

EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

DATE 2 MAY 2023

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) provides an opportunity for all stakeholders to work together to develop a national policy roadmap and shape the future of early childhood education and care.

All families deserve equitable access to affordable quality early childhood education and care. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children from regional and remote areas and children with disability. It is important that a national strategy encompasses the social determinants of health and wellbeing to allow young children to thrive and grow in ways that meet their individual needs.

Independent Schools Australia (ISA) supports the Australian Government's commitment to break down service silos in the early years and encourage stakeholder collaboration, development of stronger strategic relationships and a holistic approach to supporting young children and their families.

ISA suggests the following key policy priorities to create healthy foundations for all Australian children:

- a child-centred approach to policy decision making
- a coordinated interagency approach to support young children from birth to five years
- equitable opportunities and access to quality early childhood education and care services, especially in regional and remote areas
- address workforce issues including the shortage of qualified staff and staff retention strategies, especially in regional and remote areas
- targeted support for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities
- culturally responsive strategies
- focus on health and wellbeing with access to early intervention for young children
- sharing of data as appropriate to inform strategy and improve outcomes.

2. ABOUT ISA

ISA is the national peak body representing the Independent school sector. It includes the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISA represents more than 1,200 schools and 690,000 students, accounting for 17 per cent of Australian school enrolments.

ISA's major role is to bring the unique needs and contributions of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the Independent school sector on national issues.

EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a specific educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. A number of Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs or to reflect the religious values of a community.

Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations for example, Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Quaker and Seventh Day Adventist schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other factors.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some Independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example Lutheran schools. Systemic schools account for 20 per cent of schools in the Independent school sector. Four out of five schools in the sector are autonomous non-systemic schools.

3. INTRODUCTION

ISA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Strategy to help shape the future of early childhood education and care. ISA has prepared this submission in response to the Strategy discussion paper. ISA consulted with the state and territory AISs in preparing this submission.

Independent schools develop positive relationships with their families and communities and provide high-quality early childhood education and care to young children.

Early childhood education and care services in the Independent school sector currently include children of all ages – from babies to school age children. The Strategy's aim to support children in their first 1000 days and adopt a child-centered approach to support these early years is welcomed by the Independent school sector.

EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

The majority of Independent school providers operate early learning services for three- to five-year-olds. Most schools that offer early childhood services provide a preschool program for the year before formal schooling. Some Independent schools operate both Long Day Care (LDC) and sessional kindergarten/preschool, or may have Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) available for both preschool and school aged children.

Based on AIS 2022 data, ISA estimates that two thirds of Independent schools provide early childhood services, which equates to approximately 790 schools.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that in 2022, there were 8,251 four- and five-year olds enrolled at Independent schools. This represents approximately seven per cent of the total number of preschool enrolments across all sectors and states and territories and almost eleven per cent of the total number of preschool enrolments in the non-government sector.

4. VISION

The Strategy aims to provide a strong foundation for all young children and the statement that *Every child deserves the opportunity for the best start to life; a chance to achieve their goals and dreams* is an excellent starting point.

ISA supports a vision for all families to have equitable access to early childhood education and care to enable children to flourish and families to work, supported by a qualified, sustainable early childhood education and care workforce.

ISA recommends that the Vision highlights that early childhood education and care not only promotes life-long learning, but also plays a significant role in developing important physical, cognitive and social-emotional skills which provides children with a sense of identity and belonging. Young children have a right to learn about their world through explorative and imaginative play, rich language opportunities and positive social interaction experiences.

ISA recommends that this is made explicit in the Vision so that early childhood education and care remains developmentally appropriate and protects childhood in the early years by continuing the play-based approach of the early years learning framework. Primary school intellectual concepts and learning should be kept for primary school and not encroach on the early childhood years.

ISA agrees that it is important to develop national policies that support every child's health, education and wellbeing so they can reach their full potential. The Independent school sector supports the Strategy taking this holistic approach. It is also vital that all children have equitable opportunities to access early years education

5. PRINCIPLES

ISA values ongoing consultation and collaboration with the Australian Government, the early childhood sector and key stakeholders in developing the Early Years Strategy and associated policy development.

Independent schools support co-design with educators, communities, children and families to create successful strategies that meets the needs of stakeholders and build positive reciprocal partnerships.

EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

ISA recommends consideration of the following key concepts to underpin the principles that will inform the Strategy:

- child-centred
- collaborative, integrated and coordinated
- culturally responsive
- inclusive
- equitable
- developmentally appropriate
- evidence based
- play based.

6. STRATEGY STRUCTURE

ISA supports the proposed Strategy structure which includes a vision, policy priorities and indicators to measure success against outcomes and priority reform areas, however we note that further consultation on how outcomes will be developed and measured will be critical.

The proposed Outcomes and Evaluation Framework to monitor performance should be developmentally appropriate and consider both the integrated and diverse nature of the early childhood education and care sector, including the needs of children, families, educators, communities and policy makers.

ISA suggests that in the diagram for the proposed structure, *principles* and *evidence* could be separated to make it clear how one informs the other.

The Implementation Action Plan (IAP) incorporates the elements of the Early Years Strategy structure and should illustrate how policy priorities in the Strategy are actioned to achieve outcomes measures. As the priorities, action plans, targets and framework have not yet been developed, it is difficult to provide any further comment on the IAP.

As the Strategy will incorporate an integrated approach to break down policy silos that currently exist, ISA recommends that an outer layer in the Strategy diagram, or a separate diagram could be included to show how key stakeholders will work together. This might include peak bodies, education authorities, the Australian, state and territory governments, agencies and other key early childhood sector stakeholders.

7. STRATEGY OUTCOMES

Children have the right to the best start in life and a healthy and safe childhood that supports them to flourish and learn about their world.

Disadvantage can be measured against social determinants including housing, health, education and employment. ISA supports the reduction of systemic and multi-generational disadvantage by having a multi-tiered, collaborative approach to improving outcomes for children.

EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

ISA supports increased opportunities for young children to enrol in preschool. Quality early childhood education and care provides children with developmental opportunities and children who arrive at school 'ready' are more likely to do well in future years.¹

ISA acknowledges that there are significant challenges to increasing both the early childhood education and care workforce and access to early learning services, particularly in regional and remote communities.

With some states and territories planning to increase access and hours for young children to attend preschool, retention of the current workforce and plans to increase the number of early childhood educators is a national priority. A Strategy that also encompasses strategies to further grow, develop and professionalise the early childhood workforce would be welcomed by the Independent school sector.

Other key outcome priorities for early childhood education and care include:

- health and wellbeing
- child safety
- improved outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- inclusive practices and increased support for young children with disability
- strong focus on needs of regional and remote communities
- consultation with families, communities and key stakeholders
- oral language and literature rich environments
- breaking down silos and interagency collaboration

7.1 Health and wellbeing

ISA supports outcomes that develop and improve health and wellbeing in young children including positive physical, social emotional and cognitive development, sense of identity and belonging. These outcomes provide a foundation for health, mental health and wellbeing, educational attainment, employment and positive relationships.

Early intervention and access to support is vital for children's health, education and wellbeing and is particularly important for vulnerable children and children with disability. Early intervention and screening provide information for educators and families to identify early support requirements.

7.2 Child safety

The Independent school sector agrees that child safety and child protection strategies are essential outcomes to include in the Strategy, linked to the National Child Safety Principles that promote

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, "Australia's Children, Early Childhood Education and Care," 2022, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/education/early-childhood-education-and-care>.

EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

safety and wellbeing while minimising the opportunity for children and young people to be harmed.²

7.3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

ISA supports the Strategy's aim for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to grow up healthy, supported by strong families and proud in culture. As stated in the discussion paper, cultural identity, kinship and connection are protective factors for the safety, health and wellbeing of children.

The Independent school sector welcomes strategies that further support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, acknowledging the impact of intergenerational trauma and the importance of working in close partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and staff.

ISA agrees that the Strategy should:

- address issues impacting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and family disadvantage
- build greater cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, children and staff
- foster positive relationships between families and services
- improve attendance rates and early childhood education and care access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- develop culturally sensitive approaches that aim to Close the Gap.

7.4 Children with disability

Children with disability have the right to receive the same opportunities as children without disability. Supporting and resourcing inclusive strategies for early childhood education and care providers is important in addressing individual needs for each child and their families.

The Independent school sector supports the National Quality Standards, Disability Discrimination Act and Disability Standards for Education, to provide learning and environmental adjustments for each child's identified needs to provide equitable opportunities for learning. ISA supports the Strategy's alignment with relevant national strategies and action plans that align with diversity and inclusivity priorities.

7.5 Regional and remote areas

The Independent school sector supports greater access to early childhood education and care and health services for children in regional and remote communities to improve outcomes for young children and their families.

7.6 Families and Community

Consultation and collaboration with families and communities is important to ensure early childhood education and care meets local needs and promotes healthy relationships between child, provider

² Australian Human Rights Commission, "National Principles for Child Safe Organisations," 2018, https://childsafe.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-02/National_Principles_for_Child_Safe_Organisations2019.pdf. p.6

EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

and family. Families can benefit from access to high-quality early childhood education and care as it allows them opportunities to participate in the workforce or pursue further education or training.

ISA supports the Strategy's consultative process to shape an equitable and sustainable future for children and their families in the early years and ISA also supports strategies to reduce costs for early childhood education for all families, but especially families from disadvantaged backgrounds.

7.7 Oral Language and Literacy

Developing an oral language and literature rich environment for young children is essential for learning. It is important to ensure that education programs for the early years are developmentally appropriate and not pushing primary years literacy outcomes into the early years. A national language strategy could include a priority for access to education in first language development, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

7.8 Breaking down silos

ISA welcomes the Strategy's aim to reduce program and funding silos across Commonwealth departments and agencies to better support the development of positive wellbeing, education, health (including mental health) and safety of young children.

8. GAPS IN EXISTING FRAMEWORKS

There is a lack of national data for the early childhood education and care sector that is disaggregated at state and territory and sector levels. The complexity of the early childhood education and care sector means that the data available is often misunderstood or misinterpreted and there remains a limited overview of the early childhood education and care system.

Despite some gaps in data, there are several data collections which support the Strategy such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) frameworks for measuring wellbeing, the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy.

ISA would support processes for greater transparency and sharing of data as relevant to improve outcomes for young children.

8.1 Australian Early Development Census

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) releases census data every three years on early childhood development, with the last release in 2021. The AEDC is collected every three years and provides important information for policy makers to improve the provision and funding of early learning services to improve outcomes for all children.

However, this data collection combines all sectors together, making comparative analysis for the Independent school sector difficult. The Independent school sector notes that there are significant gaps in the AEDC data, the data collection is non-compulsory but in some states the outcomes are tied to funding.

8.2 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OECD data can assist policy makers when examining national and international trends in early childhood health, wellbeing and access to education and care.

EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

8.3 Australian Bureau of Statistics

The ABS publishes *Preschool, Education* annually.³ This publication contains statistics on preschool programs in Australia and includes data on children enrolled in and attending preschool programs, and information on providers. The statistics are compiled from data collected through the National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection (NECECC). The data for the collection is sourced from administrative data sets, including the Child Care Subsidy System (CCSS). This means that full fee-paying services may not be included in this data.

8.4 Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority

Each quarter, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) publishes a national report on early childhood education and care services operating under the National Quality Framework providing important data and analysis on the profile of the sector and the quality rating of services against the National Quality Standard.

9. CONCLUSION

Research has clearly established the first five years of life as critical for building the foundations of brain development, life-long learning, well-being and health.⁴ It is also clear that participation in high quality early childhood education and care builds strong foundations for learning and has a positive influence on the development of independence, life skills, a sense of belonging and school readiness.

Providers of early childhood education and care operate in a complex sector where arrangements differ according to jurisdictions, sectors and types of early childhood services. National investment in early learning is an ongoing priority for the Australian Government and state and territory governments and is welcomed by all providers of early childhood education and care including the Independent school sector.

ISA welcomes an overarching national early years strategy that clearly outlines principles, strategies and targeted actions, combined with interagency collaboration and stakeholder consultation, to improve outcomes for all young children and their families.

Contact details

Tracey Taylor

Director, Education Policy

tracey.taylor@isa.edu.au

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Preschool Education, Australia, 2021," March 23, 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/preschool-education-australia/latest-release>; Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Childhood Education and Care, Australia, June 2017," April 23, 2018, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/childhood-education-and-care-australia/latest-release>.

⁴ Georgie Carter-Smith, "Why Early Childhood Education Is Important to You," Melbourne Graduate School of Education, September 17, 2020, <https://education.unimelb.edu.au/news-and-events/news/2020/teaching/why-early-childhood-education-is-important-to-you>.