

SUBMISSION COVER SHEET



INDEPENDENT EDUCATION UNION OF AUSTRALIA THE EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

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Introduction

The Independent Education Union of Australia (IEUA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute towards the development of a Commonwealth Early Years Strategy.

The IEUA is the federally registered union representing over 75,000 education professionals (teachers and other education staff) in the non-government sector, many of whom work in kindergartens, preschools, and early childcare centres which may be either not for profit or profit organisations.

The IEUA strongly supports the development of an overarching Early Years strategy which supports our youngest children and prioritises the resourcing and coordination of their education, wellbeing, and development.

The IEUA believes that central to any Early Years Strategy is the accessibility and delivery of quality early childhood education by tertiary qualified early childhood teachers in a range of settings.

Section 3 Your Views

A Proposed Structure of Early Years Strategy

Question 1. Comment on the proposed structure of the Strategy

The IEUA supports the development of a well-structured Commonwealth Early Years Strategy that includes the following key components:

1. **Vision and Goals.** A clear vision and set of goals need to be articulated, outlining the desired outcomes for children's early years.
2. **Evidence Based Approach.** The Strategy needs to be based on the best available research and evidence, including input from experts and stakeholders in the early childhood education sector.
3. **Coordinated Approach.** The Strategy needs to involve a well-resourced and coordinated approach across all levels of government, as well as collaboration with education and health unions, community, and services to ensure coordinated implementation and delivery.
4. **Implementation Plan.** A detailed implementation plan should be developed outlining specific actions and targets for achieving the Strategy's goals as well as timelines and resources and accountability mechanisms.
5. **Funding and Resources:** Ongoing funding and resources must be allocated to support the implementation of the Strategy, including investment in early childhood education programs and services; investment in the provision of qualified teachers and educators, investment into professional development for teachers and educators and investment into research and evaluation.
6. **Engagement and Consultation:** The Strategy must involve ongoing engagement and consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, including education and health unions, early childhood teachers and educators, children and families, and experts in their fields.

B Vision

Question 2. What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

Overall, Australia's vision for its youngest children should prioritise the well-being and development of children and recognise the critical role that early childhood education has in achieving this goal.

The IEUA believes that a key aspect of this vision should be ensuring that all children have access to high quality early childhood education services that are affordable, accessible, and inclusive. This includes supporting families to access services that meet their unique needs and ensuring that services are staffed by tertiary qualified early childhood teachers and qualified educators who can provide the best possible care and education for children.

Another important aspect of the vision is recognising the importance of supporting parents and caregivers to provide nurturing and supportive environments for children in the home. This includes providing access to information, resources and clinical support for child development, nutrition and health and parenting as well as supporting parents to balance work and family responsibilities.

C Outcomes

Question 3. What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy

Overall, the IEUA believes that the most important outcome for supporting the early years of children are those that focus on their physical, social, emotional and cognitive development as well as their language and communication abilities. By prioritising these outcomes, we can ensure that all children have the best possible start in life and are well prepared for success in the future.

The IEUA has considered these outcomes as immediate short term, midterm and long-term outcomes for child development.

The most important **short-term outcome** for supporting the early years of children is ensuring that they are safe, healthy, and well nurtured. This includes providing access to high-quality health care, nutrition and safe environments that support their physical, social, and emotional development. In addition, it is essential to provide children with opportunities to play, learn and explore their surroundings in a safe and supportive way.

In the **medium term**, it is important to focus on developing children's social, emotional, and cognitive skills as well as their language and communication abilities. This includes providing access to high quality early childhood education that are staffed by tertiary qualified early childhood teachers who are supported by qualified educators. Such staff are qualified to support children across these areas.

In addition, it's important to provide opportunities for children to engage in positive social interactions with peers and adults, as this can support their social and emotional development.

In the **long term**, the most important outcome for supporting early years of children is ensuring that they are well prepared for success in school and in life. This includes developing strong cognitive, social, emotional and language skills as well as a love of learning and a curiosity about the world around them. It also includes developing the skills and dispositions needed for success in later life, such as resilience, creativity, and a sense of purpose.

D. Policy Priorities

Question 4 What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

The IEUA believes the following are some specific areas and policy priorities that should be included in the Strategy:

1. **Access to quality early childhood education.** The Strategy should prioritise increasing access to a well-funded quality early childhood education services for all children, particularly those from disadvantage backgrounds. This must involve improved and guaranteed funding for the expansion of early childhood education community based not for profit services, improving the quality of existing services and supporting the recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood teachers by guaranteeing the payment of salary parity, improving conditions and reducing burdening workloads.
2. **Parental support and engagement.** The Strategy needs to prioritise supporting parents and families in their role as primary caregivers and educators of their children. This should involve providing resources and support for parents to promote positive parenting practices, strengthening family support services, and improving communication and engagement between families and early childhood education centres and health services. The Strategy should consider better mechanisms for access to social workers /counsellors and support programs for families with complex needs.
3. **Health and wellbeing.** The Strategy needs to prioritise the promotion of health and wellbeing of young children, including the physical, emotional, and mental health. This could involve supporting the provision of healthy meals and physical activity, promoting positive social and emotional development, and addressing the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences. Focus must be given to areas of disadvantage, particularly for remote and rural access.
4. **Indigenous and multicultural children and families.** The Strategy must prioritise supporting indigenous and multicultural children and families, recognising the unique cultural and linguistic needs of these communities. This could involve developing culturally appropriate early education programs and services, supporting the professional development and mentoring of indigenous and multicultural early childhood teachers and educators, and improving access to resources and support for these communities.
5. **Research and evaluation** The Strategy must prioritise investment in the evaluation of current research to improve the evidence base for effective Early Years policy and practice. This could also involve analysing research into best practices in early years education and health, evaluating the effectiveness of existing programs and services and monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the Strategy itself.

Question 5. What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantage circumstances?

The IEUA believes that in order to improve the outcomes for children born or raised in more vulnerable or disadvantaged circumstances, the Strategy will require a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach that addresses the underlying factors contributing to their vulnerability or disadvantage.

The following actions can be undertaken by the Commonwealth:

1. **Increase access to high quality early childhood education.** The Commonwealth will need to increase investment in expanding access to high quality early childhood education services in areas where children are more likely to be vulnerable or disadvantaged. This should include increasing funding for existing not for profit services and establishing new community based not for profit services in underserved areas.
2. **Provide increased targeted support for families.** The Commonwealth can review and improve targeted support for families in vulnerable or disadvantaged circumstances, such as financial assistance, parenting support programs, family support programs, disability, and mental health services. This could help to address some of the underlying factors that contribute to children’s vulnerability or disadvantage.
3. **Increased focus on early intervention and prevention.** The Commonwealth need to review and expand investment in early intervention and prevention programs that target families and children in vulnerable or disadvantage circumstances. This should include the better coordination of existing programs and the further development of programs that support children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development as well as programs that focus on improving parenting skills and family relationships.
4. **Address social and economic inequality.** The Commonwealth needs to address the underlying social and economic inequalities that contribute to children’s vulnerability or disability. This should include coordinated policies that promote greater access to employment, education, and housing opportunities for families in disadvantage circumstances.
5. **Collaborate with local communities.** The Commonwealth will need to work collaboratively with State/Territory Governments, local communities, and organisations to identify and address the unique needs and challenges facing children and families in vulnerable or disadvantaged circumstances. This could involve engaging with community leaders, service providers, and families to develop better targeted strategies for improving outcomes for children in these communities.

Question 6. What areas do you think Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families

Improving the coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families requires a multi-faceted approach.

The IEUA considers the following as areas for focus:

- 1 **Establishing a cross – sectoral coordinating body.** The Commonwealth will need to consider a dedicated coordinating body that brings together stakeholders, including unions, from across different sectors involved in policy development for children and families, such as health, education, social services, and housing. This body could work to ensure that policies are integrated and aligned across sectors and that there is clear communication and collaboration between stakeholders.
- 2 **Encouraging collaboration between government and non-government stakeholders.** The Commonwealth should work to foster greater collaboration and partnerships between government and non-government stakeholders involved in policy development for children and families, such as community organisations, education and health unions, advocacy groups and academic researchers. This could involve establishing forums for consultation and collaboration, as well as providing funding and support for collaborative initiatives through a National Reform Agreement across State/Territory and Commonwealth governments.
- 3 **Prioritising data collection and evaluation.** The Commonwealth could prioritise the collection of data and evaluation of policies and programs relating to children and families, in order to assess their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement. This should involve establishing clear metrics and benchmarks for success as well as investing in data infrastructure and analysis.
- 4 **Developing a whole of government approach.** The Commonwealth should work to develop a whole of government approach to policy development for children and families in which policies are developed and implemented in a coordinated and integrated way across different government departments and agencies. This could involve establishing clear lines of communication and accountability between different government bodies as well as developing strategies for aligning policies and programs.

E Principles

Question 7 What principles should be included in the Strategy?

The IEUA believes that by incorporating the following guiding principles into the Strategy, the Commonwealth can help to ensure that all children have the best possible start in life, and that families are supported to provide a nurturing and supportive environment for their children's learning and development.

- 1 **Equity:** Ensuring that all children have access to the resources, support, and opportunities they need to thrive, regardless of their background, ethnicity, or socio-economic status
- 2 **Evidence-based:** Ensuring that policies and programs are informed by the best available evidence and research and are designed to achieve measurable outcomes.
- 3 **Child and Family-centred:** Recognising the crucial role that families play in children's development and supporting families to be active participants in their children's learning and development.
- 4 **Collaborative:** Fostering collaboration and partnerships between government, non-government, and community stakeholders involved in policy development and service delivery for children and families.

- 5 **Inclusive:** Ensuring that policies and programs are designed to be inclusive of all children, including those with disabilities, from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and from regional and remote areas.
- 6 **Responsive:** Being responsive to the changing needs and circumstances of children and families, and adapting policies and programs accordingly.
- 7 **Continuous improvement:** Continuously monitoring and evaluating policies and programs and using evidence to inform ongoing improvements and refinements.
- 8 **Respectful:** Respecting children's rights and dignity, and promoting positive and respectful relationships between children, families, and service providers.
- 9 **Sustainable:** Ensuring that policies and programs are designed to be sustainable in the long-term, and that resources are allocated efficiently and effectively to achieve maximum impact.

F. Evidence based approach

Question 8. Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy

Overall, the Commonwealth should draw on a wide range of research and evidence in developing the Strategy. The IEUA recommends research which considers the following:

- 1 **Neuroscience and child development:** Understanding the latest research on brain development in early childhood and the critical importance of the early years for building strong foundations for later learning, health, and well-being.
- 2 **Early childhood education:** Examining the evidence on the benefits of high-quality early childhood education programs for children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, and the factors that contribute to quality. Further examining the impact of low and inequitable wages and conditions as well as excessive workload and teacher burnout on attraction and retention of early childhood teachers and educators and thus the subsequent impact on the delivery of quality early childhood education particularly in disadvantaged regions.
- 3 **Parenting support and family services:** Identifying the types of parenting support and family services that can promote positive parent-child relationships, support children's development, and enhance families' well-being.
- 4 **Health and well-being:** Considering the evidence on the factors that contribute to children's health and well-being in the early years, including nutrition, physical activity, sleep, and access to healthcare.
- 5 **Social and economic disadvantages:** Recognising the impact of social and economic disadvantage on children's development in the early years, and identifying strategies to support children and families who are facing disadvantage.
- 6 **Indigenous children and families:** Understanding the unique cultural and historical factors that impact on Indigenous children's development in the early years, and identifying strategies to support Indigenous children and families
- 7 **Data and evaluation:** Ensuring that policies and programs are informed by robust data and evaluation, and that evidence-based practices are used to continuously monitor and improve outcomes for children and families.

Conclusion

The IEUA emphasises that quality early childhood education must be central to the Commonwealth Early Years Strategy as it plays a critical role in building strong foundations for lifelong learning, promoting social and emotional development, reducing learning gaps supporting families and delivering economic benefits.

To ensure the delivery of quality early childhood education and thus a successful Commonwealth Strategy, tertiary qualified early childhood teachers must be a central consideration as they play the critical role in delivering high quality teaching and learning experiences for young children, promoting positive outcomes, supporting workforce development and improving the status and recognition of the early childhood profession

The Commonwealth Government must take a range of measures to address the shortage of qualified early childhood teachers, including increasing funding for salaries, improving recognition and status, expanding training and professional development opportunities, and access to mentoring, as well as addressing the unsustainable workload and teacher burnout being experienced in the sector.

The success of any Commonwealth Strategy will be directly linked to addressing the issues of attraction and retention of qualified early childhood teachers and thus providing certainty and security for quality early childhood education.