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## **The *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*: KPV Final Response**

Improving how early years services and schools work together presents exciting possibilities for Victoria's children and their families. Following extensive consultation with both sectors the State Government has released the final version of its *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*. KPV has analysed this five year vision for Victorian education and early childhood services. As in our response to the draft Blueprint we applaud the development of a new five-year reform agenda to ensure our children "thrive, learn, grow and develop" to their full potential.

KPV's own analysis and consultations with our membership including our Cluster Manager Reference Group suggest the opportunity remains to profoundly rethink the nature of education and care for children 0-8. Our analysis builds on the earlier submission KPV made during the consultation process. Please refer to that earlier submission which can be downloaded from the KPV website, for more detailed discussion of many of the points in this paper.

### **General comments**

The *Blueprint* acknowledges that children deserve the best start in life. A combined approach to learning, wellbeing, health and development for early childhood should provide an excellent platform for the delivery of that best start. The *Blueprint* also correctly recognises that high quality early childhood education improves outcomes for children from disadvantaged home backgrounds.

A major strength of the *Blueprint* is its emphasis on one system supporting children from birth to 8 years. Other strengths include the emphasis on quality relationships with adults, successful transitions through early childhood and school and early intervention where support is required. KPV supports the integration of early childhood education and care (ECEC) into a single concept, facilitated by closer connections between state and local government in Victoria, and the Commonwealth.

However, the *Blueprint* does not clearly reference the full breadth of the reform agenda proposed in Victoria's submission to the National Reform Agenda (*Victoria's Plan to Improve Outcomes in Early Childhood, 2007*) on which many of the current COAG reforms are based. The State Government's commitment to the full National Reform Agenda for early childhood needs to be explicit. In particular, the *Blueprint* lacks goals relating to the critical role early years services can play in supporting parents and families and to the role parents can play in maximising the potential outcomes of these services. The National Reform Agenda clearly identifies both as critical.

The creation of DEECD represents an opportunity to realise the vision of one system to support children 0-8 years and their families. However, DEECD must demonstrate it is not simply absorbing ECEC into an environment where the critical focus is on schools. There is a risk that one system for children 0-8 will result in the 'schoolification' of ECEC. KPV's concerns are compounded by the failure of the *Blueprint* to recognise that the ECEC-school transition could be enhanced by extending the play-based approach to learning into the early years of primary school.

KPV is concerned by the inclusion of a goal in the *Blueprint* that 'by the time children start school they will be ready to learn at school and schools will be ready for them'. Without explicit reference to the play based curriculum approach this may be interpreted as suggesting a move away from a play-based curriculum towards a more formal literacy and numeracy based curriculum inappropriate for kindergarten aged children. The *Blueprint* does not capture the understanding that there is great diversity amongst children of school age and that all services for young children must respond to this diversity. Rather than suggesting a strict divide between ECEC and school, and setting levels of achievement to be attained before starting school, the goal should be to acknowledge and facilitate a supportive transition beginning in the kindergarten years extending through the early years of school.

The *Blueprint* highlights that different aspirations are held by government for early childhood education and care and the broader education system. 'High-quality' is the aspiration for early childhood education and care, contrasting with the vision of 'excellence' and the 'world class' standard of education that is a goal of the *Blueprint* for schools. This distinction does little to dispel any concern that early childhood education and care might be the poor relation in the broader education system. Whilst KPV recognises that the State Government has made significant improvements in early years funding over the last decade it is well understood that early years services remain underfunded. In particular, families themselves contribute a significant share of the operating costs of kindergartens, undermining the principle of universal access.

The development of an overarching structure to ensure the accountability and transparency of these new arrangements would help promote confidence amongst parents and the ECEC community. It could also provide a structure to monitor the outcomes of the *Blueprint* and help ensure that the targets set are met. It is noted that in South Australia a formal partnership drawing on the three most relevant departments and led by their Ministers was created to underpin similar efforts to develop the synergies between early childhood services and schools. In Victoria, exploration of these ideas could potentially suggest an additional role for the Victorian Children's Council.

## **Supporting the co-ordination and delivery of early childhood services**

A critical opportunity that the creation of the new Department affords is to think beyond simply *reorganising* ECEC and to instead *rethink* the kind of arrangements that would deliver the best outcomes for children 0-8 and their families. All children and their families could benefit from a better integrated service system with better networked and coordinated services.

Consistent with school education, funding for early education should reflect the government's vision of universal access to the benefits of kindergarten. Early childhood education should be underpinned by the principle of universal access, with two years of fully funded kindergarten for all children. This policy direction was flagged in Victoria's submission to the National Reform Agenda. It would also bring Victoria into line with current practice in the United Kingdom, which now fully funds two years of kindergarten for children. KPV's own

research shows universal and fully funded kindergarten for children for two years is a policy direction strongly supported by KPV members and parents.

The *Blueprint* agenda should also focus more strongly on how to support the valuable model of integrated education and care for children that many Victorian kindergartens already provide. Many kindergartens seek to extend opening hours and integrate care services will help to ensure all children reap the benefits of kindergarten and offer parents more flexibility across at least the standard working day. However, most need much more help to achieve this. Many ECEC services are also trying to offer a wider range of services that families might need such as playgroups, three year old kindergarten programs, maternal and child health and parenting support. The challenge for kindergartens within current funding parameters is to ensure their sustainability and extend their capacity to deliver high quality ECEC services across this broader spread of hours and for a broader age range of children. Full recurrent funding, a significantly increased capital works program, and greater collaboration between the Commonwealth and States in ensuring simplified access to funding are all required to sustainably transform ECEC.

The *Blueprint* proposes co-location and integration of schools and ECEC services where this meets local needs. The *Blueprint* and the creation of DEECD provides an opportunity to fundamentally rethink how ECEC is provided in Victoria. For example, entirely new early childhood learning and development centres dedicated to children 0-8 could be piloted. The development of 'children's houses' in Sweden and other European models illustrate how new models and a diversity of approaches may better meet the needs of more children and their families, and promote the workforce participation of parents. The Karingal Family and Children's Hub, which includes prep and kindergarten classes, represents a welcome step towards an integrated 0-8 concept of early childhood services provision.

The *Blueprint* recognises that service models emphasising quality relationships with adults promote positive outcomes for children. Quality services also focus on developing relationships amongst children, between the teacher and parents and, between the service and the broader community. The capacity of services to promote shared understandings of how children learn in the early years and the role of each partner (i.e. parents, early childhood educators and carers, and schools) in optimising that learning is critical.

KPV is concerned that there is insufficient focus in the *Blueprint* on the learning and development opportunities for children in care settings. The *Blueprint* definition of an ECEC service is unnecessarily limited, describing a service that provides both learning and development opportunities provided by a qualified teacher, and a care service. Care services should not be envisaged as an add-on to a learning environment. The reverse also applies. Care is part of the provision of a safe and nurturing learning environment.

## **Partnerships with Parents and Communities**

Parent participation is crucial to good outcomes for children. The *Blueprint* correctly focuses on services supporting parents to ensure good home environments for their children and on the provision to parents of clear information relating to developmental goals. However, the *Blueprint* does not emphasise the development of a family-focussed workforce across 0-8 services and the importance of this workforce collaborating and networking across a range of relevant services. As noted above, the lack of emphasis in the *Blueprint* on how ECEC can support parental workforce participation fails to recognise how responsive, high quality ECEC can support this important policy objective.

Victoria has a long tradition of parent participation in voluntary governance and management roles for kindergartens and other community based early childhood services. New models of early childhood service delivery need to promote active parent participation at all levels from

planning for the individual child through to opportunities for participation in service governance. Publicly funded educational institutions are carrying out a function of government. Citizens have a right to be engaged in how they go about this<sup>i</sup>. For many parents, kindergarten represents their first involvement in community organisations. Community participation at this level makes a strong contribution to the health and broader social capital of the local community. At its best, parent involvement underpins the efforts of staff in understanding and meeting local community needs and can even lead to new employment opportunities for parents. Many parents strongly value the opportunity to participate in the strategic directions of their local kindergartens. This does not suggest that parents must take on management/administrative responsibilities. However strategies should be in place to strongly promote parent and community participation at the *governance* level for any new models of governance arising from the integration of services.

While the strategies to promote inclusive early childhood education and care are welcome, the inclusion agenda is under-emphasised in the *Blueprint*. Measures of inclusion must be developed to assess the efficacy of inclusion strategies in boosting the participation of children from diverse and/or disadvantaged family backgrounds in ECEC and including those with additional needs. New and existing strategies to promote inclusion must also be sustainable and backed by a long term commitment to inclusive practices in ECEC.

## **Workforce Reform and Quality**

KPV applauds the emphasis in the *Blueprint* on ensuring the early year's workforce has the skills and knowledge to deliver for children and families. A sustainable, capable and willing workforce is necessary to achieve successful system development and reform. Effective collaboration across early childhood services will be increasingly important in the provision of quality childhood services. New ways are also required for staff working with each other and with children and their families. The OECD has suggested that this role for early childhood educators may require consideration of developing a new type of educator or at least better training existing educators to work in inter-disciplinary community teams<sup>ii</sup>.

Positive outcomes are promoted where learning and development are integrated into early childhood services and are guided by well-qualified staff. Increasing the number of qualified staff in ECEC and their level of attainment will support more consistent quality across the sector, as will improved staffing ratios. Renewed emphasis on education and training for early childhood staff will enhance the ability of the sector to work across disciplines and undertake successful sector development. Degree qualified staff provide a firm theoretical basis for quality early childhood programs and are a key indicator of quality in an early childhood education setting. Given the workforce shortages in ECEC, KPV welcomes incentives for staff currently working in long day care settings to upgrade their qualifications. KPV recommends these incentives be extended to kindergarten assistants. There are indications that professional early childhood curricula may require some reform, for instance to enhance the ability of graduates to work inclusively.

The ability of ECEC services to attract qualified early childhood practitioners is negatively impacted by wages, working conditions and the perceived value society places on the profession. While early childhood teachers fare better than other staff, the salary and conditions of all childcare and kindergarten staff clearly need improvement. Workforce sustainability can be improved through greater certainty for employees and a portable long service and sick leave scheme. A detailed costing of the costs and benefits of such a scheme would represent a valuable first step toward this goal.

The move to integrate early childhood services requires complementary strategies to ensure early childhood staff can be recruited and retained in existing kindergarten settings,

particularly in communities for whom integrated services cannot be sustained (e.g. in some rural areas).

In recent years, initiatives such as early childhood teacher validation have highlighted the importance of on-going professional development and learning. Peer support and mentoring continues to happen informally along with limited more formal methods. Workforce capability would be improved by a systematic and better funded approach to professional learning encompassing strategies for mentoring and graduate support. The *Blueprint* emphasises joint professional learning between primary schools and early childhood services. The KPV Solutions pilot projects recently funded by DEECD will help kindergartens to build governance and service capacity. A key aim of the KPV Solutions pilots is to develop a professional leadership model that will generate relevant information that can inform professional development and mentoring in this field.

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<sup>i</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, p. 53-55, OECD Publishing

<sup>ii</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2006) *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, p. 129, OECD Publishing