



# Two years before school: A better future with earlier participation

## RATIONALE

- A second year of preschool/kindergarten gives our children a stronger start in life<sup>2</sup>.
- Pedagogy: play-based experiential learning is the key to the best learning outcomes for young children<sup>3</sup>.
- **Long day care** offers the **ideal learning environment** for children in their two years before school:
  1. The **infrastructure already exists**; **long day care** facilities are already well established and with 93% of long day care centres reporting vacancies<sup>4</sup>, they have the capacity to meet the needs of families with minimal further investment, thereby allowing governments to redirect capital works grant funding toward increasing subsidies for all preschool/kindergarten programs to ensure quality while increasing early learning affordability.
  2. **Long day care** is better set up both physically and professionally to deliver an early education program for the 0–5 age cohort, with age-appropriate, developmentally appropriate and culturally inclusive child-focussed physical early learning environments which include bathing, nappy changing and sleeping facilities.
  3. **Long day care** is delivered under the same curriculum framework as government and other standalone kindergarten/preschools – the National Quality Framework and the Early Years Learning Framework.
  4. **Long day care** offers appropriately trained educators both from the nurturing and education aspect, with Diploma and Certificate III trained educators and at least one Early Childhood Teacher (many centres have more). From 2020 many **long day care** centres will require two Early Childhood Teachers or ‘suitably qualified’ staff.
    - Co-locating early childhood education programs in the same environment as the schooling system **puts the needs of the children aged 0–5 years last** in these environments, by limiting and decreasing the quality of play-based education and care.
    - Unless **long day care** is recognised and funded as the **key provider** of three year old preschool/kindergarten programs across Australia, families with children in the 0–3 year old age group will **struggle to access affordable early learning services**. The flow on effect will be **long term viability issues** for the long day care sector, with fewer families using their services.
    - The Federal Government Child Care Subsidy Rate that has recently been implemented will no longer support affordable access for those children and their families, and the **hourly rate will need to be increased** to reflect the changing cost structure.

<sup>2</sup> *Preschool: Two Years Are Better Than One*, Mitchell Institute, <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/reports/two-years-preschool/>

<sup>3</sup> *Experts warn starting school too young harms learning, wellbeing*, <https://www.smh.com.au/education/experts-warn-starting-school-too-young-harms-learning-wellbeing-20140125-31fp8.html>

<sup>4</sup> *Federal Department of Education Early Childhood and Child Care in Summary Report 2018*

## CURRENT SITUATION

- While Australia has high levels of enrolments of 4 year olds in early learning in the year before school (92.4%), only 15% of 3 year olds in Australia participate in pre-primary education, which falls well below the OECD average of 68.6%.<sup>5</sup>
- Australia is one of only three OECD countries to see a decline in pre-primary enrolment at age 3 since 2005. Australia's current ECEC system works to disadvantage already vulnerable groups of children, who stand to benefit the most from high quality early learning that can break the cycle of disadvantage.<sup>4</sup>
- The majority (over 60%) of children attending early learning programs two years before school do so in a centre-based **long day care** setting<sup>6</sup>.
- **No federal funding** currently exists specifically to support kindergarten/preschool programs for this age group.
- The Federal Labor Party has committed to achieving 15 hours per week of subsidised kindergarten/preschool to three-year-olds in all service types if they win the next federal election. However there is still a **lack of clarity** about how this would be implemented in practice, and this intended outcome requires an **even bigger financial commitment from the state governments**. At this stage, **only the Victorian Government has made such a commitment**. Additionally this funding would need to be equitably distributed by states to all service types, in order to support all Australian children.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

We call on all parties to support:

- The provision of additional funding that supports the **long day care** sector in delivering kindergarten/preschool programs for 3 year olds, taking advantage of age-appropriate environments and pedagogy that are already established, therefore reducing the need for significant capital investment by government.
- The **exemption** of all families from the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) activity test for **18 hours per week** in their child's two years before school.
- An increased CCS rate for low income families from 85% to 95% in their child's two years before school to ensure increased participation for vulnerable and disadvantaged families.
- Linking this funding to a program delivered by an Early Childhood Teacher as defined by ACECQA guidelines under the existing National Quality Framework (NQF) requirements, and taking into consideration changes under the NQF commencing in 2020.

5 Pascoe, S and Brennan, D 2018, *Lifting our game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions*, p 13, <https://education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-education/whats-happening-in-the-early-childhood-education-sector/lifting-our-game-report>

6 *Report on Government Services 2018*, PART B, CHAPTER 3, Early childhood education and care, <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2018/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care>

