

## **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY SELECT COMMITTEE**

### **Inquiry into the adequacy of services to meet the developmental needs of Western Australia's children**

*NB This paper was previously submitted in March 2008 to Select Committee Inquiry into Collaborative Approaches in Government but is very relevant to this new inquiry. ECAWA will also provide a further submission against the Terms of Reference of the current Inquiry.*

## **SUBMISSION**

**EARLY CHILDHOOD AUSTRALIA (WESTERN AUSTRALIAN BRANCH)**

**30 January 2009**

**Name of Committee:** Community and Development Justice Standing Committee

**Name:** Cora-Ann Wilson (040 699 2887) [cora-ann@iinet.net.au](mailto:cora-ann@iinet.net.au)

**Organisation:** Early Childhood Australia (Western Australian Branch) Inc\*

**Position held in organisation:** Secretary

**Preparedness to appear before the committee:** Representatives of Early Childhood Australia (Western Australian Branch) Inc would welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee

*\* Early Childhood Australia is a peak, national, non-government, non-profit organisation with branches in each state and territory. Its purpose is to advocate for quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children from birth to eight years. As a strategy to achieve this outcome, ECA actively seeks partnerships with government and non-government agencies which have an interest in children's well being.*

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## 1. Introduction

This is a timely inquiry from the perspective of the Western Australian Branch of Early Childhood Australia (ECAWA). Our organisation is keen to ensure that Western Australia does not lag behind the rest of the world, and other Australian jurisdictions, in recognising and applying international interdisciplinary research findings that demonstrate the effectiveness of a collaborative and integrated approach to early childhood education and child care.

## 2. Research and collaboration in the early childhood context

The necessity of adopting a collaborative and integrated approach to early childhood education and child care is indisputable. Over the last decade research from many perspectives has demonstrated that the early years of a child's life are critically important. This has resulted in a diverse range of people including government and non-government representatives, academics from many disciplines<sup>1</sup>, economists<sup>2</sup> and the business sector<sup>3</sup> strongly advocating about the importance of investing in very young children.

Dr Frazer Mustard (2007)<sup>4</sup> recently contributed two chapters to a major World Bank publication on early childhood development where he concluded:

*The quality of a population hinges on the development of its children – which underpins broader human development and overall economic growth and progress. The global*

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<sup>1</sup> Shonkoff, Jack P. & Phillips, Deborah A. (Eds) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: the Science of Early Child Development* (2002)

<sup>2</sup> Heckman, J. 'Invest in the very young' in Tremblay REF, Barr RG, Peters RDeV (Eds): *Encyclopaedia on Early Childhood Development* (2004)

<sup>3</sup> Business Council of Australia, *Restoring our edge in Education*, August 2007

<sup>4</sup> Mustard, Frazer in Mary Eming Young (ED) *Early child development from measurement to action: A priority for growth and equity*, The World Bank, Washington 2007. (as quoted in Alliance Newsletter Feb 2008 – Australia Research Alliance for Children and Youth)

*workplace favours individuals who have an intellectual flexibility, problem-solving skills, emotional resilience, and capacity to work with others in a continually changing competitive economic environment. The need to maximise human potential has never been greater.*

This has had an influence at a macro policy level when, under the former Liberal Government, the importance of the early years was recognised and became a key part of the National Reform Agenda. In February 2006 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) stated:

*High quality and integrated early childhood education and care services, encompassing the period from prenatal up to and including the transition to the first years of school, are critical to increasing the proportion of children entering school with basic skills for life and learning<sup>5</sup>.*

The commitment to breaking down the barriers, particularly between education and care, continues under the Rudd Government in close partnership with State and Territory Governments.

The benefits of adopting an integrated approach to [early childhood education and child care] is reinforced by researchers, policy makers and practitioners as it allows government ministries to organise agreed policies, and combine resources for early childhood services (OECD 2006)<sup>6</sup>.

Hertzman (2002)<sup>7</sup> drew on the Canadian experience when putting a case for developing an *Early Child Development Strategy* for Australia. He argued that knowledge about the developing brain means that improving child development means improving the environments in which children grow up, live and learn. As health, well-being and competence share common determinants there is considerable scope to apply research findings. It also means the objectives of a wide range of government and non government agencies can be met by acting in concert.

Similarly, the OECD<sup>8</sup> also highlighted the importance of co-ordinated policy frameworks at the centralised level due to the complexity and breadth of early childhood policy issues. Early childhood policy is not only concerned with child development and child poverty but also with workforce participation, social wellbeing, early education and child care. A strong argument is put for developing a systematic approach to policy development within a common policy framework, setting consistent goals across the system and with clearly defined responsibilities at all levels of government.

Sadly, no such direction is evident in Western Australia and no leadership is being shown at any level of the State Government. Opportunities to optimise outcomes for young children will be missed at a time when there is considerable national and international activity aimed at recognising the increasing evidence about how young children learn and develop and the importance of delivering services for them and their families in an integrated way – a way that makes sense to families..

### **3. Government structures inhibit collaboration**

In Western Australia for a number of years individual Ministers and agencies have spoken of a commitment to collaborate in relation to early childhood development and the development of an *Early Years Strategy*. When the Social Policy Unit was established in Premier and Cabinet it was anticipated this agency would take up the leadership role and drive an exciting new agenda across

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<sup>5</sup> Council of Australian Governments (2006), *A New National Reform Agenda*, Communiqué.

<sup>6</sup> OECD Starting Strong 11: *Early Childhood Education and Care*, 2006, pp45

<sup>7</sup> Hertzman, Clyde: *An Early Child Development Strategy for Australia? Lessons from Canada*. Commission for Children & Young People, Queensland Government 2002, pp3.

<sup>8</sup> OECD *ibid* pp47

government. However, the potential has remained unfulfilled and despite the rhetoric there are no apparent tangible improvements for children. There is still no well developed *Early Years Strategy* or any sort of a coherent Plan for Children that cuts across Ministerial portfolios and is supported by appropriate levels of shared funding.

As touched on above, nationally the importance of early childhood education and child care has now been formally recognised by the Rudd Government with responsibility for early education and child care coming under the umbrella of the Department of Education and Workplace Relations. This structure has a dual purpose. Firstly, it recognises high quality nurturing and learning environments for children in their early years is critically important for Australia's future prosperity. Secondly, it recognises the importance of child care as a workforce participation strategy at a time when Australia and Western Australia in particular, is suffering from a declining labour force.

Western Australia has no complementary structures at a Government level to enable a strategic bilateral position to be made in the COAG context. This inhibits Western Australia's capacity to do what the evidence shows is best for children. The evidence demands structures and resource allocation that support collaborative working between government departments. The current arrangements appear to make such collaboration difficult.

The separation of the Department for Community Development into two new Departments (Child Protection and Communities) was a welcome move but ECAWA does not perceive this has contributed to any further integration between early childhood education and child care. On the other hand, other Australian jurisdictions have developed comprehensive Early Years Plans and restructured Government agencies to facilitate implementation through an integrated and collaborative approach. These jurisdictions are better placed to respond to COAG initiatives than Western Australia.

ECAWA is concerned that the portfolio areas on which the Select Committee is focussing omits 'education'. From our organisation's perspective this omission merely serves to reinforce the current deficit situation in Western Australian Government structures as addressed above.

From an ECAWA perspective of advocating for young children, if the Select Committee is to properly investigate new collaborative ways of working, education must be included in the portfolio areas to be considered. The research discussed above reinforces the importance of early education and child care to the future prosperity of this and other countries. Schools and child care centres are focal points and hubs in local communities - essential prerequisites to many community development, justice or health initiatives. In fact, education cuts across all the portfolio areas and is the unifying force for collaboration.

#### **4. The challenges facing early childhood education and child care in the Western Australian context**

One of many examples of the negative impact of the fragmentation of responsibilities and lack of collaboration is in relation to children of kindergarten age. These children, who are as young as 3 years 6 months, are subjected to a myriad of arrangements including:

- Some attend child care and kindergarten and are transported to and from kindergarten on school sites either by the child care service, parents or other arrangements.
- Some attend only child care and do not attend a school based kindergarten. As there are no common standards across child care and kindergarten, and perhaps no early childhood teacher in the child care service, these children could potentially be disadvantaged on commencement of pre-primary.

- Some attend kindergarten on school sites and are transported to before and after school care services primarily concerned with the care of older primary school children.

ECAWA has created a table (attached below) which demonstrates the complexities of the current management of responsibilities for early childhood education and child care in Western Australia. This is a dysfunctional fragmented way to manage these portfolio areas which has a potential negative impact on children and their parents.

*Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*<sup>9</sup> highlights the importance of transitions for young children and, in particular, the transition between child care and school based early childhood education programs. The smooth transition is enhanced by implementing strategies to ensure children moving from child care or informal kindergarten programs to school based early childhood education programs are not disadvantaged. The most effective way of doing this is to have a common set of outcomes to be achieved in all early childhood and care environments. In this context, the concept of a “curriculum” framework for early childhood would be cognizant of the long hours some children spend in child care environments and the related nurturing and care elements of the program.

This issue, which has greatly concerned ECAWA for some time, straddles more than one Western Australian Government Department and is further confused by the involvement of two levels of Government. There is a complexity of bureaucratic and policy factors to be transcended. The fragmentation of early childhood education and care provision at a State and Federal level has resulted in a vacuum of policy in relation to this particular issue. However, there are clear indications that the Federal Government, in the interests of children, families and our nation, intends to promote collaborative working with the States in relation to the early years. ECAWA does not believe Western Australia is well placed to respond.

In October 2006, ECAWA wrote to relevant Ministers supporting collaboration between government, non-government, the private and not for profit sectors in the development of an early years plan. For nearly twelve months ECAWA tried unsuccessfully to engage the relevant Australian and Western Australian Ministers in discussions relating to their overlapping responsibilities for children from 0 – 8 years. Not one Minister was prepared to accept responsibility or become involved in addressing the issue. It was very concerning to see how quickly each Minister flicked correspondence and responsibility between the two levels of Government, and at a State level, between the Department of Education and the Department for Communities. .

In frustration in August 2007, ECAWA eventually wrote to the Premier asking for his intervention and highlighting that the situation was indicative of the very low status of early childhood education and care in this State. ECAWA advised the Premier that it perceived a lack of coordination across the State Government with Departments seemingly unable to connect with each other. A response has not yet been received.

## **5. The way ahead**

The Information Paper provided by the Committee draws attention to various paradigms and ECAWA underlines the need to create different mindsets and transcend current Government management systems.

ECAWA understands there is considerable willingness to collaborate within various Government and non-government agencies. However, well meaning, small, ad hoc attempts by individuals to

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<sup>9</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, September 2006

collaborate is not sustainable. Effective collaboration requires leadership and an agreed strategic approach otherwise, even with the best intentions of individuals, the silo systems result in competition for available resources and undermine a coherent approach to act in concert.

Models of partnership cannot work well when they are funded separately and, as highlighted in the Committee's Information Paper, this situation is prohibitive to truly integrated and collaborative work. Therefore, ECAWA believes it would be more appropriate to fund a Department specifically for early years, including education and childcare, with other relevant Departments mandated to collaborate. This would be conducive to the development of an integrated approach to supporting the wellbeing of children 0-8 years and their families.

The new knowledge concerning the early years of life demands professionals at the policy and practice level in health, education and communities work in at least a collaborative, and preferably an integrated, way. Achieving the best for children demands much greater collaboration between Ministers and across agencies than appears to currently exist.

ECAWA believes there is capacity to transcend the current situation and thanks the Committee for the opportunity to table a submission. The solutions seem very clear and underpinned by concrete evidence. What is lacking is high level leadership, a macro Plan for Children, clearly defined common outcomes and the creation of a governance structure at Departmental level to support the implementation.

ECAWA remains committed to supporting effective collaboration whenever the opportunity presents itself. Our organisation's membership has considerable professional and practical expertise in early childhood development, health, education and child care and appreciates the opportunities that have been presented to interact with Government departments, particularly the Departments of Education and Training and Communities. We are hopeful that the strong government leadership required to ensure a truly collaborative across-government approach will very soon be forthcoming resulting in the development and implementation of a cohesive and co-ordinated plan for children.

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## CHILDREN (0 – 8 YEARS) – EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PROGRAM ATTENDANCE

CHILDREN	DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES					DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION	
	Outside school hours care <sup>10</sup>	Playgroup	Occasional Child Care	Family Day care <sup>11</sup>	Centre based long care <sup>12</sup> day	Kindergarten	Pre-primary
0-12 months		X	X	X	X		
1 - 2 years		X	X	X	X		
2 – 3 years		X	X	X	X	X	
3 yrs 6 mths+	X	X	X	X	X	X	
4 yrs 6 mths+	X	X	X	X	X		X
5 yrs 6 mths+	X						
6 yrs 6 mths+	X						
7 yrs 6 mths+	X						

Responsibility of Department for Communities

Responsibility of Department for Education and Training

Spread of children across both Departments in early childhood education and care programs

<sup>10</sup> All outside school hours care services including family day care and centre based

<sup>11</sup> Family day below school age only

<sup>12</sup> Centre based child care below school age only