

# **Submission to A plan for Victoria's children**

March 2006



In 2005 KPV undertook a series of consultations. We surveyed parents of kindergarten children, stand-alone kindergarten committees of management and kindergarten cluster managers and teachers. In a range of forums we asked parents, kindergarten committees and managers, early childhood professionals and other peak organisations to identify the key issues, challenges, needs for children and families in Victoria and ways of meeting them.

While there were obvious differences in detail and emphasis, there was also remarkable convergence on goals and strategies to improve outcomes for children, families and early childhood professionals.

These engagements resulted in three documents:

- Vision 2011: A vision for early childhood education
- Budget Priorities Submission for 2006-07 to the State Government
- KPV Parent Survey: Kindergarten education is education for life

KPV's submission to the Statewide Plan for children is based on these documents. It is organised around the four things the Victorian Government expects will be improved as a result of the development and implementation of a Plan for Victoria's children.

## **1. Better access to quality learning and development programs**

### **1.1 Diverse hours and program models**

The 2005 KPV Parent Survey showed that there is now a need for community kindergartens to review how effectively existing program models take into account the need of parents to balance work and family commitments. While the majority (70%) of respondents said they would be satisfied with provision of sessional programs, there was strong support for a range of early education programs:

- 50 % would be satisfied with provision of longer day kindergarten (eg 5 or 6 hours per day)
- 30 % would be satisfied with shorter sessional kindergarten programs plus extended hours care
- 25 % would be satisfied with longer day plus extended hours care
- 20 % want longer day care including kindergarten programs.

These findings are consistent with the 2004 national childcare survey that found many parents balance work, family and childcare commitments through a range of choices. Some families balance their responsibility for children with full and part-time work (paid and unpaid), others balance full-time work commitments while others choose combinations of employment with remaining at home as the primary carer of children.

The range of flexible program options needs to be further expanded, including longer day models, for parents to better balance child educational needs and family commitments.

While many centres are providing a greater range of services, many kindergarten buildings are not fully utilised, at times this is because the building is not suitable for the required use. To address this additional resources are required, for example funding to upgrade facilities in community kindergartens and other centres, in order to expand the range of programs available for parents and their preschool-aged children.

Planning and designing programs across local neighbourhoods rather than just focussing on individual centres will provide a range of operational models in a local area, thus increasing options for families. Increasing community participation in designing and planning services at the local level, taking into account, diversity, culture and local community needs will be critical to success.

There are some additional challenges that must be considered when planning to provide flexible program options for parents, such as:

- The need to ensure each program is affordable, financially viable and sustainable over time
- The limited availability of resources and the limitations of some kindergarten buildings
- A lack of comprehensive local planning data
- Difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff.

#### *Actions*

- The Government to fund KPV's initiative to introduce a new collaborative service planning model across a network of early years providers including cluster managers, stand-alone kindergartens, childcare centres and children's hubs.

## **1.2 Quality programs**

Parents know the importance of kindergarten education; they place a high value on degree-level accredited pre-service preparation for early childhood teachers and want accredited quality kindergarten programs. Reports from teachers about their preschool child's progress is also important to parents.

While teaching standards have been introduced with the Early Childhood Teachers' MECA 2005, there is currently neither a system of accreditation nor a curriculum framework in early childhood education that provides guidance and accountability.

#### *Actions*

- Government supports KPV's initiative to develop and administer a funded quality accreditation system for all services providing kindergarten education, focussing on the children's program, partnerships with families and interactions. KPV has initiated a development project and will liaise with DHS at key stages over coming weeks. The administration of the quality accreditation system will be undertaken by KPV.
- Create an early childhood education curriculum framework.
- Ensure early childhood education programs are delivered by degree qualified early childhood teachers.
- Increase the ratio of staff to children to ensure each child's needs are met. This will require additional kindergarten funding to ensure ongoing access to affordable education programs as well as additional resources to upgrade staff qualifications.
- Establish a minimum training standard as a regulatory requirement for any staff member employed in a children's service not deemed to be qualified.
- Encourage and support early childhood educators to aspire for innovation and build knowledge about evidence-based teaching practices and continuously expand and extend their knowledge and skills.

- Ensure early childhood teachers have sufficient time and resources to plan a quality educational program.
- Promote and disseminate evidence-based research through various publications and internet-based communication and encourage discussion and debate
- Promote the importance of evidence-based teaching practices

### **1.3 Children with additional needs**

Many children who are deemed by professionals as needing support miss out because the strict guidelines of the existing Kindergarten Inclusion Support Services (KISS) means only those children who have very high support needs can access key extra resources, such as additional assistants.

Each year there are hundreds of children with additional needs who are denied access to KISS funding. For example, children with hearing impairment or speech delay who may also have behavioural difficulties are regularly deemed ineligible. In a KPV phone survey teachers identified almost twice as many children for whom KISS funding was sought who also needed additional resources but no source of funding was available.

This places enormous pressure on families, children, staff, committees and employers, who regularly report a lack of support and resources to help provide the best education experience for children with additional needs and challenging behaviours. It is extremely difficult for kindergartens to cater for children with additional needs unless these extra resources are available in a flexible manner. Increase in funding to inclusion support services and early intervention and preventative strategies is urgently required so children at risk or with additional needs can be appropriately supported—this will include access to trained aids, specialists, therapists, physical resources, effective inclusion strategies and professional development.

#### *Actions*

- Increase by 25% the number of places in the Kindergarten Inclusion Support Service program so that children with additional needs can access kindergarten education. This will ensure children who are at risk and currently missing out on kindergarten education or having reduced hours can access the resources necessary for successful inclusion.
- Extend current guidelines and the definition of 'eligible children' to include those deemed by professionals to be in need of a flexible range of additional resources.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive training and professional development strategy for staff, including piloting an action research and mentoring strategy to increase knowledge and skills of teachers to address the needs of children with challenging behaviours.

### **1.4 Affordability**

The KPV Parent Survey 2005 demonstrates that 84% of parents believe all children access to two years kindergarten education prior to school entry, funded by the government to ensure affordable fees for both 3 and 4 year old children.

International research consistently points to the importance of all children having access to kindergarten education. Gibbs (2004), commenting on the growing awareness of the relationship between quality early childhood education and outcomes for children, notes “in almost every article, study and report the following words are found somewhere in the text: ‘children who attend high quality preschool are more successful [sic] both academically and socially’”.

There are still over 4000 Victorian children who do not attend a kindergarten program, many of these due to the inhibitive cost of parent fees. Parent fees have grown at a rate considerably in excess of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) since the introduction of ‘per capita’ funding at the end of 1993—parent fees have increased ten fold. Additional government funding for kindergarten education since 2000 has not yet reduced the cost of parent fees. Parents contribute almost half of the resources needed to maintain an average four-year-old kindergarten through a combination of parent fees, volunteer labour and fundraising.

Despite rapid growth in the number of children who access three-year-old kindergarten, the cost of parent fees means that three-year-old kindergarten education is not affordable for many families as there is no government funding for three-year-old kindergarten programs.

While priority needs to be given for all children to access at least one year of kindergarten education in the year before school, there is substantial scope, given the high level of parent demand and strong research basis, for children to access two years of funded kindergarten education.

The initial priority to attain two funded years is for Government to provide fee relief for lower income families so they can access three-year-old kindergarten education delivered by a qualified kindergarten teacher.

Access and affordability are critical issues in rural Victoria. There are currently 25 small rural kindergartens facing a viability crisis due to the low number of enrolments and an inability to meet the funding gap with parent fees. Under an existing anomaly, kindergarten funding for our vulnerable small rural kindergartens is far less than the cost of salaries, placing enormous financial burden on families.

#### *Actions*

- Increase kindergarten funding so that 17,000 families who currently hold Health Care Cards and attend kindergarten each year will have no parent fees—this will provide targeted and much needed financial support to families most in need.  
This fee subsidy could be phased in over a three-year period, and would require two categories – one for rural families and one for metropolitan families – set at 100% of statewide average parent fees.
- Introduce a new Kindergarten Gap Subsidy to support families who currently miss out on benefits such as the Health Care Card—often referred to as the ‘working poor’. This Kindergarten Gap Subsidy should be set at 50% of the statewide average of parent fees (\$350 per child in 2005).  
The Kindergarten Gap Subsidy could be funded through the Community Support Fund and distributed by the Early Childhood Education Foundation, a trust established by KPV to support children who are unable to access kindergarten due to financial hardship. This would ensure that those who are eligible receive the subsidy.

- Developing a strategy for all children to access two years of kindergarten education prior to school entry
- Phase in access to two years of kindergarten education by initially prioritising 17,000 families most in need. That is, the current Health Care Card subsidy be extended so that families can access a 'fee subsidy' for children to attend a three-year-old kindergarten program.
- Provide additional financial support for small rural kindergartens with less than ten children.
- Assessing the long-term benefits of access to two years of kindergarten education should be a priority of the Victorian Children's Council research agenda

### **1.5 Workforce strategies**

Staff that are appropriately qualified, well resourced, involved in continual professional development and highly motivated provide the 'lynch pin' for a high quality kindergarten experience for young children. Victoria needs an early childhood sector that delivers a satisfying work environment with attractive conditions for staff who are committed to quality services for young children and families.

#### *Actions*

- Develop an industry and workforce plan that ensures we can recruit and retain quality early childhood teachers and support staff into the future. This includes additional professional development, mentoring programs and incentives to attract teachers to rural and remote locations; essential training such as anaphylaxis awareness and management.
- Provide career paths, staff salaries, conditions, entitlements and professional recognition that will attract and retain quality staff
- Increase the proportion of graduates who choose early childhood teaching as a career.

### **1.6 Portability of leave**

The Kirby and Harper Preschool Review (2001) commissioned by the State Government recommended, "that the Department of Human Services take immediate steps to identify and cost the options for safeguarding the long service leave and sick leave entitlements of preschool centre staff. This assessment should be undertaken whether the existing employment arrangements for those staff continue or new arrangements are put in place".

In the 1980s, legislation was passed that provided portability of both long service and sick leave for Victorian kindergarten teachers and assistants. As a result of this, and in the absence of any central Provisions Fund, individual kindergarten managers are now placed at substantial financial risk. This includes both cluster managers and those kindergartens managed by volunteer parent committees. Each employer faces a shortfall of many thousands of dollars.

#### *Action*

- Government to financially support the establishment of a Leave Provisions Fund in partnership with KPV. This will also require the Government to bring forward cash allocations to meet its proportion of leave liability for kindergarten staff. It will address critical governance and management issues facing kindergartens.

## **2. A wider range of supports for families, including vulnerable families**

Access to quality early childhood education is a fundamental right for all children regardless of socio-economic background, abilities, language, culture and additional needs. Early childhood education maximises the opportunity for all children to achieve positive and healthy lifetime outcomes. Research consistently and continually reinforces the knowledge that the early years are the most formative and influential on development and has established that high quality early childhood education has a powerful connection to positive early childhood experiences.

Strong families and communities raise happy, healthy and resilient children. Parents and families need support and must be recognised for the critical impact they have in developing and educating their children. They need support and resourcing in their role of primary educators and caregivers. Society must demonstrate how it values parents as active participants in their child's early education

### *Actions*

- Increase support and resources to parents as their child's primary educator, such as knowledge about, and access to, early education and learning resources.
- Provide parent resources that outline the key role of early childhood education programs.
- Provide resources for parents to support their child's transition to kindergarten and school.
- Create a range of strategies and programs that improve access to safe environments and promote physical activity and improve child health and safety outcomes in kindergartens, other early childhood settings and in the home.
- Ensure kindergarten education programs are an integral and valued part of community life and meet community expectations in relation to quality, flexibility and accountability
- Provide additional financial subsidies for disadvantaged groups to ensure that fees are not a barrier to children's participation.
- Fund flexible models of inclusion support.
- Early childhood staff to provide linkages for families to other appropriate services, as well as providing resources for parents and families
- Actively involve early childhood staff in the delivery of educational programs for parents

## **3. Improved co-ordination and more conveniently located services**

### **3.1 Co-ordination and location**

Strong links between early childhood education and other community services support family-centred practice. Early childhood education is a unique and critical component of the children's and family service system. The fragmentation of the current service and funding system supports neither a professional and service collaboration nor a multi-disciplinary approach to service planning and development.

Strategies are needed to ensure a sustainable statewide system of kindergarten education is implemented. Key issues related to workforce development, industry development and planning have yet to occur on a statewide basis and there has been limited opportunity for individual kindergartens to develop longer term plans to ensure sustainability and viability.

Sound planning requires that centres be located where they are needed and service and program models designed to meet the needs of local families and community. Parents must have access to services that are of a high quality for their children and are responsive to family work and life commitments. Increased government funding will support flexible service delivery to meet the diversity of work and family arrangements as well as being easily affordable to all.

Community-based kindergartens are highly valued by parents and local communities. Parents have a central role to play in the provision of kindergarten education in the years prior to school; strong parent involvement is critical.

#### *Actions*

- Provide a range of early years learning and development services accessible to all children
- Improve connectedness between services across the sector through coordinated program delivery
- Promote a range of affordable kindergarten program models that meet the diverse needs of parents with work and family commitments and arrangements.
- Support and resource cluster managers and stand-alone centres to plan collaboratively with a range of early years services and to provide maximum accessibility for parents
- Provide adequate resources for volunteer parent committees in all kindergarten management models, including cluster managers and stand-alone kindergartens

### **3.2 Infrastructure**

The community needs access to a variety of flexible, high quality programs for young children operating in premises that support quality. Kindergartens are suffering from ageing facilities that make innovation, in both educational and operational programs, difficult to achieve.

Centres have identified program and service gaps and are interested in providing various children's programs and additional services to complement kindergarten education. Committees and local governments have recognised that kindergarten buildings are a valuable community facility that can have broader use. Infrastructure needs to meet the changing needs of families and the community, with service buildings being more flexible and providing multi uses to meet community needs. State government funding is required to remodel, renovate and add to existing premises to enable them to provide more flexible and multi-use programs.

#### *Actions*

- Provide kindergartens with access to a new capital works program of up to \$250,000 that funds alterations and extensions that encourage more flexible and multi uses of community facilities.

- Ensure major repairs of ageing buildings are adequately funded. Build a permanent and rotational capital works program that would allow all funded kindergarten buildings to be repaired and renovated over a 20 year period.

#### **4. Greater opportunities for involvement in local planning**

Co-ordinating service planning and design at a local level can maximise the significant investment by state and local governments, local communities and volunteers in our community kindergartens. An integrated planning strategy at local level is required and would provide more support for flexible kindergarten programs to meet the needs of children, families and local communities.

KPV presented a proposal to Minister Garbutt for a pilot project (*Enhanced kindergarten service networks*) to develop a more responsive approach to service planning based on a neighbourhood model. This would maximise use of existing kindergarten infrastructure, expand options for flexible service delivery and ensure all children can access kindergarten education.

The project would inform and enhance existing municipal early years plans. The research and analysis undertaken to develop the municipal early years plans and the actions identified would be a sound basis for ensuring the project is locally responsive and builds on existing systems and initiatives.

The project aims to:

1. Develop a collaborative planning model where early years providers, professionals and parent committees come together to design and coordinate early years services that meet the changing needs of their community. The model will be multi-disciplinary and involve a range of child and family services.
2. Actively support clusters, groups and networks of kindergartens to provide parents with maximum flexibility in accessing kindergarten and other services that most suit their work and family needs, for example, an opportunity for working parents to access longer day kindergarten education programs.
3. Increase the use of kindergarten buildings to provide:
  - A range of kindergarten education and additional children's programs, such as extended hours care
  - Access for parents and children to a range of resources and support via on-site programs and referral systems, for example, access to parent education programs, playgroups or other child and family services.
4. Increase sense of parent competence and satisfaction in their role as the primary educator of their children, for example through having access to resources and on-site parenting programs.

Designing a planning system across an entire community area and including key stakeholders can deliver a range of responsive and innovative solutions for children and families. In addition, the use of a multi-disciplinary approach throughout the project will support a range of professionals and centres to cooperate in providing positive outcomes for children and families.

*Action*

- Government to fund KPV to undertake the *Enhanced kindergarten service networks* project

## **5. Conclusion**

There is strong research evidence that the early years are a critical period for enhancing children's wellbeing and life chances. Early education and development opportunities for all children, including early intervention strategies for children with special needs and prevention strategies for vulnerable children, are central to maximising outcomes for all children. Children need safe and healthy environments and experiences, including appropriate levels of physical activity.

Families and early childhood services are critical influences in helping children develop to their full potential. Ensuring that two years of quality accredited kindergarten education is truly universal in Victoria would be a major step improving life outcomes for all children.

The statewide plan should ensure that kindergarten education receives greater community focus and has a priority to increase investment in early childhood education because of its benefits to families and children throughout their life.

Successful implementation of a Plan for Victorian children will require engagement with and commitment from the range of stakeholders. The establishment of an early education and development sector peak organisations ministerial advisory group would be a key strategy in working collaboratively with stakeholders.

## **6. Reference**

Gibbs H.J. (2004), Career and Technical Education: The Building Blocks of Early Childhood Education, Techniques, pp26-22

## **7. Attachments**

Vision 2011: A vision for early childhood education

Budget Priorities Submission for 2006-07 to the State Government

KPV Parent Survey: Kindergarten education is education for life