

Early Childhood Management Services

Born ready to learn

ECMS submission to the Education State -
Early Childhood Consultation Paper



Introduction

ECMS welcomes the opportunity to participate in this important consultation on the Education State - Early Childhood Discussion Paper. We believe significant progress has been made by our State Government in recognising the importance of early learning in the broader education debate.

Early education is the fast track to the Education State

As Minister Mikakos states, children are born ready to learn - they are naturally inquisitive about their world. Essential and formative development and scaffolding occurs very early in life. Brain development is at its peak during the first five years of life. Access to high quality early education brings lifelong benefits; there is clear and compelling evidence that links early education with long term educational and social outcomes.

Victoria is doing well, but we must do better

In delivering outcomes for children, Victoria is doing well when compared to other states. This is evidenced in the consultation paper, for example:

- Victoria has the smallest proportion of developmentally vulnerable children in the first year of school (2012 AEDC).
- Year 3 NAPLAN results show Victoria has the smallest proportion of children below the national minimum standard in key areas (2014 NAPLAN results).
- 96.4 per cent of Victorian children participation in kindergarten in the year before school.
- Victoria has the highest proportion of early childhood services assessed as “meeting” or “exceeding” national quality standards (79 per cent).

Victoria has led the way in the national reform agenda with its roll out of the National Quality Standard and universal access to kindergarten. Investments in integrated service models and programs targeting disadvantaged children have seen improvements that will deliver educational benefits for children now and into the future.

However, much more could be done to put Victoria on the map as the Education State. The opportunity to do better is clearer when we consider how we are performing against international benchmarks:

- Public funding for early childhood education is relatively low in Australia compared with other OECD countries (OECD 2012).
- Australia ranks 34th of 38 OECD and partner countries in early childhood education enrolment rates, well below the OECD average (OECD 2012).
- In the UK, 15 hours of free early childhood education a week is available to all three-year-old and four-year-old children, and to the most disadvantaged 40 per cent of two-year-olds.
- Other countries like Norway, Canada, Sweden and New Zealand have similar free early childhood education offerings to the UK.

We also know that more can be done to support

vulnerable children who are likely to benefit most, yet participate the least, in early learning services.

- The PwC 2014 report “Putting a value on early childhood education and care” identified potential returns of up to \$30billion to the Australian economy through continuing to lift quality standards and increasing participation of vulnerable and at-risk children in early learning services.
- Early learning services in less disadvantaged areas are slightly more likely to be rated of higher quality than those in more disadvantaged areas (65 per cent) (ACECQA 2015).

The Education State Early Childhood Discussion Paper identifies five areas we need to change to become a world leader.

1. Earlier engagement in learning
2. Boost to educational quality
3. More support for parents
4. More support for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families
5. Better connection between services.

Much progress has been made towards achieving these important goals, which need to remain priorities for continuously improving our early childhood education system. However, if we limit ourselves to thinking and behaving in the ways we already have, it is unlikely the improvements we make will elevate us to the status of world leader in early childhood learning and development.

ECMS sees the time is right for leadership and systemic change that challenges our structures, mindsets and ways of working. In propelling Victoria to the Education State, ECMS invites the Victorian Government to consider the following three key points:

1. Universal entitlement
2. Systematic overview
3. Leadership for professional change.

These three points are explored in more detail below.

1. Universal entitlement

Move from universal access to universal entitlement

ECMS believes ALL children are entitled to quality early learning opportunities from birth. A feature of Victoria leading the way as the Education State would start with recognising and embracing the importance of this formative time in a child’s educational journey as an *entitlement* rather than simply an opportunity for some.

Universal services such as health and school are services for children and families that are unconditionally available. ECMS would like to see early education embraced in the same way.

Embracing early learning as an unconditional entitlement from birth will also prompt us to provide better support to empower parents in their role as a child’s first and foremost educators. Universal entitlement to early learning would lead to increased participation in services and decreased stigma for vulnerable families. Creating



a universal entitlement would level the playing field and reduce the need to target funding (such as ESK) to specific groups of children.

The early years provide the platform for the building blocks of future learning and growth. Children have a right to be given the best opportunities to make that platform strong, resilient and stable. ECMS supports ELAA's recommendation that the first principle of an Early Childhood Education State is one that is founded on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The convention includes children's rights to Participation, Protection, Purpose and Prevention from harm.

"The Committee [on the Rights of the Child] interprets the right to education during early childhood as beginning at birth and closely linked to young children's right to maximum development"¹

International examples referenced in our introduction show us that many developed countries have fully embraced the research on the importance of the early years and turned what we now know into what we actually do. Looking at early childhood education as an entitlement challenges how we design and fund the system. There are many families that cannot afford ELC for their children or don't see it as important. Vulnerable children need a service system that reduces barriers and provides resources that will contribute to better lifelong outcomes for everyone.

Not being able to afford early learning and care is not an option

As a state, we would not prevent a child from attending school because their parents could not afford it. Nor would we allow children from family environments of risk and harm to stay at home and not attend school. Extending this entitlement to the early years is not only an economic and social investment, it is a moral and ethical obligation.

ECMS sees an opportunity to address the fundamental structures of our system of funding kindergarten and preschool. If viewed as an entitlement, the funding model must be needs-based; that is, responsive to the needs of children and families, promoting equity of outcomes and excellence in early childhood education. Different children enter kindergarten with different needs. Families enter the system from different circumstances. Kindergarten services operate in different social demographics that each bring their complex needs. While the current per capita funding model does cater for some difference (e.g. Health Care Card recipients, rural / remote services, indigenous children), it fails to meet the diversity and needs of today's children and families.

¹ *General Comment No. 7 (2005) Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood. Committee on the Rights of the Child. Paragraph No.28.*



Local Case Studies

Maddie's story

Maddie attended ELC from an early age of two years old as her mother and father both worked. She was in a long day care service three days a week. At three years old, Maddie attended a three-year-old kindergarten program within the long day care service that prepared her for her preschool at four years old. When she turned four, Maddie's parents moved her to the kindergarten on the primary school she would be attending the following year to enable her to make friends and transition to school well.

Maddie's early years experiences have given her opportunities to mix with other children, form significant relationships with other adults, develop resilience and learn to separate from her parents during the day. She has flourished and is very much looking forward to school.

Maddie's parents are excited about her next steps in her educational journey and have visited the school, met the prep teacher for next year and discussed Maddie's transitional report with her kinder teacher.

Billie's story

Billy lives with his family and has never attended kindergarten or early learning and care because his family cannot afford it. His mother is unemployed and his father left the family home when he was two years old. Billie's mother does not think kindergarten is important because Billie "can learn to read when he goes to school".

Billie spends his whole day at home, rarely sees other children and is generally anxious. He is expected at school next year and he is still in nappies at night time. He has no idea about school as his mother has no reason to talk to him about it. Her school life was short as she was "not very clever and was never going to amount to much".

Her expectations for Billie are low and she feels certain he will probably be a handful at school like his sister.

Both these children will go to school as it is their entitlement. It would be progressive and responsive if they were both equally prepared as they are entitled to be.

ECMS is advocating access to early learning be framed as an unconditional entitlement for all children from birth and that we design our system of early education around this core principle. ECMS recognises this will have significant implications for policy, funding, service planning, design and delivery, but as we consider becoming The Education State, now is the time to start the conversation and articulate the vision.

If we start with the vision and enact a staged approach to implementing a universal entitlement to early learning from birth, Victoria can lead the way to becoming the Education State. A staged approach could begin with:

- Building broad community awareness of the importance of early learning as part of the education continuum
- Empowering families with the knowledge, tools and supports to fully embrace their child's entitlement to early learning opportunities
- Creating the service platforms for all children and parents to access their entitlement to early opportunities from birth through services such as supported playgroups
- Introducing a universal entitlement for all children to access two years of early learning in the years immediately before school
- Providing an entitlement to early education and care services for all disadvantaged children from two years of age.

2. Systemic Overview

Much has been done, but now is the time for systemic change

The system of early education we have today is one characterised by fragmentation and a reactive mindset. Fragmentation occurs across all three levels of government in terms of policy, funding, planning and service delivery. The fragmentation continues across the various layers of the education system itself (early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary) and despite our goals to improve transitions for children the journey is not a seamless one.

Unfortunately the children in our society who have additional needs, are disadvantaged or are at-risk face the complexity of navigating their way across our systems of health, welfare and early intervention.

A systemic child-centred approach from birth to adulthood

Applying the principle of universal entitlement to education from birth forces us to rethink and take a systems approach to education – an approach that views early education as part of the broader education continuum.

ELC belongs in the broader universal education system. As highlighted in the Education State discussion papers,

research tells us that providing a holistic, joined-up service provision from birth to 18 years old is the most productive way of ensuring children finish their education, participate in community and make valuable contributions to society by joining the workforce.

A joined up system is more than better connected service provisions

The current funding models seem to fall into 'care' and 'education' (federal and state) based on children's age. The Victorian Government, as an educational leader, needs to focus attention on the children 0-3 years old in ELC.

ECMS understands the subsidies for care have historically been the accountability of federal governments. We would support the Victorian Government to explore alternative pathways to support children from birth to three to access and participate in ELC as a fundamental right of living in the Education State.

ELC is inclusive of kindergarten, long day care, playgroups, outside school hours care, family day care, occasional care and innovative specific projects such as HIPPY², plus budget placed services e.g. MACS centres³.

Federal, state and local government processes and policies and the interface between funding models, regulations and provisions are complicated and unwieldy. Bringing ELC into the structure of education from birth to 18 is the job of the state government in partnership with local governments and service providers.

Along with health, education and community services, ELC is part of a universal provision. It is currently available to all but it is out of reach to some due to structural and systemic barriers.

Structural Barriers such as affordability, waiting lists, allocations, enrolments and availability are structural barriers to inclusion for some children. As the lead, Victoria could remove these structural barriers by embracing ELC into the education system. Dropping the age of free education to three years old would be a progressive step forward in tackling some of these barriers and creating pathways to school for all children.

Systemic Barriers such as intergenerational poor education and unemployment, low expectations and poverty are some of the broader systemic barriers that render young children disadvantaged from birth. Perforating these systemic cycles requires an entry point of intervention early in life and early in the pathway of disadvantage and vulnerability. Waiting until a child is five years old is too late. The age anomaly in funding education flows in completely the opposite direction to critical brain development.

Bringing ELC into the system sees significant longer term gains in productivity. Providing free education to children from three years old would reduce welfare costs and boost women's workforce participation. As noted on page 13 of the Early Childhood consultation paper, The UK Government has recently committed to extending 15-30 hours free childcare for working families in an effort to both increase workforce participation and improve development outcomes for children.

² *The Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters*

³ *Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services*

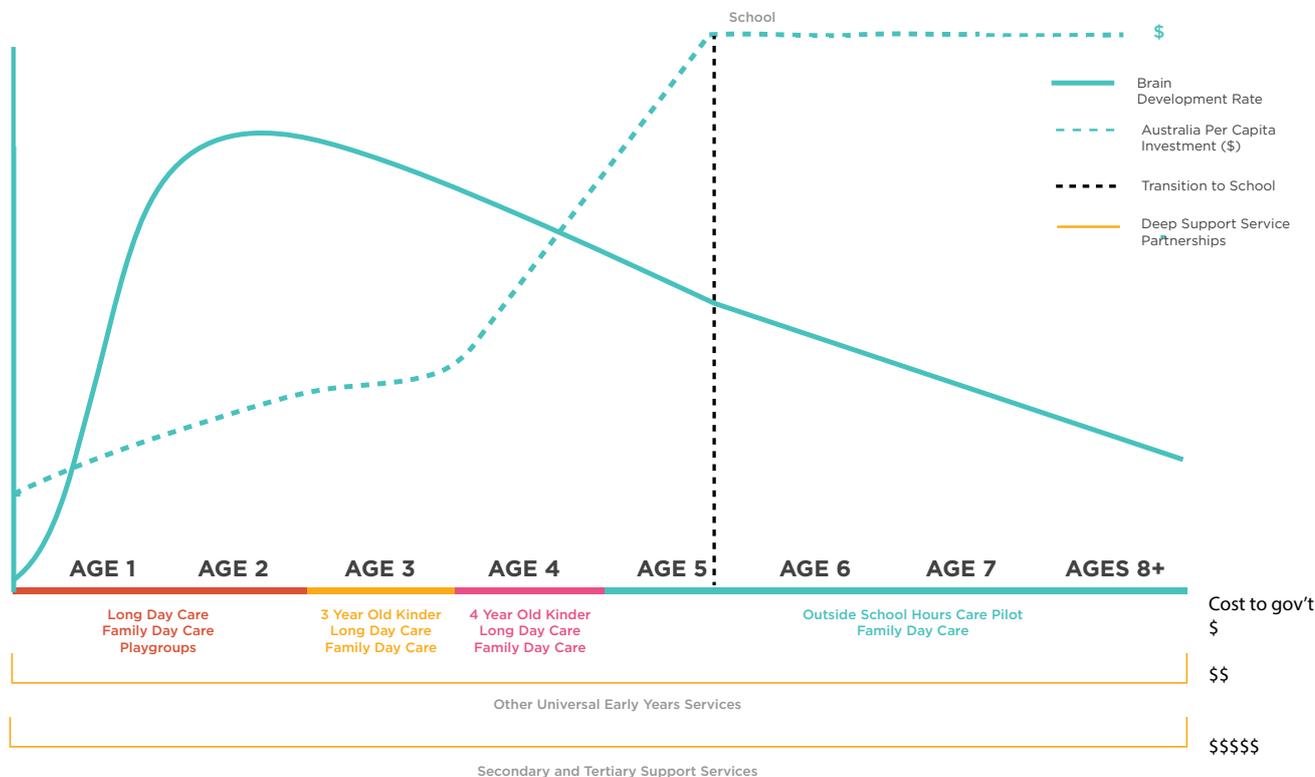


Diagram 1: Brain development rate comparable to Australia Per Capita Investment in education by the age of the child

ECMS would support the Victorian Government to:

- Lead the national debate on future reforms
- Bring policy makers, practitioners and academics together from local, state and federal arenas to draw up an agenda to design, implement and evaluate innovative strategies to produce substantially greater impact than those currently achieved by existing programs
- Drive greater investment in early education around the first three years of a child's life
- Embrace ELC into the universal systems of health, education and community services by making it part of the system, not an attachment to the system.

3. Leadership for professional change

Expect great things from our early education service platform

A significant change is occurring in the way children are being brought up in the world's developed countries. UNICEF reports that approximately 80 per cent of the rich world's three to six year olds are now in some form of early childhood education and care. Forces driving this change are increased female workforce participation and an increasingly competitive knowledge-based economy that is convincing governments and parents that early childhood education is an investment in the future (UNICEF 2008).

These forces have seen a virtual revolution in Australia over the last 10 years with the introduction of the

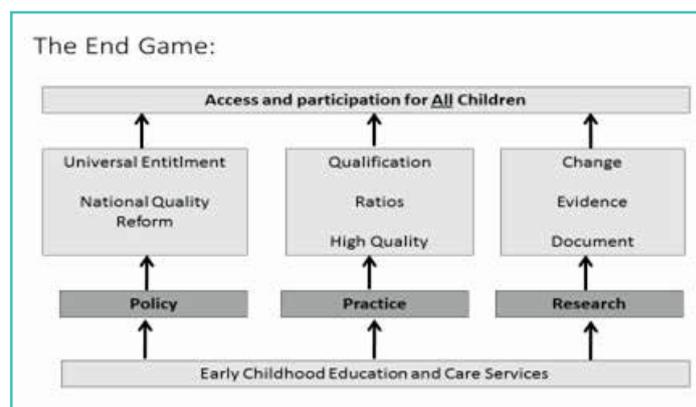
National Quality Framework and the National Early Years Learning Framework. Empirical research that has been conducted, documented and influenced our thinking on brain development in early childhood has changed policy worldwide and brought our attention to the importance of investment in young children.

Leadership, professionalism and excellence in early education

The importance and impact of early childhood education that is unfolding, particularly in the arena of neuroscience, highlights that we must expect even greater things from our early education services, their leadership, management and their accountability for outcomes.

To escalate Victoria to the Education State, ECMS sees an opportunity to fast track the professionalism of the service sector by investing in:

- High quality service leadership and governance
- Pedagogical leadership
- Educational practice
- Integrated service responses.





Local Case Study

ECMS has a multi-disciplinary leadership team comprising pedagogy leaders, social policy leaders, community development leaders and business leaders. This multi-disciplinary leadership approach offers ECMS the resources and scope to develop innovative service provision that is well informed, responsive and progressive. For long term sustainability, it needs policy investment that is not driven by political constraints.

Investment in staff via professional development, career progression and remuneration are key pillars that support the professionalisation of the sector.

ECMS has recently convened an Educational Leadership Forum where all educational leaders come together to explore and research evidence-based educational practice, team teach, mentor and critically review their work and practice. ECMS has also introduced an international post graduate leadership scholarship program in partnership with Early Childhood New Zealand. Twelve ECMS educational leaders will be commencing this two year qualification in January 2016. The diploma consists of four papers on the following:

- Leading teams
- Leading organisations
- Leading the sector
- Social change.

This kind of professional development will bring post graduate educational leadership not only into the classrooms and playrooms of ELC but also into the sector.

Giving young children access to highly qualified teachers and giving the sector professional recognition as an education service to children is another step towards Victoria becoming the leader in educational reform. The rhetoric around ELC for many years has been that it is 'child care' for working mums, crèche for children to play and not an education service or a profession. As the Education State, Victoria could lead the way in investing in the workforce and contributing to the professionalisation of the sector.

Early learning and care requires innovative, multi-disciplinary leadership on all levels to build on this investment. Practitioners, researchers and policy makers working together to ensure that what we learn from research can be put into practice and that policy can support this. Currently, practice is hampered by policy despite being informed by research. We find ourselves being led by policy constraints rather than evidence.

Integrated practice to ensure families have entitlement to all early years services is becoming a predominate aspiration in the provision of care and this requires leadership. This cannot be done by practitioners alone. It requires policy leadership, service leadership, integrated governance, integrated practice leadership and integrated management.

Victoria has been a leader in Australia in its investment in the early childhood education workforce, however there is more work to do to elevate our status to the education state:

- Provide leadership in building community awareness and recognition of early education (and the early education profession) as integral to each child's education journey
- In collaboration with the sector, establish standards of excellence and an outcomes accountability framework for the delivery of high quality early education services
- Lead development of a vibrant, viable early childhood service system underpinned by stable and professional leadership, high quality education practice and multidisciplinary practice
- Invest in securing the future pipeline of early childhood educators.

ECMS looks forward to continued conversation and contribution to the Education State.

**Early
Childhood
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