

SUBMISSION TO THE UNIVERSAL ACCESS NATIONAL PARTNERSHIP REVIEW

ABOUT REED

Regional Early Education and Development Inc (REED) was officially launched by the Hon Simone McGurk MLA Minister for Child Protection; Women's Interests; Prevention of Family and Domestic Violence; Community Services Minister on 16th March 2018. With Royalties for Regions funding and a Lotterywest grant to implement the new model with a single governance and management organisation for not-for-profit ECEC services across the Wheatbelt, REED's primary responsibilities are:

- The employment of staff, for example, managing salaries, tax and professional development.
- Becoming the Approved Provider of each service, ensuring regulatory requirements including continuous quality improvement are met, and liaising with the regulatory body in Western Australia, ECRU.
- Financial management including the development of ECEC service budgets.

Since its first meeting following the official launch, REED's Board has developed a Strategic Plan 2018-2021, which four goals:

- Delivering a range of high-quality services
- Ensuring the Organisation is sustainable
- Building our Organisation
- Engaging with the Community.

Additional information is available on our website: www.reedwa.org.au

OUR SUBMISSION

Our submission to this Review specifically addresses the issue that in Western Australia, no money from the National Partnership on Universal Access is provided to fund pre-school programmes in child care centres.

While acknowledging that the Review Discussion Paper states "*Neither is it a review of the specific funding and delivery arrangements in States and Territories*", the very first paragraph of the paper describes the review as being about "***national funding arrangements that support access by all children to 600 hours per year of quality early childhood education in the year before full-time school.***"

These are **national funding arrangements** and yet Western Australia has been permitted, since the beginning of Universal Access, to restrict the funding to those services which the Education Department of WA has chosen to fund. The Brennan/ Pascoe report, *Lifting Our Game* acknowledges that there are wide variations in how and where pre-school programs are delivered:

*In South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania, Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, government pre-schools are the main providers of preschool in the year before school. By contrast, most children in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland receive a preschool program in the year before school through long day care services and non-government preschools. In some of those jurisdictions where government pre-schools are the main providers, child care centres do also receive Universal Access money (e.g. NT) or other state funding (e.g. SA). **WA may be the only state that doesn't provide any funding at all through child care services.** [emphasis added].¹*

These funding arrangements are also about access by all children, yet clearly not all Western Australian children do have access to this support.

THE INEQUITY AROUND UNIVERSAL ACCESS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The Federal Government says that: While attendance is not compulsory, preschool programs are delivered in a range of settings including child care, stand-alone preschools and school-based preschools, in order to meet the needs of working families, and will be accessible to all Australian children, regardless of their location.

This inequity in funding for universal access has several implications:

As indicated above, not **all children** have access. REED has been particularly concerned about the access of Aboriginal children to early childhood education and care services and has a specific strategy, including a formal partnership with the Moorditj Youth Foundation Aboriginal Corporation, to address this. The extension of Universal Access to child care services would ensure that all children have access to this vital form of support.

In some states, up to 40% of disadvantaged children fail to attend the full funded 15 hours of preschool each week, particularly jurisdictions (WA, SA, Tas, ACT & NT) which deliver preschool through State preschools typically on a 6 hour school day model. Attendance rates for 15 hours pw are much higher in states with a higher reliance on long day care delivery support.²

Universal access is also about **meeting the needs of working families**. However, the present arrangement privileges parents who can afford to take the time away from work to fit in with the idiosyncratic whims of the education system which decides the timetable of how the 15 hours will be delivered. These parents get the free preschool programs subsidised by the Federal Government; those who can't take that time out of work either accept the program delivered by lower qualified staff in child care centres or they pay higher fees in child care services which employ a qualified teacher to deliver the program. In regional areas, such as the Wheatbelt where REED is based, this issue is exacerbated for parents who are travelling into larger regional centres for employment (we

¹ Susan Pascoe AM and Professor Deborah Brennan, Lifting our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools Through Early Childhood Interventions, 2017. Page 27.

² ABS Preschool education 2018 4240.0

have a number of examples of travel of 50-80 kilometres) and find it both impossible and impractical to return to their smaller regional town to collect their children at the conclusion of the pre-school session.

The commitment to the programmes being **delivered in a range of settings** avoids, as the Discussion Paper notes, a one size fits all approach. Yet this is precisely what is occurring in Western Australia, where no funding is allocated to child care services.

WHAT WOULD REED DO WITH UNIVERSAL ACCESS FUNDING?

Funding for long day care programs recognises the higher costs associated with providing a high quality preschool program compared with an NQF compliant ECEC service. These include:

- The differential cost of employing a qualified teacher rather than a senior educator;
- The cost of ensuring the teacher has comparable access to professional education and pupil-free programming time that a teacher in a preschool or school would receive;
- The costs of educational and learning resources including access to technology consistent with age appropriate pedagogy;
- The costs of developing the program;
- The costs of incursions and excursions that deliver on specific learning outcomes for children;
- Supporting children's transition to school through well-developed transition statements and learning goals, information sessions for parents, and time to connect with local primary schools.

REED understands that in a number of other jurisdictions providers of child care services use the Universal Access funding to "top up" the salaries and/or enhance the conditions of Early Childhood Teachers as a means of attracting such staff to work in their services. REED supports the need for a clear set of funding criteria tying funding to the delivery of the program by the teacher to ensure funding supports a quality program.

REED notes that a benefit of directing preschool funding into the long day care centre has been an acceleration of broader quality uplift across the services. The two states that provide the highest level of funding for kindergarten programs in long day care - Queensland and Victoria - have the highest average assessed quality of long day care centres under the NQS. The jurisdictions that provide no funding have generally the lowest quality ratings of their long day care centres. WA is below the national average in both the proportion of services meeting/exceeding NQF and meeting/exceeding QA1.

Queensland and Victoria also have lower rates of staffing waivers than other jurisdictions. As teachers are the most difficult category of staff to recruit and retain, the impact of the elevated level of kindergarten funding tied to the employment of a teacher is likely to be a key factor in this pattern of waivers. While WA has the second lowest proportion of waivers in relation to the physical environment, WA has the second highest proportion of staff waivers (NT is higher). Given

REED's heavy reliance on qualified educators working on visas, this situation is likely to be further impacted by the change in arrangements to take effect in November.

CONCLUSION

Children and families in the Wheatbelt region (and in all regional and rural areas) have as much right to access the highest quality early childhood education and care programs as children and families in cities and metropolitan areas. In delivering on the first goal in our Strategic Plan, REED staff will be supported to bring the service they provide for children and families up to standards that meet or exceed national standards. Strategies for attracting and retaining high quality staff include provision of access to Professional Development and career path opportunities and the benefits of being valued members of a team.

The ongoing provision of good quality ECEC services is important for children's development, for families, and importantly for the economic and social fabric of communities in the Wheatbelt region. The renewed emphasis on agriculture and food security in a changing Western Australian economy highlights the importance of maintaining ECEC services in the Wheatbelt. The REED Board is committed to building a financially sustainable, professionally managed, regional organisation providing effectively and efficiently managed high quality services so that ECEC services in the Wheatbelt region continue to operate and thrive. The extension of Universal Access to providers such as REED would be an important contribution to ensuring we are in a position to achieve these aims.

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