



ISSUE PAPER

EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE, LEARNING & EDUCATION

APC recognises that the years from 0-5 are a critical period of development and, in this context, that quality early childhood learning programs support successful transitioning to school, later academic success and workforce productivity.

APC considers governments have a lead role to play in ensuring all children can access and experience quality early childhood care and education options that are staffed by well qualified, well paid professionals who are genuinely committed to working in partnership with families.

APC believes the Commonwealth and State/Territory governments must tenaciously act in concert, and with other stakeholders, to breach the early childhood care – early childhood education divide in Australia and significantly improve policy and funding arrangements, service delivery and outcomes.

In moving forward, the central change focus must be the best interests of children (and their families). Traditional turf claims and parochial attitudes must not be allowed to constrain thinking or policy development, nor serve as the ‘marginally moveable’ marks in the sand around which policy implementation and funding negotiations later take place. Whilst international research suggests compelling links between investment in early childhood learning and economic productivity/prosperity, APC considers that sector reform in Australia should not be overly driven by economic motives. Children’s development, learning and equality of opportunity should be, and must remain, the primary policy driver.

Notwithstanding current funding and other functional arrangements, APC considers it appropriate for the Commonwealth government to drive the change process, to have policy oversight and to lead the development of a nationally cohesive and integrated approach to the provision of quality early childhood care and education. Further to this, APC is of the view that a sector specific Commonwealth-State/Territory Agreement must not only provide the basis for the implementation of policy and regulatory reform, but also for a substantial injection of funds and other resources into early childhood learning and education.

Along with the Commonwealth, State/Territory governments must increase their total quantum of funding for early childhood learning and education and, across government tiers, the underlying rationale for the allocation and distribution of financial and other resources must be rigorously interrogated and revised.

Presently, there is absolutely minimal government funding support for the provision of early childhood education in the non-government school sector. The exercise of parental choice, and actual ability to access learning experiences that best meet the needs of

individual children, and the circumstances of their families, is unjustly constrained by current arrangements.

More specifically, APC supports:

- A nationally cohesive approach to the provision of early childhood care and education within an integrated service model to:
 - improve policy (consistency, coherence, direction and stretch)
 - achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency in the distribution and use of existing and new funds/other resources
 - deliver more seamless early childhood services (incl. family support services) and enhance intra-sector quality assurance and collaboration
 - provide more equitable access, experiences and outcomes for all children
- The collaborative development of a national curriculum framework specifying the developmental and learning outcomes that are to be promoted and monitored
- A nationally consistent approach to early childhood staff preparation and credentialing, coupled with substantial remuneration increases for well qualified staff and intense efforts to positively influence the perceived status of early childhood professions
- Collaborative engagement with parents as 'equal partners' and other community stakeholders to oversight all aspects of early childhood policy at the Commonwealth and State/Territory government levels and both drive and monitor planned improvement of strategic and functional coordination.

If the non-government schooling sector is going to be in a position to deliver quality early learning programs, substantial capital funding allocations must be directed to schools in the sector as they already face significant pressures in respect of capital funding. Their capital works are mostly funded from private sources and there is therefore currently very limited capacity for schools in our sector to look at developing early childhood care and learning centres. While there are already a number of cases of childcare centres being co-located on non-government primary school grounds, in many cases those centres have been built by commercial childcare providers on land leased to them by the school authority.

On the other hand, state and territory governments have the capacity to construct their own childcare centres on their own land. Non-government schooling authorities need to be resourced to enable them to provide a better level of integration between early learning and schooling as that will help to ensure that they can compete with government and commercial providers in the early learning area on a more level playing field.
