

3 November 2017

Hon Anastacia Palaszczuk
Premier of Queensland
PO Box 15185
CITY EAST QLD 4002
thepremier@premiers.qld.gov.au

Dear Premier,

Queensland early education and care policies

As the State peak body in the Queensland early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector, Australian Childcare Alliance Queensland (ACA Qld) is a not for profit, member funded organization representing over 700 ECEC services employing approximately 10,500 educators, who educate and care for around 145,000 children of over 200,000 parents in Queensland. We advocate for the interests of children and families. We work on behalf of ECEC service owners and operators, predominantly private, to ensure families have an opportunity to access affordable, quality ECEC throughout Australia.

ACA Qld have a long track record of working collaboratively with all levels of government, regulatory bodies including the Department of Education and Training in Queensland and other stakeholders to ensure that families are supported into the future with a sustainable, affordable and viable sector. ACA Qld is extremely proud of the ECEC sector. ACA Qld is seeking responses from political parties on policies to improve access to quality early education and care for Queensland families. Each day, children from more than 150,000 Queensland families access 2000 ECEC services employ more than 25,000 early childhood educators and teachers.

ACA Qld, on behalf of our members, is seeking the following commitments to ensure *all* Queensland children thrive:

- A long-term commitment to at least maintain, current total levels of funding for Universal Access to kindergarten programs in the year before school
- Development of a whole of government Early Years Strategy
- Improve the quality of early education and care through workforce development initiatives
- Support children who are disadvantaged to participate in ECEC, including children in regional and remote areas and from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- Greater intervention in the planning of ECEC services
- Standardised school starting age across all states
- Minimum level of engagement for all children irrespective of their family's circumstances

These priorities are strategically aligned to improve longer term educational and lifelong outcomes for Queensland children, and to help equalise opportunities for children between city, regional and remote areas.

Access to early education and care benefits *all* children, particularly children who are disadvantaged or developmentally vulnerable. Investing in the first five years, not only improves a child's readiness for school, but helps build the skills base needed for success in later life in this rapidly changing world.

Queensland has much to be proud of. Over the past decade, the last four Queensland Governments have supported expansion of kindergarten programs with participation rates rising from just 26% of four-year olds enrolled in kindergarten programs in 2008 to now almost 100%. This has, in turn, contributed to a significant improvement in educational outcomes for Queensland children, with Year 3 NAPLAN mean scores rising on average over the last six years by 25 points in reading and 17.5 points in numeracy¹, and many improved results have not even been realised yet.

The sector is keen to see Queensland consolidate and build on these gains in all parts of the state. **We seek your response on the above by 5pm Friday 17 November 2017.**

1. Make an ongoing commitment to at least maintain current total levels of funding for Universal Access to kindergarten programs in the year before school

An ongoing commitment is needed to fund Universal Access to kindergarten programs in the year before school, at least at its current total level of investment as an integral part of the education system. This funding should continue to support both the operational costs of providing quality Queensland Government approved kindergarten programs in long day care centres and kindergartens, fee relief for low income families, and programs to support vulnerable children, in addition to existing (and future) child care subsidies. Funding must be adequately indexed to ensure its value is not eroded over time.

2. Develop a whole of government Early Years Strategy

The first five years of a child's life are crucial to their later educational, social, health and employment outcomes, and provide a unique window for high returns on investment. A whole of government Early Years Strategy could help to build awareness on the importance of the early years, focusing on positive progress in broader early childhood well-being. This should be backed by outcomes-focused research that takes advantage of data matching opportunities.

¹ Steel, C. (2016). Queensland's NAPLAN results show how early learning works. Retrieved from <http://thespoke.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/queenslands-naplan-results-purest-example-early-learning-works/>.

3. Support improving the quality of early education and care through workforce development initiatives

The E4Kids report, supported by the Queensland and Victorian Governments, highlighted the need to improve the quality of early education and care, particularly for disadvantaged children². The Victorian Government has responded with a \$200m Early Childhood Reform Plan to improve the quality of learning through mentoring, coaching and professional development³. The State Government needs to build on the current Workforce Action Plan and do more to support educators to upskill to Diploma and Bachelor degrees (including access to HECS-HELP while educators work in the ECEC sector), as well as funding professional development and support programs to improve practice. This would help meet the 2020 requirement to employ a second early childhood teacher (or suitably qualified person) in each service. Enrolments in early childhood teacher courses fell by 13% in 2017⁴.

4. Support children who are disadvantaged to participate in early education and care

One in four Queensland children start school developmentally vulnerable, and one in four children finish school without basic literacy and numeracy skills needed to succeed in life. 42% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children start school developmentally vulnerable. Children in western Queensland are twice as likely as children in inner Brisbane to start school developmentally vulnerable (36% vs 18%). Children in Townsville and the Far North are a third more likely than children on the Gold or Sunshine Coast to be developmentally vulnerable (29% vs 22%)⁵.

Access to quality early education and care can help change this trajectory. Children who might benefit the most often face multiple barriers to participation. Children in regional and remote areas and from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are at most risk to address barriers to participation. We propose the following:

- Maintain and build on fee help for low income families to participate in kindergarten.
- Targeted professional development and support programs to support disadvantaged children, particularly in rural and remote services.
- Work to achieve 95% participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early education and care through targeted investment in strategies such as cultural awareness programs, and improved pathways to employ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the early childhood sector.

² Tayler, C. (2016). E4Kids study: Assessing the effectiveness of Australian early childhood education and care programs. Retrieved from http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news_and_activities/projects/E4Kids.

³ Victoria State Government Education and Training (n.d.). Kindergarten funding reform. Retrieved 3 November 2017, from <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/educationstate/Pages/eckinder.aspx>.

⁴ Queensland Tertiary Admissions Centre (n.d.). Statistics. Retrieved 3 November 2017 from <https://www.qtac.edu.au/about-qtac/statistics>.

⁵ The Australian Early Development Census (2015). Retrieved 3 November 2017 from <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data>.

- Fund outreach programs to support families not utilising early education and care to engage with and participate in the sector, particularly children in child protection.
- Commit to similar strategies implemented in Tasmania, ie provision of free preschool for all low income 3-year olds from 2020; and Victoria and New South Wales who fund access for some disadvantaged 3-year olds at present.⁶

5. Greater intervention in the planning of ECEC services

ECEC services should be made available where needed, as part of good community planning, at a price that facilitates participation by all families. The existing private/public collaboration model (wherein the private sector provides the infrastructure and operates the services, and the government subsidises attendance by families) is successfully delivering high quality ECEC services, while allowing the government to focus on providing funds to families who need it most.

Better access, affordability and community inclusion could be achieved through greater intervention from planning authorities at the local, state and federal levels to allow for greater communication with individual/corporate developers looking to develop new services. Planning authorities could seek to ensure that developers undertake due diligence by adequately researching the need for new services, taking into account the existing services in the local area, the projected population statistics, the elasticity of demand and the business model. As an example, the Howard Government implemented a planning system that met the needs of families without costs to the tax payer.

In terms of government subsidies, ACA Qld would support a government funding package that encourages the development of new services **only in areas of proven need**, to ensure that existing services remain viable and ECEC is maintained at an affordable level for families.

6. Standardised school starting age across all states

ACA Qld would like to see the State Governments form a well-informed opinion on what would be the most appropriate standardised school starting age, encompassing the key learnings from other countries with successful ECEC programs and using them as policy benchmarks.

ACA Qld strongly recommends that **children must be at least 5 years of age by 1 January in their first year of formal schooling.**

7. Minimum level of engagement for all children irrespective of their families circumstances

ACA Qld implores all political parties to put the concept of universally accessible ECEC for all children at the forefront in any policy development. In doing so, accessibility needs to take into consideration the factors of affordability, location and inclusion.

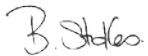
⁶ Victoria State Government Education and Training (n.d.). Early Start Kindergarten. Retrieved 3 November 2017, from <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/parents/kindergarten/Pages/earlystart.aspx>

If we are a country that significantly values early childhood education and care, we need to invest to allow all children to have access to at least **30 hours of subsidised early childhood education and care per week**. ACA Qld believes that any government policy development should include this commitment to funding families.

Yours faithfully,



Majella Fitzsimmons
President, Australian Childcare Alliance Queensland



Brent Stokes
General Manager, Australian Childcare Alliance Queensland

Responses to be emailed by 5pm, Friday 17 November to: gm.qld@childcarealliance.org.au
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