



The Australian Education Union (Victorian Branch) is pleased to provide this submission in respect of the development of the Plan for Victoria's Children.

Preamble

The Australian Education Union is a federally registered union that represents employees in the public education sector throughout Australia. The AEU Victorian Branch has as its members, principals/teachers/school services officers employed in government schools, teachers in TAFE and Early Childhood education, teachers in Disability services and teachers in Adult Migrant Education Services.

Our submission adopts as a fundamental belief that a quality public education system is the cornerstone of a cohesive, democratic and multicultural society. It is the cornerstone for our common future, prosperity and happiness. It is vital to the future economic, social, cultural and intellectual development of our nation and all its citizens and enriches and strengthens our local communities. It is imperative that it should be of the highest quality, accessible to and effective for all.

Well funded, high quality early childhood education programs, provided by specialist early childhood teachers, are recognised by the body of international and local research as having a very beneficial effect on the lives of young children during their participation at preschool or kindergarten, during their school years and beyond. These programs also particularly enhance the development of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Economic analyses indicate that these programs are an excellent investment in the future of our society.

Early Childhood teachers hold tertiary teaching qualifications in early childhood education, the majority have four year degrees and many are dual qualified for both early childhood and primary education. In their work as early childhood specialist teachers, they make a valuable contribution to children, their families and the community.

Victoria's Vision for Children and Young People

Whilst the AEU generally supports the broad vision articulated by the government in the consultation document "*Putting children first...planning for the future – challenges in early childhood*" (page 4), the AEU cautions that Victoria's vision for children should retain a clear focus on the child. The child should be kept at the centre of the state plan in order to avoid government priorities becoming distracted or diverted either in policy or budgetary contexts.

Notwithstanding, the AEU acknowledges that the child is not an isolated unit and his/her human growth and potential is required to be encouraged and supported by the child's family. The child needs also, in the context of his or her family, to have access to a range of services, professionals, staff and structures which assist the child directly along with her/his family.

These arrangements work best if they are co-ordinated and appropriately integrated to provide a cohesive service system which is accessible and responsive.

The AEU is keen to ensure that there is a range of services and programs that are available to children and their families but we again caution that many children and families have multiple communities in which they live and to which they relate.

These communities are diverse and may be defined in many ways – geographic, cultural, linguistic, related to employment, just to name a few. An over-reliance on a traditional definition of community as the basis of service provision may prove unreliable and unsustainable.

A Plan for Victoria's Children

The Plan for Victoria's children provides the opportunity to identify what will be needed for children to become effective adults whose life opportunities are maximised.

The discussion paper contains significant detail regarding the current backdrop of services and arrangements against which children and families are featured. There is a pervasive sense of responding retrospectively to that which has already occurred – a set of circumstances which have not been adequately addressed and for which we must somehow catch up.

The AEU concurs that there is much to be done in this regard and a great deal of ground to recapture. However, the opportunity is also offered to anticipate what will be needed in 10 or 15 years time to ensure children are well served now as well as later.

An attempt to predict the future challenges of our society and of its people will show that education is the cornerstone for our common future, prosperity and happiness.

Education provides the foundation for a start in life; a community of friends and acquaintances; the skills, knowledge and discipline necessary for successful participation in the workforce; frames of reference for making sense of present and future demands; and a continuing interest in the fundamentals of learning – curiosity, investigation, rational analysis, considered conclusions, open and honest discussion. We share the experience of formal education as an induction to social behaviour and to the cohesion on which our society depends.

In times of uncertainty, instability and change, the importance of education for all young people is magnified. This is particularly true at present. The idea that we are moving towards a knowledge-based global society is not empty rhetoric, but a fact we face daily. At the same time we are confronting a swiftly rising disparity in resources between groups in our society, a division which is having a serious impact on the opportunities and quality of life for a significant proportion of the population. It is not just the wealthy few who should have access to the necessary ongoing opportunities

that education provides, but every person. Every person should be provided an education that meets his or her individual needs.

The AEU wishes to comment in relation to the relatively narrow scope of this discussion. The foreword from the Minister for Children, Hon. Sherryl Garbutt MP, articulates the view that *“the Bracks government has started a new approach.....- an approach that puts children front and centre, right across government, right across the community”*.

The consultation paper addresses the early childhood years but there is no indication as to how the State plan for children will address the multiple issues and challenges for children as they move along the trajectory of their childhood to adulthood with the support of their families.

The opportunity in the State Plan for children across the age span of childhood to tackle a platform of services and programs for children and their families which are cohesive and provide continuity should not be constrained by current government portfolios, bureaucracies and administrative arrangements. It is of significant concern to the AEU that the consultation paper steps around this major element of a new vision for children.

The AEU articulates our vision in the final section of this submission.

Responding to Changing Needs

The AEU accepts that the construct of families is dynamic and continues to change. Consequently families require a range of supports at different times and to various degrees according to their circumstances. Many struggle to cope without adequate support. The child within the family (however comprised) also requires support in addition to that provided by her/his family.

Programs targeted to meet the child’s particular needs are critical to achieving a vision where Victoria’s children are kept safe but are given every opportunity and advantage to become well equipped to deal with the challenges of the future.

Whilst the arrangement of services for families and services for children should not be seen as mutually exclusive, it is also true that there is a place for services with a priority focus on children. There are clearly shared goals and overlap but there is a potential risk of loss of focus away from a child-centred approach if the emphasis is placed on family centred practice as an accepted way to provide services for children.

It is critical at this juncture, when families and family structures are under pressure, that the State Plan clarifies the focus or primary goals of services for children, the focus or primary goals of services for families and identifies the overlap and areas of inter-connectedness.

It is irrefutable that a child within a family being supported by a program or family support service will benefit both in the short term and the longer term because the

family is strengthened in its capacities. However, the primary focus of the intervention is not always, at first instance, the child.

Whilst it is acknowledged that family support services are critically important, services that are focused on the particular needs of children are also critical.

Children need services which provide:

- security and continuity of experience derived from optimal association with adults and children;
- a sense of self worth - gained from achieving tasks and overcoming problems, initiating activities and creating both activities and physical objects, on the child's own, and derived from contact with adults and children who respect and encourage the child's abilities;
- knowledge of the physical world derived from exploration of the environment and properties of the environment, combined with input of adults to make sense of these experiences;
- knowledge of feelings and emotions, both of the child's own and those of the people (adult and child) around the child and the skill to deal effectively with these;
- ability to cope with the social world by having the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge and relationships with children and adults and the ability to communicate (receptively and productively) in pursuit of these.

While the above categorisation of children's needs is largely oriented towards their future, they should also be considered in the light of their impact upon the child's present day world. In other words, no definition of children's needs should be limited only to that necessary to ensure the child's competence as an adult. It is equally important to ensure that children are satisfied by and enjoy the present, independently of what is hoped for those children in the future.

Parents require services for children:

- to address the educational needs of their children which cannot be dealt with without recourse to expertise and knowledge which are commonly considered to be outside the realm of family,
- to respond to demographic changes which necessitate a large proportion of care for children to take place outside the home,
- which are affordable and responsive to their cultural and other needs.

Children's need for a service which aims to maximise all aspects of their learning and development should be viewed independently of, but related to, the needs of their parents for children's services.

Staff in services also struggle to meet the needs of families and children and have inadequate supports and insufficient ongoing professional development to assist them to deal effectively with very diverse and increasingly complex demands.

The *Plan for Victoria's Children* must also identify predicted trends and demands which will confront and challenge children and their families in the next decade or two.

An analysis of relevant future trends in cultural, economic and social domains should inform the development of the *Plan for Children*. Additionally and importantly, whilst there should rightly be a focus on prevention and promotion in respect of children's development, there should be guarantees provided by government in policy backed by the provision of adequate resources. The lack of longitudinal commitment by government is one of the hallmarks of Victoria's service provision to date and has contributed in large part to the incongruence of delivery arrangements and unmet demands that currently exist.

Many services, including preschools and kindergartens, have sought to be responsive to the changing needs of children and their families. They have done so with very little or no additional resources and this has led to stretched budgets and stressed staff.

A Service Platform for the Future

Notwithstanding our earlier comments, the AEU accepts for the purposes of this submission, the scope of the early years of childhood, ages birth to five years.

The AEU acknowledges the valuable and important work that is undertaken in the best interests of children and their families by current services and programs and by the staff whose strong commitment is evident.

The AEU accepts that strong linkages are required between services in order to achieve cohesion and co-ordination, to eliminate duplication and to achieve improved planning and access.

The AEU supports integration and co-location of services where appropriate to address the particular needs of children and their families. The mix of services should include both universal and specialist services and should encompass a range of disciplines and expertise of staff who each have a unique contribution towards the provision of services and programs.

The AEU strongly believes preschools and kindergartens should be part of the service mix of universal services along with long day care, out of school hours care, schools and maternal and child health. These existing services should provide for a continuous platform for children to which all children have guaranteed access. It would be exciting to see adjunct to these arrangements, a range of universal family support services which could strengthen family capacity.

In addition to the universal platform, there needs to be accessible specialist support programs which may have various primary foci.

Clearly, a range of targeted services which provide specific programs for children with particular additional needs, e.g. children with disabilities, children at risk of harm, are needed.

Many of these services will also support families in order to provide for the best interests of the child. These should ideally encompass a range of services providing health and allied health programs along with other relevant programs.

Services which cater for indigenous children and their families must be made available. It is the AEU's view that these services must be culturally inclusive of indigenous pedagogies and provide environments where parents feel welcome and encouraged to be involved. This will require staffing policies which give priority to appropriately qualified Aboriginal staff. Professional development must be provided for all staff to ensure cultural awareness, appropriate and sensitive cultural orientation and to counter racism. It would assist greatly if early childhood programs are co-ordinated with health and nutrition education programs for these children and their families.

Other specialist services are required to assist universal services in their work with children, e.g. those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds or those in transition to mainstream settings from specialist programs.

What has to be done

Having established children at the heart of the State Plan, the next question is how and over what time period are the goals of the Plan to be achieved?

Government has not very long in which to ensure the children of today are guaranteed the fundamental entitlements associated with their childhood in order to maximise the benefit they receive as they head towards their future. Political will and adequate resources are predeterminants to a healthy, energetic, educated, well prepared community of children on their way to adulthood.

OVERCOME BARRIERS TO ACCESSIBILITY

Barriers that prevent children accessing services and programs that will assist them must be tackled. These may be cultural, linguistic or geographic. Services may also be unaffordable for their families.

In Victoria, research conducted by several organisations has identified that cost is a major impediment to participation. In preschools, fees paid by parents are many times those paid by parents in other states for a similar attendance period (i.e. 10 hours per week). Victoria's spending on preschool education remains the second lowest in Australia and meets only about 60% cost of provision. For example, Northern Territory spends \$5,811 per capita, ACT \$4,018 and Victoria \$1,674. (*Productivity Commission 2004*)

PROVIDE A SEAMLESS PLATFORM OF SERVICES

The AEU agrees that children should be regarded in an holistic manner and consequently, services should provide programs which are co-ordinated and cohesive and which provide smooth transitions for children and their families.

The AEU strongly advocates a service system which is coherent in terms of the multiple programs which children access and in terms of the information flow that is associated with this pattern of participation.

We reiterate that the view of children should encompass all their health, developmental and educational needs across the age span of childhood from birth and the platform of services to support families can be adjunct to this model.

The AEU supports a model of services which may be integrated rather than just co-ordinated, as well as co-location of services. Various factors come into play when determining whether integration or co-location should occur or whether a co-ordinated approach will suffice. Obvious physical barriers to full integration and even co-location can include availability of land, infrastructure suitability, condition and adaptability. Funding resources for capital works impede these innovations.

IMPROVE QUALITY OF SERVICES – STAFFING

The supply of appropriately qualified staff must reflect the range of specialist skills that are needed. The staffing profiles and mix of qualifications is of paramount importance in the delivery of a seamless platform of services.

The AEU will actively oppose any diminution of the professional role performed by qualified early childhood teachers and the contribution they make to the education of children. However, the AEU is very supportive of a model of co-operative and collaborative service provision where early childhood teachers work with and participate fully in a team of professional staff within services for children. The AEU is alert to the potential risk that substitution of roles brings within multi-disciplinary teams and the loss of quality that accompanies this approach. We support the notion of a “crucible of knowledge” where expert contributions from each of the various disciplines are melded into a holistic approach to meeting the child’s, and if relevant, the family’s needs.

Similarly, the numbers of staff must be adequate to deliver a quality program. In many services and occupational groups, attraction and retention of staff is a significant challenge. Further, provision of high quality and accessible professional development programs should be a priority in order to equip staff to deal with the challenges that a seamless service platform provides along with the changing and complex set of needs of children and their families.

With improved numbers of staff, group sizes and staff workloads can be reduced.

The State Plan should consider the pressing issue of supply of qualified staff and put in place a strategy and resources to overcome the current challenges.

GOVERNMENTS AND GOVERNANCE

There appears little or no recognition that there is an imperative for the *State Plan for Children* to address structures and the lack of a systemic coherence to the provision of services for children.

Some of the flaws of the current service platform can be tracked to one or more of the current funding, planning or governance arrangements which are generally inadequate and are inherently unable to deliver what is needed.

The failure of the Federal government to have a vision and a plan for services for children, their failure to have adequate planning processes and insufficient funding for services to provide quality programs and guaranteed access is scandalous. The Federal government's determination to view childcare as a workforce participation issue has ensured the current crisis in provision. Their refusal to accept preschool education as part of the commonwealth responsibility for education is also scandalous.

The Victorian government appears to accede to the Federal government's position but refuses to accept responsibility for carrying out the roles defaulted by the Federal government. Whilst this is understandable from the State's perspective, it leaves services in a shambles and further compounds discordance.

The view of the State government that Local Government is the level of government that should deliver services for Victoria's children is opposed by the AEU. We acknowledge that broadly Local Government has an important role to play and in many cases, has done it well. Local governments are important in planning services, ascertaining the needs of their residents and facilitating the articulation of these needs and views. However, a service platform predicated on an ongoing commitment from local governments is not sustainable. Local governments are elected entities and with electoral cycles comes changing priorities. There is not a universal view amongst the current 79 local governments that accepts they have a responsibility for service provision, nor in terms of shared costs. Cost-shifting is a familiar experience at all levels of government and many local governments appear fearful of this risk. Additionally, service delivery across 79 municipalities does not, of itself, ensure a cohesive service platform. Whilst the AEU does not advocate that services are all identical in every municipality, we say that a coherent system has key qualities which cannot be guaranteed in such a diverse governance arrangement.

The AEU's Vision

The AEU has been agitating for some years that preschools should be transferred from the Department of Human Services to the Department of Education and Training. Our policy also has a wider perspective.

The AEU supports the retention of the portfolio of the Minister for Children and the Office of Children's Services.

However, both should be incorporated within the portfolio of Education and Training, perhaps with a refinement of title. We see no legitimate obstacle to the Office sitting alongside the Office of School Education and the Office for Training and Tertiary Education.

The Office of Children's Services should retain responsibility for services such as preschools, childcare, out-of-school hours, early intervention and could extend to maternal and child health.

This move could encompass both the children's hub model which exists under DHS and the community hubs model within DE&T. New service models should include a mix of services for children along with schools and could be located on-campus if appropriate, or off-campus or co-located.

The benefits for children and families in the improvements in continuity and coherence of service provision would be substantial.

One departmental auspice would have responsibility at the State level for children from 0 years of age to adulthood. Whilst it would not overcome the issues of lack of Federal leadership and responsibility, it would ensure the Victorian view was holistic about children and not compartmentalised by Departmental auspice. It would also assist with co-ordination of local government's response and contribution as they are also involved in school education as industry partners and in some areas, in childcare.

With improved resourcing, many of the governance issues in services for children could be overcome, e.g. parent workload and legal liability. Cost barriers could be at least reduced if not eliminated. Parents have a vital role in their children's lives and once freed of the administrative burdens, they can participate meaningfully in the key areas of service provision – service policy development, service delivery arrangements, curriculum policy and involvement in programs with their children, if they choose to do so.

The capacity for staff to work collaboratively, undertake shared professional development, to share information and knowledge and most importantly, to create a seamless continuum for children is possible within the AEU's vision. Access to teachers within centre-based childcare services (and possibly home-based services), within preschools, within schools, within early intervention, within integrated or co-located services is possible with the advent of one Departmental auspice. The connection of childcare services, including out-of-hours care, to preschools and schools can be strengthened. Transitions between preschool and school and/or childcare and school as well as other programs will be improved. Community hubs incorporating children's hubs can cater for children from birth with playgroups and other programs and can incorporate family support services. Parents with school aged children also need family support services and these can be unified along the age span of children. Services which are targeted to meet the requirements of children with additional needs, whether these arise from a disability, from cultural or language diversity or because of disadvantage, can be arranged to assist as needed along the length of life pathway of the child until adulthood. Duplication and disruption of services will be eliminated in this vision and professional supports for these children and families can be consistent and not divided by portfolio.

The benefits of the AEU's vision for children and families has been broadly described and it should be noted that there is efficacy for government also in expenditure terms over time.

The AEU acknowledges there is an increased cost in the short to medium term to government of implementing the AEU's vision. Later savings and improved outcomes for children provide compelling reasons for the government to proceed. A State plan that outlines a concrete transition program for a phased implementation and provides a commitment to the provision of funding and resources will ensure future generations of Victoria's children will be well served.

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