated with users accessing multiple services and assists families become familiar and at ease with the staff and environment, which helps significantly to promote belonging and build confidence in the education community. All of these factors combined provide a wealth of benefits for the well-being and development of children as well as significant advantages to educators and families, particularly women, who are in a much stronger position to be able to engage in workforce participation or boost their working hours if they choose to.

Some states and territories such as Victoria and NSW are providing capital funding for the co-location of early learning services on primary school sites. Consideration should be given, wherever possible by the Australian Government to fund the establishment of early childhood education and care centres on existing primary school sites, including Catholic primary schools.

Catholic Education South Australia's (CESA) largest involvement in preschools is in eight primary schools that were included in a state project over the last 40 years targeting low socio-economic suburbs and/or suburbs with a high proportion of new migrants. This longstanding program has delivered access to high-quality education and care for generations of four-year-olds in addition to generating many social and economic benefits for families who have and continue to establish deep relationships with other families across these local communities. CESA welcomes an expansion of this model of partnership particularly in areas identified as having the highest needs for better access to quality early childhood education and care. Appendix 1 outlines a Catholic Community early learning centre in Adelaide which is demonstrating innovation and excellence in the provision of ECEC.

Improved government co-ordination

Improving coordination between Commonwealth programs, funding and frameworks affecting early childhood development should be a priority outcome for the Productivity Commission as it would result in a more efficient delivery of services. Importantly, this would also make navigating the various services easier for parents and carers particularly for the many people seeking these services for the first time. This is critical because, as revealed in the most recent 2021 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC),⁵ almost 45 per cent of Australia's children are experiencing higher rates of developmental vulnerability in at least one area, including physical health, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognition and age-appropriate general knowledge.

NCEC also urges a strong commitment to increased accountability for services dedicated to the well-being, education, health, safety and development of children and urges maximum transparency across these areas to ensure parents and carers have confidence in entrusting their children to others' care, protection and stewardship.

Workforce

The education and care sector is extremely challenged in relation to the attraction and retention of experienced, passionate and qualified staff. Staff shortages and limited professional experience placements and development opportunities particularly in regional and remote areas have a

⁵ AEDC data, [2021 report](#)

significant impact on staff workload, staff skills and capacity and the ability to provide quality education and care services for children.

All Catholic preschool/kindergartens are run by tertiary qualified early childhood teachers. The attraction and retention of qualified staff however is particularly difficult in regional and remote areas. This is exacerbated by qualified early childhood teachers preferring to teach in primary schools rather than preschool/ kindergarten settings. It is recommended that early childhood staff are remunerated at comparable rates as that for primary teachers.

Upskilling early childhood teachers across all ECEC professional services is an outcome that should be explored and tackling these workforce issues through the delivery of affordable training opportunities. NCEC urges the Commonwealth Government to address the pressing need to attract and retain educators in early childhood education and care with an emphasis on treating educators as professionals with specialist expertise.

Conclusion

NCEC welcomes the Australian Government's development of an early years strategy, a national vision for ECEC and this Productivity Commission inquiry into ECEC to build a strong framework to guide policy discussions and decisions for the benefit of all Australian children and their families/carers.

NCEC recommends that:

1. The Victorian and NSW model of expanding access to 30 hours of preschool for children in the year before full time school be adopted in other states and territories
2. Young children in regional and remote areas are offered the same opportunities to allied services as their counterparts in metropolitan areas
3. Capital support be provided to the non-government sector to establish early learning centres on existing primary school sites in areas of high disadvantage and low supply.
4. Coordination and alignment be improved between Commonwealth programs, funding and frameworks.
5. Improved remuneration and professional learning support be made available to make early childhood more attractive to the profession.

NCEC looks forward to continuing to work in partnership with the Commonwealth Government to implement recommendations that arise from the Productivity Commission's final report.

Should you have any further questions in relation to this submission, please contact via email

Yours sincerely

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19 May, 2023

Appendix One

Nazareth Catholic Community: A Case Study of Innovation and Excellence in the Provision of ECEC

Established in 2007 in response to emerging community needs in the western suburbs of Adelaide, Nazareth Early Childhood Centre is an integrated service within the Nazareth Catholic Community offering long day care and preschool for children aged six months to five years old. The Universal Access funded preschool program is offered during school terms, with a holiday program for families throughout the term breaks. This demonstrates Nazareth's commitment to providing an educational program that is inclusive, equitable and accessible for all children particularly to families in need. It provides a useful model of what is possible when developing a whole of community approach to the provision of Birth to Year 12 education, complete with wrap-around social and health services.

Nazareth Early Childhood Centre is well supported by an extensive and supportive team of Allied Health Professionals including Speech Therapists, Nutrition and Dietetics and Occupational Therapists as well as student clinics through partnerships with Flinders University. As a result, allied health professionals are readily available for advice for educators and families, observations and small group and 1:1 support for children, in addition to pastoral support for both families and staff in times of hardship and grievance. Nazareth works in collaboration with the supported playgroup that is run by a paid facilitator and provides a time and place for children and families to play, be and belong. Integration also occurs with staff from the College, particularly those who work in Wellbeing Coordinator roles that enhance transition processes into Reception.

The integrated model of Nazareth Catholic Community is not static and evolves as the needs of the community, young people and families change over time. Nazareth's commitment to working collaboratively and respectfully with families from diverse backgrounds and cultures has been instrumental in delivering outstanding educational outcomes for students including 12 consecutive years of 100% SACE completion.

The success of early childhood education at Nazareth is attributable in part, to the overall schooling model in that community, where the economies of scale provide access to greater financial reserves and management capability necessary to steward the development of this impressive service. CESA is well positioned to undertake similar developments to Nazareth in the extension of its facilities in developing suburbs in the North and South of metropolitan Adelaide, corresponding with recent SA Government announcements regarding future residential land releases.