EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS

INTRODUCTION

There is substantial evidence that giving children the best start to life and nurturing them over the early childhood years will have long-term benefits for their future life and learning. In NSW, early childhood years are defined as from birth to eight years of age. For this reason, the issues related to early childhood education include the years prior to school and generally the first three years of school (Kindergarten to Year 2).

There is increasing evidence that the early years of life are a critical period in which the foundations for competence and coping skills that affect long-term learning, behaviour and health are established. The research demonstrates that development from the prenatal period to age six is rapid and dramatic and shapes long-term outcomes (Mustard and McCain, 1999).

**Early childhood is a complex area with a range of risk and protective factors combining to influence children's development. Children's learning, development, health and wellbeing depend on their circumstances as individuals, as members of their families and communities and within society as a whole.** (DET Early Childhood Unit)

**Education is a continuum, beginning at birth, and the first eight years of a child's life are the most important in determining the child's development. ... Children inadequately cared for in their preschool years enter schooling at an educational and personal disadvantage.** (P&C Association of NSW)

There is also a range of research that indicates that single “one-off” strategies to support children at a particular stage are unlikely to be sufficient to make a difference to the future of children who may be at risk. The research shows that ongoing support for these children is required throughout their early years. (Mitchell et al, 2001)

In NSW early childhood educational settings are managed by government, community-based organisations and the private sector. The NSW Government responsibility is through two departments – the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Department of Community Services (DoCS). There are 100 preschools managed by the DET. There are around 800 preschool services licensed by the DoCS. In addition there are over 1800 long day care services. The majority of long day care centres are managed by the private sector although a significant percentage is run by local government or community-based non-profit organisations.

While there is a range of early childhood education and care services across NSW, there are still many children unable to access one of these services. Many of these children come from areas that are socially disadvantaged.

ACCESS TO PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

There was general agreement by respondents on the benefits of children attending preschool or some form of childcare prior to entering school.

**There is strong evidence that early childhood services, including preschools, can have a major beneficial impact on young people's lives and give real meaning to the long espoused social aim of children attaining their full potential in life.** (Vinson, 2002: 78)

**The recommendations contained in the AEU National Preschool Education Inquiry Report, 2004 are supported. In particular:**

All children should have access to fully funded government preschools so that they are better prepared to start school. (Parents)
• the provision of high quality and accessible preschool education in the year before commencing school [which] is free for all children … and is acknowledged as a universal right; and

• [that] the Commonwealth reintroduce dedicated funding for preschool education and that Commonwealth and state and territory movements jointly provide the full costs of preschool education. (NSW Teachers Federation)

The claims by respondents are supported by a large number of overseas studies such as the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program evaluation, conducted in the USA.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Program was conducted over 24 years. It showed that children who attended the program had less remedial schooling, achieved higher levels of schooling, and were more likely to attend university. As young adults, they earned more, were older when their first child was born and were less welfare dependent. It also showed that for every $1 invested in services to help families with young children, between $4 and $7 was saved on child protection, health education and justice systems (Schweinhart 2003).

Another recent study by the University of London and the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff showed that children who attended three years or more of preschool were more ready for school and were 10 to 12 months ahead of children who did not attend any prior to school program or care.

A substantial number of respondents commented on the need for greater access to preschool education or some form of childcare for all children in the years prior to school. The cost and lack of available preschools were cited as the reasons many children do not attend.

The provision of free / affordable preschool education would ensure that families would receive professional support in their parenting, be involved in a community of care, contribute to and be involved in their child’s education. Early learning difficulties would be identified allowing for early intervention. (Preschool Provider)

A relatively small number of respondents stated that preschool or childcare are not the only way to support children and families in the years prior to school and some commented on the changing role of parents in society and the value of mothers or fathers staying home to care for children.

We shove our children in institutions from 10 months old or earlier and go out to work at some obscure venue to pay someone else to look after our children build them houses, feed, clothe, entertain, train them. (Personal submission)

It is our contention that attendance at preschool does not necessarily enhance children’s entry into school. It is a further symbol of the breakdown of the family unit that preschools are being required to attend this preparation, a role that rightly belongs to the home. (School staff meeting)
Many respondents said that preschool education should be compulsory for at least the year before entry to school. Other respondents qualified this statement by suggesting that it should be compulsory in disadvantaged areas only.

The particular needs of families in rural and remote areas and the difficulty of accessing a preschool or childcare facility were raised in several submissions. Some respondents suggested that children in particularly isolated areas should have access to Distance Education preschool.

Pre-school age children from isolated areas should be eligible for enrolment at the Distance Education preschool if there is no other preschool in the area, even if they will not be continuing with DE but attending a small isolated rural school with no preschool facility. (Isolated Children's Parents Association)

Address the issue of access to a prior to school education, especially in remote and rural areas of New South Wales, through the sponsorship of a needs-based transport-to-school scheme for children enrolled at the Department's 100 preschools and 50 Early Intervention Support Classes. (Primary Principals Association)

A number of solutions to the difficulties of access were suggested. Suggestions included:

- increasing the number of government preschools
- providing additional funding to current community based preschools so that fees could be reduced.

Deliver on the relevant sections of the Vinson Inquiry ... by establishing further Departmental preschools in communities where many children could be given an opportunity to access a quality prior to school education. (Primary Principals Association)

We don't need more preschools, but affordable education with current established & recognised community based centres. Providing financial support for early intervention centres to extend hours & capacity of clients as to ensure all children with disabilities have full access to mainstream schooling (if applicable). (Preschool provider)

There was strong support by respondents to ensure that Aboriginal students have access to preschool education.

More culturally appropriate preschools especially for Aboriginal families - Aboriginal run preschools which have minimal or no fee attached. (School staff meeting)

The particular needs of Indigenous children in accessing preschool education were canvassed in 2004 in The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education – Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future. As noted in the Report, Aboriginal children are poorly represented in preschools. In 2003, 348 Aboriginal children attended a government-funded preschool. This is approximately 10% of the 3784 children enrolled.
Quality of Service

While recognising the importance of access to a prior to school service, many respondents noted the importance of the quality of service. Some respondents stated that not all prior to school facilities provide quality programs that support children’s development. Many respondents said that to achieve quality, qualified early childhood teachers must work in prior to school facilities.

We need to place value on good, quality preschool education that teaches children how to be prepared for the classroom experience, builds early skills and gives them confidence to learn. (Parent)

A number of studies have found that children who have attended a quality childcare facility (as opposed to a poor quality centre) are more ready to start school, and have better language, pre-numeracy and pre-literacy skills. Children from poor quality care were found to have more behavioural problems (Vandell and Woolfe, 2000). Many see the critical factor in the provision of child care programs to be quality.

Access for every child to have good quality preschool year for free in accredited preschools/childcare centre. (School staff meeting)

It is not a time for children to be babysat; it is time to nurture, encourage and allow children to explore and extend their development within their own level. (Parent)

Research evidence indicates that high quality childcare is the most effective in improving educational outcomes and providing children with a chance to start school on a more equal footing to children from more advantaged backgrounds. It has also been found that to be effective, childcare does not have to be all day or all year but it must be high quality and programs need to be goal-oriented.

Government Responsibility for Preschool Education

It was suggested by some respondents that responsibility for preschool education should be transferred from the Department of Community Services to the Department of Education and Training.

The view that preschool education is comparable to childcare is a serious flaw of the NSW system. Preschool education should be overseen by the Education Department and follow a curriculum which will prepare children for entry into kindergarten. The association with DOCs gives the appearance that it is viewed as a form of childcare for those who can afford to send their children. (Parent)

Preschools and child care centres across Australia should come under the jurisdiction of DET in each state and provide continuity for children and families between childcare, preschools and the first years of school. (Preschool provider)
TRANSITION TO SCHOOL

Research indicates that children who make a smooth transition and experience early school success are more likely to be socially competent and achieve better results in school (Alexander and Entwisle, 1996; Pianta, Rim-Kaufman and Cox, 1999; Luster and McAdoo, 1996; Shepard and Smith, 1998, cited in Dockett and Perry 2003).

A significant number of respondents stated that transition to school programs were very beneficial in supporting children’s successful entry to school. The term “transition to school programs” appears to have been used by respondents to describe the orientation programs that primary schools operate each year for children entering Kindergarten the following year.

The guiding principle for effective transition to school acknowledges the importance of ‘transition’ to school instead of ‘orientation’ to school. Transition is a process that involves all stakeholders and acknowledges that it is a continuum until at least the end of the first year of school. (Parents and Citizens’ Association)

While supportive of the current programs, there was strong support for a much more structured and extended program that involved children and their parents. Some respondents suggested that the program should be held at least one day a week over the last term of the school year. The particular needs of children with disabilities were mentioned by a number of respondents.

Government schools should provide an informative / practical orientation process for both children and parents. My son’s school only provided one half day for orientation, which I personally feel was inadequate. I would like to see more input to extend the orientation process, where follow up visits by families to discuss how parents can participate in their child’s education. (Personal submission)

A number of respondents identified the specific issues that they would like addressed for parents as part of a transition to school program. These included information on:

- the school structure
- how the curriculum ‘works’
- specific information on how to teach reading
- how to be an effective parent helper
- how to help their child with homework.

Parents need orientation as well as the children (and not just in head lice, mealtimes and uniform policy – although they are important!). … Parents need training in how children learn and how to do homework with their children in order to maximise learning and minimise frustration and yelling! (P&C member)
Readiness and Starting Age

The issue of ‘readiness’ for school was raised throughout all the questions of paper 2, Early Childhood Years.

There is a great deal of research about school readiness, what it means and what it implies. Narrow definitions of readiness focus on individual children and their perceived readiness to integrate into a school environment. More progressive definitions of readiness focus on the context of the school, as well as child, family and community expectations. In this view readiness is not a characteristic of individual children, rather of communities and contexts (see Dockett and Perry, 2001a).

(UWS meeting)

Recognising that the main criterion used for school readiness is currently age, many respondents commented on the appropriateness of starting age:

Establish an enrolment age as at the 1st of February thus ensuring that all children are of a similar age when they start school. This in conjunction with preschool attendance prior to starting school would overcome most of the problems faced in the early years of school. (School staff member)

Generally, there was agreement that the current starting age allows for too great a gap in age on entry to school and that the starting age should be raised. Other issues raised include:

• most respondents said that children should be 5 when they start school
• there were various cut off dates suggested but all would raise the entry age
• a significant number of respondents said that there should be a national entry age
• some respondents suggested that:
  - the entry should be staged so that students can enter throughout the year as they turn 5
  - a transition year be introduced for students who are not ready to progress to Year 1
  - the entry age of boys should be greater than for girls.

Something must be done urgently about school starting age. There is a 24 month variable. My suggestion - kids start transition year when they turn 5. The teachers then make the decision as to whether they should progress to Yr1 the following year or remain in transition year. Most parents are not equipped to make this decision. (Personal submission)

Studies have found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to be less “ready” for school. Children who begin school significantly behind their peers may never be able to catch up (Stipek and Ryan, 1997).

Many researchers have considered what determines readiness for school. Some argue that children need some minimal level of social competence (Ladd, 1999); some say that children’s social and behavioural adjustment is as important as cognitive and academic preparedness (Raver and Zigler, 1997; Raver and Knitzer, 2002); some say that language development is most important (Carnegie
Task Force, 1994); more specifically, some highlight the ability to communicate effectively, with both teachers and peers; and others point out that being well coordinated and physically healthy also helps children.

**Location of Preschools**

A significant number of respondents said that preschools and other childcare facilities including playgroups should be located within the grounds of public schools to support the transition of children to school. There is already a number of public schools that have non-government preschools located within the grounds of the school. Respondents stated that they see benefits for the children in terms of their transition to school.

_The establishment of preschools within the grounds of their departmental school would support a far smoother transition for school starters. Although communication between school & preschool is encouraged & the benefits appreciated not all preschools/schools have easy access. (School community group)_

Respondents stated that the physical location of preschool facilities on school grounds, where possible, should provide opportunities to better support children’s learning and transition from preschool to the first year of school.

_A free preschool should be available to everyone through the public school system. Perhaps it could be linked with the public school, so that every child regardless of their economic background is able to access preschool and attend just one or two days a week so when they attend kindergarten full time they are ready to start learning straight away instead of having to settle into a new environment. (School P&C)_

Another view was:

_A cost effective alternative to establishing purpose built preschool facilities might be to provide teachers who would teach within premises operated by health and welfare services. Disadvantaged preschool children would benefit from being in an environment which coordinates education with health and welfare services. (DET staff member)_

The Institute for Family Advocacy and Leadership Development commented that there needs to be greater consultation with the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) and the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) around the location of future DET preschools. It was noted that some areas where the most recent DET preschools were established were already serviced by community-based childcare. The Institute stated that:

_In an environment of scarce resources, it is critical that there is an equitable distribution of quality early childhood services. (Institute for Family Advocacy & Leadership Development)_
PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Prevention and early intervention strategies are designed to promote the necessary conditions for a child’s healthy development. Current thinking about intervention increasingly accepts the idea that early childhood experiences crucially determine health and wellbeing and the attainment of competencies in later life. It also recognises that investment in early years will lead to improved education, employment and even national productivity (Keating and Hertzman, 2000).

This was reflected in a significant number of responses with many requesting that health screening be conducted at any early age and in the years up to and on entry to school. Some people said that they would like to see the return of school nurses. Early intervention for children with disabilities was highlighted.

Plans for the provision of services to families of children with disability must place families at the centre of decision-making, taking into account the needs of the whole family and building harmony between the needs of the child and the needs of the family. (Institute for Family Advocacy & Leadership Development)

Review the role of the school nurse with the view to implementing a renewed and invigorated program based on increased efforts to diagnose and provide early intervention for those children from communities with high health needs as well as those children who present with characteristics or symptoms that may impede upon their success and happiness in the school setting. (NSW Primary Principals Association)

Consideration should be given to the reintroduction of a school/preschool medical service. This is particularly relevant in rural/remote areas where an itinerant medical service would improve general accessibility. (NSW Teachers Federation)

Role of Parents and the Community

The critical role of parents in providing for the needs of their children was central to many of the comments around early intervention. The education of parents of children aged birth to 5 years of age was acknowledged. Some respondents suggested that the Parents as Teachers program be extended. Some people felt that parents should be able to complete a TAFE course at low cost. Some people felt so strongly about the need for training that they suggested that childcare benefits should be withheld until parents completed training.

Families are living in diverse communities and this in turn means that their lives and backgrounds are different. For many parents living in disadvantaged communities, their own experiences of being a child, and attending school, are not happy ones. They have little or no knowledge of child development, parenting, the needs of children, and the skills they need to develop to have the best chance of success when they attend school. (School P&C)

One of the most hard-hitting comments about the vital role of parents came from a young person through the submission from the NSW Commission for Children and Young People who said:
If you had a good father and a good mother, then you’d be laughin’.

Generally respondents felt that some parents and families do not access support available in their community as they are unaware of what is available. There were a number of suggestions about ways to improve communication and disseminate information. Suggestions included using television commercials, and distributing booklets through schools or other community agencies.

In my local community I have experienced fantastic resources available for children 0-5. I believe the foundations are already in place. The problem that exists (I believe) is in educating parents to use these great facilities. (Community member)

Some respondents stated that the community should share some responsibility for the important role in caring and educating children within the community. The Early Childhood Services Policy for NSW states:

A community that has an appropriate mix of services can help break down isolation by sharing information and developing vital support networks, which can prevent problems and relieve pressures on parents and families. (Department of Community Services, 2000)

Interagency Approach

There was strong support for an interagency approach to early childhood services before school and within schools.

The importance of pre-diagnosis of disabilities and transfer of information to kindergarten implies a much higher level of cooperation and information exchange between agencies – DADHC/DoCS/Health. Need to develop urgently protocols to facilitate the sharing of this information. (Regional staff meeting)

Many respondents suggested that children need a range of support that should be coordinated within the community to ensure effective early intervention and identification of the possible indicators of learning difficulties. The submission from the Department of Community Services stated that:

The NSW Department of Community Services supports initiatives that promote schools as community centres and which endeavour to incorporate children and families into the wider school community. This can assist in reducing social isolation particularly for families newly arrived to an area and promote the school as a vital element within the community. (Department of Community Services)

The needs of children and families in rural and remote areas were highlighted by respondents. It was suggested that an interagency approach could be of great benefit to isolated rural communities.

Many respondents commented on the positive nature of the Families First strategy which brings together five government agencies (NSW Health and Area Health Services, Education and Training, Community Services Housing and Ageing, Disability and Home Care) to support Parents must have much better resources and advice to be active enhancers of their children’s mental and physical development. (School staff member)

TAFE programs can be created to assist young mothers with training, both vocationally and in parenting with child care facilities available. (School P&C)

Need to be a comprehensive program for young children that includes health promotion and nutrition and networking opportunities for services in local communities. (School community meeting)

Families First has provided a visionary framework for integrating resources so that government and non-government service delivery is more effective. Education needs to collaborate more strongly with agencies including DoCS, Health, Disability and Early Childhood Services to promote community development locally. (Community Member)
families to raise healthy children and help parents build their skills and confidence in parenting.

The Schools as Community Centres program is funded under the Families First strategy. It was established to reduce the impact of disadvantage for children entering school by providing integrated services for families in disadvantaged communities. Many respondents suggested that this program should be expanded.

The Federation supports a genuine, systematic interagency approach utilising the expertise of other professionals in the development of programs that will truly address all factors that are indicators of possible learning difficulties. Programs need to be delivered within an integrated framework. Additional resources should be allocated to improve access to support services for young children, such as counsellors, speech therapists, mental health experts, both via DET preschools and schools and other child development agencies. There is a particular need for this provision in rural/remote areas. (NSW Teachers Federation)

Schools as Community Centres are located in primary schools and are designed to meet the particular needs of the local families with young children. These current 39 centres are located in the most disadvantaged areas of the state. The program reflects research that acknowledges:

- the importance of the early years for children's development
- the important role of parents as their child's first teacher, and
- the importance of community in assisting to achieve positive outcomes for children.

Whole of Government initiatives are reflected in the increasing interagency approach with DET as the lead agency in a number of initiatives that target children “at risk” 0-5 years such as Schools as Community Centres. These initiatives need to provide a strong early literacy, numeracy and social competency focus for families involved. (Disabilities Program Directorate)

Phase one of an external evaluation of the Schools as Community Centres program was undertaken in Term 4, 2004. Initial findings indicate that the program has had a positive impact on a range of factors that affect educational outcomes, including positive transition to school, increased community capacity building, increased confidence and skills in parenting and positive connections between schools, families and students.

Many respondents suggested that community liaison officers should be employed to support schools to develop a coordinated approach to the delivery of services to families with young children.

It is these early years of schooling that will establish critical learning. It is also the time when behavioural and physical problems children are experiencing can be identified and more readily than in later years effectively dealt with. However additional resources need to be allocated to improve young children's access to support services, such as counsellors, speech therapists, mental health experts and medical...
professionals. These are particularly needed in rural and remote areas. (School staff meeting)

In the response from the Department’s Early Childhood and Preschool to Year 2 Initiative Units, it was recommended that the Department develop linkages and strengthen the relationship with Children’s Services and other agencies. In particular it was suggested that schools should be supported to map community services in the local area in the same way as Schools as Community Centres and that this information should be shared with parents and community members.

Some respondents suggested that community liaison officers be appointed within regions to assist schools to develop linkages with Children’s Services and other agencies:

Strengthen community partnerships through the employment of more community liaison officers. (School staff meeting)

EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING

Preschool Curriculum

In NSW the preschool ‘curriculum’, The practice of relationships, was produced by the Department of Community Services. It provides a focus for preschool staff to discuss, plan and evaluate their work with children to support their learning and well-being. It does not prescribe specific academic outcomes.

The promotion of reading and general literacy and numeracy development with 0-5 year olds was a major theme throughout the responses. There were varying views about what learning children attending preschools should have that would better prepare them for school:

- some people said that the program should be skills based – focusing on the development of thinking skills, emotional learning skills, communication skills and physical skills
- some said that programs should link to the Kindergarten syllabus particularly in reading programs and be outcomes based and prepare children for achievement of Early Stage 1 (Kindergarten) outcomes
- some said that children should be allowed to play and only to be taught social skills and how to look after themselves in terms of belongings and being careful.

I am a stay at home mum with six children and have observed the 0-5 variations that children experience. With five children at school I also have watched children’s responses to school. The most important 0-5 skills children can learn is to follow routine and instructions, sit down for key tasks, sit down for eating. Basic things in order to concentrate on task at hand. Too many parents don’t set a standard for “there’s a time and a place” and “no fidgeting” and not enough emphasis placed on good manners and respect for others. (Parent)

Early childhood education needs to ‘lift’ from a caring focus to an educational and developmental focus. A curriculum framework that specifies the important dispositions young children need to acquire would assist. (Personal submission)
Personalised Learning

Addressing the needs of the individual (personalised learning) was a significant theme throughout the responses for both prior to school and school aged children:

- catering for gifted and talented children before they are “switched off” schooling – need more appropriate progression and acceleration options
- more support is needed for students with learning difficulties and disabilities
- teachers need to cater for children’s different learning styles.

All children will be different we do not need to try to make them all the same as long as we support the strugglers and give opportunity to progress faster to the faster learners. (Parent)

There was recognition by respondents of the importance of school teachers being familiar with what is being taught in preschool so that children’s learning is continuous.

Class Sizes

A significant number of respondents commented on the need for small class sizes in the early years of school. Some respondents were pleased with the most recent reduction in class sizes in these years.

Thank you for smaller class sizes. (School staff member)

Smaller class sizes is a good start. 20 students K-2! And then beyond. (School staff member)

Many respondents suggested that class sizes should continue to be reduced to help teachers better address the needs of individual students. A significant number of submissions expressed respondents’ opinion simply by recording the statement Smaller class sizes. The Federation of Parents and Citizen’s Association stated:

Federation is pleased with the current initiative for smaller class sizes in the K-2 years but believe that class sizes in Kindergarten should not exceed 17. (Federation of Parents and Citizens’ Association)

Teachers

Teacher qualifications for teaching in preschools can be gained through a TAFE diploma course in Children’s Services or through university to gain a degree.

The importance of having qualified teachers in all prior to school settings was raised by a significant number of respondents.

Early childhood services and all K-2 classes in schools to be staffed by specialist early childhood university trained teachers (birth to 8 years) (Kindergarten Union)

The importance of providing better professional learning opportunities for early childhood teachers was raised by a number of respondents. The NSW Primary Principals Association made note of
the need to target professional development for teachers of Kindergarten to Year 2 and noted a number of experiences that should form such a program, including the value of play as a learning tool and using assessment to inform student learning outcomes. This was supported by many other respondents.

Because infant teacher training no longer exists, infant teachers may not be aware of all the stages of early childhood development. (Learning Difficulties Coalition of NSW)

Many people commented on the importance of recognition of early childhood training and expertise by schools. Some people suggested that all teachers of Kindergarten to Year 2 should have early childhood qualifications.

Whilst Federation supports the concept of K-6 in regard to curriculum and school policy, Federation believes that teachers who teach K-2 should be trained in early childhood. Children in the early years need teachers that have an understanding of child development within the 0-8 years. (Parents and Citizens' Association)

Some respondents commented on the benefits of male teachers in the early childhood years.

Initiate programs encouraging males to teach in the 0-5 year category; role model leadership may assist in deterring young male disengagement at a later stage. (Personal submission)

Kindergarten to Year 2 Curriculum

The curriculum for children in the first three years of school is largely defined in syllabuses produced by the NSW Board of Studies. Learning is defined in terms of outcomes to be achieved in six key learning areas (KLAs) by the end of Kindergarten and again by the end of Year 2.

The importance of preschool teachers and teachers in the early years of school understanding the learning that occurs across these years was raised by a number of respondents.

Closer relationships with prior to school field can support the development of curriculum and reduce the gap between prior to school and school learning experiences, and support and enhance the development of very young children. (Department of Community Services)

Many respondents stated that they feel that the curriculum is overcrowded and the number of outcomes to be achieved should be reduced. Specifically respondents expressed concern about the current focus on assessment. These are major issues being addressed in the section on the Primary School Years.

The curriculum has become very ‘crowded’ in recent years, resulting in inadequate learning time for the basic skills areas of reading, writing and mathematics. (School staff meeting)

Less pressure on schools to teach ‘everything’ - a less busy curriculum and focus on the 3 ‘R’s’. (School staff meeting)
Many responses called for a reduced focus on key learning areas (KLAs) and achievement of outcomes and a greater focus on literacy and numeracy achievement.

*Reduce the curriculum load in the early years and focus on the basics!* (Personal submission)

Some respondents felt that there was not enough learning in the Kindergarten year and that some children remained unchallenged.

*Bright children entering the school system are disadvantaged. The critical kindergarten year is ‘wasted’ as a ‘socialisation’ year. Kids that are already readers have to ‘dumb down’ to fit in.* (Personal submission)

*Less focus on learning through playing, more on learning core subject.* (Personal submission)

On the other hand, some respondents said that the curriculum in these early years of school should be “less formal” and focus primarily on the development of language, social skills and fine and gross motor skills. Some people said that there should be a greater focus on “play” as a valid learning experience.

*We felt that there should be less formal education expectations in Kindergarten. It is more appropriate to develop language, gross and fine motor skills and social skill informally. Children need to have the time to develop their early Talking and Listening skills in a fun and non-threatening environment.* (School staff meeting)

There was a call for the purpose of Kindergarten to be better defined and that the outcomes for Kindergarten children be reconsidered as a result.

In the submission from the NSW Commission for Children and Young People, children and young people spoke about the importance of literacy and numeracy learning in the early years of school. The children’s and young people’s comments included:

*You need the basics, like reading and writing … and numbers.*

*It’s so shocking to see people in our year who can’t read properly. Like they just slipped through the system. That shouldn’t be happening.*

*Reading needs to be targeted in primary school. As soon as you hit high school, you are expected to read.* (NSW Commission for Children and Young People)

Recognising the importance of early intervention, many respondents said that intervention support should be increased for children who are not achieving. There was strong support for a range of programs, including the Reading Recovery program which has shown to be successful in assisting children in Year 1 in need of additional support. Some respondents expressed concern that not all schools have access to all programs.

*If you are in a school that does not have Reading Recovery, or Early Learning Initiative or PSFP, you are considered privileged,*
well you are not. In actual fact you are disadvantaged. I am not seeing any inclusion of developmental play in the K-2 classrooms. (Parent)

Provide access to programs such as Reading Recovery for all students not just those students in high demand schools. Students with difficulties at schools where numbers are low can’t compete at present with students in high need areas. They are currently disadvantaged because they would gain support in higher need schools. (Personal submission)

A submission from the Department’s Early Literacy and Numeracy Advisory Group made the following recommendations about support in the early years of school. These comments reflect many of the comments made by other respondents.

That the DET:

- maintains funding to focussed equity programs in the K2 years, such as ELI.
- expands targeted funding to extend access to the Early Learning initiative (ELI) to all schools where there are concentrations of students from low socio-economic backgrounds.
- recognises and utilises the infrastructure, capacity, and expertise that resides within ELI in relation to K2 literacy, assessing, teaching and learning.
- uses this … expertise … to develop an assessment tool that not only informs teaching but also demonstrates growth in learning for educationally disadvantaged students at the class, school and system levels.
- coordinates the above in a strategic and planned way through one directorate with the key responsibility for the K2 years of schooling.
- ensures that any program designed to support K2 students and their teachers is developed in negotiation with, and endorsed by the above directorate. (NSW DET Early Literacy and Numeracy Advisory Group)

**IN SUMMARY**

The long-term benefits of a quality preschool education for society and for individual children have been well documented.

The current provision of 100 Department of Education and Training preschools attached to primary schools has been greatly welcomed by those communities. It is recognised that the Department is a comparatively minor provider of preschool education in this state and that the majority of children attend a range of other quality preschools. Respondents have said that the need for non-Departmental preschools to charge fees has clearly excluded a number of children from less advantaged backgrounds. In addition, parents have indicated that there are not sufficient preschools and that waiting lists for enrolment are often long.

To ensure that all children can access a quality prior to school education program is clearly a major issue for governments.
Given the research evidence and the strength of opinion of so many respondents, it is undeniable that this issue needs to be addressed. The needs of children are greatest in areas of disadvantage. It is time to put in place a range of strategies that can increase access for all children to a quality prior to school education experience.

For many years schools have recognised the need to assist children in their transition to school and have developed “transition” or “orientation” programs for this purpose. Many of these programs are very successful and are greatly appreciated by their communities.

It is clear from responses that people are seeking programs that:

- commence while the child is in a prior to school facility
- are coordinated across the prior to school and school settings
- are developed over an extended period of time, such as the term before or even the year before commencing school
- has a major component that “educates” the families about child development, school routines, structures and curriculum
- ensures that teachers are aware of particular needs of children prior to entry to school.

A number of respondents saw benefit in greater coordination in the provision of preschool services. Some respondents suggested that the Department of Education and Training should have responsibility for all preschools.

It would appear that there would be a number of benefits to greater coordination or one department having responsibility for children's learning from preschool to Year 12. These benefits may include:

- greater opportunity to address issues of transition to school
- easier identification of potential learning difficulties early and development of programs to address needs of children
- better development of a continuum of learning from preschool and into Kindergarten.

The success of the *Schools as Communities Centres* program is clear and some respondents who are familiar with the program suggested that it should be extended to additional schools. Many more people did not comment specifically on the program but identified the benefits for children and their families if the school became the focus of the community, and the centre for a range of local government and non-government services. The strength of support for this proposal was significant.

The expansion of the *Schools as Community Centres* program would be welcomed in areas of greatest disadvantage. However, many people appear to be supportive of the concept of an interagency of approach in a greater number of schools. It was suggested by respondents that support would be needed by schools to establish effective links with agencies. Some respondents suggested that community liaison officers be established in regions for this purpose.

There were strongly held and divergent views about the focus of learning in both preschool and the first years of school. It was, however, clear that people think that the curriculum of preschool and school should be aligned so that there is a clear continuum of learning across these early childhood years. This may require a review of both the preschool curriculum developed by the Department of Community Services and the curriculum for the early years of school, particularly Kindergarten.

The issue of starting age was raised by a significant number of respondents as a concern in a child's readiness for school. The consultation did not specifically seek comments on the starting age for school but it is clearly an issue that people feel very strongly about. The people who did mention starting age felt that the current age span of Kindergarten children is too great and that the age of entry should be raised. There may be people who hold quite contrary views who did not make comment on this issue.

The starting age and enrolment guidelines have been reviewed over the years. In looking to the future, however, this issue may need to be reconsidered as part of an overall plan to ensure that every child is well prepared to start school.
References


Vinson, T. 2002. Inquiry into the provision of public education in NSW. Sponsored by NSW Teachers Federation and Federations of P&C Associations of NSW (First Report), 78