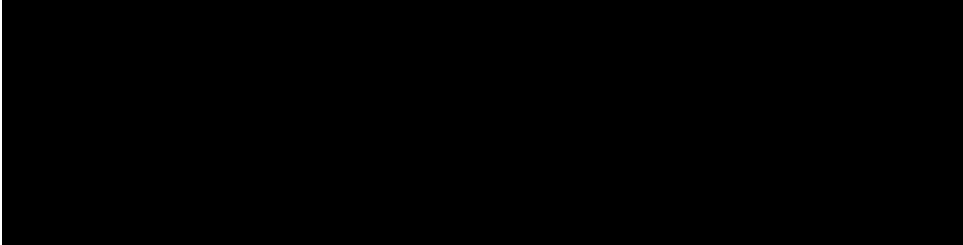




Submission to the *Early Years Strategy*





Response to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

The Social Policy Research Centre welcomes the Early Years Strategy that will provide a roadmap for holistic government policy and a common agenda to drive government actions.

This submission provides evidence to support thinking about the Strategy's aim **to break down silos** and in particular, how commonwealth programs and policies can support children's outcomes as they move between policy and jurisdictional borders.

We are drawing on evidence from the ARC Linkage project Engaging Families in Early Childhood (LP180100142). This project aims to gather insights about enduring inequalities in children's participation in high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and how they can be addressed in policy and practice. The project has a strong Indigenous focus and aims to develop knowledge and professional development supports about effective ECEC practice in mainstream settings for Indigenous children and their families. We have employed ethnographic and dialogic methods in sites of 'good practice' to identify the practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2013) that support effective practices.

Our evidence has been collected in an ECEC centre of excellence in a SEIFA 1 neighbourhood. This service has a long track record of interagency work, trauma informed practice and rigorous implementation of approaches designed to support children with behavioural and neurological challenges (such as the Early Start Denver Model). The research team has worked with this centre for over three years. Each year the service enrolls a significant number of local children with a disability diagnosis and receives state government inclusion support funding to enable adequate ratios and ongoing staff training. The service accepts children that have been asked to leave other local ECEC services and there is a high retention rate of these children in the service in part because of interagency work that wraps services around families.

The director also reports that each year they have children who cannot secure a full time place in local schools once they transition to school.

██████████ (a fully trained ECE teacher) has observed some of these children over time. Our fieldnotes from 2022 show that an Indigenous child who has been refused full school enrolment in 2023 was able to participate in learning and social activities throughout the preschool day without emotional or violent outbursts. Furthermore, he has advanced mathematical abilities and is highly engaged in tasks that require spatial, seriation and patterning knowledge. The child has an autism diagnosis and simple strategies were used to support his learning and participation during his pre-school year. School personnel were invited to come to the pre-school to observe and discuss children transitioning to school in term 4 of 2022. This exchange did not occur.

His mother reports that when he transitioned to school he was placed on a partial enrolment (2 hours a day) for the first 5 weeks on school. While this period of partially enrolment has



officially passed, she is called everyday by 11 pm to come and collect him. He receives less than two hours of formal schooling a day and she is unable to work. The director of the services tells us that every year, they have one or two children in their cohort that cannot find a fulltime place in mainstream or special schools.

It is our concern that the silos between pre-school and school are detrimental for children's outcomes. Here we have an example of a child who began school with a sense of himself as an accomplished learner and capable group member. We do not doubt that the kindergarten teachers find him hard to manage and that he engages in behaviour in the school setting that he did not engage in at the pre-school. Nevertheless under-resourcing in the school system means that gains he made in pre-school are quickly lost.

The move between educational jurisdictions needs to be better supported by strong skilled inclusion support work and resourcing. This requires policy that enables trusted resources (either specific inclusion support workers or pedagogical continuities) can follow children into school so learning gains are not lost. This is true for all children but especially so for those with developmental vulnerabilities.

The remit of the EYS is to break down siloes including those between commonwealth and state, however these are predominantly focussed on health and education silos in the years before school. As our data shows, it is not enough they have joined up services in the years before school if these supports cannot move into schools with the children they support. It is thus important that the strategy is able to make recommendations that support children make strong transitions into the school sector.