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I am a Canberra-based early childhood teacher, freelance writer and advocate, particularly focusing on early learning in political and policy contexts.

Please accept the following as my submission to the Inquiry into the Social Services Legislation Amendment (Omnibus Savings and Child Care Reform) Bill 2017.

The Package will slash access to early education for children who most need it.

Early childhood development research is unequivocal that the greatest life gains from early education are received by children at risk of, or experiencing, vulnerabilities such as poverty and trauma. The Jobs for Families drastically ties together a child's right to access early education to their family's job status, including number of hours worked. Children experiencing vulnerability are far more likely to have families who either do not work or do not work enough to meet the new Activity Test.

At a time when other major countries are working to remove barriers to early education participation for children, this Package marks an alarming and dangerous step backwards.

The Package makes supporting children at risk (if they can even gain an enrolment) a lot more difficult.

For those children experiencing vulnerability who do manage to start at a centre – of which there will be far fewer – it will become much harder for a centre to support them. The current support frameworks that are in place (which are still not good enough), will disappear to be replaced by a vague “Child Care Safety Net”. There is almost no information about how this will work, how it will operate in practice, who will be eligible and how much support they will be entitled to. We do know that the definition of “vulnerability” will be tightened, and minimum access slashed from 24 hours to 12 hours per week.



The Package will make it much harder for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to access early education.

At a time when Australia is failing to meet our Closing the Gap target for early education attendance, and out-of-home care and youth detention statistics are worse than they were before the 2007 Apology to the Stolen Generations, the idea of slashing access to Indigenous children is an appalling policy measure.

Budget Based Funded services provide critical, community-based and run services to Aboriginal children and families – including early education. This Package will end that funding and force those services to adapt to the “mainstream” funding model. Bluntly put, that is impossible and many of those centres will close¹.

The Package will fundamentally alter the operational structure of the sector – for the worse.

The proposal to move to an hourly fee cap, and the shift to six-hour block funding, will severely undermine the current service delivery model for early education. Put simply, the move towards six-hour blocks of ECE will mean the shifting of educators currently employed full-time to casual or part-time hours.

The impact of this on the ongoing campaign for professional recognition and identity, and recruitment of the best people to support children’s learning in high-quality ECE settings, cannot be understated. The aims of the National Quality Framework (NQF) reforms can only be met by high-quality, well-trained and committed educators. This cannot be achieved without career certainty.

The Omnibus Bill entangles and complicates reforms that should be about children, not welfare reform.

Internationally, children’s participation and access to high-quality early education and care is seen as policy and investment priority in its own right, not an adjunct to the welfare system. Early childhood education and care reforms should focus on improving and strengthening access and affordability to *all* children, not be focused on altering welfare

1

http://www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Impacts_aspects_Jobs_for_Families_Child_Care_Package_Indigenous_communities.pdf

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levers that will leave some families better off and some worse. Changes to Family Tax Benefit, Paid Parental Leave, Newstart and other payment issues should be completely separated and evaluated individually.

Summary and recommendation

- The legislation as proposed drastically cuts access to ECEC for the children who would most benefit.
- The legislation as proposed will see the closure of Indigenous ECEC services, and failure to meet the Closing the Gap target for early childhood education.
- The legislation entirely priorities workforce participation over a child's right to education
- I recommend to the Committee that the legislation be retracted, and re-introduced following amendments that fundamentally realign the purpose of the package to focus on children and completely separate it from the welfare and tax reform measures.