



**Submission to the Australian Education Union
National Preschool Education Inquiry**

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1. Executive Summary

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the National Preschool Education Inquiry. MacKillop Family Services works with children, young people and families with special needs. This submission is based on the experience of our practitioners. We have responded to terms of reference number one: “The degree to which Australia is successful in ensuring that all children in Australia have equitable access to high quality free preschool education”. In our submission we argue, based on our experience, that not all preschool education in the western metropolitan region is accessible, nor is it free, and therefore is inadequate in meeting the needs of marginalized children and their families. We highlight our experiences through numerous examples. This submission has been prepared by Kaye Cameron of ParentsLink (a service of MacKillop’s Family and Community Services [Western]) and Suzanne McManus of the Practice and Policy Unit at MacKillop Family Services.

2. MacKillop Family Services – History and Mission

MacKillop Family Services, established in 1997 as a refounding of seven long established Catholic agencies, is a provider of specialist child, youth and family services to some of the most marginalized families in Melbourne and Geelong. Key areas of support include family and community services, special education, out of home care, disability services, youth services and foster care. This work is coordinated through over 90 services and the efforts of some 350 staff and a further 350 volunteers.

MacKillop’s mission is to foster hope in every person by awakening them to an appreciation of their self-worth. Through a diversity of creative programs we resource children, young people and families who have particular needs, to empower them to achieve their full potential within the wider community. We stand with those who struggle for justice, peace and hope, and, in partnership with those on the margins, advocate for positive social change and a just society.

Family and Community Services (Western) is a program of MacKillop Family Services based at the St Anthony’s Family Centre in Footscray. It provides the family support and education services within the western suburbs of Melbourne: Family Preservation Service, Substance Abuse Family Support, Strengthening Families, Educational Outreach Service, School Focused Youth Service, and ParentsLink Regional Parenting Service. Services are designed to work with children and families who have complex welfare needs, and help families alleviate crises and overcome long term difficulties that may lead to out-of-home placement of children.

Many clients of our Family and Community Services are families with pre-school children receiving intensive intervention case management in order to reduce risks to the children’s health and well being. Currently, approximately 33% of 1700 families we work with are children aged 0-4 years.

3. Terms of Reference - Number One

The degree to which Australia is successful in ensuring that all children in Australia have equitable access to high quality free preschool education.

Our experience indicates that not all children in Western Melbourne have access to free high quality preschool education. There are 3 elements to this argument:

3.1 Access/location is problematic

Our experience is that pre-schools, particularly in the Western Region, are not accessible to all parents without private transport. The clients we work with tend to have either no transport, or unreliable transport. In these cases families/parents may have to use multiple forms of public transport or take their child to kindergarten, for example using two buses. This would involve four trips on eight buses for the parent and 2 trips on 4 buses for the pre-school child. If the parent also has younger children, the trip is increasingly onerous.

The location of the pre-school in relation to primary school can be quite important. If a parent has to walk/travel in one direction from home to take primary school children to school, it is unlikely the parent is then able to walk/travel in an opposite direction to take a pre-school child to pre-school.

3.2 Access is too expensive

Our experience is that the cost of preschool is prohibitive to many of our clients. Whilst we recognize there is a Pre-School subsidy scheme, the barriers to children's access due to families living in poverty, and being unable to pay the remaining fee, cannot be overstated. Fees range from \$400-\$600 per year for preschool. The preschool subsidy scheme for parents on a Health Care Card reduces the fee by \$250 per year. Compared to the 'parent contribution' which is paid by parents at a local state school of \$80 per year, \$70 for second child and so on, the cost of preschool is prohibitive even though the hours of attendance are much less.

A related expense issue is the current practice that a voluntary parent committee or teacher is responsible for collection of fees from other parents. Parents living in poverty face considerable hardship in meeting the educational needs of their children. Whilst at primary or secondary school levels, non payment of fees or excursion costs may lead to a supportive intervention (such as student welfare officer intervention), at pre-school it is most likely a fellow parent will be 'debt collecting'. The same support at a professional level is not there at pre-school. Unfortunately, pre-school committees can be quite judgmental in their attitude to another family's ability to pay fees, while at secondary or tertiary level a punitive approach to school fees is rare.

Teachers are also placed in a difficult position of compromising the teacher/parent relationship by attempting to collect fees. Is this humiliating experience replicated any-

where else in a government funded service? Pre-schools should not be placed in the position like 'Little Athletics' clubs, dependent on parent volunteerism with the attendant difficulties of parents feeling stigmatized, or avoiding attendance due to lack of finances to pay fees.

3.3 Quality is compromised by new timeframes

The pre-school offerings available to our clients from the Western Region of Melbourne are of very high quality. The curriculum developed by each teacher addresses the individual developmental needs of children in the particular setting. Pre-school services offer a curriculum which is sensitive to children's cultural, religious, and socio-economic needs. Key countries in the western region include Vietnam, Italy, Greece and China.

Pre-school teachers have always advocated for service delivery which is in the best interest of the child. For example, in the past all centres in the Western Region offered 2.5 hrs x 4 sessions per week. The new timeframe for sessions is 5 x 5 hours per week. Although there is an argument that this timeframe may suit parents, many early childhood specialists believe this is not the optimal learning situation for children. Lunch or substantial food breaks and concentration levels need to be considered and take up more quality learning time than in the earlier model. In whose interests are we acting upon when these discussions are made – the parent's or the child's? Ideally both need to be considered.

4. Other Issues

Some other issues regularly facing families with complex welfare needs, and which mitigate against their children accessing pre-school are:

4.1 Benefit for families in need. Where children can more readily access pre-school (geographically and economically) the opportunities for the child and family to be supported are increased. We know numerous instances of pre-school teachers meeting with family support staff to ensure the child/family's welfare is maintained. These examples have occurred, however, when the child has already been enrolled. We work with families who would greatly benefit from this support but accessing the service in the first place is very difficult for our families who are under stress and/or may not see the value in early childhood education.

4.2 A family in crisis will not always be able to ensure their child attends regularly. This may be perceived as lack of interest or commitment by staff at the centre. If a child arrives late, or is picked up late from the service, this can lead to negative perceptions of the parent.

4.3 There is an understanding amongst some parents that school is essential, but pre-school is optional. Obviously pre-school attendance is not compulsory, however, poor literacy rates in children attending preparatory in the Western region can be partially attributed to the number of children who don't attend pre-school. Community education

to help parents understand the value of early years education, and that literacy begins at birth (or even earlier), may counter the belief that ‘learning’ begins at school. Some cultural groups highly value education but see this beginning at the formal primary school age level. They do not value ‘learning through play’, which is the major educational tool in Australian contemporary pre-schools. Maribyrnong has a particularly high number of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse residents, including refugee new arrivals.

5. Concluding Reflections

We agree that all children in Australia should have access to high quality, free public preschool education, but as the examples in this submission illustrate, this ideal remains for marginalised families elusive. Families regularly struggle with public transport, ill located pre-schools and daunting school fees. All this is coupled with the everyday stressors facing families with complex welfare needs, indicative of those on the margins. We are also concerned with the practice of parents and teachers becoming debt collectors. This practice is non conducive to a trusting society. Although we affirm that there is high quality preschool education being offered in Melbourne’s Western Region, equitable access to this service is far from free and involves a large degree of difficulty for marginalised families. What we know from our experience in the Western Region of Melbourne, working with 1700 families, could be extended to Australia by implication. Finally, we recommend that emphasis be given to a community education program to raise the awareness of the value of early year’s education.

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