

Planning for three-year-old preschool in SA: What early years associations want you to know

A COLLABORATIVE SUBMISSION FOR THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE.



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Executive Summary

The 'why' of expanding preschool to three-year-old children is an idea with merit and supported with evidence. On the other hand, the 'how' requires careful thought to ensure it is delivered with equity for all children and is of a consistently high-quality across South Australia. Our members are broadly supportive of universal high-quality, play-based preschool for all three-year-old children. However, it must be done with the best interests of every child at the forefront of our decisions. Offering high-quality education and care to more children for longer in the early years is our number one priority that drives this submission and our recommendations.

As a group of leading early childhood associations, we understand this space deeply and as such, offer a comprehensive list of recommendations developed to align with the Royal Commission's scope. We are united in supporting three-year-old preschool. Wherever it is delivered in SA, it must have equitable access, be of high quality, and based on the EYLF. It must be led and delivered by qualified and experienced early years educators. Our recommendations are supported by evidence and empirical research, by previous policy and government-initiated reviews, by practical experience, and leadership expertise.

While preschool is a well-evidenced population-level intervention, it is fundamentally an opportunity for every child to reach their full potential. Increasing access to preschool offers clear workforce and economic benefits, however this is not the primary driver for South Australian early childhood associations. The quality of children's learning experiences should always be the primary goal of preschool and a two-year program holds significant opportunities. When three and four-year-old children learn together, the peer-to-peer learning opportunities are rich and plentiful, and the benefits are exponential. This is what will influence children's trajectories.

A genuine commitment to reform, outlasting electoral cycles, and significant financial investment is needed to make this successful. Investment in two years of quality preschool now will achieve the important economic benefits needed for the future. A combination of universal and bespoke approaches will be needed to deliver this commitment. While universal access is the optimal approach, consultation with local communities is needed throughout the implementation phase about how they can deliver a two-year preschool program with consideration of staffing and workforce, cultural and socio-demographic needs of their families and physical space available.

The transition to three-year-old preschool will require a rethink of current practice. Teachers who are designing, and delivering, the two-year preschool program must have demonstrated understandings of the different developmental and personal care needs of three- and four-year-old children. For young children to thrive and succeed, their social, emotional, physical and educational needs must be met. This requires consistent access to caring, qualified teachers who believe in and have time available to develop and participate in provocations for play and opportunities for intentional teaching.

This submission explores both the opportunities and qualities, as well as the challenges, tensions and dilemmas that might be faced when offering preschool programs for all three-

and-four-year-old children. We present a set of agreed principles, standards and concepts that all represented organisations would like to see considered by the Royal Commission to ensure the commitments made are deliverable and at a standard all South Australian children deserve.

In one sense, this submission is aspirational and strives to set the minimum accepted standard of quality from the outset of the two-year program. We propose these ideas free of constraints in the hope that they can be achieved as soon as possible and on an agreed upon schedule.

When embarking on a reform process, it is wise to start with the strengths of the current system. Much of what is presented in this submission is not new, nor surprising. Some of which was tried before, should be tried again on a larger, and more well-funded scale. The State Government, and other governments across Australia, have previously embarked on significant early childhood reform, and commissioned experts in this field. They have excellent ideas that could be drawn upon in shaping this once-in-a-generation change. Furthermore, the EYLF provides an excellent framework to provide three-year-old children with the learning and experiences they need in preschool.

South Australia is unique in having over 100 years of publicly provided preschools, initially through the Kindergarten Union and then the SA Government. It has been a leader in early childhood education, by providing high-quality education to all young children. Therefore, we recommend that the Royal Commission incorporate South Australia's unique position and rich experience into an SA model for equitable and high-quality provision of two years of preschool.

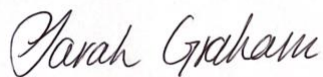
While predominantly, this is through government provision of preschool. However, the interaction of state-funded preschool programs and non-government early learning and childcare services as preschool programs are scaled up has implications to be noted. We advocate for a range of options to be explored for delivering preschool, including standalone and co-location services. Importantly though, we ask that all settings delivering preschool attend to the same requirements, standards and regulatory oversight. Appointing a governing body, which has representatives and stakeholders from all sectors, could be considered as a mechanism to ensure all voices have an equal seat at the table.

Significant workforce challenges in the early years sector will need to be addressed. A targeted focus on workforce development and growth is needed to ensure that children are taught by qualified, skilled, supported and dedicated degree-qualified early childhood teachers, and led by those who have the same experience and qualifications.

United as a broader coalition for change, this submission and its key messages and recommendations are presented by the following associations:



Early Childhood
Australia
South Australia



Recommendations

The recommendations proposed have been developed collectively by all associations, based on policy and practice knowledge. Recommendations are drawn from a breadth of evidence-based reviews and reports that previously examined current policy and advocated for reforms to international, national and state early childhood education and care programs and policies. Notwithstanding others, these include the early understandings by South Australian Thinkers in Residence Fraser Mustard (2008) and Carla Rinaldi (2013), the State Government's *The Virtual Village* inquiry (2005), the *Starting Better* report by the Centre for Policy Development (2021), the Northern Territory guidelines on early childhood transitioning (2017) and learnings from authors such as Reynolds and Temple (2019).

Purposes and Aims

Clarity is required around the purposes and aims of three-year-old preschool, so that developments over time are consistent and stay true to outcomes of the Royal Commission.

- a) Adopt a clear and unambiguous purpose for the two-year preschool educational program.
- b) A consistent assessment and reporting strategy is developed for all preschool students, irrespective of where they attend preschool. These reports should be shared with families and the child's enrolling school.
- c) A Memorandum of Understanding is developed where all sites offering a preschool program, whether they be government or non-government, must agree to common educational principles and standards.
- d) Earlier government reviews and reports into early childhood provision, including *The Virtual Village* and recommendations by Professor Carla Rinaldi and Dr Fraser Mustard, are closely inspected for relevant recommendations that have not yet been enacted.

Defining Key Terms

To provide equitable access and quality learning opportunities, the following recommendations are required.

- a) Additional and earlier supports are put in place to support vulnerable children who are currently eligible for two years of preschool, and their families.
- b) State preschool enrolment and attendance data is collected, analysed and reported on an annual basis. Further analysis of the enrolment and attendance data is needed to understand the barriers to low attendance and inform future support needs.

- c) A universal phasing-in program that is equitable across the state, rather than an emphasis on specific sites. A targeted and nuanced approach may be needed for particular children and sites, but phasing in must be done in a clear timeframe that leads to equitable and universal provision.
- d) If phasing in is required, we recommend this is completed as soon as possible without compromising on quality. Ideally, within a two-year period. That is, by 2028, all three and four-year-olds in South Australia will have universal access to a minimum of 15 hours of high-quality preschool.
- e) The Commission endorses the EYLF as the guiding curriculum framework with its principles, practices and outcomes to guide all teaching, learning and assessment of preschool children in South Australia.
- f) Children’s learning and development in preschool should be measured through formative and summative teacher assessments, based on the outcomes of the EYLF and effective pedagogical documentation.
- g) Liaison with OSHC services about how they can be supported to include all preschool children.
- h) Planning and policy development for three-year-old preschool for children includes specific attention on their development of co-regulation, self-regulation and executive function competencies as part of a broader early childhood wellbeing agenda.

Quality and Innovation

All preschool programs need to be high-quality and led by qualified teachers.

- a) Evidence-based strategies are implemented to promote the engagement of parents in preschool. Staff time to implement this is costed and funded.
- b) Review the Department for Education Outdoor Learning Environments Standard and other relevant standards for relevance to preschool for three-year-old children.
- c) Teachers designing, and delivering, the two-year preschool program have demonstrated understandings of the different developmental and personal care needs of three- and four-year-old children.
- d) All preschool programs are led by qualified and experienced early childhood teachers.
- e) Toileting and changing facilities, and funding for additional staff, are reviewed prior to three-year-old children commencing preschool.

- f) Prior to entering preschool, every child receives a Health and Development Check, and these results are provided to preschools at least three months before commencement.
- g) Every preschool child is provided a documented and consistent transition pathway. This will coordinate a child's entry into preschool, access to other services and continuation into formal schooling. Staff time to implement this is costed and funded.

Workforce

Leadership, ratios and ongoing professional learning for teachers and leaders are essential to the success of universal preschool.

- a) Every preschool leader is provided a base load model for regulated 0.5 FTE minimum leadership and administration time. This minimum should increase on a sliding scale to 1.0, based on complexity criteria.
- a) The ratio of teachers and educators to children in each preschool group should be raised by 2026.
- b) Designated leadership of preschools by qualified early childhood teachers.
- c) Designated funding for workforce development and growth is committed to ensure the availability and retention of skilled early childhood teachers.
- d) The Department for Education implement a recruitment and mentoring approach to encourage greater representation of policy executives with early childhood backgrounds. This may initially require exploration as to why there is currently a low representation across the Department.
- e) A plan, including sponsorship and/or subsidies, is needed to upskill the current cohort of preschool teachers and leaders, to ensure they are not disadvantaged by the recommended arrangements of degree-qualified staff.

Delivery and Administration

A range of options are required to ensure universal and equitable access to preschool.

- a) A range of options for settings are explored for delivering preschool, including standalone preschools, co-location with schools and other sites. All settings delivering preschool must attend to the same requirements, standards and regulatory oversight.
- b) That the Department for Education preschool indicators of Numeracy and Literacy are made available to teachers in all 3- and 4-year-old programs across South Australia.

- c) Where needed and appropriate facilities are available, preschools can be co-located on school sites provided that preschools have autonomy with designated leadership, funding and staffing, including a Band A Leader (in DfE sites) or similar.
- d) Preschool enrolments will be required to universally follow the current two intakes, commencing the term after a child turns three.
- e) A two-year preschool program should not lead to greater workload and administrative demands on teachers and preschool leaders.
- f) The State government negotiates with the Federal government about the flexible use of appropriate subsidies to support more three- and four-year-old children to attend preschool.
- g) The School Card system for government schools is expanded to include government preschools.
- h) Once commenced, the two-year preschool program is subject to ongoing review and independent evaluation. Factors of interest include implementation barriers and facilitators that impacted on participation, the challenges and opportunities found by educators, and how the program was experienced by three and four-year-old children. Following the review process, insights from this evaluation could be used to develop a sustainable and scalable model of two-year preschool.

Background and overview

It has long been a policy and political interest in South Australia, and indeed beyond, to see every young child thriving. The early years have rightly been identified as a critical time of development and high-quality learning experiences in these years pay dividends for years to come. This was established clearly in our joint paper, *'The future of early learning in South Australia'* (Graham, 2021), where one of our main recommendations was consideration of a two-year preschool program for South Australian children.

Responding to this need, the Malinauskas Labor government made an election commitment to the introduction of three-year-old preschool by 2026. However, while we all agree it is a good idea, there are many factors to be addressed to ensure three-year-old preschool is delivered with fidelity and quality as a driver.

To this end, the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care was established in October 2022. The Royal Commission (herein referred to as 'the Commission', led by the Hon Julia Gillard AC, has been provided a remit to investigate what can be done to better support families in South Australia in their engagement with early childhood education and care and out of school hours care services.

According to the Royal Commission's Terms of Reference, a specific central reform being explored is examining *how* all three-year-old children can attend preschool in South Australia, with a view to making it accessible, affordable, of a quality standard and how to achieve universality for both age cohorts.

Our collective vision

This submission has been researched and written by Educators SA and represents the collective views and agenda of the peak early childhood education associations in South Australia. Educators SA is the leading representative organisation for teachers in SA, engaging with more than 60 member-based associations and over 15,000 educators.

All arguments have been collated from an overarching viewpoint: ***what does a pre-schooler need to thrive?***

Methodology

A number of strategies were implemented to understand the views of early childhood associations in preparing this submission. These include:

- Consultation sessions and regular meetings were held with all early childhood association Presidents and members to understand the key pillars to be explored in the submission;
- Desk research and a literature review of seminal peer-reviewed research, policy papers and best practice examples from other jurisdictions who had undertaken similar reforms;
- Interviews with association members, as well as the collection of anecdotes, case studies and practice experiences.

We have also drawn heavily on the new Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) in formulating our ideas and recommendations, noting it is the universal national framework guiding prior-to-school learning environments.

Purpose and Aims

High-quality preschool provision

Our associations see quality early educational outcomes as the primary condition of the two-year preschool system. Many children currently attend long day care or childcare programs, including for the duration of the preschool year. While we recognise that increased access to preschool may support mothers' participation in the workforce, and this has important economic benefits now and into the future, this should not be the primary goal. Rather, high quality educational outcomes in the early years should be the driver. Mustard (2008, p. 19) agrees:

Early childhood development programs are not babysitting services for working parents but are the first tier of education and development programs that set the foundation for future success.

We are aware that much of the research supporting increased access to early childhood education supports later developmental gains in academic achievement, such as in the AEDC and NAPLAN. This is an excellent outcome, however should not drive the reform in early childhood. These years are not to be seen as merely preparation for the next stage of schooling.

It is our belief that the following elements are the entitlements of all South Australian three-year-old children accessing a preschool education program:

- Professionally designed and culturally appropriate educational program delivered and implemented by qualified early years teachers;
- Equity and a commitment to no child being further disadvantaged;
- Child-led learning experiences aligned with the EYLF that are designed and facilitated by qualified early years teachers;
- Integrated play-based and oral and non-verbal language rich learning program which promotes peer-to-peer learning;
- Play-based curriculum delivery with planned and spontaneous in the moment, intentional teaching;
- Strong relationships with supportive teachers and educators;
- Ongoing formative assessment of learning to responsively inform children's learning plans;
- Sharing children's individual learning progress with families; and
- Valuing the uniqueness of this stage of childhood, and resisting the push-down of school curriculum and pedagogy.

There are a number of ways these elements can be combined to meet the needs of local communities, and retain individual philosophies unique to services. However, it is critically important that these entitlements are realised irrespective of which setting or sector they attend to ensure universal high-quality and meaningful preschool provision.

It is important to recognise that this early childhood education reform to introduce three-year-old preschool is not happening in a vacuum. There are a suite of initiatives that this sits alongside, including but not limited to the Department for Education's Purposes of Schooling Review, the Department for Education Early Learning Strategy (2021-2031) and the Federal Government's Family Assistance Legislation Amendment Bill 2022.

Recommendations

- a) Adopt a clear and unambiguous purpose for the two-year preschool educational program.

- b) A consistent assessment and reporting tool is developed for all preschool students, irrespective of where they attend preschool. These reports should be shared with families and the child's enrolling school.
- c) A Memorandum of Understanding is developed where all sites offering a preschool program, whether they be government or non-government, must agree to common principles and standards.
- d) Earlier government reviews and reports into early childhood provision, including The Virtual Village and recommendations by Professor Carla Rinaldi and Dr Fraser Mustard, are closely inspected for relevant recommendations that have not yet been enacted.

Defining key terms

The notion of universality

An essential first step for the Commission is to operationalise what universality looks like in a two-year preschool program. Importantly, Mustard (2008) notes that *“any program to improve early child development should be universal, not targeted”* (p. 14).

The minimum of 15 hours is based on the current agreed national allocation for universal preschool for all four-year-old children in Australia. It should be noted that 15 hours is often problematic to deliver, and many sites offer a half day or a fortnightly extra day to meet this commitment. For parents and caregivers, both options are often difficult to manage with work commitments as they still have to pay for childcare even if their child only attends fortnightly or for some of the day.

In circumstances where there is an identified additional need, such as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, a child under the Guardianship of the Minister, three-year-old children can access an additional year of government preschool for 12 hours per week under the Department for Education's Preschool Enrolment Policy. This equates to 480 hours of preschool in the two years before full-time schooling (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 2021). We encourage the Commission to consider how this policy will be succeeded by the shift to universal preschool for three-year-old children, and how families with additional vulnerabilities and needs can be supported prior to commencing preschool.

This reform presents an opportunity to rethink the optimal dosage of preschool for both three and four-year-olds and increase this beyond the current 15 hours. It is difficult to identify the right dosage of preschool as it depends on the quality of the program and children's individual needs, however regular and predictable hours reduce the stress and uncertainty for families. By comparison, New Zealand pre-schoolers receive 23 hours per week (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

Enrolment versus attendance and participation

The national Universal Access to Preschool Education commitment significantly boosted enrolment numbers from 12% in 2008 to 85% of four-year-old children in 2021. It is

however important to be aware of the distinction between enrolment and actual attendance and engagement in preschool programs. Participation in preschool is not compulsory and is influenced by parental preference and other factors, such as school starting age and parental working commitments (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). National attendance data in preschool is inconsistent and not reported in a timely manner to ensure it is usable. The Australian Bureau of Statistics collect data during one week of the year, and children are counted as long as they attended at least one hour during that week (The Smith Family, 2019). This offers limited understandings about participation and engagement in preschool, and makes it difficult to ascertain the benefits gained versus dosage experienced.

According to 2021 ABS data, only 56% of three-year-olds actually attend preschool in NSW and Victoria, who both offer subsidised programs for three-year-olds. Unlike long daycare services, there is currently no annual state reporting and analysis of ongoing attendance and participation by South Australian children for the fully-funded 15 hours of access to preschool in all settings. It would be ideal to address this gap before increasing universal access to three-year-old children, and also develop strategies to increase participation for younger children.

Diversity of preschool providers

Currently, South Australian children access one year of preschool using a diverse range of settings. These service delivery models include government-funded preschools, long day care, and early learning programs by private providers. A child may attend both a state-funded preschool and a separate or adjoined childcare service funded by the Federal Government and that *“there is little sense of shared responsibility for...learning”* between the services (Centre for Policy development, 2021, p. 2). Both sectors expect additional parent contributions.

Hard work in South Australia has led to a high-quality preschool system which is predominantly delivered by government providers. Our desire is that any model recommended by the Commission must maintain this level of quality.

Before and after preschool care

We promote a holistic view of the child and recognise that both care and education are essential services to child development and one cannot be delivered without the other. Where possible, these should be complementary to one another. However, there does need to be clear delineation between hours spent in preschool educational programs meeting educational outcomes versus hours spent in other forms of informal learning and care.

Currently however, OSHC services and school leaders can decide whether to accept preschool students into the OSHC service. Hence, this is not consistent across sites and is an influential factor in parental decision making about which site to choose. If preschools will be expected to offer before and after kindergarten care on their sites, consideration should be given to OSHC providing an age-appropriate service to three- and four-year-olds instead.

Before and after school care provision should be available in a coordinated way to reduce fragmentation of a child's day.

Children's development and learning programs

Preschool programs that have well-developed philosophies, in which teachers are responsive to children's varied needs, are known to be the most effective. Particularly in the areas of physical, language and social and emotional development, the differences between a three and four-year-old child can be quite stark. Quality early childhood teachers understand these differences, and value the knowledge, strengths and interests that children bring with them to preschool. They use this information to be responsive to children's learning and needs, and individualise learning opportunities to assist each child to take the next step on their learning journey.

Preschool is as much an opportunity to develop learning dispositions and learning processes such as confidence and resilience, as it is to produce tangible work or meet learning outcomes. The EYLF is an appropriate framework to inform the curriculum for three and four-year-old children and promotes ideas of Belonging, Being and Becoming (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Central to this is the importance of play. Through play, children explore, communicate with oral language, imagine, explore, cooperate and learn about the world around them (Jay & Knaus, 2018).

Relationships and the critical importance of co- and self-regulation

A great benefit of a two-year preschool program is the continuity of the group of children spending two years together— learning, socialising and playing. Research supports the idea that preschool children form fluctuating relationships with peers, but that these become more stable over time (Barbu, 2003). We also see the potential for close relationships between children and teachers, and the opportunities to forge closer connections with families over the two year preschool program.

The EYLF emphasises the importance of relationships, both with caring and highly-trained teachers and educators and also with each other, as well as the quality of the learning program provided (Centre for Policy Development, 2021). The large-scale Australian E4Kids Study supported that the most significant driver of quality early learning programs was the quality of teacher-child relationships and teaching and learning that took place (Tayler, 2016).

For young children, developing the skills to interact positively with each other are building blocks for the development of self-regulation and executive function. These skills are an umbrella term for a range of inter-related components, and contribute to the ability to manage one's social and emotional experiences, also termed 'social and emotional competence' (Collie, Martin, Nassar, & Roberts, 2019; Day, Freiberg, Hayes, & Homel, 2019). These skills are understood to be some of the most essential competencies for later success in education and indeed, life. These skills will be essential for the future world that we are currently preparing children for.

Self-regulation and executive function abilities are not inherent, and develop progressively from early childhood through play and experience. The American Academy of Paediatrics (Yogman, Garner, Hutchinson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2018) states:

Play is fundamentally important for learning 21st century skills, such as problem solving, collaboration, and creativity, which require the executive functioning skills that are critical for adult success. Play helps to build the skills required for our changing world; and play provides a singular opportunity to build the executive functioning that underlies adaptive behaviours at home; improve language and math skills in school; build the safe, stable, and nurturing relationships that buffer against toxic stress; and build social–emotional resilience.

The critical window for the development of these skills is before children arrive at school. It has been found that a key period in the development of self-regulation capabilities is in preschool between the ages of three and five (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). Hence major differences in early academic, learning and behavioural regulation skills can emerge at preschool or school entry. Often, there is a wide range of capabilities in these skills for children entering school (Graham & Nutton, 2021). Earlier research has shown that teachers are most concerned with the self-regulation of school starters, over and above their literacy or academic abilities (Graham, 2019).

Beginning school and preschool are particularly important transitions that tax young children's emotional and self-regulation skills. Teachers identify that some children may have difficulty with paying attention, managing emotions, completing tasks, and communicating wants and needs verbally, which impacts on their success at school. Even when only one or two students in a classroom have poorly developed self-regulation and executive function skills, the entire class is affected, and teacher time is spent on managing behaviour rather than on teaching. It is often within the classroom environment, in a group, with the demands of schoolwork that delays in the development of age-appropriate self-regulation and executive function skills are first noted.

A substantial body of research over recent decades has demonstrated the importance of high-quality preschool and early childhood education in the development of these skills, particularly for supporting children and families living with disadvantage (Melhuish et al., 2008; Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). However, in recent years, policy agendas have typically paid more attention to the contribution of early literacy and numeracy skills on academic outcomes rather than the importance of well-developed social and emotional skills. We would like to see a key focus of three-year-old preschool is on the development of self-regulation and executive function skills.

Planning and assessment

The developmental needs of children between the ages of 3-5 can differ widely, and each child has unique learning needs to be met. Even at the same chronological age, children have a span of abilities. In the preschool years, child development should be considered holistic and developmental. There is a wide variation between children and milestones do not follow a linear pattern as they might in the acquisition of other skills. For example, when a child learns to walk, there is a window of time where this skill is mastered, and it usually

comes after the development of other foundational skills. When a child is learning to play cooperatively with others, take turns, or separate from caregivers, the 'normal' developmental range is much greater. Furthermore, it is not as easy to determine when such a skill is mastered. Instead, they are constantly progressing.

Educators SA, and our members, acknowledge there is a need to observe and evaluate how children are progressing, use this information to plan for their learning and assess and report children's progress towards the EYLF learning outcomes. The EYLF provides a vision for all children to experience play-based learning that is engaging, and provides opportunities to learn in a way that builds success for later in life (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Presently, early childhood educators do this daily and in effective ways. However, a push towards more formalised norms-based assessment and reporting of children at a time of such variable and rapidly changing developmental stages would be unnecessary and cumbersome on the educators.

Transitional arrangements

We accept that it is possible that the implementation of a two-year preschool program will require a staggered or phased approach. Fundamentally, we want a guarantee that implementation in South Australia will be carefully explored and not rushed, to ensure no further inequities are entrenched.

Recommendations

- a) Additional and earlier supports are put in place to support vulnerable children who are currently eligible for two years of preschool, and their families.
- b) State preschool enrolment and attendance data is collected, analysed and reported on an annual basis. Further analysis of the enrolment and attendance data is needed to understand the barriers to low attendance and inform future support needs.
- c) A universal phasing-in program that is equitable across the state, rather than an emphasis on specific sites. A targeted and nuanced approach may be needed for particular children and sites, but phasing in must be done in a clear timeframe that leads to equitable and universal provision.
- d) If phasing in is required, we recommend this is completed as soon as possible without compromising on quality. Ideally, within a two-year period. That is, by 2028, all three and four-year-olds in South Australia will have universal access to a minimum of 15 hours of high-quality preschool.
- e) The Commission endorses the EYLF as the guiding curriculum framework with its principles, practices and outcomes to guide all teaching, learning and assessment of preschool children in South Australia.

- f) Children’s learning and development in preschool should be measured through formative and summative teacher assessments, based on the outcomes of the EYLF and effective pedagogical documentation, rather than norm-based testing.
- g) Liaison with OSHC services about how they can be supported to include all preschool children.
- h) Planning and policy development for three-year-old preschool for children includes specific attention on their development of co-regulation, self-regulation and executive function competencies as part of a broader early childhood wellbeing agenda.

Quality and Innovation

Equity and consistency for all preschool children

The drivers of high-quality preschool provision are well-established; however the quality of preschool education is not consistent for all children (OECD, 2018; Torii, Fox, & Cloney, 2017). The tension between increasing the scale and dosage of preschool programs, and the possible decline in quality, is of concern. Importantly, for quality to be assured, universal provision must be combined with a targeted approach in local communities. When considering the current educator shortages faced in regional, rural and remote areas, moving to a two-year preschool program could be problematic. There may be a more nuanced approach needed in these areas. It cannot look the same in every suburb or setting, however the principles presented in the ‘Purpose and Aims’ section should be always followed.

Accommodating children with additional needs in preschools can be a challenge. Some children arrive at preschool without a formal diagnosis but significant learning or behavioural needs that require intense support. Often by the time teachers identify and discuss these with families and a diagnosis is made, much of the year has passed. Hence, it is incumbent that children’s health, learning and behavioural needs are identified prior to entry through developmental checks, and this information shared with preschool teachers and sufficient funding is provided to support each child’s functional needs.

Obtaining support for children with disability and additional learning support needs in preschool has been described as complex, slow and onerous on staff to apply for at present. Greater flexibility for site leaders/directors to access funding to meet the needs of individual children and families is needed to ensure that all children can access necessary supports in a timely manner.

Connected and coordinated transitions

Connected and cohesive educational services from prior to preschool well into the primary school years are essential. The 2020 Productivity Commission Report commented on the continuing fragmentation of early childhood services resulting in ongoing gaps and

duplication of funding to services which often did not address community interests of needs (Productivity Commission, 2020). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) also advocates for the adoption of a more unified approach to learning in both the early childhood education and the primary school systems, and additional attention to the challenges faced by young children as they transition to school (OECD, 2019). Finally, Rinaldi (2013) observed the fragmentation of the early childhood system was a specific issue for South Australian children and families.

While policy reforms of the last 10-15 years, such as the National Quality Framework, have aimed to strengthen linkages between education-focused and care-focused services, more needs to be done to ensure integration for children moving between preschool and school. Families, communities and education systems and service providers all play a role in supporting a child's readiness to enter formal learning.

Ensuring each of these stakeholders have a say is essential, as the OECD (n.d.) recommend:

Defining and assuring quality should be a participatory and democratic process, involving different groups, including children, parents, families and professionals who work with children.

Having a holistic and systemic approach to early childhood education and school education, where services are coordinated and work together for children's best interests, makes it easier for families to navigate a fragmented system, and supports a collective responsibility for child development (Brown & Lan, 2018). Silburn and colleagues (2018) highlighted the necessity of policy and services supporting children's transition into formal school learning extending through to at least Year 3. Such linkages will require mechanisms and guidelines to be developed to manage the coordination and professionals whose primary focus is to manage these transitions.

Research examining the transition to school period shows a need for further work to ensure the continuity between services at times of transitions (Boyle & Petriwskyj, 2014). The Centre for Policy Development (2021) report that "*the transition from preschool to primary school can be bumpy for children because educational approaches and curricula are poorly aligned*" (p. 2). The EYLF (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) describes the following factors as important to successful transitions:

- building on children's prior and current experiences;
- ensuring children have an active role in preparing for transitions, in partnership with families;
- assisting children to understand transitions, routines and practices of the settings they are moving to and feel comfortable with this process;
- helping children negotiate changes in status or identity, especially during the school transition phase; and
- working collaboratively with each new teacher for the child and other professionals to make certain that a successful transition occurs.

Ensuring the same teachers work with the cohort of preschool children over the planned two-year preschool program, where possible, is critical to ensuring the continuity of education. However, this cannot stop at the conclusion of preschool. Investment in early

childhood increases the productivity of following stages, however this can be weakened at any moment (OECD, n.d.). As Mitchell and colleagues aptly put, “*facilitating environments have to follow facilitating environments*” (Mitchell et al., 2008, p. 24). Therefore, complementarity implies that the gains in early childhood are maximised if preschool and school work together cohesively.

To this end, our members would like to see greater cohesion and a more ‘joined-up’ approach for children and families in early childhood. At present, there are many points of disconnect that would benefit from support such as when they are entering preschool from home or long daycare, moving from preschool to school and when accessing other services such as allied health supports. We would like more consideration into how the two school systems work together in SA, including planning of new preschools and the capacity of the local schools to accommodate these families as they continue through their learning.

Physical environments of preschools

The physical environment of a preschool is an important determinant of how effective and appropriate it will be for three-year-old children. Whether it is a standalone preschool or on a school site, there are structural inputs that must be included such as:

- the inclusion of authentic, high-quality nature rich outdoor learning environments;
- nature rich outdoor learning environments that support the National Quality Standard Quality Area 3 aims (ACECQA, 2018) and the Department for Education’s Outdoor Learning Environments standard;
- dignity of children will be provided by the ease of access to age-appropriate toilets, changing facilities and additional staff to support toilet training and changing nappies, who are willing and funded to change nappies;
- adequate meeting space and storage for materials, play equipment and sufficient teacher preparation spaces; and
- a wide diversity of learning spaces to accommodate large groups of young children.

Recommendations

- a) Evidence-based strategies are implemented to promote the engagement of parents in preschool. Staff time to implement this is costed and funded.
- b) Review the Department for Education Outdoor Learning Environments Standard and other relevant standards for relevance to preschool for three-year-old children.
- c) Teachers designing, and delivering, the two-year preschool program have demonstrated understandings of the different developmental and personal care needs of three- and four-year-old children.
- d) All preschool programs are led by qualified and experienced early childhood teachers.

- e) Toileting and changing facilities, and funding for additional staff, are reviewed prior to three-year-old children commencing preschool.
- f) Prior to entering preschool, every child receives a Health and Development Check, and these results are provided to preschools at least three months before commencement.
- g) Every preschool child is provided a documented and consistent transition pathway. This will coordinate a child's entry into preschool, access to other services and continuation into formal schooling. Staff time to implement this is costed and funded.

Workforce

The importance of a strong early childhood workforce

We now understand that strong and supportive relationships between children and early educators are fundamental. This makes the quality and readiness of the workforce to meet the increased demand critically important. In meeting the commitment to three-year-old preschool, the size of the workforce will need to effectively double in size. This comes at a time of well-documented teacher shortages, and record levels of teachers leaving the profession (Australian Government, 2022). Hence, building workforce supply and striking the balance between the quantity of a qualified workforce and high-quality outcomes will be a key challenge for the Commission and government.

The presence of degree qualified and experienced teachers and leaders is considered the key driver of preschool quality (e.g. Blanden, Del Bono, McNally, & Rabe, 2016; Mustard, 2008; Ranns et al., 2011; Rinaldi, 2013). Having diversity in the background of educators has also been identified as an indicator of quality (Torii, Fox, & Cloney, 2017). Finally, a stable and well-supported workforce enables sustained quality and consistent relationships to be built with children and families (Centre for Policy Development, 2021).

While much is explored in the literature about the positive impact of quality teaching, this cannot be achieved without an influential early childhood leader, who is responsible for facilitating and promoting these positive relationships between teachers, children and families. Supportive and effective leaders, with expertise in early childhood development and curriculum programming, allocation of resources and implementation, staffing and mentoring, and organisational culture and reflective assessment are critical to the success of preschool programs. This is recognised within the NQS (Quality Area 7) (ACECQA, 2018). This requires experience within the demands of early childhood settings, which are unique to other educational environments.

Conditions for teachers and leaders

Our members want surety that any initiatives introduced to meet the workforce challenges will not come at the cost of quality teaching and high-end early learning environments. Irrespective of setting, we ask that all preschools are:

- Staffed by four-year degree qualified teachers;
- Adequately and flexibly funded;
- Appointed a Band A Preschool Leader (in DfE sites) or similar;
- Provided designated preschool leadership that is valued, as demonstrated by leaders having control over their own staffing, decision making and funding (even when co-located on school sites);
- Provided access to high-quality professional learning opportunities including mentoring; and
- Subject to the same expectations, monitoring and regulation processes that have funded implementation.

Members of the early childhood education sector we spoke to say it is essential to retain early childhood autonomy, professionalism and leadership. This can only be achieved by having designated early years leaders responsible for sites, and a genuine sense of educator agency that have expertise in preschool settings. Furthermore, ensuring that senior policy staff in the Department for Education responsible for the early childhood portfolio responsibilities have early childhood qualifications and experience is essential. Mustard recommended that the government “*should take steps to close this gap in understanding in its public service*” (2008, p. 24).

Staff-child ratios play a key role in ensuring quality for better child development (OECD, 2006). It has been identified as the most consistent predictor of high-quality learning environments because it increases the opportunities for frequent and meaningful interactions. Higher ratios also promote child safety, particularly when younger children require additional support (OECD, n. d.). Having three-year-old children, and the interaction of the two age cohorts, at preschool will require lower teacher: child ratios than presently set.

Recommendations

- b) Every preschool leader is provided a base load model for regulated 0.5 FTE minimum leadership and administration time. This minimum should increase on a sliding scale to 1.0, based on complexity criteria.
- c) The ratio of teachers and educators to children in each preschool group should be raised by 2026.
- d) Designated leadership of preschools by qualified early childhood teachers.
- e) Designated funding for workforce development and growth is committed to ensure the availability and retention of skilled early childhood teachers.

- f) The Department for Education implement a recruitment and mentoring approach to encourage greater representation of policy executives with early childhood backgrounds. This may initially require exploration as to why there is currently a low representation across the Department.
- g) A plan, including sponsorship and/or subsidies, is needed to upskill the current cohort of preschool teachers and leaders, to ensure they are not disadvantaged by the recommended arrangements of degree-qualified staff.

Delivery and Administration

Strengths and opportunities from the current system

A real strength of the existing model in South Australia is that we currently have a strong government preschool system that can be expanded upon. According to ACECQA ratings, government preschools were among the first services to be rated of an Excellent standard (ACECQA, 2013). However, the demand of including three-year-olds into preschools is unlikely to be able to be met by government preschools alone. Hence, it is of paramount importance to our members that there is rigorous and consistent supervision and accreditation of the preschool program irrespective of where it is being delivered. Appropriate regulation of services and application of minimum standards is essential, given the groundswell of evidence and evaluations supporting the quality of the program and service as being critical in children's developmental outcomes (OECD, n.d.). While there are a wide range of initiatives currently available for preschool children, many early childhood programs are not subject to evaluation or public scrutiny on their effectiveness, impacts and cost/benefits (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). Furthermore, the lack of consistent evaluation framework and absence of systematic sharing of good practice in preschool limits the benefits that could be experienced from knowledge sharing (The Smith Family, 2019). While this move to three-year-old preschool is founded in evidence and there are examples in other jurisdictions that can be learnt from, systematic state-based evaluation would ensure lessons are learned from the implementation.

Co-location on school sites

To address the demands on capacity with the introduction of three-year-old preschool, one solution could be to explore co-location of preschools on school sites. Relationships between early childhood programs and policies are often strong where preschools are co-located with school sites, consistent with Mustard's recommendations (2008). This model reduces fragmentation in education pathways and often means communication is shared more readily than between some standalone preschool providers and schools where the touch points are fewer. In addition, co-located services are more likely to be utilised by vulnerable families (Centre for Policy Development, 2021).

Educators SA met with the Director of Highbury Preschool, Marnie Hillier, to understand features and benefits of a co-located preschool. The below case study presents some of the facilitators, challenges, and learning opportunities from the perspective of someone leading a successful co-located government preschool.

Highbury Preschool

Highbury Preschool is a co-located, standalone site, with its own site leadership and management, located at the base of the Adelaide Foothills in the north-eastern suburbs. The current staffing is a Director, 1 Teacher and two ECW's (one for Occasional Care). The current physical capacity is 44 children per session, and it is a fulltime site able to enrol 55 children in total, including Occasional Care. Highbury Preschool runs a long-day model of delivering the 15 hours of universal preschool, with children able to attend two days per week from 8.15am to 3.45pm. This makes it longer than a school day, however feedback from parents indicates this is a preferred option than a fortnightly extra day or a half-day.

Since the beginning, Highbury Preschool has always been co-located on the site of Highbury Primary School, however it has always retained standalone status. That is, it is run completely independently in terms of staffing, administration, and funding.

The Director described strong connections between the OSHC, preschool and school all located on the same site and within the same grounds, however made the point that this depends on the school Principal at the time. When there is a change in leader, there are few protocols in place to structure and guide the interface between the services. Furthermore, integration of the preschool students with school activities or shared use of facilities is currently limited because of restrictive and onerous policies that mean each time the students leave the preschool fence, it is considered an excursion. This involves the consent of every parent/caregiver, completion of a risk assessment and putting on extra staff. That includes visits to the school library, classrooms, sports day, or watching student performances.

Preschool children can access the OSHC service in the same way as school children, meaning more flexibility for parents and ease of one drop off. This is a well-utilised service by preschool families, parents get to know the service staff and it increases the children's familiarity with the school site and interaction with other children at the school. OSHC staff walk the pre-schoolers across to the preschool in the morning, and collect them in the afternoon. However, the OSHC does not allow three-year-old children to attend, even if they are eligible for an additional year of preschool. This could be due to the increased staffing ratios that would be required, and inadequate facilities such as toilets for such young children.

The school has a Management Committee with staff representatives from the OSHC, preschool and school to discuss campus-wide matters. This allows everyone to have a voice and understand what is going on in other areas of the site that might impact on their work. While this is a positive initiative, a joint Governing Council across the whole site would be preferable, though still retaining individual line management and funding controls for the individual services. This would enable parents to stay on for many years, thereby increasing their interest in joining at preschool.

The preschool offers a fully integrated, Department-funded occasional care program for two- and three-year-old children that has given them a good sense of how integration of younger children can be managed. These sessions are for three hours and offered at very low-cost to parents and carers. These children arrive later than the preschool children, to enable them each to receive staff support to settle in. All children are greeted in the outdoor play environment to enable strong connections with families and multiple opportunities for all children to interact with different educators and for families to do the same, as well as ensure the duty of care can be met for all children. Families can actively play with their child/ren if they choose to and spend time supporting the separation if required. The learning program is structured to support all curriculum areas during this time. Sessions involving occasional care and preschool children are offered to the different cohorts at different times, so the content and resources (such as stories) can be matched to their differing developmental needs. Early Childhood Workers (ECWs) can choose whether they wish to change nappies and can apply for a financial incentive through the Toileting Allowance.

One of the benefits with co-located preschools and schools was described as an ability to know the whole child over a period of time. Information is shared between all three services about a child. For example, the preschool provides Individual Learning Plans they have written for all children enrolled in the OSHC to strengthen the knowledge of the individual child and plan accordingly. Particularly for children with complex medical needs or significant learning and behavioural support needs, families appreciate knowing they tell their story once and that information about their child is communicated.

The preschool itself has a large outdoor play area that supports nature play and open-ended play experiences. However, they have insufficient nappy changing facilities which will require upgrading prior to accepting three-year-olds in preschool. The physical location of the preschool is ideal, situated near the junior primary classrooms. This helps parents with children in these classes to drop off in one area of the school, and supports preschool children to become familiar with the space they will be transitioning to once at school.

Playgroups are not currently available at the preschool, due to high enrolment numbers. However, the Director would like this option to be possible with a trained educator to facilitate it as a way of transitioning three-year-old children into preschool.

Co-located preschools must be appreciated as distinct from child-parent-centres (CPC's) or school-based preschools, which are not a model being advocated for by our members. Our member organisations describe some key elements of successful co-location, which include:

- Band A Leadership of the preschool;
- Indoor and outdoor quality learning spaces appropriate for early childhood, not shared facilities such as toilets or playground equipment designed for older children.
- Adequate non-instructional time;
- Monitoring the administrative and regulatory burden on leaders and teachers;
- Coordinated services;
- Collaboration and close relationships between the school leader and preschool leader;
- Preschool line management by professionals who have adequate early years qualifications and experience;
- Joint professional development between preschool and school teachers and shared understandings of the EYLF;
- Transition planning and regular communication between preschool and school teachers;
- Resource inputs are shared equitably by all users; and
- Strong relationships with families.

Our members expressed apprehension about where preschool programs will be placed if the places available are insufficient to meet demand. While co-location of preschools on school sites is broadly supported, careful consideration of whether a school site is appropriate in individual circumstances. It came through strongly that our members do not want to see pre-schoolers in classroom settings, even if these might be *available* within schools. All pre-schoolers need and deserve indoor and outdoor play-based environments to explore, collaborate and create in. Not every site will have the necessary space or requirements.

Equity and cost

Reducing inequities in cost and fees must be an important aspect of this reform. As a system presently, preschool in South Australia is a well-utilised and affordable system that relies on minimal and voluntary parent contributions. Hence, early learning opportunities can be provided to a far greater range of children than childcare. On the other hand, many families are locked out of the childcare system due to the prohibitive costs (Centre for Policy Development, 2021). While parents can access Commonwealth government subsidies to send their child to childcare, these are not available for preschool.

Nationally, parents pay anywhere from no fees to more than \$5 per hour to access preschool for their child. Fee schedules can differ between programs, service providers and jurisdictions. Fees may be charged daily, weekly, annually, per session or per term. In the same way that funding for Australian school education is universal and tries to balance entitlement and need, funding for preschool education should follow a similar model.

Mustard (2008) recommended that in keeping with the ideals of public education, that preschool programs should be integrated into early childhood development and parenting centres and be fully funded from birth. Keeping costs affordable for all children attending preschool will be key to ensuring high enrolment numbers. Affordability could be increased through the flexible application of subsidies, such as Child Care Benefit, to preschools.

Recommendations

- a) A range of options for settings are explored for delivering preschool, including standalone preschools, co-location with schools and other sites. All settings delivering preschool must attend to the same requirements, standards and regulatory oversight.
- b) That the Department for Education preschool indicators of Numeracy and Literacy are made available to teachers in all 3- and 4-year-old programs across South Australia.
- c) Where needed and appropriate facilities are available, preschools can be co-located on school sites provided that preschools have autonomy with designated leadership, funding and staffing, including a Band A Leader.
- d) Preschool enrolments will be required to universally follow the current two intakes, commencing the term after a child turns three.
- e) A two-year preschool program should not lead to greater workload and administrative demands on teachers and preschool leaders.
- f) The State government negotiates with the Federal government about the flexible use of appropriate subsidies to support more three- and four-year-old children to attend preschool.
- g) The School Card system for government schools is expanded to include government preschools.
- h) Once commenced, the two-year preschool program is subject to ongoing review and independent evaluation. Factors of interest include implementation barriers and facilitators that impacted on participation, the challenges and opportunities found by educators, and how the program was experienced by three and four-year-old children. Following the review process, insights from this evaluation could be used to develop a sustainable and scalable model of two-year preschool.

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