

National Early Childhood Reform Agenda Update August 2009 (By DEEWR Queensland Office)

Background

The reform agenda is built around expanding and improving the quality of early childhood services, starting with the integration of care and education in the early years. The work of the Council of Australian Government or COAG provides a whole of government approach to the reform agenda.

National reform initiatives that seek to improve early childhood outcomes are outlined below. The initiatives are delivered as part of COAG to support movement toward a more coherent and integrated early childhood sector supporting children and their families. A total of \$2.4 billion dollars over five years has been committed by DEEWR to early childhood education and care initiatives. This does not include child care benefit which for 2008-2009 was close to \$3 billion.

A National Early Childhood Development Strategy developed collaboratively across Commonwealth Agencies and the States and Territories was endorsed by COAG in July 2009. It outlines a shared vision for the development of young children in Australia by 2020. COAG will also progress the strategy by the development of proposals for six reform priorities and progress measures by 2010.

- Strengthen universal maternal, child and family health services
- Support for vulnerable children
- Engaging parents and the community in understanding the importance of Early Childhood Development (ECD)
- Improve early childhood infrastructure
- Strengthen the workforce across ECD and family support services and
- Build better information and a solid evidence base

A copy of the Strategy is at www.coag.gov.au Also see "Supporting the development of young children in Australia: 2009" at www.deewr.gov.au/earlychildhood

The **Closing the Gap** initiative includes ambitious targets for Indigenous children related to infant mortality, literacy and numeracy and participation in quality early childhood education.

The National Partnership Agreement to address the needs of **Indigenous Early Childhood Development** was signed by COAG in October 2008. Bilateral plans for implementation have been developed across all jurisdictions. Three key elements include **35 Child and Family Centres** established across Australia, increase access to antenatal care, teenage sexual health and child and family health services for Indigenous children and families. There will be \$75m for nine Child and Family Centres in Queensland with the implementation by the Qld Department of Education under the Office of Early Childhood Education and Care. Development will involve consultation and ongoing engagement with communities, stakeholders and partner agencies. Mt Isa is to be one of the nine sites.

Australian Governments have committed to establishing a **National Quality Framework** to raise the quality and drive continuous improvement in early childhood education and care services. Families need access to high quality affordable early learning and care for their children to give the basis for a long productive working life.

In August 2008, the COAG Productivity Agenda Working Group (PAWG) released a discussion paper on the development of the National Quality Framework as the basis for consultations to progress these reforms. The discussion paper outlined the key features of the new Framework, including:

- Strong National quality standard;
- A quality rating system;
- Streamlining or integrating licensing, regulation and accreditation arrangements to increase national consistency; and
- The Early Years Learning Framework.

In July COAG endorsed a Regulation Impact Statement (RIS) with reform options for improving quality and announced public consultations in relation to the National Standards, the Regulatory System and the Rating System. Public Forums were held in July. See www.deewr.gov.au/earlychildhood to access the RIS document, the Policy Overview and to participate in the online survey. Written submissions can be emailed to eccequality@deewr.gov.au by 31 August 2009.

The RIS outlines a number of options to achieve national quality reform in child care and early education settings across the country, including:

- lower staff to child ratios
- higher staff qualification requirements
- tougher quality standards for early childhood education and child care services
- a new rating system designed to give parents more information about the quality of their child's early education and care service.

The **draft National Quality Standard** comprises seven quality areas:

1 Educational program and practice - The Early Years Learning Framework (or a prescribed curriculum framework) informs the development of a program for each child that enables and supports their learning and development.

2 Children's wellbeing, health and safety - Every child's health and wellbeing is safeguarded and promoted.

3 Physical environment - The physical environment is safe, suitable and provides a rich and diverse range of experiences to promote children's learning and development.

4 Staffing arrangements including ratios and qualifications - Staffing arrangements create a safe and predictable environment for children and support warm, respectful relationships. Qualified and experienced educators and coordinators encourage children's active engagement in the learning program.

5 Relationships - Relationships that are responsive, respectful and promote children's sense of security and belonging, freeing them to explore the environment and engage in learning.

6 Collaborative partnerships with families and communities - Respectful supportive relationships with families are developed and maintained. The service also engages with the community.

7 Leadership and service management - Effective leadership contributes to sustained quality relationships and environments that facilitate children's learning and development. This quality area includes service governance, commitment to continuous improvement, planning and evaluation and business management.

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) the first component of the Quality Reform Agenda is linked to the National Quality Standard and underpins universal access to early childhood education.

- The EYLF is a curriculum framework document which will guide early childhood educators in developing quality early childhood programs by providing broad parameters, principles and outcomes and enhance young children's learning from birth to five years of age, as well as their transition to school. It is a guide characterised by the balance of three core themes - Belonging, Being and Becoming. It has a specific emphasis on play-based learning and recognises the importance of communication and language (including early literacy and numeracy) and social and emotional development. It will form the basis for ensuring children in all early childhood education and care settings experience quality teaching and learning.
- The EYLF has been trialled in 28 case study sites across Australia. In April 2009 DEEWR hosted an online forum to provide early childhood educators and other interested parties with an opportunity to provide feedback directly to Government. Finalisation of the draft EYLF has been informed by feedback from the consultations, field trials and online forum.

- The final draft of the Early Years Learning Framework was endorsed by COAG on 2 July 2009. Access the Early Years Learning Framework and Families Guide at http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Pages/EarlyYearsLearningFramework.aspx
- The EYLF roll out is currently in a familiarisation period for the early childhood sector. The roll out will take time to ensure awareness of its release, understanding of the content, mapping it against current practice and next steps. An Educator's guide is expected for release in October 2009. Online training with seven modules is under development for a staged implementation from October 2009. Any comments about the kind of support that services would like to assist them in engaging with the Framework are encouraged.

A **National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education** aims to achieve **universal access to quality early childhood education** for all children in the year before school (3 ½ to 4 ½ years) by 2013. Universal access to an early education program will be for 15 hours per week for 40 weeks a year delivered by a university-qualified early childhood teacher in a diversity of settings. The Australian government is making a major investment in early childhood education for all children (\$970m over five years nationally) and the States and Territories have committed to achieving universal access. The Qld government has announced funding to establish 240 new kindergarten services across Qld in a variety of settings. A range of projects assist with the implementation challenges.

C&K have been one of the key players in developing and trialling models of Universal Access delivery. Their trial project "Piloting Pre-Prep Mobile Delivery Strategies" in Queensland covers five sites including Woodridge (FDC), Karumba/Normanton, Julia Creek/Richmond, Surat/Injune and Carole Park/Redbank Plains.

The provision of **260 Early Learning and Care centres** will provide a mix of services designed to meet the needs of parents and families including accredited Long Day Care Centre and provide for universal access. The Commonwealth is working with the States to look at planning for new services and use of existing infrastructure to meet increased demand associated with universal access; and at some flexible ways of delivering services in regional areas and where there are low numbers of children. The Minister for Early Childhood Education, Child Care and Youth, Kate Ellis, and the Queensland Minister for Education and Training, Geoff Wilson announced five new early learning and care centres in July at Amberley, Cairns, Gladstone, Townsville and Weipa. The Weipa site is a partnership between Rio Tinto and C&K and is currently in development.

In addition, under this initiative, an **Autism-specific Centre** for Brisbane will provide early learning and care programs for children diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder and those with ASD related symptoms. The ASD Centre complements the \$12,000 "Helping Children with Autism" Package for children 0-6 years. The Centre will be an accredited Long Day Care Centre. Brisbane AEIOU for Children with Autism, in partnership with Griffith University, will establish an Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centre at Griffith University's Nathan Campus and opening in February 2010.

National Early Years Workforce Initiatives are currently in development to build the professional capacity within early childhood education and care to support the up skilling of the workforce and to encourage early childhood trained teachers to work in rural and disadvantaged areas. The first three initiatives from 2008-09 Budget are:

- removing TAFE Fees on up to 8000 child care diplomas and advanced diplomas from 2009;
- creating additional university places for early childhood trained teachers, starting with 500 places in 2009 and rising to 1,500 places by 2011; and

- reducing half the HECS-HELP debts of early childhood teachers who work in regional and remote areas, Indigenous communities and areas of high disadvantage.

The 2009-10 Budget includes additional HECS-HELP reduction for graduates over five years. The Initiatives aim to improve quality and supply of the early childhood education and care workforce. Workforce Projects are currently being developed.

The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) is currently being rolled out nationally. Community results are expected in December 2009. See www.australianedi.org.au

The five domains are:

- Physical health and well being
 - Social knowledge and competence
 - Emotional health and maturity
 - Language and cognitive development
 - Communication skills and general knowledge
- These are measured at the time a child commences school (4 ½ to 5 ½ years old)
 - Communities can use the AEDI results to show what specific developmental areas require particular attention, to better focus further support and intervention measures (individual results are not released) and communities can see whether their services are being effective and to assess progress over time.
 - The Indigenous AEDI uses the same assessment tool however a known Indigenous local community person assists the teacher to make the assessment.
 - The AEDI Language Background other than English (LBOTE) Study is currently being developed via focus group consultations.

The Centre for Community Child Health is interested in your feedback.

The Home Interaction Program (for parents and young people) (HIPPY) visits parents of children 3-5 years at home every two weeks to provide personal mentoring and tutoring assistance as well as educational resources - parents must be involved and take responsibility for their children. It will help parents develop confidence in their own ability to get their children ready for school and beyond. It will prepare children for learning, improve their relationship with their children and help them make a much more positive contribution to their child's education. The Brotherhood of St Laurence has carriage of the project across Australia. Playgroup Queensland recently commenced a HIPPY service at Riverview and South Brisbane Division of General Practice has an Indigenous HIPPY service at Inala. Three additional sites for Queensland Mt Morgan, Pioneer (Mt Isa) and Logan Central have been announced on 7 August 2009. See hippyaustralia.org.au for Expression of Interest details.

All Australian governments have endorsed the first **National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020** and are committed to implementing six key outcome areas. It is a long-term, national approach to help protect all Australian children and provides the foundation for national reform. See www.coag.gov.au to view the Framework.

On 5 December 2008, State, Territory and Commonwealth Ministers of Education meeting as the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, released the **Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians**. They committed to supporting the development and strengthening of early childhood education, to provide every child with the opportunity for the best start in life.

On 16 February 2009, The Hon Jenny Macklin MP announced the establishment of the **National Family Support Program** which brings together eight Commonwealth programs for children, families and parenting to enable them to better manage life's transitions and contribute to building stronger, more

resilient communities. It is a national program under FaHCSIA with a strong collaborative approach including:

- Family Relationship Services
- Strengthening Families Program funded under the National Illicit Drug Strategy
- Communities for Children Initiative
- Invest to Grow
- Child Care Links
- Responding Early Assisting Children
- Indigenous Children Services
- Playgroup
- Indigenous Parenting Support Services

The Paid Parental Leave Scheme will be introduced for parents who have a child or adopt a child from January 2011. An eligible person will receive taxable PPL payments at the Federal Minimum Wage for a maximum of 18 weeks.

Next Steps: Reform in early childhood goes beyond governments. We need to have families, carers, services, communities and governments engaged together to ensure implementation is successful in bringing about better outcomes for all children regardless of their life circumstance. Your input is essential to continue development of the above key elements and ensure successful implementation. For more information check out www.coag.gov.au www.deewr.gov.au/earlychildhood/projects and <http://education.qld.gov.au/earlychildhood/> or email wilma.schouten@deewr.gov.au at DEEWR Brisbane Office.

National Early Childhood Reform Agenda Discussion Questions:

1. What do you understand about the National Early Childhood Reform Agenda in terms of purpose, development and implementation?
2. What impact do you see the National Early Childhood Reform Agenda may have on your role, your service, your organization and your community?
3. What questions do you have unanswered?