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Playgroups are part of the glue, but we are also the glitter: Playgroup SA's response to the Royal Commission recommendations

Playgroup SA commends the release of the final Royal Commission into early Childhood Education and Care Report, released on 27 August 2023. Playgroup SA contributed to the Royal Commission process through participation in the stakeholder roundtables as well as formal written submissions on Preschool and The First 1000 Days.

"The Final Report includes 43 recommendations for South Australia's early childhood education and care sector and we are pleased that much of what we recommended and asked for is represented in these recommendations, recognising that the detail must be worked through", says Playgroup SA CEO, Mr Craig Bradbrook.

The Royal Commission report sets the State Government "an ambitious 20-year goal for reducing the proportion of South Australian children who are developmentally vulnerable from 23.8 per cent to 15 per cent". Playgroup SA supports this goal. "We know from national research that playgroup attendance is an integral lever in reducing developmental vulnerability at school entry, so supporting children to have access to a range of high-quality playgroups in their area across the week will be critical to meeting this target", says Mr Bradbrook.

One of the recommendations made is for "more frequent and easier access to child development checks provided through Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS) and the Office for the Early Years". Playgroup SA is currently contracted to deliver child development checks through our Ready Set Progress program, in partnership with the Office for the Early Years. The Commissioner recommends that in operationalising this recommendation, ensure "there are linkages and exchanges between CaFHS (and).... other development check providers". Mr Bradbrook, says that "Playgroup SA is proud to have a collegial relationship with the Office for the Early years currently, and supports the recommendation to expand their remit and mandate to lead a universal child development system. As an organisation that has piloted developmental checks through our Ready Set Progress program, and given the overwhelming success, we call for the government to invest now in extending our services so families can continue to grow their confidence and understanding of the importance of developmental checks".

Playgroup SA welcomes the recommendation to address the workforce-related concerns through a \$14 million per year Early Childhood Workforce Fund, to ensure sufficient workforce to deliver three-year-old preschool. The Commissioner recommends that the State Government works with the sector "on initiatives to support local workforce attraction... and innovative models of soft entry into workforce and pathway development". This Fund "will support trialling and monitoring different approaches, with a view to ensuring the most effective and efficient suite of activities".



Dr Amy Graham, who manages the research and advocacy activities at Playgroup SA, says that “at Playgroup SA, we have already taken steps towards bridging this gap and provide this soft entry through training courses for playgroup coordinators and other community-based early childhood staff and volunteers. We look forward to working with the State Government to increase the reach and breadth of our training modules and formalise it as a recognised professional learning pathway to address the workforce concerns”.

The Royal Commission is clear that connecting early years services is of utmost importance. Mr Bradbrook says that “in our submissions, Playgroup SA identified that children and families often have multiple interactions in the early years, between education, health, mental health and parenting supports and that each contributes meaningfully to a child’s development. However, the potential of these supports and services are not fully realised when they are fragmented, sporadic and crisis driven. Integration and connection of these services and a multi-disciplinary view of the first 1000 days is a great step forward, however, to be a national leader, South Australia will need to address these complex, and multifaceted problems associated with a crisis driven system that is not delivering outcomes for children and families experiencing poverty”.

The Royal Commission recommends SA move towards a more cohesive, data driven and integrated early childhood system that is both universally accessible but individually relevant. The Commissioner refers to ‘the glue’ in Rec 8, in ensuring the connection and integration of all early childhood activities and services. “We absolutely believe that playgroups are part of the glue, as a universally relevant and accessible early childhood activity. But we are also the glitter. Many families use playgroups as their first experience of early childhood learning, so we need to make sure their first experience is a beautiful and bright one that inspires them to continue to engage with more formal learning down the track. We hope that playgroups can be formally recognised as an essential part of the preparation for three-year-old preschool”, says Dr Graham.

In areas of very low rates of preschool enrolments, the Commissioner recommends that alternative learning models for three-year-olds are explored. Communities would be chosen on the basis of very low enrolments in four-year-old preschool. “Playgroup SA see ourselves with a lot to offer as one of these alternative learning models, where programs are delivered by organisations with existing connections to the community, can be staffed by local community members without formal qualifications and support connection to the broader education system”, Mr Bradbrook says.

The Commissioner further recommends improving parent and community awareness of the importance of preschool, what quality preschool looks like and the new three-year-old preschool program. Playgroup SA can support this through our existing connections with families and local communities, and has a project plan to develop a program for parents attending playgroups to provide access to accessible evidence-based information, resources and support from our staff.

The recommendations are equity driven. If accepted by the State Government, 3 and 4-year-old children who need more support will be eligible for up to 30 hours of preschool access for those who need more support. Dr Graham, says that “around the country, and indeed the world, policy makers now understand that excellence cannot be achieved without equity. For too long, this has been the missing piece of the puzzle in the early childhood landscape. This is why we firmly

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advocated for proportionate universalism, where children with the greatest needs are often more intensively supported and helped to reach their full potential”.

The Royal Commission will hold a webinar on Wednesday 30 August at 11am to discuss the findings of the Final Report. You may wish to attend this to learn more about how the Royal Commission findings will impact you, your work or your family. You can register here <https://www.royalcommissionecsa.gov.au/news/latest-news/final-report-webinar-scheduled>

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Who We Are

Playgroup SA is a non-profit, community-based organisation which is committed to providing quality services to families with young children across South Australia.

With over 2000 family members attending more than 190 playgroups across South Australia, Playgroup SA offers practical, professional advice and support, training and development including additional needs services, broad insurance coverage, play resources and playgroup workshops, among other services.

Playgroup SA is a growing organisation that is run by a Board and has been operating since 1974. As a non-profit organisation, all funds received go directly into the servicing and support of SA Playgroups.

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