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Ms Yuki Simmonds
Committee Manager
Legal and Social Issues Committee
Legislative Assembly
Parliament of Victoria
E: Yuki.Simmonds@parliament.vic.gov.au

About Early Learning Association Australia

Early Learning Association Australia (ELAA) is a peak body which works in partnership with early learning providers and parents to deliver our vision of excellence in learning for every child. Our diverse membership base of over 600 service providers managing services at more than 1,200 locations includes early years management organisations, independent kindergartens, local governments, long day care services, government and independent schools and out of school hours care programs.

Introduction

ELAA welcomes the opportunity to provide additional information to the Legal and Social Issues Committee into its Inquiry into early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19). In developing this response, we have canvassed our membership through consultations at member meetings, direct approaches to services and through an open sector-wide invitation to contribute to the submission. We focussed our questions on four areas:

- How CALD families have been kept informed about COVID-19 and what it means for using the service
- How services have kept CALD families engaged throughout the pandemic
- How remote learning/ learning at home has been supported for CALD families
- How CALD families have re-engaged with attendance at services.

Context

During term 2 many families took their children out of kindergarten and long day care services with attendances dropping to as low as 20 percent and 50 percent respectively. Free child care in long day care saw an increased attendance over the term. There has been a slower return to kindergartens with the largest increases seen as students returned to schools.

During term 2, sessional kindergartens were expected to provide opportunities to support learning at home as well as continuing to work with children in attendance at the service.



Keeping CALD families informed about COVID-19 and its impact on services

Services kept families informed through their existing communication channels including:

- email
- early childhood communication apps
- hard copy information, including translation of changes to drop off and pick up procedures.
- posters, policies and procedures in different languages displayed or available at the gates/entrances of services.

Some services provided in-person information to each family to ensure that they understood what it meant for their children and the service.

Whilst broadly there is a sense that the communication strategies engaged by services have been successful with families, in some instances, families have not understood the need to keep children who are unwell at home and have felt some distress at being turned away at the door of the kindergarten and without access to interpreters. Some services also talked about the pandemic occurring at the early part of the year when relationships are still being established.

Families were grappling with new information and challenges across work/employment/financial system/schooling and some found navigating that information incredibly difficult, whilst they also continued to have responsibilities to support their extended families.

The rapidly changing and volume of information has also been difficult to navigate for services and then to communicate to families, including changes in fees, eligibility requirements and processes to maintain social distancing.

Keeping families and children of CALD backgrounds engaged

Organisations reported that they were able to maintain contact with the families of enrolled children. The majority of families have continued to be engaged through the early childhood communication apps or email, with most responding and engaging in learning at home activities that the services were providing.

A service reported provided training for families to use communication tools (App and Zoom) and translated phone calls.

One organisation reported having a staff which speaks a total of 21 languages which they relied upon to communicate with families. In recognition of the need to diversify their workforce they have employed educators from CALD backgrounds and are now looking at belonging and connectedness within the team and the service to ensure they can retain staff, build capacity and continue to reflect the needs of their changing communities. This organization provided additional information about how they maintained the sense of connection across the community through the height of the pandemic (see Case Study 1 on the following page).



Case Study 1: Maintaining connections

It was important to us to keep families engaged and create a sense of connectedness across our community. We held many parent events via zoom, coffee and catch ups and connecting people in break out rooms with topics to discuss or just an opportunity to engage with each other as they would at the 'school gate'. Videos and photographs of each classroom in the early learning centre (ELC) were sent home regularly to families so that they could see what was being done in their child's room and their child could see how their contributions from home were being integrated into the ELC context and inquiry. For children not attending, they were invited to zoom into group times to see their peers and to support peer engagement.

Home learning supports for CALD families

Services reported regularly checking in with families, mostly on a weekly basis and providing learning activities. Some services provided a learning activity each day as well as directing families to online learning resources available. One organization created a booklet of home learning experiences for families to do at home using resources and materials typically found at home or outside, embedding language, literacy and numeracy into the activities.

Some organisations also engaged directly with their communities to find out what they wanted covered within the curriculum. Case Study 2 illustrates the responsiveness of services to meeting the needs of families.

Case Study 2: Responding to community needs

A large percentage of our families request that their child speak English at the service, and their home language at home. As a result many families were concerned about their child losing opportunities to speak English. Educators responded with links to video content and pre-recorded stories of either themselves or another child reading a story book to share with their peers at home.

Access to technology did not prove to be a barrier with families having access at a minimum to smart phones.

Home learning by its nature is biased toward parents who were not working. For many families, managing demands of family and work life have often meant it was easier to keep all children at home, rather than sending one child to kindergarten whilst the siblings were at school. Many families reported that it was difficult to provide preschool children with much of their time if they were either working from home or assisting school age children with learning at home. Single parents in particular found remote learning difficult supporting children to participate in learning activities (school or kindergarten) during the day, and having to work additional hours in the evening to meet the demands of their job.



Re-engaging families at the service

At some services/service sites there has been a continued hesitancy about children returning to the ELC. The different messages in relation to school versus early childhood services and the role of early childhood services as essential services caused confusion in the early part of the pandemic, however services report that families have now by and large returned. Where families had not returned, for example due to health or other reasons, services were maintaining contact and a level of service provision.

As noted in ELAA's submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry, engagement and support for families is an area of strength for the sector with 97 percent of services meeting or exceeding Quality Area 6 of the National Quality Standards, Collaborative Partnerships with Family and Community. The feedback from ELAA's membership about the strategies they have used to engage families including vulnerable families and children such as those from CALD backgrounds throughout the pandemic reflects these results.

If you have any questions relating to this submission, please contact Lisa Minchin, ELAA Advocacy and Grants Lead, by email on LMinchin@elaa.org.au. Lisa's days of work are Monday, Tuesday and Thursday.

Sincerely,

David Worland
Chief Executive Officer
Early Learning Association Australia