



Submission to the Premier's Children's Advisory Committee

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Executive Summary

This submission comments, firstly, on the difficulties that face marginalized families and children in accessing preschool education, particularly with respect to location, cost, and cultural expectations of education. It recommends that preschools be made more readily accessible. Secondly, it argues for greater investment in long-term family and community support in order to sustain children in families as much as possible and to reduce the negative impact of placing children away from their family and community. Thirdly, it endorses the committee's proposal for locally based approaches, but raises cautions about how such centres might best meet the needs of marginalized families.

Introduction

MacKillop Family Services welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Premier's Children's Advisory Committee. MacKillop shares the Premier's concern that children be provided with timely support through the early years of their lives. The first stages of a child's life are critical for their future well-being and participation in society. While we acknowledge that the *Children First* strategy covers a range of important universal issues, our major concerns here have to do with the needs of children in marginalized families, particularly with respect to access to preschool services and to sustained support within a community context. We are aware that disadvantage is concentrated in particular communities. We are equally aware that interventions which focus on child development, education, family support, community participation, and viable employment opportunity make a sustainable difference.¹

MacKillop Family Services works with children, young people and families with special needs in Melbourne and the Barwon region. This submission is based on the experience of our practitioners working in family and community services. It has been prepared by Kaye Cameron of ParentsLink (a service of MacKillop's Family and Community Services [Western]) and John Honner and Suzanne McManus of the Practice and Policy Unit at MacKillop Family Services.

MacKillop Family Services

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, and disability services for families with complex needs. This work is coordinated through over 90 services and the efforts of some 350 staff and a further 350 volunteers.²

¹ See Tony Vinson, *Community Adversity and Resilience Report*, Melbourne, Jesuit Social Services, 2004.

² For more information on MacKillop Family Services, go to www.mackillop.org.au.

Family and Community Services (Western) is a program of MacKillop Family Services based at St Anthony's Family Centre in Footscray. It provides a range of family and educational support services within the western suburbs of Melbourne. Some of these services are provided for children and families who have complex welfare needs, helping families alleviate crises and overcome long term difficulties that may lead to out of home placement of their children. Other services are more general in character, and focus on parenting skills, early intervention, and education support.

Currently, children aged 0-4 years make up 33% of the number of people we work with through Family and Community Services (Western) across 1700 families.

In the sections below we attempt to answer the Committee's questions.

1. What are your major concerns?

We have three major concerns:

- The importance of access to preschool;
- The importance of long term integrated family support;
- The importance of delivering services locally and as part of a continuum.

These will be dealt with in turn below.

1.1 Preschools

The preschool offerings available to families in the western suburbs of Melbourne are of very high quality. The curriculum developed by each teacher addresses the individual developmental needs of children in particular settings. Preschool services offer a curriculum which is sensitive to children's cultural, religious, and socio-economic needs. Key cultures in the western region include Vietnamese, Italian, Greek, East African, and Chinese. Our major concern is that many children are unable to access preschool and that the loss of contact with preschool leads to further marginalization of children and families.

Access/location is problematic

Many parents without private transport, particularly in the western suburbs, are unable to access preschool. The families we work with tend to have either no transport or unreliable transport. In these cases parents may have to use multiple forms of public transport to take their child to kindergarten, for example using two buses. This would involve four trips on eight buses for the parent and two trips on four buses for the preschool child. If the parent also has younger children, the trip is increasingly onerous.

The location of the preschool in relation to primary school is 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.

Preschool is too expensive

Our experience is that the cost of preschool is prohibitive for many of families. While we recognize there is a preschool 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' paid by parents at a local state school (\$80 per year, \$70 for second child and so on), the cost of preschool is prohibitive, especially given that the hours of attendance are much less than school hours.

A related expense issue is the current practice for collecting fees, either through a voluntary parent committee or a teacher. Parents living in poverty face considerable hardship in meeting the educational needs of their children. 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), but at preschool it is most often the case that a fellow parent will be 'debt collecting' and no professional support to help the family is available at preschool. Unfortunately, preschool committees can be 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 can also be placed in the difficult position of compromising the teacher/parent relationship by having to collect fees. This experience can be humiliating for parents, and then lead to the child being withdrawn from preschool services.

Quality is compromised by new timeframes

Preschool teachers have been strong advocates for service delivery which is in the best interest of the child. For example, in the past all centres in the West offered four 2.5 hour sessions per week. This time frame allowed for appropriate breaks and met the children's concentration levels. The new timeframe for sessions, however, is five 5 hour sessions per week. Although there is an argument that this timeframe may suit parents, this is not the optimal learning framework for young children.

Benefit for families in need is not always accessed

Where children can more readily access preschool (geographically and economically), the opportunities for the child and family to be supported are increased. We know numerous instances of preschool 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.

Problem of irregular attendance

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.

Some parents see preschool as optional

Some parents see school as essential, but preschool as optional. While preschool attendance is not compulsory, poor literacy rates in children attending preparatory in the can be partially attributed to the number of children who do not attend preschool. 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 value education highly but see education beginning at the formal primary school age level. They do not value 'learning through play', which is the major educational tool in Australian contemporary preschools. As a result, they and their children are at risk of becoming further marginalized in the local community.

1.2 The importance of long term integrated family support in community context

Many of the families we work with have been identified through Child Protection processes, and the children in these families have particular needs for nurture and education. The government's recent consultations and reports have highlighted many problems in the current child protection and placement systems, and point to the value of greater investment in early intervention and prevention services.³ While there is continuing debate about the value of long-term and short-term interventions,⁴ it is clear that long-term entrenched problems will require long-term solutions. Further, particularly where disadvantage is entrenched in localities, solutions are required that address a range of community needs, particularly in terms of employment, community

³ See for example DHS, *An Integrated Strategy for Child Protection and Placement Services*, Community Care Division, Department of Human Services, Melbourne, 2002; and The Allen Consulting Group, *Protecting Children: The Child Protection Outcomes Project*, The Allen Consulting Group, Melbourne, 2003.

⁴ See John Honner, Lyndal Hickey and Suzanne McManus, "The value of long-term multiple engagement family preservation services", Paper presented at 8th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, www.aifs.org.au/institute/afrc8/honner.pdf

engagement, and education.⁵ Family support programs need on the one hand to address the developmental needs of the children and, on the other, address the barriers to social inclusion in any particular locality.

As the *Integrated Strategy* document shows, there is a huge imbalance between the amount of money invested in early intervention services and the amount spent on protection and placement services. In 2001-02 Community Care budget allocations, for example, \$33.1m was to be spent on prevention services and \$177.9m on protection and placement services.⁶ Of the \$177.9m to be spent on protection and placement services, \$58.2m was to be spent on 525 residential care placements and \$59.4m on 3000 home-based placements. Further, this level of funding fails to meet the real costs of placing children in care. It would make much better economic sense, therefore, to invest more in family support services today, so as to maintain children within families and communities, and save on the prohibitive costs of looking after children and young people in care tomorrow.⁷

1.3 The importance of a local continuum of services

We strongly support the committee's proposals about locally based approaches building on already available community resources. The details, however, needs to be explored. In our submission to the *Protecting Children* consultation we made the following observations around related proposals:

While the intent of the proposed "Community Child and Family Support Centres" may seem like a good idea, and while there is value in co-locating a spectrum of services so that families with protective concerns are not stigmatized in a separate system, feedback suggests that some marginalized families will be wary of engaging with such centres. How these Centres are established and understood will therefore be important: they should be family friendly and provide resources for activities, group meetings, child care and the like. It may be worthwhile co-locating some front line services, but the more important objective is the linkage of family services. If there is an office called "Child Protection" as part of this Centre, on the other hand, the proposal will not work. Instead of having active Child Protection staff at these centres, Child Protection should provide a secondary consultative role. Alternate models of linking services without co-location should also be explored (the Report speaks of "virtual" centres on p. 96). We also urge that mainstream services be better designed so as to include, rather than exclude, families that otherwise end up in tertiary services.

We support the development of "Community Support Networks" following the model of the innovation projects, but caution that the resources needed to deal with

⁵ See Tony Vinson, *Community Adversity and Resilience Report*.

⁶ See *An Integrated Strategy*, p. 21.

⁷ These arguments are explored more fully in *Protecting Children*.

long term causative factors of struggling families will be extensive. If government is to “solve the problem”, then more than restructuring will be required....

We suggest that a community building approach, based around family and community needs, would help develop networks and integration. We therefore support the model of networking and cooperation (p. 78), hoping that this in turn will lead to necessary coordination and collaboration. Restructuring alone, as was the case with the YAFS decree, is unlikely to be effective and meet desired goals. It will simply establish another system....

We do have concerns about what might be meant by ‘community’ and ‘local’. This discussion needs to be more refined, as ‘local community’ can mean anything from a part of a suburb to an entire DHS region. It can refer to local community organizations that are co-located and collaborate and cooperate, or it can refer to community processes that involve networks and organizations. We endorse Don Edgar’s proposals for family friendly zones around schools, building natural centres of community in a normalized environment, with the service system organized around these natural meeting points (*The Patchwork Nation*, pp. 140 ff).

With more specialized services, however, there are further difficulties. Under current funding arrangements the catchments for these services end up being large DHS regions whose administrative responsibilities include hundreds of communities. It would be impossible, under the current system, for regional services to engage at a community level in the way that the report envisages. While more universal and less intensive services ... could develop strong community integration, specialist secondary and tertiary ... will not be able to readily develop the same degree of identification in community without substantial reworking of frameworks and targets.

2. What are the best ways for governments to improve outcomes and address these concerns?

Access to preschool can be improved by locating preschools in more accessible areas or by providing some form of pick-up/take home transport. Access can be improved through reducing fee structures and changing processes for fee collection. And access can be improved through actively inviting cultural groups to participate in preschool activities.

Long term integrated family and community support can be improved through a commitment to long-term solutions for long-term problems, through a revision of the legislation governing child protection and placement, and also through the local integration of services through the initiatives of the Department for Victorian Communities. The same applies to delivering services locally and as part of a continuum. Governments can also improve outcomes by continuing to develop partnerships with community organizations and service providers.

3. How well do current arrangements meet the child care needs of families?

No comment.

4. Children's Centres under one roof: what are the key elements needed for success?

Accessibility, as noted above, is clearly important. It is also important that these centres are welcoming to marginalized families and children and able to meet their aspirations. It would be unwise to have Child Protection activities based under this roof, and some alternative pathways for attending to children at risk should be explored. In our submission to the *Protecting Children* consultation we made the following proposal:

We need to develop a path to services for families that goes directly through local government or the non-government sector. In other words, formal Child Protection notifications could continue to go to DHS, but lower level concerns could go to designated non-government family support services in a particular region. DHS and NGOs would be given the capacity to move referrals to each other according to their own assessments. In other words, family assessments, with multi disciplinary responses, would be done in the non-government sector. Further, the mandated responsibility of professionals to report child protection concerns would have to be seen to be legally fulfilled when their concerns are reported to the relevant non-government organisation.

If this is to happen, however, priority must be given to developing generalist and specialist family support services, which in time would meet the goal of the Report, that is, a reduction in the number of children captured in Child Protection.

Whatever approach is chosen, there is a need for greater flexibility of services. Currently families have to fit into one of a handful of services and their specified targets. Ideally assessment and intake will respond to the needs of a family and collaboratively design a service package to meet those needs.

5. How can linkages and transitions be improved?

The proposals for locally based approaches seem to be in the right direction.

6. How can maternal and child health and parenting services be improved?

These services are generally widely used and highly valued. Where there are concerns about the future well-being of children, it would be valuable to have an alternative pathway to family support that did not necessarily go through child protection systems.

7. Would a local planning and service model improve outcomes? What are the major barriers?

Local planning and services are in theory very attractive. Marginalized families, however, can be transient, given the precariousness of housing and relationships. Children, on the other hand, need stability of home and environment for healthy development. It will be important, then, to factor in processes that will help to maintain marginalized families in the one locality. This will include the great challenge of housing, and also the challenge of communities learning to accept of difference. This will require some active community building work.

Governments should not do everything. Balances needs to be struck between accountability and partnership, and between responsibility and subsidiarity.

Costs will be a barrier, particularly for specialist services being made locally available. Centralized systems may appear more “efficient” on paper, but the problem then shifts to one of access. The real barrier is the electorate’s acceptance of the fact that sound investment in the well-being of children will cost more than we currently budget for.

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