

# 2021 EDUCATION STATE FORUM: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

11 AUGUST 2021

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The Education State Forum – early childhood education day, themed **Bigger, better, fairer: bringing the Sector Together**, was held on 11 August 2021. Some 160 participants came together from across Victoria and interstate to attend the online event. Participants included early childhood teachers and educators, system leaders, parents and carers, representatives from peak bodies and unions, as well as representatives from universities, TAFEs and the Department of Education and Training (DET).

The Forum was an opportunity for participants from across the early childhood education and care sector to connect, share ideas, problem solve and build a shared understanding of what we can all do to deliver the best early learning experiences for Victoria's young children, with a focus on kindergarten programs.

In her welcome, Ingrid Stitt MP, the Minister for Early Childhood, expressed gratitude for the dedication and hard work of the early childhood workforce and the collaboration of the sector more broadly to the benefit of Victorian children, and reflected on:

- Victoria's nation-leading focus on providing children with access to two years of funded kindergarten, to ensure every child has the best start in life
- support for Victoria's dedicated kindergarten program workforce, including a range of State Government investments that have been made over the last three years, as well as further immediate action that has been taken on the recent ideas the sector has raised in consultations.

As Jenny Atta, Secretary of DET, outlined in her introduction, the Forum was a valuable opportunity for all participants to:

- reflect on what the sector has learned from implementation of early childhood education reforms – including lessons from the early years of the Three-Year-Old Kindergarten roll-out
- strengthen our shared commitment to support kindergarten workforce attraction, retention and quality
- discuss how we can work together to support all young children and their families to benefit from kindergarten programs.

## Workforce Strategy

The Forum was a great opportunity to outline the findings from sector consultations on Victoria's kindergarten workforce strategy, generate cross sector discussion and share best practice ideas. During small group discussions, attendees generated advice for the broader sector on how different stakeholders could address the workforce challenges of attraction and retention/quality, including leveraging State investments. We heard from senior representatives from the sector on what is working and what could be done differently.

## Key messages / overarching themes emerging from the session

The workforce sessions of the Forum provided a shared space for participants to generate advice and ideas for the sector as a whole. Three key overarching themes emerged from these discussions, focused on opportunities for the sector to:

- Share and scale best practice, in a way that takes into account the local setting in which it works and the diversity of settings across the sector.
- Learn from each other and think collectively, rather than separately, about common challenges occurring across Victoria and ways to address these.

Around the theme of **attracting the kindergarten workforce Victoria needs moving into the future**, key opportunities were identified to:

- Shift community perceptions to improve the attractiveness and recognition of the early childhood profession – through consistent narratives to communicate recent improvements in pay and conditions, how valued staff are, particularly through COVID-19, and the sector's unique value proposition which enables teachers and educators to make a difference in children's lives at the most critical stage of their development.
- Better connect early childhood students with prospective employers to improve placements, understanding of careers and job-readiness – more people could be attracted if they had a better, and earlier, knowledge about what the sector is about, and the career opportunities and supports available, along with high-quality placements.

- **Attract a more diverse workforce** – a stronger focus on building local connections and workplace inclusion could reduce barriers to increasing workforce diversity, to encourage men, parents returning from parental leave and people from different cultural backgrounds, to join the workforce.

Among the themes of **retaining a dedicated kindergarten workforce** and **improving educational quality**, key opportunities were identified to:

- **Build strong leadership** – through supporting service leaders, teachers and educators to strengthen the skills they need to play a critical role in building cultures of learning and wellbeing.
- **Improve workforce wellbeing and workload** – in addition to improving pay and conditions, there may be innovative ways to address workload pressures via cross-sector solutions and through peer support for staff at all levels.
- **Provide mentoring across the career journey** – by giving educators and teachers mentoring supports across different career stages.
- **Attract and retain more trainees** – exploring new ways for training providers and employers to attract and support trainees.

### Actions / Next steps

Next steps following the Education State Forum relating to the workforce sessions will be to:

- **Incorporate discussion themes** from the workforce sessions into DET’s broader analysis of findings from consultations and written submissions relating to the next steps in Victoria’s kindergarten program workforce strategy. A further paper will be released later in 2021.
- **Continue to encourage ongoing conversations** that build a shared commitment to lift whole of sector workforce outcomes.

### Participation – access, equity and inclusion

This session focussed on how to maintain and improve participation for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. With the expansion of Three-Year-Old kindergarten, we need to ensure that priority groups of children continue to access and receive 15 hours of high-quality kindergarten through Early Start Kindergarten (ESK).

The session was designed to provoke reflection on how all parts of the sector work to ensure equity of access and maximise participation through adopting and continually improving inclusive approaches.

In the opening panel discussion, Anne Dight – parent and foster carer, and Rachael Gemmill – Early Childhood Teacher and *Inclusion Support Coordinator* at Glen Eira Kindergarten Association, reflected and shared their experiences of inclusion support. In summarising the session, Professor Anne Kennedy, identified key messages emerging from Anne and Rachael’s generous exchange:

- The importance of keeping in view the lived experience of children, families and teachers in considering how to improve inclusion at a service and systemic level.
- The criticality of the “first encounter” with children and families to facilitate a sense of inclusion and connection, which is central to any effective learning.
- Following on from the previous point; the necessity of educators committing to and establishing effective partnerships with families within an organisational culture that supports this.

Forum participants then gathered into breakout rooms to discuss the following questions:

- *What are one or two actions you could implement as an individual/organisation to improve access and inclusion?*
- *How would you know that you were doing well in access and inclusion? What are the markers of improvement and success?*

Key themes emerging from the breakout discussions emphasised the importance of:

- **Leadership in establishing a culture** that supports educators to make themselves fully open to the needs of children and families from the initial contact. Participants stressed the importance of leadership in establishing the conditions required to underpin their workforce capacity to extend their practice, including having a network for support and debriefing.
- **Leadership in establishing systems** to support staff from a **strengths-based approach**. Creating partnerships between teacher/educator and the family, aiming to reassure families that a child is welcomed and valued from the first moment they arrive.

- **Services being fully aware of the systems and resources** available to them and to families. There are a range of policy and funding initiatives available to support access and inclusion, but continued work is required to enhance services' awareness and utilisation of these resources.
- **Building awareness** across the sector of trauma informed care leading to improved long-term outcomes for children with complex needs. Based on clearer chains for **communication and information sharing** to support children as they transition through a variety of contexts.
- **Learning and sharing practices** that are effective in increasing participation by facilitating promotion and exchange of inclusive practices.
- Professional **learning opportunities** to support educators in identifying opportunities to build on the theory gained from degrees and diplomas, and embed these skills in practical lived experience. Leadership to identify opportunities to support and mentor through these learning moments.

### Next steps

Reflecting on the collective actions that can be implemented, DET will consider opportunities to:

- build a better understanding of access and inclusion supports available for families and across the sector, particularly for children with additional needs
- continue to raise awareness of ESK in the context of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten roll-out to ensure all vulnerable and disadvantaged children access 15 hours of kindergarten during the staged rollout.

### Three-Year-Old Kinder – Change Management

This session focused on sector perspectives on the implementation of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten. It sought to highlight the changes services, providers and councils have made to implement the reform, and to demonstrate the positive impacts for children, staff, communities, and services.

As part of the session, four panellists discussed how they are adapting program delivery and adopting other innovative approaches to support children's access and participation as part of the introduction of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten. Panellists sharing their experiences were Miryam Franjic – Children's Services Manager at Glenelg Shire Council, Karen Mills – General Manager, Kensington Community Children's Co-operative, Cathie Koelewyn – Co-owner and Director of Eastwood Early Learning Centre and Kindergarten, Georgie Hill – Manager Service Planning, Partnering and Reform at Wyndham City Council.

The panellists provided real-life experiences of successful change-management techniques, including:

- early and tailored recruitment efforts
- innovative and responsive parental/community engagement
- innovative program delivery (sessional programs alongside integrated)
- introducing mixed-age groups
- running rotational models

The key themes that emerged from this session are summarised briefly below.

#### **Parental and community engagement**

Connecting with local communities at the right time, in ways that are meaningful to them, is critical to the success of the reform. This includes ensuring that communities understand that kindergarten is available in both sessional and long day care settings, helping families understand how and when to engage with Three-Year-Old Kindergarten, and ensuring kindergarten programs are culturally responsive. Successful methods have included making use of a range of resources, tailoring information to parental/community needs, and proactively engaging with community groups.

#### **Programming and change management**

Highlighting examples of the different program models, and how these have had a positive impact on children, can be a powerful change management tool. This includes sharing best practice examples, including tips on how to discuss these changes with colleagues and families, as well as listening closely and responding to sector challenges and concerns. There was also recognition of the benefits of employers working directly with their workforce on shaping and implementing change.

### **Workforce supports**

There is a strong need to support the workforce across the lifespan of an early childhood educator/teacher's career. From their initial education, into their placement experience, early career support and mentoring, and providing ongoing professional learning and networking opportunities for educators and teachers in moving to a two-year kindergarten program.

### **Next steps**

DET will continue to work with our partners in the sector on support for change-management, including practical support for services considering programmatic changes.

As well as change-management support for providers, services, teachers and educators, this work will include messages for families. This includes the development and distribution of case studies and video content featuring practical, applicable advice.

DET's forward plan of sector engagement, across Early Childhood Networks and Leadership Forums, as well as themed seminars featuring experts and practitioners, will align to the themes identified above.

### **Forum reflection**

At the conclusion of the day's Forum, Kim Little, Deputy Secretary for Early Childhood Education reflected on four "Ls":

**Learning** from each other, from the research evidence, from the lived experience of parents, carers, educators, teachers, and community. This curiosity for learning and sharing ideas must be a strong suit in our sector.

**Leveraging opportunities** to understand and use the investments being made by the Victorian Government, and the information and guidance available through the Department and other bodies to achieve our shared goals for young children. On the other side of the equation, we must ask; how do we as a department make information and supports as accessible and effective as possible to the sector?

**Leading** – this takes place in our services, in our own communities and across the sector. If you've got something great that you're doing, that you know is working, for a particular type of community, for a particular cohort, if it's working for your teachers and educators, we want to hear about it and so does everyone else in the sector.

**Looking out for each other.** It is a tough and stressful time, and we need to think about each other's wellbeing, particularly those working in services. Our kindness and care for one another enables us to do the best possible work for our children and families.