



# *Australian Education Union*

Ground Floor, 120 Clarendon Street, Southbank, Victoria, 3006  
PO Box 1158, South Melbourne, Victoria, 3205



**Federal Office**

Phone : +61 (0)3 9693 1800

Fax : +61 (0)3 9693 1805

Email : [aeu@aeufederal.org.au](mailto:aeu@aeufederal.org.au)

Web : [www.aeufederal.org.au](http://www.aeufederal.org.au)

27 April 2023

Early Years Strategy  
GPO Box 9820  
Department of Social Services  
Canberra ACT 2601

Email: [earlyyearsengagement@dss.gov.au](mailto:earlyyearsengagement@dss.gov.au)

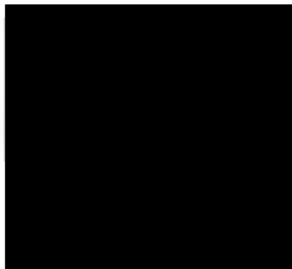
Dear Sir/Madam,

**Re: AEU Submission to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper**

Please find attached the Australian Education Union's submission to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper.

Please contact me if you have any questions in relation to our response.

Yours sincerely,





**Submission**  
**to the**  
**Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper**

**27 April 2023**



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South Melbourne Vic 3205

Telephone: +61 (0)3 9693 1800  
Web: [www.aeufederal.org.au](http://www.aeufederal.org.au)  
E-mail: [aeu@aeufederal.org.au](mailto:aeu@aeufederal.org.au)

# Australian Education Union Submission to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

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The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents over 195,000 educator members employed in the public primary, secondary, early childhood, and TAFE sectors throughout Australia. We welcome this opportunity to present our views on a national Early Years Strategy, recognising that an overarching, cohesive strategy has the potential to lead to improved outcomes for children, families and communities. For the first time, Australia will have a strategy to guide policy making and investment decisions for the youngest members of our society and their families.

The AEU believes that a high quality properly resourced public education system is the key to a more equitable and democratic society and a fundamental entitlement of all Australian children, regardless of their background, family income, circumstances or where they live.

High quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a vital component of the public education system and an entitlement of all Australian children. It is integral to the educational, social, physical, and emotional development of children, consistent with the International Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>1</sup>, and associated resolutions and statements made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and/or adopted by the UN General Assembly.

In addition to the significant long term individual benefits for children, investment in high quality ECEC also has significant benefits for families, and for the social and economic fabric of our community. The importance of the link between access to high quality preschool and success in school education and later life cannot be overstated.

Australia has much ground to make up since Labor was last in government at the federal level. The National Quality Framework (NQF) introduced in 2009 for early childhood education and care was a critical turning point for the sector. For the first time, states and territories were united under a national framework of regulation, assessment and quality improvement. The NQF lifted the bar for the sector and defined high-quality programs and outcomes for young children engaged in ECEC.

After almost a decade of neglect by the former coalition government, the ECEC sector has been left wanting at the national level. Affordability and accessibility to early learning and care remain a challenge for many families. Commonwealth funding certainty for preschool programs has been a year-by-year prospect until very recently (2021). The ECEC workforce crisis deepens as low

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text#>

wages and poor conditions undermine efforts to attract and retain staff. And an unacceptable number of children continue to start school developmentally vulnerable, with persistent gaps between disadvantaged and advantaged communities and between Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and non-Indigenous children. There is a persistent level of developmental vulnerability that is not shifting, with 11.4 per cent of children developmentally vulnerable in two or more areas of development in 2021 compared to 11.8 per cent in 2009<sup>2</sup>. The AEU welcomes the work of the Commonwealth government to address each of these challenges through the raft of inquiries, reform and work currently underway.

An overarching Early Years Strategy has the potential to provide a more cohesive and collaborative system of services and supports for Australian children and their families. The current siloing and fragmentation undermines the efforts of everyone in the sector working towards better outcomes for young children and families. The development of an early years strategy presents an important opportunity to bring a number of existing initiatives together, providing better coordination and designing future reforms and policies that set children up to thrive. The success of the strategy will depend on the Commonwealth playing its role as system steward with the appropriate set of reforms, policies and investments to help children live happy, healthy and safe lives.

Whilst we understand this strategy is broad-ranging and scopes systems and services beyond ECEC, our submission will focus primarily on the role and value of high-quality early childhood education and care, specifically preschool education in the two years prior to formal schooling.

### **Structure of the Strategy**

The proposed structure of the strategy sets out a logical framework for establishing the policy priority areas, goals and indicators that will sit beneath the overarching vision. The vision will need to be broad enough to capture the range of services, supports and programs that children and families engage in, but not be so lofty that it is unachievable.

Success of the strategy will depend on well-articulated and defined policy priorities and indicators, with a strong evidence base to inform these decisions. Early childhood teachers and educators must have meaningful input into the strategy at all stages. A vision will be worthless and skepticism will creep in from the sector if they are not genuinely consulted, if there is not a clear articulation of specific reforms and policies, paired with the necessary resourcing and investment. Words must be matched by action.

The Implementation Action Plans and the Outcomes and Evaluation Framework should provide all levels of government and stakeholders with a clear path forward to bring the vision to life, provided they set out clear expectations with reasonable timeframes. Indicators and outcomes

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<sup>2</sup> AEDC (2022) <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

should not be tied to funding or resources in any way that is punitive; services need to be set up for success to achieve the best outcomes for children.

Genuine consultation will be critical to the success of these policies and plans to ensure the ECEC sector (and other relevant sectors, workforces, and children and families themselves) are thoroughly engaged, that there is cohesion and a consistent narrative with other reforms, and that the strategy does not inadvertently create workload pressures for an already overburdened workforce.

### **What vision should our nation have for Australia’s youngest children?**

The very articulation of a vision for young Australian children is welcomed by the AEU and will help frame the action plans that sit beneath the strategy. Early childhood teachers and educators are well placed to help inform this vision, based on their pedagogy and practices that centre children. In their daily work AEU members put children at the heart of their decision-making regarding curriculum design and implementation, child safety and wellbeing, sourcing support for vulnerable children and families, seeking out professional development opportunities, and securing resources and funding to ensure services can deliver what children and families need. Early childhood educators genuinely position children at the centre of all they do.

The vision for Australian children should also be developed in conjunction with young children themselves and listening to their voices. What lives do they wish to enjoy here and now, and into the future? In developing the strategy and vision, the voices of children must be listened to and respected, and AEU members would welcome any such opportunities to help amplify the voices of children.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of the benefits of investing in the early years, Australia can and should do better when it comes to valuing children and childhood. There is a lack of national consistency and entitlement for children with a patchwork of systems, services and funding sources across the country. Experts agree that the first few years in a child’s life are the most important time for brain development and key to building good social and emotional skills, which will smooth a child’s transition into school. Children who attend preschool can expect to achieve greater academic success, have better career prospects, better health and stronger family and personal relationships.

Public education is the key to a more equitable, more democratic society. Investment in quality public education during early childhood reaps significant long-term benefits for children, their families and the community. All children in Australia have the right to be given the very best start in life. Adequate investment must be made in the public provision of ECEC, as it is only through the public education system that families have a right to accessible and free early education.

The value of early childhood education is not just in setting the foundations for cognitive, physical, emotional, social and language development. It is often essential in terms of the detection of impediments to learning which, if not attended to, could affect a child's learning potential for the rest of their life.

Australia lags behind much of the world when it comes to funding early childhood education. Across the OECD, expenditure on all ECEC settings accounts for an average of 0.8% of GDP. Australia lags far behind on this OECD average with 0.57% of GDP expended on ECEC, and significantly behind the best performing countries for this indicator including Sweden, Iceland and Norway, which all spend at least 1% of GDP on ECEC.<sup>3</sup>

And while most countries provide their children two years of preschool as standard, Australia only provides one year of preschool education. Only 67% of three-year-olds are enrolled in ECE in Australia, far behind the OECD average of 79%<sup>4</sup> (and this data doesn't account for specific provision of a preschool program led by a teacher compared to a more general early childhood program).

Some states, notably Victoria, have committed to a rollout of preschool programs for three-year-olds, NSW is trailing three-year-old preschool in long day care services, Victoria and NSW have committed to increasing the hours of preschool in the year before school and the South Australia Royal Commission into Early Education and Care has recently recommended universal preschool for three year olds. These advances mean that we potentially face a situation where access to a three-year-old preschool program and an expanded four-year-old program will be dependent on which state a child lives. The Commonwealth must be ambitious and take the lead to renew its commitment to universal early education to ensure programs for all three and four years olds are available in every community.

The vision must also support the professionals who work with young children, with appropriate funding and initiatives to recruit trained staff who are qualified to support children's cognitive, social and emotional development. Professionals across disciplines must be supported to work collegially to help children reach their potential, particularly to support vulnerable families where we know that appropriate early intervention is key. Outcomes for children depend significantly on the capacity of the adults around them, so workforces like educators, health practitioners and others need time to build and nurture these professional relationships. Investment in early childhood facilities and materials also helps support the development of child-centred environments for well-being and learning.

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<sup>3</sup> OECD, *Education at a Glance*, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

## **What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?**

Children must be at the centre of the strategy with outcomes that enable all children to lead happy, thriving lives. Outcomes should address the immediate lives of children as well as mid- and long-term outcomes, recognising the uniqueness of childhood by respecting children for who they are right now. The early years are not just a rehearsal for later life and all children should be supported to be happy, healthy and learning regardless of their family background or circumstance. Children and families deserve to be supported from the word go, even before children are born, in ways that are affirming of culture, are inclusive of all family types, and recognise that some families need extra support.

Outcomes should be defined across the areas of healthy growth and development, social, emotional and communication skills, early learning skills and understandings, and having a strong sense of identity and connection to culture and agency in the world.

All families should have access to adequate levels of high quality and free early childhood education and care to meet children's, family and community needs. Access to early learning and care should be viewed as a right of the child as part of the education system and not linked to parents' capacity to work or study. High quality preschool education is of critical importance to children's development and life opportunities and must be seen as a universal, legislated right for all children. Within this context it is essential that the Commonwealth shares responsibility with the states and territories for ensuring the delivery of a high quality, free, public early childhood education to all children in Australia.

Early childhood education must recognise and affirm the cultural knowledge, language and values of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children from culturally diverse backgrounds. Children with special needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds must be provided with equitable access to high quality, properly resourced early childhood education which meets the needs of every child.

Links and coordination between early childhood, health and family services must be developed and supported to provide a more seamless continuum of education and care from birth to 5 years and beyond. Nurturing partnerships with families should be an outcome of the strategy, recognising that strong, respectful partnerships set children up for success.

## **Policy Priorities**

Any national Early Years Strategy should include a policy framework within an overall policy perspective on public education, aimed at ensuring that all children have equitable access to properly funded early childhood education and care that is of high quality.

The strategy must prioritise guaranteed access to at least 20 hours per week of free, high-quality preschool education for each of the two years prior to school, as we know the positive impact this has on outcomes for children. The Commonwealth Government, in partnership with the states and territories, must maintain a responsibility for funding and planning preschool education accessible to all children in Australia. The expansion of funded universal preschool to three-year-old children should be a policy priority.

Funding of early childhood education and care should be a policy priority of the strategy, acknowledging that work is also underway by the Productivity Commission and the ACCC to review accessibility, affordability and most importantly, quality. This early years strategy and associated plans will be rendered ineffective without a thorough review of the funding for ECEC, including preschool programs, noting that the current arrangement is prohibitive to genuine access and equity so long as the activity test for access to childcare remains in place. Priority of funding should also be directed towards community-based and not-for-profit services, recognising that the education and care of young children should not be a “market” where young children are viewed as commodities to be profited from. Preschools also need an enduring, long-term funding agreement that provides certainty to the sector, and we were pleased to see this as a priority for the Commonwealth Government.

Appropriate recognition, remuneration, career paths and status of early childhood teachers and educators must be a priority. This includes parity of salary and conditions with other education sectors, irrespective of the location or centre type in which preschool education is provided. For maximum impact, the national early years strategy must coordinate with the implementation of the national ECEC workforce strategy.

Quality early childhood education is characterised by appropriate child teacher ratios and group sizes, appropriately qualified and trained teachers and educators with opportunities for ongoing professional development, and enriching, well equipped, caring and secure environments in approved and accredited locations, all of which should be defined and enforced by regulation. Early childhood education should be coordinated and delivered by qualified early childhood leaders and teachers in developmentally appropriate, educationally sound, and culturally inclusive learning environments.

Policy must also address how to best engage parents and caregivers in the provision of quality preschool education. Quality is enhanced when parents are actively involved in the expanding development of their children, in acknowledgement of their critical role, rights and needs in caring for and educating their children. Outcomes for children are also strengthened by providing quality transitions, where possible by integrating into or co-locating with primary school.

Links and coordination between early childhood services must be developed and supported to provide a more seamless continuum of education and care from birth to through preschool and the



early school years. The Commonwealth and state and territory governments must work cooperatively to develop links between early childhood education and care structures and services to ensure that continuum. Such actions must address national, state and community links and recognise international trends. The AEU recognises that this will require a diversity of models which reflect the different structures, history and funding models that currently apply to systems and services.

Early childhood education centres should be established primarily on primary school sites but also in other locations that meet local demand. At the least, early years education should be co-located with schools and integrated to provide wrap-around care and access to other services required by the local community. These could include extended hours care, long day care for younger children, out of school hours care and other services which meet local parent and community needs and establish schools as a vital community hub. Commonwealth and state and territory governments should fund the integration or co-location of early childhood education services which are school based and/or other public or community/not for profit services through provision of funding for facilities and infrastructure and qualification upgrades for early education centres. Early education services which are not integrated with or located on school sites must be supported and required to develop links to local primary schools, including the development of transition programs, early childhood curriculum guidelines and early childhood networks, accompanied by the necessary funding and resourcing to support staff to connect across services.

**What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?**

Children with special needs and/or from vulnerable or disadvantaged backgrounds should be given priority in phasing in universal access to two years of preschool education, along with children in rural and remote localities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Development of a national database on provision of and participation in preschool education should give a particular focus to the identification of the barriers to access for individual children with special needs, children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and for disadvantaged groups.

A national picture of programs and supports currently offered by individual states and territories for children identified as disadvantaged or with special needs must be developed, with a view to identifying gaps and under-resourcing as well as exemplary models which have the potential to deliver quality education. There is no need to reinvent the wheel where programs are operating effectively. Rather, there is a partnership opportunity for the Commonwealth with states and territories to expand and build on already successful programs.

Together with universal funding and access to preschool, the Commonwealth should support the states and territories with targeted funded programs to support children and families with particular needs. Some examples of this include School Readiness Funding (equity-based funding as pro-

vided in Victoria), inclusion support packages, and specialist programs to target the most vulnerable children. A range of programs exist in various states and territories, i.e.: Access to Early Learning Program for children and families with complex needs, Best Start place-based program, and programs for children in out of home care, children from refugee communities, children known to child protection, and home-based and in-centre supports for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

We know that any developmental vulnerabilities are best targeted early in a child's life. Preschools should have free access to nurses and allied health professionals such as speech pathologists and physiotherapists. They could also provide pathways for referrals to child psychologists and paediatricians, and work with NDIS liaison partners. Where these services are not integrated onsite, a weekly or regular drop-in model could provide an effective means of support and connection.

As is the case for universal programs, funding must be provided to resource the teachers and educators who deliver or interact with any specific programs. Educators need paid time to engage in professional development, to build professional networks, and to complete any necessary administration required to secure funding. Programs should be as accessible as possible to maximise the impact of early intervention. Valuable time is lost when children are languishing on waiting lists, applications for support are rejected, or educators are unable to navigate overly complex systems. Within a preschool, integrated hub, or local network, a community coordinator or other such role could focus on the holistic and wraparound support children and families need. This person would have qualifications and experience in education and/or social work, working to connect families to local specialist support services and design targeted programs in parenting and childhood development to families who use the preschool. Parents and caregivers also need to be set up for success. Appropriate outreach is important to identify families who need extra support in a way that is not perceived as punitive, to enable them to access universal programs and then be connected to the specialist programs they need.

### **What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?**

Children and families need services and programs that are evidence based, that can be easily accessed no matter where you live and achieve immediate and long-term outcomes. The current complicated patchwork of early childhood education and care (and other services in scope of this strategy) does not lend itself to something that can be easily coordinated to achieve these goals.

A national early years strategy is ambitious as it stretches across the major portfolios and bureaucracies of education, health, and family services with a range of starting points for the different states and territories. It will be advantageous to map and understand these starting points, aim to reduce duplication, and identify the clear role for the Commonwealth to play in order to achieve greater coordination and cohesion. There may be merit in the creation of a Ministry for Children

and Families as an overarching office that can strategically coordinate within and across governments, and work with stakeholders to advance the strategy.

Regardless of the mechanics of government, it's now time for the Commonwealth in partnership with states and territories to play their role as system steward; to take greater responsibility for coordination and funding of the various parts of the system that are required to make up a successful whole. Existing service deliverers (such as local government) could be leveraged to play a role in collecting data and evidence, in helping coordinate services, to outreach to vulnerable families, and to help coordinate, resource and deliver local programs.

Genuine and thorough consultation with the various sectors, relevant stakeholders, unions and experts will be the key to success to strike the right balance between national consistency and localised, place-based solutions. In terms of early childhood education and care, teachers and educators are well connected to their local communities and understand local needs. They are also often well-connected to professionals in other fields working with children and families. A genuine sense of trust and autonomy needs to be placed in the profession, with the Commonwealth playing their part to support the sector. The AEU welcomes any opportunity for its members to be involved in the development of the strategy and the associated implementation plans.

## **Principles**

The strategy should be underpinned by:

- A child and family-centred approach that affirms cultural knowledge and lived experiences of families.
- Full resourcing of the public education system, to ensure every child's right to access free, high quality, early learning and care.
- An understanding of the diverse needs of children and families and supporting services and programs to meet these needs.
- Stewardship and partnership by the Commonwealth, state and territory governments and government departments.
- Stakeholders working collaboratively in the best interests of children and families.
- A contemporary evidence base with the capacity to review and update the strategy in the context of new data and knowledge.

## Evidence Based Approach

The evidence is clear and has been confirmed time and time again by multiple Australian and international studies. The OECD (2014) found that students who had attended pre-primary education perform better in PISA at age 15, after accounting for the students' socio-economic status. They found that a longer period of preschool has the largest impact on a child's literacy at age five apart from parental education and income.<sup>5</sup> This means that two years of preschool is the best policy change to immediately improve children's literacy. The positive impact of at least two years of preschool on teen literacy is approximately 60% higher than less than two years of preschool and is equivalent to more than an entire year of schooling. Despite this, currently nearly one quarter of Australian children arrive at school without the skills they need to thrive.<sup>6</sup>

The OECD's *Education at a Glance 2022* report shows that from 2005-2020 Australia's enrolment rate, measured according to OECD standards, improved from 77% to 82% of 3–5-year-olds, but still lags behind the OECD average of 87% and the European Union average of 91%.<sup>7</sup> Only 65% of three-year-olds are enrolled in ECE in Australia, far behind the OECD average of 78%, and 87% of four-year-olds are enrolled in ECE in Australia, again lower than the OECD average of 88%.<sup>8</sup> This places Australia squarely in the bottom third of the OECD rankings for both 3- and 4-year-old enrolment, behind the top half of OECD countries, all of which have enrolment rates above 90%.<sup>9</sup>

There has already been a plethora of inquiries, reviews and reforms across the country and internationally in respect of the early years, with a strong evidence base demonstrating the suite of actions governments should take to help children realise their full potential. Where appropriate, international evidence should be considered such as that from the Nordic countries where there is a high level of respect for children and families and investment in the early years with associated positive outcomes. The strategy must also account for the lived experiences of particular cohorts of children and families and their needs, along with the people and professionals who are responsible for service delivery in the early years.

## Conclusion

Australia finds itself at an opportune time to develop and implement a national early years strategy, the absence of which has made it challenging to bring together all of the systems and programs that work to enhance the lives of young children and families.

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/education/EAG2014-Indicator%20C2%20\(eng\).pdf](https://www.oecd.org/education/EAG2014-Indicator%20C2%20(eng).pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell Institute - two years are better than one

<sup>7</sup> OECD, *Education at a Glance*, 2022, Figure B.2.1, p.170

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

A core component of the national strategy should be a commitment to two years of free preschool education for all three- and four-year-old children, implemented as a priority across the country to ensure equitable access and outcomes for children.

Now is the time to invest in not only the strategy, but the implementation plans that will deliver on the promises for Australia's children. It is the Commonwealth's responsibility, in partnership with the states and territories, to act as steward of the various systems and services, to break down silos, and usher in a new era to ensure Australian children are happy, healthy and thriving.