



EARLY
LEARNING
ASSOCIATION
AUSTRALIA

The voice for parents and service providers

Australian Government Budget Submission 2014-2015

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) is a peak membership organisation representing the voice of parents and early learning service providers.

We represent over 1200 early childhood services, including stand-alone kindergartens/preschools, cluster managers, integrated services, long day care centres, local government, government and independent schools, and before and after-school care providers.

At this critical juncture in early learning policy in Australia, ELAA calls on the Commonwealth Government to recognise the importance of quality early childhood education and to fund it appropriately.

High quality early learning programs are pivotal for the wellbeing and development of all children and fundamental to Australia's social and economic future.

This submission recommends that all governments – Commonwealth, State and Territory – continue to work together to support and adequately fund 15 hours of preschool for all four year old children.

This submission also emphasises the importance of quality in early learning services, and calls for the Australian Government to continue implementation of the national quality framework that defines and supports quality educational outcomes for children.

Our priorities for the coming Australian Government 2014–15 Budget are detailed within.



Priority Areas For Investment

PRIORITY AREA

1

Continued Australian Government funding for 15 hours of Preschool for 4 year olds



THE ASK →

- Ensure provision of a minimum of 15 hours of fully funded, preschool for all 4 year old children and 5 hours of preschool for all 3 year old children
- Lead broad based community debate on the provision of fully funded, compulsory preschool for all four year old children.

Rationale

For over a decade, ELAA has called upon successive governments to provide free access to fully-funded preschool programs for three and four year old children. A quality early learning environment is much more than a welcome addition to a child's early life – it is critical to the child's longer term educational, wellbeing and financial outcomes.

Australian and international research indicates that it is in the critical first years of life that a child's brain is developing most rapidly. The research, including the EPPE¹ study, NAPLAN² and NATSEM³ research, shows the positive impact of quality early learning programs is strengthened by increased hours of participation over time. All children benefit, with improved development, learning, cognitive and social-emotional outcomes. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit more.

ELAA believes that it is not only a sound economic and social investment in the future of Australia, it is also our responsibility to provide the best start we can for our

“Trying to change behaviour or build new skills on a foundation of brain circuits that were not wired properly when they were first formed requires more work and is more expensive.”⁴

children. There can be no greater rationale for the Australian, State and Territory governments to work in partnership to fully fund the provision of preschool. Making it free and fully funded would ensure preschool becomes a genuinely universal service for all children.

Under the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education (2008), all States and Territories committed to the delivery of 15 hours of preschool, by a university trained early childhood teacher, to all four-year-old children for 40 weeks in the year before school from 2013. In many jurisdictions this is now well established. In Victoria for example, 94 percent of services are now delivering on this commitment. This high rate of uptake has been possible largely due to the funding support provided by the Federal Government under the National Partnership Agreement. ELAA strongly urges the Federal Government to capitalise on the significant investment already made and continue to fund and support the National Partnership to deliver vital early learning services to all Australian children.

From governments' perspective, every dollar invested early will have substantial longer term social and economic benefits for individuals and for the community as a whole.

“Trying to change behaviour or build new skills on a foundation of brain circuits that were not wired properly when they were first formed requires more work and is more expensive.”⁴ The rate of return to human capital investment is significantly greater for preschool programs than for schooling or job training⁵ and can lead to real savings in the areas of education, training, health, welfare and justice in both the short and longer term.

Since April 2013, ELAA has also been calling for debate within Victoria on the issue of compulsory preschool for all 4 year old children. We now call on the Australian Government to lead broad-based community debate on the provision of 15 hours of fully funded, compulsory preschool for all Australian children. We believe this would ensure preschool becomes a genuinely universal service for all children with opportunities to better link vulnerable children and families to early intervention and prevention strategies.



THE ASK →

- Maintain the national quality framework and continue to implement the national quality standards within the timeframes agreed by all Australian Governments
- Adopt the recommendations of the ELAA *Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning, February 2014, Submission No 271.*

Rationale

Central to the improvements of quality in early learning service provision has been the requirement for higher level qualifications for educators and an increase in educator-to-child ratios. A significant longitudinal research program in the UK (the EPPE Project) found that “Having qualified trained teachers in pre-school settings (for a substantial proportion of time, and most importantly as the pedagogical leader) had the greatest impact on quality and was linked specifically with better outcomes in pre-reading and social development”.⁶

Closer to home, research from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Institute of Family Studies indicates that “Early childhood educators who are qualified, well-resourced and supported are critical to program success”.⁷

Increasing levels of knowledge and understanding about the significance of the early years to children’s longer term development and outcomes has led the shift to a more

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professional approach to the delivery of education and care. Higher level policies, such as the national quality framework, fully-funded 15 hours of preschool, and the more aspirational National Quality Standard and Early Years Learning Framework require a professional workforce with commensurate qualifications and skills. While increasing educator-to-child ratios and staff qualifications has been challenging, ELAA members have stressed how important these requirements are for children’s development outcomes and are “opposed to any wind-back of ratios or lessening of qualification requirements”.⁸

These national reforms have been widely accepted in the early childhood sector and are already contributing to significant improvements in the quality of early learning programs delivered to Australian children. It is critical that the Australian Government maintain this momentum and continue to oversee the implementation of high quality national standards within the timeframes previously agreed by all Australian governments.

Other challenges still remain. With higher level qualifications for educators and professionalisation of the early childhood workforce comes the need for appropriate professional and salary structures. There is also a need for a comprehensive workforce strategy to attract and retain suitably qualified early childhood professionals to the sector. Other challenges include issues of supply, poor quality training and the need for professional development, ongoing mentoring and support for staff.

To address these and other issues facing the sector, we recommend that the Federal Government adopt the recommendations outlined in ELAA’s *Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning, February 2014, Submission Number 271.*

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2. Warren, Diana & Haiskens-DeNew, John, P. (2013) *Early bird catches the worm: the causal impact of pre-school participation and teacher qualifications on Year 3 NAPLAN outcomes*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne.
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