

ANONYMOUS 16930 - New submission from Early Years Strategy - Public Submissions

National Early Years Summit:

I have been in the childcare industry for over 30 years, I have seen many changes and what we have experienced in the last 10 years has been detrimental to all stakeholders , that is Staffing, Families and Children.

We have highly complex and highly administrative systems which are undermining children's outcomes, children's well-being, staff well-being , families abilities to work, and access for their children to quality and affordable care.

This has occurred for many reasons:-

- Whilst the National Quality Framework offered a simpler system, it is highly complex, highly administrative, completely open to interpretation of Early Childhood Officers. Regulatory authorities can go above and beyond the requirements of the NQF without advising services of those added requirements.
- All systems involved around the management of funding and compliance has exponentially increased to a level that is out of control and causing many qualified and experienced educators and centre managers to leave the industry.
- ACECQA is a body that does not work with the sector, they keep increasing the compliance, paperwork is at a level that is not manageable for most services. The sector's morale is extremely low and ACECQA does not actually help services e.g. when you email a question in it may take weeks to get back to you and by then you have forgotten the question. There is no one at ACECQA that can help you with the most basic questions etc. They divert you to the Regulatory Authorities who are also overwhelmed with system workloads. E.g. in our area it is taking 8 years for services to be re-assessed and rated.
- All areas of business have increased with compliance and paperwork e.g. Fair Work Australia, Fire Services Compliance, Work Health and Safety, Food Safety Management, Childcare Subsidy, Kindergarten Funding, Blue Card compliance, Modern Award Compliance, HR compliance. So all areas of business is out of control with paperwork.
- Quality staff are hard to come by and many educators are not remaining in the sector due to the high workload, lack of support due to increasing challenging behaviours from children, low pay, low morale (as most services feel they are not able to meet exceeding anymore due to the exceeding model not being articulated well enough for services to aspire to, most of it is paperwork anyway and services are choosing just to gain a Meeting Standard to ensure the well-being of all stakeholders, having an exceeding rating does not mean that you are an exceeding service e.g. one service in our area was granted Exceeding but excludes LGBTQ+ families, how does that happen??
- The costs for services is exponentially increasing due to the increase by both state and federal governments increase in compliance. We now undertake a lot of unproductive work that is detrimental to the sector.
- Staff are expected by all stakeholders, that is state and federal governments to undertake unpaid work to meet expectations. (I wonder what would happen if you asked a Tradie to do unpaid work??)

- Since the inception of the childcare subsidy, again administration is high, the system is complex, it prevents children from accessing early learning and this system is very anti-female. We have seen children who need to be at an early learning service being denied access due to the Activity levels of their parents, why is a child's learning based on their parents income?? We will see the full effects of this subsidy from 2024 onwards, children are more at risk under this system and this system has exponentially increased fees due to the complex nature of the system.
- The whole industry needs to be simplified and new strategies put in place if Australia wants their Early Years sector to be successful and available to all children . Whilst there are restrictions on access for children, they will not thrive especially those who are vulnerable.
- There are so many barriers in front of women and children in this sector, it is really sad to see the decline in the sector and access for children and families.

Training:

We need quality training, and we need trainers to do more on the floor in services, this used to be the case, however most of this is now left to services to train students, again this is time that is taking away from the children. We need to ensure that those studying are there because they want to enter the sector not just there because they have to be.

Training packages need to be overhauled with the actual industry involved, a lot of students come out with few skills.

Early childhood teachers:

There is a chronic shortage of Early Childhood Teachers , there is a new course that is available for Diplomas to undertake another year of study, but unfortunately the cost is prohibitive and unless that cost is funded we will continue to be extremely short of Early Childhood Teachers. We need a national approach to funding for Early Childhood teachers so that we will have the supply of ECT's needed for now and the future.

Moving Forward:

In my mind we need to completely start from scratch:-

1: Consult with sector as previous systems have worked more effectively or alternatively there is a model that would be better suited to ensure that services e.g.

A Family Day Care Model, this would entail services being allocated with a co-ordinator to help with compliance, identify needs, celebrate successes, offer advice, or help with queries. This would be a strength-based model that would help and lift morale of all services. We would not need an Assessment and Rating as this would be an ongoing with regular meeting with services. This would eliminate stress, and other practices that are not conducive to effective outcomes for children and well-being of staff.

Simplification of all systems:

The childcare subsidy is highly complex and highly administrative, the costs for this system would be enormous and places significant barriers to children's development, families ability to provide a high quality early learning experience, and the ability for families to access the workforce.

Included with CCS is ACCS, again ACCS is highly administrative and places huge barriers for children at risk, not in safe environments, or families struggling financially for a variety of reasons. We need full access to all children if we really are being inclusive and the focus is on early learning not babysitting so families can work, that shift in focus would open up the early learning sector for all children so they can all start with a bright future.

CCS also involves other types of funding which again is highly complex, and needs to be simplified.

Inclusion:

Inclusion Support Subsidy is again highly complex and needs simplification and be more effective in its approach, the old systems worked much better with qualified staff visiting services to support and helping apply for funding for extra staff where needed. The extra staff need to be fully remunerated appropriately as centres are still carrying the burden of the cost of extra staff which raises fees.

A better option, that would also provide a further career path for educators is to be trained as Speech and OT allied health support aides, they could come into centres regularly to support those children (who are increasing in numbers) that need support and help promote their plan from the OT or Speech therapists, and identify children who may need support. This would be another game changer for all stakeholders.

Behaviour Specialists could also provide ongoing support for services as this again is an area that is exponentially increasing. Educators are expected at present to do all this and there is not enough time in the day to undertake all that is expected of them.

Remuneration:

We have a workforce strategy that is laughable not worth the paper it is written on, there is only 2 things that need to be done: -

1. Increase in pay funded by the government not families (This could be done by simplifying systems and lessen the administrative burden)
2. Less administration and a strength-based system of compliance and monitoring.

This would provide the sector with the ability to do their job of educating children not complying with multiple levels of complex compliance.

In conclusion, there are some simple solutions if the governments of the day were interested in a high-quality early learning sector, the benefits to the community would be huge, we all know the research about spending in this area to prevent more costs in the future, so why do we keep complicating systems which have huge barriers to all stakeholders.

Staffing Issues:

Rural and remote services struggle to attract qualified staffing and retain staff, this has been an ongoing issue for childcare services and has never been successfully addressed, state governments may offer incentives but due to staff shortages if a position is taken rural or remotely, that leaves

another service in a regional or city service less an educator or ECT, so this is not an effective strategy.

Funding is needed for the new 12 month course offered by Swinburne to ensure that we have enough ECT's moving forward, if it is not funded then we will have even more critical shortage of ECT's in the sector. This course was recommended by our network in 2011 during the consultancy period for the National Quality Framework, of course no one listened until last year, 11 years later when someone finally realised that ECT's in the early childhood sector was not working in its current form, unfortunately the cost of the course is prohibitive (\$23,000) for educators to take the course on.

Staff shortages mean that staff are burning out, they are not able to attend professional development, they are leaving the industry for better work life balance and wages.

The sector is crumbling under complex unproductive systems, Centre managers are unable to keep up with all the paperwork compliance, therefore services are having to employ more administrative staff which leads to higher fees, so the cycle is never ending.