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The Best Start in Life

The importance of early childhood education

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KEY POINTS

- International and national research highlights the importance of early childhood education. It is the foundation for lifelong learning.
- The ACT Government is committed to providing the children of Canberra with the best possible start in life. The Government is therefore committed to excellence in early childhood education.
- The following principles guide the ACT Government's approach to early childhood education.
 - Early childhood learning must be delivered through programs of the highest quality.
 - Early childhood educators must build strong partnerships with parents and carers to promote the wellbeing of young children.
 - Services must be delivered in an integrated way to make the whole system work for every child.
 - Timely, targeted interventions improve the life chances of all children, particularly those who are potentially vulnerable and at risk.
 - Collaborative, planned transitions and pathways through early childhood assist young children to move confidently and successfully to the next stage of learning.
- As part of its commitment to early childhood education, in 2005, the ACT Government increased the number of preschool education hours to 12 per week, for all four year old children, flexibly delivered in either long day or short day programs. In 2003, the Government also reduced class sizes in the early years of school. Classes from kindergarten to year 3 generally now have a maximum of 21 students.
- The ACT also has one early childhood school, the O'Connor Cooperative School, which covers preschool to year 2. The O'Connor Cooperative School is a very popular and successful school.
- To further its commitment to early childhood education, the ACT Government will be establishing four new early childhood schools:
 - Southern Cross – to serve the Belconnen region;
 - Lyons – to serve the Woden and Weston Creek region;
 - Isabella Plains – to serve the Tuggeranong region; and
 - Narrabundah – to serve the central Canberra region.
- These regional centres will provide access to integrated services for children from birth to eight years. We envisage these services will include, in addition to preschool to year 2 classes, childcare, family support and other services that sustain children's learning, health and wellbeing.
- From 2008 all ACT government preschools will be forming a closer working relationship with a primary school to support the continuity of learning. All ACT government schools catering for primary aged students will offer two years of non-compulsory education.

Introduction

Providing support for children in their early years lays the foundation for their future. The ACT Government is committed to giving all children the best start in life and helping them become “resilient and optimistic, healthy and active, creative and innovative, and supported and protected.”

ACT Children’s Plan 2004

Across the world, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of the early years of life. Research across the medical, behavioural and social sciences provides the evidence that the early years are critical in setting the foundation for learning, behaviour and health throughout the school years and on into adult life.¹ According to the experts:

- ‘the early period of brain development is critical to the wellbeing of our community; not just in physical and mental health, but also in literacy and numeracy.’²
- ‘The value of early childhood education programs... is undisputed and well substantiated... Short term benefits include improved cognitive functioning, school readiness and social skills. Longitudinal studies have demonstrated positive effects on school completion, further education participation, employment outcomes, earnings, and general social well-being.’³
- each dollar invested in early childhood development can save up to seven dollars in later public expenditure.⁴

All children have a right to be all they can be and to enjoy and experience a full and supported childhood. Children have the best start when their early learning experiences are guided by professionals with expertise in early childhood development, and are delivered in caring settings, with strong connections to their family and their community. High quality education programs boost cognitive development, social and emotional skills and generally prepare children for success at school.

This policy paper sets out the principles that guide the ACT Government’s approach to early childhood education, and the practical commitment that the Government has made to giving Canberra’s children the best possible start in life.

¹ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Starting Strong II: Early childhood and care*, OECD, Paris (2006).

² B Jones, *Report of the Knowledge Nation Taskforce*, Chifley Research Centre, Canberra (2001) 51.

³ M Harrington, ‘Early childhood programs – an overview of the research’, *Background Note*, no. SP010, Parliamentary Library, Canberra (2005).

⁴ See L Schweinhart, H Barnes and D Weikart, *Significant benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 27* (Monographs of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 10), High/Scope Press, Ypsilanti (1993).

Principles

1. Early childhood learning must be delivered through programs of the highest quality.

- Early childhood learning and development programs should offer high quality curriculum over children's early years. Curriculum and pedagogy should be based on up-to-date research into early learning.
- The early childhood band of the ACT Curriculum Framework, *Every Chance to Learn*, identifies the learning that is essential for all ACT preschool to year 2 students to develop as active learners, "*empowering them with the knowledge, understandings, capabilities and values to participate as active members of their community and society.*"⁵
- Staff qualifications and experience in early childhood, and child-staff ratios that promote personalised approaches to learning, are critical if children are to achieve successful outcomes. With maximum class sizes of 21 students from kindergarten to year 3, optimal conditions for an individualised approach are in place. Preschools integrated with primary schools will be well placed to support professional learning for all staff in best practice early childhood education.

2. Early childhood educators must build strong partnerships with parents and carers to promote the wellbeing of young children.

- Families are central to children's development. The security, encouragement and responsiveness that families can provide enable children to grow emotionally, socially, intellectually and physically.
- Early childhood learning and development programs operating within ACT government schools will seek the active participation of families, giving them a strong voice in decision-making and empowering them to contribute to their children's learning and development. This will harness the strong tradition of ACT families' active participation in their children's early years.

3. Services must be delivered in an integrated way to make the whole system work for every child.

- Across Australia, schools are recognised as having the potential to be effective centres for integrated services for children and families. A holistic approach to early childhood and development which focuses on the whole child makes their needs the central focus for service delivery.
- Government schools are already well recognised for providing a universal service, for providing venues for community activities and for facilitating community connectedness.

⁵ ACT Department of Education and Training, *Every chance to learn, Curriculum Framework for ACT Schools Preschool to year 10, Phase 2 Trial Draft 2006*, Publishing Services, Canberra (2006) 6.

- Early childhood programs in ACT public schools will provide learning experiences and services that:
 - give all children opportunities to reach their potential;
 - improve transitions for children between home, early childhood settings and the early years of school;
 - help build strong families and communities;
 - involve families and communities in genuine partnerships; and
 - offer before and after school care which seeks to link with childcare provision.

4. Timely, targeted interventions improve the life chances of all children, particularly those who are potentially vulnerable and at risk.

- The amalgamation of preschools into schools will, over time, strengthen school excellence across the ACT by ensuring every student has the skills and knowledge for their ongoing engagement in education.
- Early intervention programs and services aim to address inequalities by identifying the specific needs of young students, including potentially vulnerable children and those with disabilities and developmental delays.
- By incorporating services to improve the life chances of children potentially at risk, additional support will be provided to those most at need.
- Access to additional, culturally appropriate preschool programs for Indigenous children and their families provides sound preparation for school and can increase the benefits of early childhood education.

5. Collaborative, planned transitions and pathways through early childhood assist young children to move confidently and successfully to the next stage of learning.

- Early childhood and early intervention programs that are linked with other services for young children prior to beginning school can continue into the early years of schooling. This will ensure a positive transition to the compulsory years of schooling and will strengthen a child's sense of belonging.
- Ongoing professional development in early education and child development will be provided to schools to ensure the excellent foundation of preschool is expanded and progresses throughout the early years of schooling and beyond.
- Parents can be assured that there are identified pathways beyond the early years for the next phase of their children's learning and development.

The Government's commitment

As part of its commitment to early childhood education, in 2005, the ACT Government increased the number of preschool education hours to 12 per week, for all four year old children, flexibly delivered in either long day or short day programs. A range of specialised early childhood programs are also available, including five Koori preschools and a comprehensive range of early intervention programs for children with a disability or developmental delay.

In 2003, the Government also reduced class sizes in the early years of school. Classes from kindergarten to year 3 generally now have a maximum of 21 students.

The ACT also has one early childhood school, the O'Connor Cooperative School, which covers preschool to year 2. The O'Connor Cooperative School is a very popular and successful school.

To further its commitment to early childhood education, the ACT Government will be establishing four new early childhood schools:

- Southern Cross – to serve the Belconnen region;
- Lyons – to serve the Woden and Weston Creek region;
- Isabella Plains – to serve the Tuggeranong region; and
- Narrabundah – to serve the South Canberra region.

The ACT Government proposes that these new schools will incorporate a range of early childhood learning and development services – they will be regional centres that will provide access to integrated services for children from birth to eight years. It is envisaged that these services will include, in addition to preschool to year 2 classes, childcare, family support and other services that sustain children's learning, health and wellbeing. The centres will also provide a valuable research base that will help improve early childhood education across the ACT government school system.

The focus of these centres will be on learning and preparing children for full engagement in school life. The most effective way to improve educational outcomes for all children is to ensure they experience the rich environments and nurturing relationships they need before they come to school and in their early years at school.

From 2008 all ACT government preschools will be forming a closer working relationship with a primary school to support the continuity of learning. This will mean that all ACT government schools catering for primary aged students will offer two years of non-compulsory education.

Integrating preschools into schools will achieve three key outcomes:

- stronger transitional pathways for preschool children into kindergarten and the early years of learning;
- opportunities for staff to work and move within with the early years of schooling, thus strengthening and supporting early educational pedagogy and practice; and
- greater community capacity through stronger associations with local schools and related family services.