

# Pre-Budget Submission:

High expectations for children with disability and/or developmental delay.

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The Victoria Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) includes eight practice principles, one of which is ‘High expectations for every child’.

*“High expectations by professionals and families means being open to possibilities about children’s capabilities and avoiding being locked into ideas about what children are capable of at a certain age or stage. This expectation of success is a powerful motivator for children, promoting resilience and willingness to work hard, regulating behaviour and establishing goals and aspirations for the future”.<sup>1</sup>*

For children with disability and/or developmental delay, high expectations support their learning, development, and wellbeing, and help them reach their full potential. The important people in their lives are encouraged to have high expectations of their capabilities.

In turn, we have high expectations of professionals working with children with disability or developmental delay and their families. We also have high expectations of the universal and specialist programs and services available to them. This necessarily includes an integrated service system with strong governance and adequate resources; data that can inform program improvements; quality standards, accountability, and improvement; and a ready and capable workforce that can deliver high quality inclusive programs.<sup>2</sup> With the recent appointment of Minister for Early Childhood and the Victorian Governments clear commitment to inclusion through significant investment in the school-based Disability Inclusion program, now is the time to strengthen the foundations by focusing on services for young children with a disability/developmental delay and their families.

ECIA VIC TAS acknowledges the Victorian State Government for their ongoing commitment to quality services for children with a disability/developmental delay and their families. With ongoing support and goodwill from the sector, ECIA VIC TAS is in a strong position to work with government to ensure that best practice is strengthened.

This Budget submission proposes policy settings and programs in four key areas that can further the work proposed in the States Government’s Early Childhood Reform Plan to:

*“... aspire to be among the best in the world. Over the next 10 years, we will establish a world-class early childhood system that is responsive to children’s needs, welcoming to all families, and supportive of all parents and carers”.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> DET (2016). *Victoria Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF)*. p10.

<sup>2</sup> ECTA (2015). *A System Framework for Building High-Quality Early Intervention and Preschool Special Education Programs*. Retrieved from: <https://ectacenter.org/sysframe/>

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education and Training (2016), *Early Childhood Consultation Paper*. Retrieved from: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/educationstate/ec-reform-plan.pdf>

## 1. Reinvigorate and strengthen an integrated early childhood system.

There has been considerable disruption to the early childhood service system in Victoria over the past seven years since the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). The interface between mainstream services and disability services has been negatively impacted. This is extremely disappointing given the significant work that had previously been undertaken to develop an integrated service system by the Victorian Government and early childhood education, health, and community services.

The transfer of Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services to the NDIS has involved moving the sector from its previous state government early childhood policy base to the federal disability sector. The impact is that ECI is no longer embedded within early childhood settings and there is a worrying disconnect between services. Coordinated information, supports, data, referral pathways and resources between local, state and territory and federally funded mainstream and specialist providers is critical to supporting inclusion and participation for young children. A coordinated approach requires urgent realignment. This work should align with the State Disability Plan that is currently under development. The 2020-2030 National Disability Strategy also provides an important focus for development given that it aims to “... provide an opportunity to clarify the roles and responsibilities of various levels of government in disability policy and service delivery. The new Strategy will also seek to clarify the important role of the sectors outside government in improving outcomes for people with disability, including removing barriers to participation and shaping community attitudes”.<sup>4</sup>

### Recommendations:

- Reinvigorate and strengthen an integrated early childhood service system across all jurisdictions, levels of government and health, education, and community services.
- Coordinate information, supports, data, referral pathways and resources between local, state/territory, and federally-funded mainstream and specialist providers, aligned with the 2020-2030 National Disability Strategy and upcoming State Disability Plan (2021-2024).
- Establish mechanisms for clear communication, planning and policy development between federal and state governments with a focus on young children with disability and/or developmental delay.
- Enlist expertise within the sector to establish a taskforce or expert advisory group to support mechanisms for monitoring and responding to issues related to young children (birth to 8years) with developmental delay and/or disability and their families.

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Government (2020). *National Disability Strategy Position Paper (2020-2030)*. Retrieved from: <https://engage.dss.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/national-disability-strategy-position-paper-accessible-pdf.pdf>

## 2. Invest in building the specialist early childhood workforce.

The ECI sector is currently experiencing unprecedented workforce pressures. There is a chronic shortage of specialist early childhood teachers and paediatric allied health practitioners with the skills, knowledge, and experience to work effectively with young children with disability and/or developmental delay and their families. There are also particular issues for early childhood special education teachers working in ECI whose positions have been made redundant due to the significant barriers of the NDIS guidelines. This is a worrying trend given the critical role early childhood specialist teachers have in their work with children, families, and educators. The workforce shortage has led to increasing wait lists for ECI services for Victorian children, with families reporting 9-12 month wait for services after they have received an NDIS Plan.

A clear and robust sector wide workforce strategy needs to be developed as a matter of urgency. This would see the Victorian Government working with the NDIA, the sector, universities, TAFEs, and peak bodies to develop a plan that would be responsive to the future needs of the sector. Workforce pressures are being addressed for the broader disability workforce through the Joint Standing Committee on the NDIS Workforce Interim Report.<sup>5</sup> They are also being addressed by the Victorian State Government for the early childhood sector in relation to the rollout of universal three-year-old kindergarten initiative. However, there appears to be no attention to the issue for the ECI sector, and specialist early childhood teachers in particular.

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) has recently released the 'Allied health capability framework: disability and complex support needs.'<sup>6</sup> This is a welcomed framework and could be utilised as a template for a complimentary capability framework for specialist teachers. This could focus on those working in the early childhood field (e.g., ECI, PSFOs, Allied Health...) or be broadened to include specialist teachers working with school-aged children with disability. A 'Specialist Teachers (early childhood) Capability Framework' would be one way of developing the skills and knowledge of specialist teachers and provide a unifying and consistent framework for all those working in the field.

An ECI workforce strategy must address recruitment and retention and the need for a comprehensive range of options for those working in the ECI field across pre-service, in-service, and postgraduate training. This should include professional learning in best practice in ECI, based on the ECIA National Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention.<sup>7</sup> ECIA VIC TAS has also developed Best Practice in ECI professional development modules that could be utilised and further developed.

In recognition of broader early childhood workforce issues, the Victorian government has advertised for a supplier to design and deliver 'Early Childhood Teacher End-to-End Career Supports and Early Years Learning Networks'. This initiative is a welcome approach to attracting and retaining teachers and

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<sup>5</sup> Australian Government (2020). *Joint Standing Committee on the National Disability Insurance Scheme NDIS Workforce Interim Report*. Retrieved from: [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Joint/National\\_Disability\\_Insurance\\_Scheme/workforce/Interim\\_Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/National_Disability_Insurance_Scheme/workforce/Interim_Report)

<sup>6</sup> Department of Health and Human Services (2020). *Allied health capability framework: disability and complex support needs*. Retrieved from: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/health-workforce/allied-health-workforce/ahcf-disability-complex-support-needs>

<sup>7</sup> Early Childhood Intervention Australia (2015). *ECIA National Guidelines for Best Practice Early Childhood Intervention*.

educators with a continued focus on the development of high-quality practice for existing and new educators in the profession. A similar approach for ECI professionals, including Specialist Teachers, Pre School Field Officers (PSFOs), and those Allied Health Practitioners delivering supports under School Readiness Funding is worth exploring.

Similarly, some of the Disability inclusion initiatives to help build knowledge and skills in inclusive education across the school system are worth considering for the ECI sector, including coaching, professional learning, evidence-based guidance and resources and scholarships for ECI professionals.

#### Recommendations:

- Work with the NDIA to ensure issues related to the ECI sector are reflected in the upcoming National Workforce Plan.
- Develop a Victorian ECI workforce strategy with a focus on:
  - recruitment and retention of those working with an early intervention focus.
  - a comprehensive range of training options across pre-service, in-service, and postgraduate training.
- Develop a ‘Specialist Teachers (early childhood) Capability Framework’.
- Consider broadening current initiatives such as the ‘Early Childhood Teacher End-to-End Career Supports and Early Years Learning Networks’ and the Disability Inclusion initiatives to meet the specific needs of the early intervention sector.
- Focus workforce efforts on evidence-based professional development practices such as coaching and mentoring.
- Work with the NDIS to address the barriers to early childhood special education teachers’ provision of ECI services.

### 3. Invest in implementation of inclusive practices and programs.

In 2020, the Victorian Government announced disability inclusion funding of nearly \$1.6 billion to support students with disability in government schools. This significant funding boost is an important indicator of the current government’s commitment to ensuring “every student at every ability can thrive at school and in life”.<sup>8</sup> In recognition that early inclusive experiences establish a trajectory for children’s further participation in school and community life, it is important that the foundations of inclusive programs and practices are well established in the early years. In order to build a solid foundation, further investment is required in implementing inclusive practices and programs in early childhood education programs in line with the current research.

The Productivity Commissions’ Report on Government Services indicates that children with disabilities in Victoria are significantly underrepresented in Child Care<sup>9</sup>, so there is extensive work to be done in better

<sup>8</sup> Victorian Government. (2020). *Disability Inclusion*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/disability-inclusion.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> Productivity Commission (2020). *Report on Government Services*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020>

understanding and addressing the barriers to access. In relation to attendance at preschool, Victorian children with special needs are reported to be much better represented when compared with children in the community.<sup>10</sup> However, we understand from the sector that systemic barriers to children's meaningful inclusion and participation in kindergarten programs remain.

Early childhood educators reported during the initial NDIS pilot several years ago that they were grappling with the influx of clinicians wanting to provide therapeutic services to children within the early childhood setting. Educators reported that therapists working with a family through their NDIS Plan may have little or no understanding of the early childhood environment or are not able to translate their understanding of the child's development into strategies that can be incorporated into an early childhood program. This has been exacerbated by the dramatic reduction in early childhood special education teachers working in ECI, who do have this expertise, due to the significant barriers of the NDIS guidelines. More recently, with full roll-out of the NDIS, educators now report very little interaction with ECI, primarily due to the concerning trend towards providing therapeutic services in a clinic rather than in the child's natural learning environments. Interactions that have remained are primarily with ECI services that had previously been state-funded and continue to provide a Key Worker model of service. Furthermore, if a child is supported by ECI the kindergarten educator is advised by the Department of Education and Training (DET) to seek inclusion support from this provider, not the PSFO.<sup>11</sup> Together, these issues mean that early childhood educators no longer have the consultancy support of ECI professionals that they had previously enjoyed and relied upon when ECI was provided through state government. This situation needs to be managed as a matter of urgency in order to support children's inclusion in high quality programs.

Some of these issues can be addressed by reinvigorating an integrated early childhood system and developing the workforce as described above. In addition, consideration should also be given to refreshing the current programs designed to support children's inclusion in kindergarten in line with current research findings.

a) Kindergarten Inclusion Support Program

The Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) program is designed to allow children with disabilities, high support needs and/or complex medical needs to be engaged and participate in all aspects of kindergarten life on the same basis as their peers. The support can include staff training, minor building modifications, access to specialist expertise and additional staffing.<sup>12</sup> In most instances, services employ staff, in the form of an 'additional assistant'.

Research in the past decade has raised questions about the effectiveness of this model of support for school children with disability. To the best of our knowledge, research has not been conducted in early childhood services on the effectiveness of this model. However, given the "serious unintended

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Department of Education Website. Pre School Field Officer Program.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/needs/Pages/psfo.aspx>

<sup>12</sup> Department of Education Website. *Kindergarten Inclusion for children with disabilities*.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/needs/Pages/kinderinclusion.aspx>

consequences” of teaching assistants in classrooms<sup>13</sup>, there is a compelling argument for the Victorian state government to better understand the outcomes of this model of service delivery for preschool children. This might take the form of research to investigate the most effective way of utilising additional assistants in early childhood programs, and/or investing in pilot programs that design, implement, and evaluate alternatives to the KIS program in line with the best available evidence.

#### b) Pre School Field Officer (PSFO) Program

The PSFOs role has changed over the past decade in line with current literature on the best ways to enhance educators’ capacity and confidence to provide an inclusive program that is responsive to the needs of all children. This has essentially meant a shift from providing support directly to children with a disability and/or developmental delay, to capacity building supports for educators such as coaching, modelling, and providing information, resources and planning supports. This significant shift in approach requires investment in professional development for PSFOs to ensure they have the skills, knowledge, and confidence to work with educators within this coaching framework. This should interact with the development of a workforce plan and capability framework to support the integration of PSFOs with the broader specialist teacher workforce. Systematic support and professional development for PSFOs should also include a coordinated approach to coaching and mentoring across the state to ensure comprehensive and consistent fidelity to practice. ECIA VIC TAS is well positioned to provide this coordination function.

#### Recommendations:

- Work with the federal government to investigate and address the barriers to Victoria’s children with disability and/or developmental delay attending child-care services.
- Fund research to investigate the most effective way of utilising additional assistants in kinder programs.
- Invest in pilot program/s that will design, implement, and evaluate alternatives to the KIS program model in line with the best available evidence.
- Provide a comprehensive professional development program for PSFO that focuses on embedding contemporary capacity building approaches to supporting educators in inclusive practices.

## 4. Invest in children with disability and/or developmental delay experiencing disadvantage.

#### a) Continuity of Support

Providing support for children with developmental delay or disability who do not meet the NDIS Access (Residency) requirements remains an important issue.

<sup>13</sup> Webster, R & Blatchford, P. (2020). Rethinking the use of teacher aides. In Graham, L. (Ed.). *Inclusive education for the 21st century: Theory, policy, and practice*. Routledge.

b) Young children (Birth-3 years old)

The ECI sector has been reporting for some time that the number of very young children with a disability and/or developmental delay aged birth-3 years receiving a service in Victoria has reduced significantly. It is not immediately clear why this is occurring but has significant implications for the learning, development and wellbeing of children and the early support required by families. The way in which the NDIA releases data does not make it transparent about what age children are entering the Scheme. This issue requires urgent attention to ensure children's prompt access to appropriate services and support.

c) COVID-19

As we navigate the ongoing uncertainty brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever to understand the impact on young children with disability/developmental delay and their families and provide appropriate supports. The community lockdowns have presented many challenges for children, families, and early childhood educators alike.

ECIA VIC TAS recommends that the Victorian Government work with regional staff and the sector to better understand the impact on young children with disability and their families and provide suitable resources and guidance to educators and families. This would take the form of 'rapid fire' learning from the sector and a flexible and responsive approach to ensure children are actively included and participating in early childhood services.

#### Recommendations

- Continue the provision of Continuity of Support (CoS) funding for children with developmental delay or disability who do not meet the NDIS Access (Residency) requirements.
- Work with the NDIS to determine whether young children (0-3 years) are getting prompt access to appropriate services and support.
- Develop an approach to learn from the sector about the needs of children with a disability/developmental delay, families, and educators as a result of the pandemic and provide a flexible and responsive approach to ensuring children are actively included and participating in early childhood services.