



East Brunswick Kindergarten
and Childcare Centre

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31 January 2014

Childcare Inquiry
Productivity Commission
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Dear Commissioners

As a medium-sized not-for-profit community run service, East Brunswick Kindergarten and Childcare Centre Inc. (EBKCC) is keenly interested in the process and outcomes of this Childcare Inquiry. We have been in operation at the same site for more than 60 years, and have demonstrated a long term commitment to providing high quality education and care to thousands of children over this period.

Currently we are licenced for 78 children at any one time, and our service is structured to provide 3 sessions of 4 year old kindergarten each week (each group receiving 15 hours per week) and a wide range of childcare sessions for 3 to 5 year old children.

Our service is structured to provide maximum flexibility to local families and is open from 8am-5.30pm five days per week.

Being a volunteer-managed service, we do not have the capacity to fully respond to the many questions in the Issues Paper released by the Commission, given that many of those questions would require consulting with our families and that the period for responding has been over the summer vacation period

However, we would like to make the following comments about the key issues and problems that confront our service and that we believe should be taken into consideration in designing any future early childhood system and programs to subsidise their use by Australian families.

- Our service remains committed to providing both kindergarten and childcare services to the local community as these are both necessary for families with young children. We were fortunate to receive funding in 2011 to build an additional classroom to cater for high demand for both these services, and from 2013 have been able to offer 3 separate kindergarten programs of 15 hours duration. Providing co-located kindergarten and childcare services benefits the children through continuity throughout their early years of learning, and assists working parents in being able to offer wrap-around childcare to supplement the 15 hour kindergarten program. It also assists families with multiple preschool aged children in being able to offer a single service for 3-5 year olds.
 - We strongly support the implementation of the National Quality Framework and accreditation process for early childhood services. Despite the additional demands created on management and staff, we believe it is important the sector operates professionally within a regulated environment and with a focus on continuous improvement. Future iterations or changes to the NQF should however be accompanied with additional funding to enable these processes to occur without over-burdening educators or volunteer parent committees.
 - Decisions around staffing and timetabling of our kindergarten and childcare services are based on higher than the minimum staff:children ratios, as long term experience has shown that this provides a better quality early learning environment, benefiting both the children and the staff involved. Around 90% of our annual budget goes toward staffing costs, making it clearly the single most important factor in our fee-setting and other financial considerations. While we do offer some above-award conditions for staff (such as an additional 3 weeks paid leave throughout the year), we are very concerned at the low award rates offered to both childcare educators and kindergarten assistants. For many, the very low rates of pay compared to other less demanding and less stressful roles (such as packing supermarket shelves) make the choice to continue long term in this sector financially difficult. The fact that we put our children's important early learning and development years in the hands of people that we then pay less than the waiting staff at the local coffee shop is pretty appalling. However, in the absence of significant fee increases or reform of the entire early learning system, these low pay rates are likely to remain.
 - The proposal to widen the pool of eligible Commonwealth childcare funds to registered nannies and other private providers is of some concern given that the overall pool of funding is not going to increase – therefore existing providers are only likely to be receiving less revenue through the CCB and CCR streams. In addition, we believe that there are real benefits to preschool children in being engaged in a social environment and learning the important skills of negotiating, sharing, and interacting with their peers that cannot be replaced by care provided in a home or other one-to-one environment. It is difficult to
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understand how the skills of trained early learning educators is equivalent to that of untrained nannies, particularly now that the National Quality Framework is driving the curriculum and management of registered child care providers, and therefore there is no equivalency in what is being offered.

- The issue of insufficient places for preschool aged children in both childcare and kindergarten are of real concern, and while we try to accommodate the needs of all families on our waiting list we are not always able to do so. The reality is that many parents are forced to delay return to work or work only limited hours because the places and times on offer do not match with their paid employment, particularly for those wanting to work more than part time. This also impacts greatly on women returning to work as they are often forced to take on only part-time and lesser-paid positions in order to match their working hours to the available childcare hours.
- While we try to keep our fees as low as possible, it is evident to us that the fees charged for childcare are creating financial stress for many families, and we are not in a position to offer to waive fees for those facing hardship except in exceptional circumstances. While the additional CCR and CCB provided by the Federal Government in recent years has been seen to have some positive impact on this, we still believe that there could be a better system of funding the early childhood sector that does not rely on the ability of parents to pay to make this critical service available to all children.

Finally, we believe that the early childhood education and care system deserves a thorough review and reform and would like to see a much broader and more consultative terms of reference established for a longer term inquiry. The timing and limited terms of reference for the current Productivity Commission inquiry has not allowed us to consult with our staff or families and we feel that they would have valuable insights to share if given the opportunity. We hope that this is the start and not the end of discussion and deliberations about this critical public policy issue – our children deserve it being given the highest of priorities.

Regards

Chris Black, President
EBKCC Committee of Management