



PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

INQUIRY INTO THE TASMANIAN GOVERNMENT'S CONTINUING RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) has been a voice for young children since 1938. We are a peak organisation acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the field of early education and care.

ECA advocates to ensure quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children birth to eight years of age.

With Branch in every State and Territory, our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning.

ECA Tasmania Branch was disappointed not to be included in the invitation to contribute to the inquiry given the significant role the education and care sector plays in the lives of children, their families and the broader community.

Noting the terms of reference has a particular focus for education and the government's return to school plan, it is imperative that the focus is broadened to take into consideration the education and care sector.

Given evidence-based research highlights the importance of the early years as the most critical period of brain development and that early experience shapes the trajectory for later life and has lasting impression on the child's ability to learn and succeed, both in school and life, it is essential that the years prior to formal school is valued and recognised for both the care component and importantly the educative value.

ECA Tasmania Branch has sought feedback from its members and now take the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry on matters that effected the early education and care sector. It is noted that some of the focus questions were not relevant to the sector.

Financial and public health measures taken by Government to prepare for return to school for students and staff for the 2022 educational year

The Tasmanian Government implemented a short-term waiver on rental charges for education and care services operated from Department of Education facilities. This was appreciated but given the rental fees are cost recovery-based model it was not a major expenditure for services.

Free Rapid Antigen Tests and Masks were made available and distributed freely to the sector by the Department of Education. However, initially these were not available when needed resulting in services securing supplies at their own cost. Then when not needed there was an oversupply as the distribution to education and care services commenced. Ironically this supply coincided with school recommencement and did not recognise that education and care services continued to operate when school embarked on the learning at home program.

The Federal Government provided financial support through the Job Keeper program, offered free education and care for families for a short period, allowed services to waive the gap fee paid by families

(the fee between the child care subsidy and the full fee costs). The waiving of the gap fee resulted in a loss of income for services with financial viability a consequence.

The education and care sector continued to operate and provide a vital service throughout the pandemic. This enabled many allied health provision to continue to work. Educators were at the front line throughout the pandemic. Working from home not possible for the sector.

In summary the lack of understanding of how services are structured and operate plus lack of support from the Tasmanian Government was a consistent message from members.

The Public Health advice that supported the return to school plan

The advice and directives from Public Health were at times inconsistent. The help line operators were not familiar with the education and care sector thus the information provided varied depending upon who answered the call. This caused confusion and inconsistency and ongoing changes to Covid Management Plans. This improved slightly when services could contact the Department of Education - Education and Care Unit.

Members expressed from the onset the education and care sector should have been provided with management plans and reporting templates. Instead, over 300 services had to undertake research to develop these documents. To avoid confusion and have a consistent approach it would have been invaluable – saving time and energy for the important task of educating children.

The financial, social and educational impacts associated with measures implemented to support the return to school plan including impact on:

- **Students and educational outcomes**

Children faced massive change – from not having consistent caregivers, educators wearing masks and impacting on language development as not fluent words with masks in place.

Their routines changed – staggered mealtimes, separated from their peers, play spaces altered to accommodate smaller groups, excursions cancelled.

Social distancing for little children not possible.

For two years young children have missed out on important early learning opportunities that has impacted on their learning and development.

- **Parents and carers**

Financially parents received support through Federal Government through fee waivers. But the uncertainty of the health and wellbeing of themselves and their children required additional communication strategies to be developed and distributed regularly.

At times they left children with educators that with whom they weren't familiar.

Mental health issues became increasingly prevalent as families lost jobs or had work hours reduced – often the service became the listener and supporter.

Some families cancelled education and care services either because of loss of their work or concerned about the health of their child in a group setting.

- **Staff**

The loss of educators and staff due to the mandated vaccination directive was significant. Prior to the pandemic the sector was suffering a critical workforce shortage. Covid has exacerbated the situation resulting in the loss of qualified and experienced educators from the sector.

The vaccination mandate resulted in the loss of many educators to the private and catholic school sector where it was not mandated.

Mental health of educators emerged as a consequence of the impact of the pandemic.

Leave entitlements were exhausted resulting in no income for a period of time.

Retention and recruitment of educators was a continual time-consuming task for operators during the pandemic and continues. The workforce needs now and into the future must be addressed.

- **The broader Tasmanian community and economy.**

The management of Covid been resource intense - increased costs to ensure heightened health and hygiene procedures, additional cleaning, reporting to Public Health, signage, protective equipment, updating management plans, supporting employees who were juggling work and family responsibilities. Ultimately the fees for education and care will increase and families will face increased costs at a time when employment, cost of living and interest rates continue to grow.

Summary

The past two years has been a challenge for the sector and it continues as Covid-19 remains within the community. The flow on effect with loss of staff, financial implications, changes to business models to accommodate government mandates has resulted in a loss of trust in government decision making and complete lack of understanding of the sector.

Appreciating education and care services are not government agencies and operate on a business model, without a vibrant, accessible and affordable sector the key enabler for workforce participation is lost. The contribution to the state's economy cannot be underestimated.

One member described the experience as 'being thrown under the bus' and another stated they "felt like second class and less valued than the school sector".

During COVID-19 pandemic the early years have been the second cousin to the school sector, when in fact it should be the reverse given the early years of life are characterised by significant opportunity, rapid change, and accelerated development which is unapparelled by any other stage of life.

ECA Tasmania Branch appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback to the inquiry.



Ros Cornish

Branch President on behalf of Members - Early Childhood Australia – Tasmania Branch 29/7/2022

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Note: Education and care is used throughout the response, however it is also referred to by many as child care.