Advocacy is about speaking and acting out, or writing on behalf of individuals or groups to promote, protect and defend their rights. It is also about influencing or changing the system—that is legislation, policies and practices in ways that will benefit others. Advocacy is active; it involves doing something.

With advocacy being a key function of Early Childhood Australia (ECA), the recent advocacy undertaken by the ECA Tasmania Branch in relation to the Tasmanian Government Education Bill 2016 provided a real example of the impact of advocacy and some of the tensions it created.

The Branch took the position that Clause 8 and 9 within the proposed Bill, that related to the lowering of the school starting age, was not in the best interests of young children. The proposed Bill reduced the school starting age to four-and-a-half years, with a flow-on effect influencing the Kindergarten starting age, which was reduced to three-and-a-half years.

The current situation in Tasmania is that four-year-olds can attend 15 hours of Kindergarten—this is not compulsory, however 98 per cent of Tasmanian children attend.

The Kindergarten program is delivered by schools, and the first compulsory year of school in Tasmania is Prep for five-year-olds.

While the best interests of children were paramount in the advocacy work, a secondary issue was the impact on the education and care sector. The loss of the three-and-a-half years+ cohort to the school sector would have a significant impact on the viability and sustainability of the education and care sector. The concerns of job losses, the real potential of closure of some services, particularly small, rural and remote services, and the downsizing of others were identified. If services closed, this would mean that all children in some communities would be denied access to quality early learning. Knowing how important access to quality early learning is for young children, this would have a detrimental impact.

Some of the actions undertaken by the Tasmanian Branch included:

- a member survey for data collection
- engaging a consultant to undertake research to validate ECA’s position
- conducting and attending forums
- sharing information with members
- gaining membership on key government working groups
delivering presentations to all levels of government and opposition
• meeting with the Minister for Education and key bureaucrats
• collaborating with key stakeholders and agencies
• publishing articles in local press
• distributing media releases.

One could state that ECA’s advocacy resulted in changed policy as the government determined that school attendance at the earlier age would be optional, and secondly, government would undertake a social and economic impact report to ascertain the impact of the lowering of the school starting age.

ECA Tasmania Branch actively encouraged members and non-members to engage with the consultants appointed in order to undertake the analysis and provide the report to government. This included providing utilisation and financial data, and host service visits. While the data collection was in progress, the Branch continued their advocacy with the key stakeholders on behalf of members.

The report was finalised and provided to government, and the decision not to pursue the earlier school starting age was announced. The rationale being the report outlined the significant impact the change would have on the education and care sector, a sector that has undergone and continues to undergo major change. The cessation of the Professional Support Program, the completion of the Long Day Care Professional Development Program, the National Quality Framework review, and the imminent changes associated with the Jobs for Families Child Care Package are some of the most recent.

Importantly, the funding allocated to support the implementation of the lowering of the school starting age has been redirected to support vulnerable three-year-old children to access 10 hours per week of early learning, for 40 weeks per year, provided by education and care services. The initiative titled ‘Working with Three Year Olds’ will commence in 2020.

This outcome was welcomed by ECA Tasmania Branch and the sector broadly. The Branch will now focus on working in collaboration with the government to co-design and deliver this initiative.

The advocacy journey over the past 18 months provided peaks and troughs, but the outcome demonstrates, in this case, the willingness of government to listen, understand and respond appropriately.

The challenge of advocacy that placed the Branch at odds with government policy was fraught with potential consequences. What would it mean in terms of relationships, long and short term?

The key learnings from this process were:

• focused advocacy can influence the decision-makers in a positive way
• be clear about how interests and needs may be in conflict with purpose
• remain professional in all interactions—an adversarial approach is harmful not helpful
• don’t become emotive or personalise the situation
• ensure the position is evidence-based
• seek a ‘champion’ or ‘champions’ to publically support your position
• engage members—particularly to advocate at local level
• ensure members are equipped with the key messages—consistent messaging is imperative
• where appropriate, collaborate with other organisations and individuals
• acknowledge and recognise gains or changes made by key stakeholders
• it takes time, resources and a great deal of energy
• keep the purpose as the focus.

While ECA Tasmania Branch worked diligently, it is believed it was the collective and collaborative approach within the sector that achieved this outcome. The integrity of the Branch was intact, relationships were maintained and there was willingness of all parties to work together to support young children.

Ros Cornish
ECA National President
ECA Tasmania Branch Executive Member

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