

AN ABRIDGED VERSION OF A PRESENTATION GIVEN BY KYLIE HELGESEN, REED GENERAL MANAGER,
TO A FORUM OF WHEATBELT ECEC SERVICE DECISION MAKERS IN DECEMBER 2017

I've spoken on a number of occasions about the importance of certainty and quality for communities across the region and why I think REED is so important for our Wheatbelt children and families.

Given the goal of ensuring that young children across the Wheatbelt region have access to quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), it's helpful to remind ourselves why quality is so important.

In the early years of the 21st century, we learned a great deal about how young children develop and it was recognised that investment in early childhood development is an investment for life. The period between birth and age 8 – the early childhood yearsⁱ - is the foundation of a child's future health, growth, development and achievement at school and throughout life. 'The early years matter because, in the first few years of life, more than 1 million new neural connections are formed every second'.ⁱⁱ

'Early learning not only supports the development of cognitive, social, emotional and motivational skills, but drives later learning and achievement, which in turn contributes to the "human capital" which underpins the economic well-being of the broader community.'ⁱⁱⁱ

There's also evidence that the better the service, the greater the impact. Wheatbelt children deserve the best and in turn the Wheatbelt region as a whole will benefit.

The formal process for assessing quality sits within the framework of the *Education and Care Services National Law* and the National Quality Framework (NQF) and recognises that children learn from birth. The framework sets a high national benchmark for early childhood education and care. The National Quality Standard which is linked to National Learning Frameworks has seven quality areas against which services are rated.^{iv}

Publication of ratings is one way that parents can find out about the quality of services and is intended to help them make choices about the service that might best meet their child's needs. Word of mouth and communication via social media also inform the decisions parents make.

In the Wheatbelt region, parents don't generally have the luxury of choice which makes it even more important that every service is consistently of the highest possible standard – not just at the time of their assessment.

How good would it be if a Wheatbelt-wide campaign could promote the value of ECEC? This could lead to a better understanding of the importance of services - not just for children and parents but also for the whole of our region. It can be difficult for individual small services to generate that kind of publicity, but this is something that REED will be able to do.

REED will improve marketing and community awareness of services and the important role of educators, as well as the understanding of early childhood learning.

Certainty will be enhanced by management tools such as matching staff numbers to the number of children attending on a particular day, sound budgeting and fee setting, both of which are challenging in small communities, but essential for viability and certainty – and critically - understanding that utilisation rate is the lifeblood of a service.

Certainty that a service is available and of high quality is important for the families who already live in the Wheatbelt. Certainty and quality are also important when families are deciding whether or not to move to the Wheatbelt for work or business opportunities.

Obviously the annual fluctuations in the number of children born in a community impacts on the number of children attending an ECEC service from year to year. The quality of ECEC services also affects service utilisation rate.

Reputation is driven by quality which is in turn a driver of utilisation. Quality staff and quality programs attract parents.

The knowledge and skills of educators are important drivers of quality. I've visited ECEC services throughout the region and there are some amazing educators. However, it's well known that one of the significant challenges for services is recruiting and keeping skilled experienced educators.

We want the educators who work with our children to have the skills and knowledge that will enable them to provide the very best education and care, and we want to keep experienced educators in our services. REED will offer a career pathway – and will hopefully encourage more young people to become educators and not leave the region.

REED will provide region-wide professional development and enrichment for all staff through Cluster Managers who'll be experienced educators who'll be in regular contact with the services in their cluster area.

Worthy aspirations are for all of the services that become a part of REED

- to achieve ratings of not just meeting, but exceeding, quality standards
- to think of quality not just in terms of ACECQA assessment but something that's embedded in practice every day of every week
- to not have to rely on waivers because of unavailability of appropriately qualified staff
- to share common goals while keeping their local flavour
- to be widely recognised for their quality and contribution to children, families and communities.

REED will also aspire to

- develop strong feelings of children's self-worth and self confidence
- encourage an environment that challenges children to extend their skills and take calculated risks, to love learning and be proud of their accomplishments
- ensure an atmosphere of warmth and love where children feel secure and free to grow
- discover each child's uniqueness, special needs, talents and strengths
- provide a stimulating environment
- reinforce and challenge each child's natural development socially, emotionally and intellectually

I think '*We are one but we are many*' is an apt theme song for REED.

ⁱ www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/ECA_Constitution_2014.pdf

ⁱⁱ Center on the Developing Child (2009). Five Numbers to Remember About Early Childhood Development (Brief). Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

ⁱⁱⁱ Heckman, J. (2000a) "*The real question is how to use the available funds wisely. The best evidence supports the policy prescription: Invest in the Very Young*". Ounce of Prevention Fund and the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy Studies: Chicago.

^{iv} www.acecqa.gov.au