

# Quality early education for all: Fostering creative, entrepreneurial, resilient and capable learners <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

Full report PDF <sup>[2]</sup>

## Executive summary

There is a mismatch between investment and opportunity in early childhood policy in Australia. The early years are a critical window for building the foundations that enable all children to become creative, entrepreneurial, resilient and capable learners. Yet current policy settings are not meeting the needs of the children who stand to benefit most. This report aims to inform priorities for action for the next five years.

Early education is one of the most significant investments in education and productivity that governments make. It has positive impacts on all children and is a key strategy for overcoming the impact of early disadvantage on educational outcomes and life chances.

However, in Australia, there remains an unacceptable divide in both opportunity and outcome between the poorest and wealthiest communities, between cities and very remote towns, and between children from different cultural backgrounds.

A third of Australian children do not attend preschool for the number of hours needed to make a difference and children in poorer communities have fewer high-quality services available to them.

More than one-in-five children start school with vulnerabilities that can make it hard for them to take up the opportunities that schooling provides.

This has long-term consequences for the future productivity and prosperity of the nation.

We need to act urgently.

Australia does not have a coherent or equitable policy framework and service delivery platform for children and their families in the early years. The system is complex, fragmented, and unequal access to effective services further entrenches health, social and economic inequalities.

The early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector is a key element of the early years platform and shares this complexity. Responsibility for funding and delivery of early education is spread across all levels of government and there is a lack of robust data to measure impact and target investment decisions.

Advances in boosting participation in early education have been made, and the National Quality Framework (NQF) provides the foundations for high-quality and more equal ECEC but the pace of change is too slow. Australia does not yet provide all Australian children with high-quality early education.

Current policy settings are still not extending educational opportunity equally to all children. This means we are missing out on chances to maximise the potential of all children to thrive, participate in and contribute to our society.

The growing gap between the most advantaged and least advantaged children, in both learning and wellbeing, creates significant challenges for an education system already struggling to reduce the gap in achievement. Unequal access to early education and difficult transition into primary school also contributes to increased risks around early disengagement from school, the incidence of mental health issues, substance misuse and involvement in juvenile justice.

High-quality, developmentally-appropriate early education in the two years prior to school must be a core component of national investment to secure the health, wellbeing and education of our children and to secure positive futures for them and for the country.

This report aims to inform priorities for action for the next five years to ensure that all Australian children can benefit from a quality early education.

## Early education in Australia

The signing of the National Partnership Agreement in 2009 (and commencement of the NQF in 2012) ushered in a new national approach to the regulation and delivery of high-quality ECEC in Australia. The NQF provides the foundation and framework for lifting levels of quality across the system. Its core elements – the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the National Quality Standard (NQS) – reflect research evidence and a broad professional consensus about the conditions that create positive relationships and a high-quality learning environment for children. The EYLF and NQS highlight the fact that children learn through play and in the context of secure and positive relationships and recognise that the early years are a crucial period for early cognitive and social and emotional development.

In the past five years, the proportion of children accessing early education has increased and progress has been made towards achieving higher and more consistent quality across services. This is a strong foundation that can and must be built on.

Although measurable progress has been made, access and quality are still skewed by socio-economic status, meaning that we are missing opportunities to extend access to quality early education to the children who stand to benefit most.

A substantial proportion of services have been independently assessed as working towards the minimum quality standards outlined in the NQF. The NQF Assessment and Ratings results provide independent confirmation that quality remains highly variable across the country, although there are indications that the assessment process is resulting in services improving their quality. A quarter of services have still not been assessed.

Of most concern is that nearly one-in-four services experience difficulty in meeting the NQF's 'education program and practice' standard which focuses on embedding children's individual learning, exploration and identity in everyday practice.

There is a clear need for a focused strategy to ensure all services meet the NQS. In particular, it is necessary to accelerate assessment processes to drive an increase in quality and to embed quality improvement across the system.

### **How Australia's children are tracking**

Despite the rapid expansion in provision, access and funding for early education and care in the past decade, there are cohorts of children who are either not accessing a preschool education, or who are not accessing the hours of quality early education needed to make difference to their development.

Each year, 15 per cent of the children from the lowest socio-economic quintile and around 60,000 children in total enter school developmentally vulnerable. Quality early educational opportunities are a vital strategy for reducing these numbers.

While overall levels of developmental vulnerability have not shifted significantly, these levels have widened between the poorest and wealthiest communities, and metropolitan cities compared to very remote towns. Cohorts of children and an unacceptable number of communities fare extremely poorly on the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).

Early education must be delivered in a way that, as far as possible, reduces barriers to access for the children who stand to benefit most. Priorities include shifting family and community perceptions about the importance of early education and delivery models that prioritise assertive outreach, engagement with families, cultural appropriateness and additional support for families where needed.

Early education must also be delivered with a level of quality and an intensity that is proportionate to need, which will require additional investment in the communities the AEDC indicates need more support.

### **Priorities and recommendations**

This report makes five priority recommendations that the Mitchell Institute believes should be key national objectives for early childhood policy over the next five years.

These overarching recommendations address issues of access, equity, quality and data. They reflect the evidence about which investments can have the greatest impact and a pragmatic approach to building on existing achievements.

The Mitchell Institute will explore these issues in more detail in 2016.

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