

2022 Education State forum Best Start for all Victorians

10 August 2022

The Education State Forum early childhood education day was held on 10 August 2022. Some 120 participants came together from across Victoria and interstate to attend the event. Participants included early childhood teachers and educators, providers, local governments, and representatives from peak bodies, unions, higher education and training and skills sectors and the Department of Education and Training.

The Forum was an opportunity for participants from across the early childhood education system to connect, share ideas, problem solve and build a shared understanding of how we can work together to deliver the best education for Victoria's young children.

The strategic objectives for the early childhood day were to:

- strengthen our collective work to improve outcomes for young children and their families
- consult on and unpack the Best Start Best Life reform
- build a shared understanding of 2022-2023 priority actions.

Best Start Best Life

The session opened with an overview of the Best Start Best Life reform and how we can work together to lift outcomes for young children and their families.

A panel comprising of Emma King (Victorian Council of Social Service), Elizabeth Death (Early Learning and Care Council of Australia), and John Merritt (WorkSafe) provided their insights into what we can learn from other large-scale reforms to help us work through an exciting and challenging period of change.

Speaking about the impact on children and families, the panel reiterated the value of two years of early childhood education for children. The panel discussed the opportunities for these early childhood reforms to impact on the lives of children, families and communities – especially those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Reflections from the panel on the reform journey: key factors for success:

- **purpose and strategic vision** – we must continue talking about and keeping the overarching purpose in mind which is seeking to change the life of every child in our community through education and the opportunity to have a broader impact on children's life trajectory
- **multi-pronged, collaborative approach** – connecting with people/organisations/systems at all levels of the reform. This includes those who are part of the broader eco-system of child education and development (including those in the health, wellbeing, social and community sectors)
- **a focus on continual improvement over the long term** – across the life of the reform we must continue to measure and evaluate progress, communicate and consult, listen and respond to feedback, acknowledge opportunities for improvement and learn from past experiences
- **communicate the compelling case** – we must seek to win hearts and minds over and over again; articulate and re-articulate messages; listen, compromise, explain decisions.

Key messages / overarching themes emerging from the session

During small group discussions, attendees explored the opportunities and challenges under the expanded reforms and the relationship to the work already underway.

Around the theme of **what reform success looks like**, participants identified the following key markers:

- that **every child can access an early learning service** that is inclusive and focused on their outcomes
- the **whole system working together**. Greater linkages across state-wide systems from early years and beyond, including supporting enrolment and information flows through Maternal and Child Health.
- **greater workforce diversity**. A teacher and educator workforce which is gender and culturally and linguistically diverse; greater opportunities and support for Koorie people to join the profession,
- **increased understanding of the value of kindergarten** and early education within the broader community
- **high participation rates** in Pre-Prep and Three-Year-Old Kindergarten from all children, particularly those who are disadvantaged and/or vulnerable.

Key initiatives identified as working well in the roll out of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten that may inform the transition to Pre-Prep included:

- **Change management and service planning:**
 - continuing to foster the relationships between the department's early childhood improvement branches and local governments, providers and services
 - staging the roll out with priority areas identified through data analysis to receive delivery first, as well as flexibility to scale up offerings
 - retaining play-based learning, under the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework and focusing on lifting learning and development outcomes for all children
- **Infrastructure and provision planning:**
 - continuing to roll-out the Building Blocks grants, and ensuring infrastructure is fit for purpose and funded to ensure quality outcomes. Using Kindergarten Infrastructure and Services Plans (KISP) to identify infrastructure priorities
- **Sector Partnerships:**
 - strengthening relationships between the department and the sector with opportunities to provide input and collaborate, listening and responding flexibly and in real time
 - increasing engagement with regulatory bodies (such as Quality and Regulation Division, Victorian Institute of Teaching) to meet specific and targeted community needs
 - supporting families to make informed choices through the Kinder Tick program
 - using and connecting data to understand the engagement of children in key services
- **Family Engagement:**
 - acknowledging that families naturally promote kinder programs and their benefits if they have a positive experience
 - Three-Year-Old Kinder Kits have been received positively and services reported these have stimulated conversations with families.

Opportunities identified to improve the roll out of this reform include:

- **Change management and service planning:**
 - creating strong and clear messaging around Pre-Prep terminology to support community understanding

- ensuring there is still choice for families about the mode of service delivery
- supporting the wellbeing of the workforce during the reform and ensuring they are feeling valued and motivated. This includes clear messaging to the sector about why we are undertaking the reform
- simplifying and/or streamlining service reporting.
- **Infrastructure and provision planning:**
 - revisiting the kindergarten funding model
 - continuing to work closely with regions to understand how the reform is rolling out across the community
- **Sector Partnerships:**
 - developing clear and relevant consensus on what counts as evidence, measurement, and reporting
 - ensuring all communications are inclusive and not causing confusion or division between service types.
- **Family Engagement:**
 - engaging and establishing a relationship with families early. Acknowledging the need for a coordinating role to help families with enrolment processes and accessing support
 - utilising trusted people and organisations to spearhead engagement with marginalised communities
 - supporting teachers to connect across early childhood education and schools to support a seamless transition
 - acknowledging the range of models and service delivery tailored to local community.
 - acknowledging that families and communities are not a homogenous set – tailoring messaging to different audiences is important for engagement.

Actions / Next steps

Next steps following the Education State Forum relating to the Best Start Best Life sessions will be to:

- incorporate discussion themes from the workforce sessions into the department's broader analysis
- ongoing conversation and consultation on the next-level design and implementation planning for the reforms.

Workforce

The workforce session opened with an overview of current and anticipated challenges for attraction, retention, and workforce support, and the progress made to date. This included the steps that have been taken by the department following consultation at the 2021 Education State Forum, in [insert the name of the workforce strategy doc that came out late 2021]. A panel comprising Andrew Hume (Early Childhood Management Services), Cara Nightingale (Australian Education Union), Emma Orchard (Macedon Ranges Council), and facilitated by Deborah Harry (DET) discussed examples of innovative localised approaches to providing additional networks and support for graduate early childhood teachers. The panel also discussed the opportunities to attract people with different cultural and professional backgrounds, genders, and ages to the profession. There was also a discussion of the importance of both pay and conditions and of ensuring that staff have high levels of satisfaction at work.

During small group discussions, attendees described their experience in helping to attract and retain teachers and educators, as well as discussing new approaches to address these workforce challenges.

Key messages / overarching themes emerging from the session

The workforce session provided a shared space for participants to provide advice and generate ideas for the sector as a whole to consider.

When discussing the **attraction and retention initiatives that have worked well**, participants highlighted the following:

- supporting and preparing people to move into leadership roles
- using a distributed leadership approach across the service to give people different areas of specialisation and responsibility
- School Readiness Funding (SRF) as a standout initiative which has helped staff to support the outcomes of children experiencing educational disadvantage. One service reported utilising SRF funding to develop in-house coaching support for their workforce
- the Macedon Ranges Shire Council Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce development group supports services, state and local governments, peak bodies and training providers to work in partnership to develop local and tailored workforce strategies and supports; with the key guiding principle of working in partnership and not in competition
- the Southern Melbourne Area Early Childhood Improvement Branch's efforts to introduce themselves to new graduate early childhood teachers and connect them to the people, processes and resources available to support them in their role

In relation to **innovative approaches in attraction and retention support**, key opportunities were identified to:

- improve pay and conditions and workforce wellbeing. This could include considering service proximity to home, choices about full time and part time employment, workload, and safe psychological and physical working conditions. Motivation factors such as recognition, personal development, autonomy, connection to clear a purpose and sufficient challenge are also important
- better acknowledge the collective effort of teachers and educators required to lift children's outcomes
- streamline connection between early childhood teaching students and prospective employers to improve understanding of careers and job-readiness – more people could be attracted if they had a better knowledge about the profession, and the career opportunities and supports available, along with high-quality placements
- attract a more diverse workforce – emphasising local connections and workplace inclusion could reduce barriers to increasing workforce diversity, for example services reaching out to local

communities to encourage men, parents returning from parental leave and people from different cultural backgrounds to join the workforce

- further developing the mentoring and peer support network
- traineeships and upskilling are effective and quality pathways to both attract and retain staff – however it is important that trainees are looking for early childhood careers and work above ratio while training
- increase professional learning opportunities for teachers and educators.

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 the department's broader analysis and continue to develop Victoria's kindergarten workforce strategy to respond to feedback, new evidence, and the new context of the Best Start, Best Life reforms
- the Government will continue to engage and consult closely with all stakeholders in the development of the next stages in Victoria's strategy and will encourage and support the sector to leverage government investment and take their own actions to build and support the kindergarten workforce.

Quality

This session opened with an outline of the importance of quality practice and the departmental quality supports in place.

A panel including Professor Karen Thorpe (Queensland Brain Institute) and Professor Marilyn Flear, (Monash University) spoke about the evidence on the importance of quality when combined with participation to improve learning outcomes for children. The panel also discussed opportunities to deepen and broaden outcomes for children building on the initiatives to be rolled out as part of Best Start Best Life.

Key messages from the panel discussion included:

- intentional teaching requires quality interactions and purposeful environments in which children have agency
- intentional teaching improves children's learning outcomes within play-based programs
- teachers and educators require tools to teach intentionally and build learning concepts
- some teachers and educators are finding achieving a balance of teaching strategies complex within play-based programs. Some teachers may also be struggling to understand the connection of how high-quality intentional teaching strategies benefit children's learning outcomes
- there is evidence that if teachers and educators only rely on child-led play as a basis for learning it can result in the intended learning concepts not being embedded
- connecting teachers and educators to evidence gives them confidence to implement education strategies and understand the impact different strategies have on learning outcomes for children, which in turn develops professional autonomy
- teachers and educators need to continue to be encouraged to think about every moment as an opportunity for learning. The BSBL reform provides an increase in learning time across two years ("the gift of time")
- it is critical for teachers and educators to understanding children's learning and development trajectories and develop content expertise in language development, self-regulation, numeracy, science, technology to support children develop and embed concepts within play. Evidence suggests that some teachers and educators may require some further support in developing content knowledge in some areas such as STEM to improve learning for children.

Key messages / overarching themes emerging from the breakout session

During small groups which included a mix of perspectives, attendees discussed activities undertaken to understand **professional learning needs** from various perspectives. Key themes included:

- need more focus on:
 - developing integrated teaching and learning resources to support teachers and educators to provide and reflect on high quality interactions and purposeful environments that can support children learning through play
 - increased professional learning and connection that is underpinned by research and supports evidence informed reflective practice
 - supporting services to develop engaged leaders who can provide a pedagogical vision across a service, encourage team-based teaching and development of evidence enriched programming and planning approaches
 - further support to build capability to interpret data generated through assessment tools and how to improve the planning cycle and extend children's learning
 - importance of understanding how educators are assessing learning and making observations, and then how these inform program development
 - connecting service leaders to research that builds understanding about how children learn and how they can adjust programs and practice that supports children across two years of learning. This is a key consideration as children's participation increases from 600 to 1800 hours, and the breadth of learning that educators will see will grow significantly.
- need for more focus on developing more leaders:
 - developing team-based environments that support an aligned approach to teaching and learning under a common vision that builds leadership across the service improving the ability to reflect on practice.
 - leadership should not only be determined in terms of hierarchy. It is important to develop pedagogical leaders within all teams and create sustainable mentoring and learning environments
 - improve the delivery channels for educators and teachers to improve access to professional learning resources so all team members can be developed and learn together and
 - develop subject knowledge focused professional learning resources and build the capacity of teachers to specialise -for instance, in STEM, language development, and self-regulation, building career pathways and developing teams of experts
- in support of the sector throughout long term reform we could consider:
 - acknowledging that there is a spectrum of learning needs and professional development must meet the needs of teachers, educators and educational leaders at different stages of their career
 - acknowledging that pedagogical leadership needs to be integrated as a service priority
 - pedagogical frameworks and tools will improve the sectors' ability to develop evidence-based program if they are supported to develop their skills
 - there is a need to start preparing for team teaching now to prepare to support change. This requires both a structural and process quality lens
 - educator, teachers and education leaders need time and access to resources that support the various qualifications and professional maturity of the sector to support change of practice
 - the sector would like a consolidated IT platform that creates enables equitable access to DET resources and connects all teachers and educators to the same opportunities to learn and connect with research.

Actions / Next steps

Next steps relating to the Quality session will be to

- consult and collaborate with peak bodies, tertiary education providers and researchers to develop skills focused professional practice supports that meet needs of professionals across their career
- consider the development of a Practice Support Framework to help educators find the right supports at the right time
- simplify delivery channels of professional practice supports and improve equity of access to ensure all services can access supports and research.

Participation – Enrolment and Attendance

This session focussed on how to maintain and improve participation for all children, especially children and families in underserved or marginalised cohorts and communities.

A panel comprising of Brad Miller (One Tree Community Services) Deb Tsorbaris (Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare), Professor Sharon Goldfeld (Murdoch Children's Research Institute) and Leanne Fary (Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-Operative) provided examples of best practice in supporting both enrolment and attendance. Leanne Fary shared her experiences working within the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation, including the importance of how the framing of vulnerability is communicated to families and the negative impact this can have in families establishing a sense of trust and inclusion in early childhood services. Brad Miller described how One Tree establishes trust and relationships in working in disadvantaged communities and Deb Tsorbaris and Professor Goldfeld drew on their respective expertise and experience to outline what they see as the critical factors in engaging vulnerable children.

Key messages / overarching themes emerging from the session

The overarching themes emerging from the session, raised by the panel and/or table discussion members, include:

- **Cost of kindergarten** is a common barrier but does not occur in isolation of other barriers and influences that impact families making decisions about enrolment and attendance. The impact of the Free Kinder reforms is expected to have a positive influence on participation, but there remain other factors that need to be considered to ensure all children participate on kindergarten.
- **Availability of places at the right time and right place for underserved and marginalised children and their families.** The reality of getting all children into places remains challenging, and there is a need to proactively identify and engage with these families early to support enrolment.
- Further **promotion and understanding of kindergarten benefits for children and families** is required, at a universal level and targeted to specific cohorts to ensure inclusivity and cultural appropriateness. Limited research exists that explores parental motivations and behavioural patterns with enrolment and attendance.
- The early years education and care delivery system is complex, requiring simple **navigation to find a kindergarten and ease of enrolment** through universal and targeted supports. Easy-to-use and streamlined access to enrolment, program supports, and subsidies (e.g. central enrolment) are important for families, kindergarten services, and tools to support families and other early years services (e.g. MCH) that engage with families early in life. Concerns about enrolments processes being exclusionary were also raised.
- The **cultural safety and inclusion of services and the system** plays a significant role in influencing access and attendance. Cultural safety, inclusion and trust begin with a family's first interaction with the early years system, its policy and program wording, and continue once a child enters an ECEC program, including a kindergarten program. Building and maintaining trust and relationships with families is critical following enrolment to maintain attendance.

- **Identifying and connecting with children and families that are missing out** as early as possible is key. Outreach programs are effective in proactively and meaningfully engaging with and building trust with families who are missing out. Examples of effective initiatives raised include Koorie Preschool Assistants and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Outreach workers.
- **Useable data** is critical for identifying who is missing out and what universal or targeted supports are required to shift participation. There is a level of awareness of what data is needed and how it could be used to support service and area level participation approaches, but more advice is needed on what is available now to be used and what is planned in the future. A need for systemic capability building on strategic use of data was raised, to support services and local areas in making decisions.
- Strengthening of **system partnerships to use place-based data** to drive improvement and accountability, such as through the Early Years Compact, was raised as an enabling feature. Sector Partnerships with services such as Maternal Child Health and Department of Families, Fairness and Housing who are already present in the lives of vulnerable families can help us to reach the families and populations that are not hearing about kindergarten or do not have a tradition of attending.

Actions / Next steps

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

- develop an evidence-based framework and strategic plan for understanding enrolment and attendance efforts, informed by available data, to support decisions on areas for additional focus and improvement
- improve collection and accessibility of enrolment and attendance data, and understandings of what exists (and how to access it) and what is planned for collection in the future (including timeframes for attendance data collection)
- drive the re-ignition of sector partnerships with key stakeholders, including local government (Maternal Child Health and supported playgroups) and Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, including through the Early Years Compact.

Forum reflection

At the conclusion of the day's Forum, Kim Little, Deputy Secretary for Early Childhood Education reflected on the reform across these key points:

Implementation roadmap

We are both in the middle and start of the reform journey. We need to collectively develop an implementation roadmap, so we know where the landing points are in each year. This will be a process of co-design and co-delivery.

Recognising the challenges

We will focus on working together to solve problems as they arise because we are all committed to the goal of making the biggest positive impact on the lives of young children and their families. We recognise that big reform opportunities are challenging but these are also a sign of the value of early childhood and the trust in all of us to work together to deliver that impact. We know we can do this – because we have already worked together in this way with the roll out of School Readiness Funding and Three-Year-Old Kindergarten.

Reconnecting with purpose

We have been looking out for each other, supporting each other, sharing our best ideas and our struggles, both before and during COVID. It has been a tough time, and we need to think about each other's wellbeing, particularly teachers, educators, education leaders and support staff. Our kindness

and care for one another enables us to do the best possible work for our children and families. I see that from all of you repeatedly, and I am deeply grateful for it and your deep dedication and professionalism