

Response to the The Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

The National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC) is pleased to provide a response to the Discussion Paper about the Early Years Strategy and welcomes the Australian Government's leadership to deliver Australia's first National Early Years Strategy.

Background

As the peak body representing Catholic schooling across Australia, the NCEC advocates on behalf of 1,759 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).

Introduction

NCEC believes that the child and the family should be at the heart of formulating “*the most effective*” national early years strategy.

NCEC welcomes the key consideration noted in the Discussion Paper (p7) that childhood experiences occur in the context of families and that the strategy will be family centred. Such an approach has been widely endorsed at the 2023 National Early Years Summit, which noted that “*Parents should be valued for the critical role they have in raising children and policy design should be there to empower and support them.*”¹ Similarly, the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (December 2019)² stated: “*Learning is a partnership with parents, carers and others in the community, all of whom have a role to play in nurturing the love of learning needed for success at school and in life.*”

The family is the key social institution that must be supported and strengthened so that children can flourish. Families are the building blocks of societies, where special attention is devoted to the development of children. Parents must be supported by Governments to raise healthy children and in their critical role as first educators, creating a home where children can learn, love and grow.

The Strategy

NCEC welcomes the development of an Early Years Strategy to help the Commonwealth create a more integrated and holistic approach to the early years (0-5 years) and better support the education, well-

¹ IBID

² <https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

being and development of Australian children. Achieving the best outcomes for all Australian children is what we must continually strive towards.

The stated ambition in the Discussion Paper to reduce the current siloed approach and focus on improved coordination between Commonwealth programs, funding and frameworks affecting early childhood development is strongly supported by NCEC and is likely to result in more efficient delivery of services. Importantly, such an approach would also make navigating the various services easier for parents and carers particularly for the many people seeking these services for the first time.

NCEC also welcomes the commitment in the Discussion Paper's introduction (p5) 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.

The Discussion Paper appropriately highlights the alarming data revealed in the most recent 2021 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC),³ that 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. Much work is required to eliminate these development vulnerabilities and NCEC recognises that this Strategy will be key to this work.

It is important to recognise that improvements have been made and to identify the factors that may underpin this improvement. The Australian Government needs to look for opportunities to highlight best practice and, where appropriate, support the scaling and sustainability of such best practice. For example, in Queensland, 2021 AEDC data shows that 51.4% of Queensland children started school developmentally on track in all five AEDC domains. This is an improvement of more than 10 percentage points over the last four collection cycles. As a result, while the proportion of children developmentally on track is lower in Queensland than nationally, Queensland is demonstrating considerable success in narrowing the gap.

Response to Discussion Questions

NCEC works collaboratively with State and Territory Catholic Education Commissions and providers of Catholic early education and care centres. Their contributions, often with a local jurisdictional focus, are incorporated in this NCEC submission.

Question 1: Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

The proposed structure of the strategy seems appropriate although careful development of the vision, outcomes, policy priorities and performance indicators will be key to its success, ensuring it is "*the most effective early years strategy.*" The proposed structure suggests that principles and evidence will underpin all elements of the Strategy. This is strongly endorsed. NCEC suggests that as each element is developed and articulated, the principles and evidence informing the element are clearly identified and not simply implied. Ensuring overall coherence as well as internal consistency throughout the Strategy will be critical.

While the Discussion Paper outlines a proposed Implementation Plan/s, NCEC suggests that a much more explicit alignment to the Early Years Strategy is required. The suggestion that there may be more

³ AEDC data, [2021 report](#)

than one Implementation Plan is concerning as this may lead to a lack of coherence, connectedness which transgress against the strong co-ordination that the Strategy seeks to provide.

Question 2: What vision should our nation have for Australia’s youngest children?

The vision should be aspirational, inclusive of all children, evidence informed, and positive. It must be attuned to the future, recognising the many unknowns, but also, and importantly, it must address immediate needs. Australia has developmentally vulnerable children and they need support now. As the Discussion Paper highlights “If a gap emerges and doesn’t close by the age of 5 it is likely to persist, especially for children experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage” (p9). If the Strategy development process is prolonged, more and more children will be at risk of preventable lifelong adverse outcomes.

NCEC notes and supports a vision for the Strategy which is broader than the vision for the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector the Australian Government is developing in collaboration with state and territory governments. However, it is imperative that there is a clear and explicit alignment of the strategy’s vision with the more targeted vision for the ECEC sector. Misalignment would result in confusion, inefficiencies and ineffective outcomes. The vision should explicitly reference a smooth transition into formal schooling.

NCEC advocates for a vision that families, kin and communities are appropriately supported to enable every child to be loved and nurtured.

Question 3: What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

Research undertaken by NCEC in April 2023, with Catholic dioceses across Australia, identified a number of key outcomes which are considered necessary to ensure all children do well in life. NCEC advocates for their inclusion in the National Strategy outcomes. They are:

- Emotional and mental health
- Positive sense of identity and culture
- Love and nurturing
- Meeting other basic needs, including safety and physical health

NCEC also supports consideration of outcomes identified in existing policy documents. For example the [Queensland Children’s Wellbeing Framework](#)⁴, which is part of the Queensland Government’s Early Years Plan, identifies the following aspirations for Queensland children’s wellbeing:

- strong in self and culture
- active and healthy
- happy and resilient
- learning and exploring
- capable and connected.

In line with comments in the introduction highlighting parents as the first and most important educators of their children and supporting their critical role, a key outcome of the Strategy should be equitable access for all parents and carers to quality programs that will support their development of essential knowledge, understanding and skill in early childhood development. Families, for example,

⁴ <https://alt-qed.qed.qld.gov.au/programsinitiatives/education/Documents/qld-children-wellbeing-framework.pdf>

need to be aware of the importance of speaking and reading in the first 1000 days of their child's life and be supported to engage with literacy, numeracy, and wellbeing programs.

NCEC further advocates for partnership and connection with community to be a key outcome. Such an outcome would build capacity within the local community, strengthen the sense of community, deepen understanding of the complexities which create barriers to children flourishing, and enable an integrated and more culturally appropriate response.

Question 4: What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

Early childhood education provides important opportunities to learn and develop. It helps children to develop important social and emotional skills and independence and to learn new routines. Critically it also supports their transition to school. NCEC believes there is a strong role for the Commonwealth in ensuring that all children, including vulnerable and disadvantaged children, have equitable access to appropriately funded and resourced early childhood education and care opportunities.

Catholic education and care providers operate in many regional, rural and remote areas across Australia. The provision of inclusive, culturally safe environments that ensure families have confidence in their children to attend an early education service is essential to drive increased and sustained participation. Ensuring young children in regional and remote areas are offered the same opportunities as their counterparts in metropolitan areas must be a priority including the allied health and other supports that are routinely made accessible through metropolitan early education and care programs.

A key policy direction will be ensuring coordinated purposeful actions across Governments avoiding silos and duplication. This will include mapping high potential State and Territory initiatives and developing Commonwealth responses sensitive to existing initiatives with positive outcomes and funding to enable scaling up of these initiatives.

Question 5: What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

As noted in the response to question 4 above, investment in early childhood and care including equitable access for all children is a critical role for the Commonwealth and one that would improve outcomes for children. As part of this investment, NCEC proposes that the Commonwealth contribute through ongoing funding to building capacity and honouring the skills and knowledge of local educators and health and allied health workers, particularly in regional, remote and/or disadvantaged areas, who will support the sustainable delivery of culturally appropriate, quality early education and care services.

NCEC further proposes that the Commonwealth support the establishment and recurrent funding for a central hub of services in each community for children and their families. This would ensure more effective integration of and streamlined access to education and care services (including schools, parenting support, allied health, child development teams and clinicians). Such Hubs would build capacity within the local community, strengthen the sense of community, deepen understanding of the complexities which impede children and families and enable a more integrated and culturally appropriate response.

Education Ministers recently supported the implementation of a schools USI which will complement the already existing VET USI. NCEC advocates for a unique identifier for each child from birth which would be an important enabler of education and health care for all children which is coordinated and

streamlined and would facilitate cross sector and cross agency collaboration, early intervention and a targeted, integrated and holistic approach to meeting the educational and health needs of all children in the critical years of their development and life. This would be particularly valuable in ensuring very mobile families and children who move frequently between family and carers, are able to be supported irrespective of where they are located or who is the current primary carer.

NCEC further calls on the Commonwealth to contribute through funding, tax relief or benefits, capital investment and other policies, to providing adequate and sustained support with basic living requirements to the families/carers of children in more vulnerable or disadvantaged circumstances. This includes access to suitable housing, health and medical services, and nourishing food.

Question 6: What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

NCEC acknowledges and applauds the current collaborative work underway between the Commonwealth and States and Territories to improve co-ordination of actions in Early Childhood Education and Care (Discussion Paper, p 7), including the chronic workforce shortages in ECEC particularly in regional and remote areas. Focused attention on workforce issues, including attraction, retention and ongoing training of staff, is essential to the success of an early years strategy.

NCEC also notes the recognition in the Discussion Paper (p6) that delivery of the best outcomes for children in the early years has been hampered by the current siloed approach within various Commonwealth Government departments and agencies with responsibility for children in the early years. Tangible action to increase collaboration and reduce silos, while also ensuring there is no reduction in overall funding allocations, is supported strongly by NCEC. Such collaboration should include health, education and specialist support services and agencies.

The current early childhood and education and care model operates under the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) and each state's regulatory body is highly regulated with sometimes little consideration, flexibility or understanding of the culture and complexities within each context. For example, compliance regulations for the physical environment are not always considerate of the unique context, such as requiring grassy playgrounds in a desert community which may be unsustainable and potentially cost prohibitive.

NCEC urges the Commonwealth to work collaboratively with States and Territories to ensure the regulatory model is fit for purpose, that is, rigorous but appropriately flexible and responsive to context. Additionally, funding models with requirements around attendance, for example, the universal funding for preschools, need further careful consideration to ensure that cultural, community and family circumstances are sensitively and appropriately addressed.

Question 7: What principles should be included in the Strategy?

NCEC supports the need for guiding principles to inform policy development and implementation and suggests a key principle should be the centrality of both children and their families and carers, as noted in our introduction.

Another guiding principle should be that policy development and implementation must be proactive as well as responsive, that is, policies will be required to support children and their families in immediate need or with existing vulnerabilities but equally, policies are required that seek

proactively to reduce the proportion of developmentally vulnerable children. This will necessitate the collection of primary source data from the communities that are disadvantaged in early years provision, to deeply understand context and causal factors contributing to disadvantage and a principle of engagement within these communities that promotes agency, partnership and voice.

Priority attention to improving education and care services to children born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged communities, who are often in regional and remote areas, must also be a key foundational principle in the strategy to ensure all children can develop and thrive.

It is of the utmost importance that the strategy focuses on building the capability of families and carers to provide safe, nurturing environments that allow children to thrive. A holistic focus on children and their families, kin and communities requires innovative approaches to service delivery that are tailored to local contexts. This will necessitate guiding principles of collaboration, accountability and transparency as well as sustainability in the provision of support, programs and policies. Succinct family/community friendly language is also importance and a foundational access issue.

Question 8: Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

The Discussion Paper outlines the numerous frameworks and data sources that are already available and NCEC endorses drawing from these well researched sources to develop the National Strategy. However, there is limited attention and focus in the Discussion Paper on workforce issues and NCEC urges greater attention be given to this critical area. Policy implementation and program delivery will be compromised if suitable staff are not available to develop and implement these, particularly in the areas of most disadvantage.

While many of the existing frameworks provide a rich and diverse base to derive a national strategy, the National Strategy will require a clear, sharp focus with realistic and tangible actions and outcomes, with clear impact measures. Previous work in early childhood development has, at times, been challenged by unnecessary complexity, a lack of co-ordination and collaboration and unnecessary silos of activity. NCEC applauds the clear commitment in the Discussion Paper to a data informed and evidence-based approach to the National Strategy and urges a timely, targeted and impact focused process to finalise the Strategy.

Conclusion:

NCEC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this initial stage in the development of a Commonwealth Early Years Strategy and looks forward to ongoing consultation as the Early Years Strategy is developed.

Should you have any further questions in relation to this submission, please contact me via [REDACTED]

Yours faithfully

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30 April 2023