

EXPERTISE AND EFFICIENCY

in early childhood education and care

My professional interests in early childhood services quality and access are longstanding, but personally too, I see the struggles of friends and family to find affordable, quality child care. The lengths to which many families go to find workable, flexible child care arrangements are beyond belief. The number of children and families using early childhood services is growing rapidly and while many people access quality early childhood services quite readily, others miss out. Problems with supply and quality are widespread but unevenly distributed and high costs exclude many families.

Hopefully, the Productivity Commission's careful, systematic inquiry into future options for childcare and early childhood learning will generate changes to ensure better access for families while at the same time promoting children's learning and development, especially the needs of the most vulnerable children and families.

I can't recall an investigation that has generated so much interest or controversy and this reflects the multiple impacts of early childhood—to us as families and communities and to the economy of the nation. Getting the right balance to accommodate families' needs and nurture children's development, while achieving positive social and economic outcomes, all within a sustainable budget is not easy. Productivity Commission ideas around more flexibility for families and bringing all subsidised provision under the *National Quality Framework* are excellent. The challenge will be in the implementation—building community commitment to put children first must be a priority.

While the Productivity Commission's work has been prominent in the news this year, the Australian Government is also undertaking a review of the *National Quality Framework* (NQF). The process of assessment and rating early childhood and other services is now well embedded and accepted. Most educators and service providers support the importance of quality assurance to provide best possible environment and programs for children, however, finding ways to ensure the approach works smoothly and with minimal administrative burden for services and regulatory bodies is critical for the future. A review of processes, compliance costs, and ways of streamlining the NQF is timely.

Complicating the picture around quality early childhood services are workforce problems. While the early childhood education and care workforce expands to meet the growing population of children accessing early childhood



services, attracting and keeping early childhood educators continues to be a challenge—especially in regional, rural and remote areas. That said, there has been encouraging progress in building the profession. For example, Queensland's Workforce Action Plan has seen excellent gains in the number of early childhood educators completing qualifications, entering and staying in the sector. Nationwide, the uptake of scholarships and other incentives to complete early childhood study has been encouraging, with many new early childhood completions and graduates entering the early childhood workforce or taking on leadership positions.

In this issue of *Every Child*, winner of the prestigious Barbara Creaser award, Christine Tayler, writes about her teaching experiences in the Northern Territory. Ann Pelo takes us on a journey 'from teaching to thinking', Anne Webster reports on a program to re-engage young mothers with education, and with the delectable title of 'Edible education' Brittany Miller introduces the idea of productive gardens in early childhood facilities and schools. Other articles on digital technologies and changing policies, using photography to share children's ideas, and engaging the community to develop outdoor learning environments provide a wealth of ideas. Finally, in the light of recent debate about the value of qualified early childhood educators for very young children, Margaret Sims provides compelling evidence on the benefits of early learning for under-threes.

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