

## Why are Preschool Programs are important for every child?

In NSW there are approximately 800 community based and 100 Education Department preschool services. There is also a provision in the children's services regulations requiring all centre based children's services with more than 29 places to employ a qualified early childhood teacher, thereby enabling Preschool programs to be provided in a range of centre based services. However, it is estimated that only around 80% of 4 year olds in NSW are accessing these programs in preschools and long day care centres – 20% are missing out.

In delivering preschools through two different government departments, NSW has created a system in which the cost of preschool is inequitable depending upon the service accessed. The fee differential between DET preschools and community based preschools is huge and insupportable, with DET charging \$2-5 per day compared to an average of \$30 per day in community based services. Long Day Care is also often more affordable because it is subsidised by the child care benefit (CCB).

The NSW Children's Services Forum believes that there is a need to provide a mixed service system that meets the needs of children and families in a way that ensures easy access to services, affordability for all families, and an equitable distribution of government subsidies, both state and federal. Community based preschools are an essential component of such a system, and the following arguments are designed to demonstrate their fundamental importance to the provision of high quality early childhood education and to broader outcomes relating to the wellbeing of children in our society.

- Preschool programs can be offered in a range of formal settings including Long Day Care (LDC), therefore supporting both stand alone preschools and LDC is important.
- Preschools have grown on the back of community support, fundraising and management – they are highly valued community assets.
- According to the recently released HREOC discussion paper “Striking the Balance”, the employment rate for mothers when their youngest child is under five is 46.3%. (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sex Discrimination Unit, *Striking the Balance: Women, men, work and family*, Discussion Paper 2005). This indicates that the majority of mothers with four year olds do not in fact need long day care options for their children. While this picture may be somewhat influenced by women unable to return to work due to shortages of places for 0-2 year olds, it is indicative of a strong need for other types of services – occasional care and preschools probably the most widely used by non-working mothers.

- Preschools are one of the most widely available community services – even many very small towns have a preschool, if only part-time or mobile – where no other community service exists.
- Preschools that are universally available and affordable are non-stigmatising services that produce great benefits for disadvantaged children (Research: Hertzman; Highscope Perry Preschool; etc). They can act as a soft entry point to a range of other community and health services for families and children.
- The Rand Corporation Report :The Costs and Benefits of Universal Preschool in California – has demonstrated the cost benefit to society and to children of a 1 year universal preschool education – min \$2.62 per \$1 spent (conservative estimate) rising to over \$4 on a less conservative estimate.
- Preschools are seen by school teachers as an important prerequisite for starting school – they make a difference to outcomes for children at school (e.g. this is evident in many of the submissions to the Vinson Inquiry into the Provision Public Education in NSW)
- Preschools have a long history of excellent work in early intervention for children with special needs. The provision of a structured preschool program, preferably over the 2 years prior to starting school, can make a huge difference.
- Preschools provide an age appropriate physical environment, as well as program, for 3-5 year olds
- Preschools are valued by government when part of the Education System, why not those in the community services system? DET is currently expanding the number of preschools in the public education system – this is counter productive if it results in a loss of places in community based preschools.