



**Early Childhood Australia**  
A voice for young children

# Review of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians

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## Submission from Early Childhood Australia

June 2019

### *About us*

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit organisation that has been a voice for children since 1938. We have a federated structure with branches in every state and territory in Australia and our membership includes individual professionals, early childhood services and schools, as well as public, private and not-for-profit organisations that share a commitment to young children.

Our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning. To achieve this, we champion the rights of young children to thrive and learn at home, in the community, within early learning settings and through the early years of school.

Our work builds the capacity of our society and the early childhood sector to realise the potential of every child during the critical early years from birth to the age of eight. ECA specifically acknowledges the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, and the past and current injustices and realities for them around Australia.

Find our more at: [www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au](http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au)

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## 1. Executive Summary

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) welcomes the opportunity to present its views and recommendations on updating the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians ('the Melbourne Declaration').

ECA agrees with the sentiment expressed in the Discussion Paper for this review, that wholesale rewriting of the Melbourne Declaration is not necessary<sup>1</sup>. In general, the content of the Declaration holds up very well 11 years later. The one significant exception is in relation to early childhood education.

While the Melbourne Declaration devotes some attention to early learning, early childhood education is not woven into the fabric of the document – and it needs to be. Early childhood education is critically important in preparing Australia's children for success at school and for a lifetime of achievement and wellbeing. For this reason, the Melbourne Declaration must ensure that it focuses on the full span of educational opportunity, from early childhood onwards.

Notably, embedding the early years of learning into the Melbourne Declaration was one of the recommendations of the landmark report *Lifting Our Game*, which was commissioned by all State and Territory Governments in Australia.<sup>2</sup>

This submission from ECA recommends that a revised Melbourne Declaration:

- Accords greater prominence and weight to early childhood education and its contribution to school readiness.
- Highlights the links between early learning outcomes and the learning mindsets necessary for success in school and later in life.
- Recognises the importance of universal access to early childhood education.
- Includes explicit reference to the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) in tracking developmental vulnerability among children entering school.
- Recognises the need for culturally-appropriate early childhood education services to support the learning, wellbeing and future success of First Nations children.

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<sup>1</sup> Education Council. (2019). *Review of the Melbourne Declaration, Discussion Paper*.

<sup>2</sup> Pascoe, S. and Brennan, D. (2017). *Lifting Our Game. Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions*. Creative Commons Attribution 4.0. p. 74.



## 2. Issues in depth

The Melbourne Declaration has proven to be an effective framework for the development of education policy in Australia. The evidence for this can be seen in the number of highly significant reforms and reviews sparked by the Melbourne Declaration, among them the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (the NQF) and the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education.

Partly as a result of these significant reforms to policy and practice in early education, it is time to better reflect the importance of early education in the Melbourne Declaration. A deeper appreciation of early education would also recognise the burgeoning research evidence on the role of early childhood education in preparing children for a lifetime of learning.

### 2.1 Early childhood education and school readiness

Since the signing of the Melbourne Declaration in 2008, researchers have produced a considerable body of evidence on the impacts of early learning on a child's schooling and subsequent outcomes. Much of this evidence was summarised in the *Lifting Our Game* report, which showed that children who have participated in a high-quality early childhood education program are:

- more likely to be ready for school
- higher achievers in school
- less likely to need special education placements
- less likely to repeat a grade in school
- more likely to complete high school
- more likely to go on to further education
- more likely to be employed, and at a higher wage.<sup>3</sup>

The *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* (the Gonski 2.0 report) also concluded that early childhood education is critically important for a child's later success at school:

'Early childhood education makes a significant contribution to school outcomes. The transition between preschool and school education should be seamless. Ongoing reforms that lay the foundations in the early years for future learning, and close the learning differential between advantaged and disadvantaged students, are essential to ensure all children have the best start in life.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Lifting Our Game*. (2017). p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Education and Training, Australia. (2018). *Through Growth to Achievement: Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*. Canberra: DET. p. xv.



The concept of developmental readiness for school is critically important for any discussion of education. Since 2009, the AEDC has become a key measure of the developmental state of young Australians in their first year at school, with a particular focus on identifying developmental vulnerability.

Worryingly, while the AEDC has shown improvements in the developmental gains of young children over the last 10 years, these gains have been sporadic and inconsistent. For example, in the domains of social competence and emotional maturity, the percentage of Australian children deemed developmentally vulnerable was higher in 2018 than in 2012.<sup>5</sup> These results suggest a need for greater focus on, and investment in, high-quality early education, especially for children at risk of disadvantage.

## 2.2 Skills for learning

The impact of high-quality early learning extends well beyond the early years of school. OECD data from the 72 countries participating in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows a clear academic advantage accruing to children who had attended early childhood education and care. At age 15, children with no early education experience were nearly twice as likely to perform poorly at school as children with at least one year of early education.<sup>6</sup>

Evidence from the UK and the US also shows a strong correlation between early childhood education and wellbeing in adulthood, including higher academic study and lower use of social services.<sup>7</sup> In one prominent US study, these effects are intergenerational, with early education helping to lift – and keep – families out of disadvantage over the course of decades.<sup>8</sup>

The *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* highlighted the importance of children developing a ‘growth mindset’, which ‘positions them for success throughout education and life’.<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, the Discussion Paper notes that ‘a balanced set of cognitive, social and emotional skills’ prepares young Australians for ‘life as productive community members’.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Department of Education and Training, Australia. (2019). *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2018*. Canberra: DET.

<sup>6</sup> *Lifting Our Game*. (2017). p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> *Lifting Our Game*. (2017). pp. 41-44, 48-50.

<sup>8</sup> The Heckmann Equation. (2019). Perry Preschool: Intergenerational Effects Research Summary. Accessed 29 May 2019. <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/perry-intergenerational-effects-summary/>.

<sup>9</sup> Department of Education and Training, Australia. (2018). p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Discussion Paper, p. 7.



The dispositions for learning that are supported by high-quality early childhood education are closely linked to the so-called ‘21<sup>st</sup> century skills’ that are considered necessary for success in school, post-school learning and the workforce. <sup>11</sup> If we compare 21<sup>st</sup> century skills with the attributes that are explicitly supported in high-quality early learning environments, there are remarkable parallels:

**Table 1: Skills for lifelong learning: from early education to the workforce**

| 21 <sup>st</sup> century skills <sup>12</sup>                                  | Outcomes of high-quality early learning (as per Early Years Learning Framework) <sup>13</sup>  |
|--|--|
| <b>Creativity</b><br><b>Grit or perseverance</b><br><b>Motivation</b>          | ‘Children develop dispositions for learning such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity’  |
| <b>Critical thinking</b><br><b>Problem solving</b><br><b>Conscientiousness</b> | ‘Children develop a range of skills and processes such as problem solving, enquiry, experimentation, hypothesising, researching and investigating’   |
| <b>Metacognition</b>   | ‘Children transfer and adapt what they have learned from one context to another’   |
| <b>Collaboration</b>   | ‘Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect’<br>‘Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibilities necessary for active community participation’ |
| <b>Self-efficacy</b>   | ‘Children develop their emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency’<br>‘Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing’   |

<sup>11</sup> Twenty-first century skills are required by young people ‘to become engaged thinkers, resilient and resourceful learners, creative problem solvers and active members of their communities’. Lamb, S., Maire, Q., Doecke, E. (2017). *Key Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: an evidence-based review*. A report for the NSW Department of Education. Melbourne: Victoria University. p.3.

<sup>12</sup> As defined in Lamb, S., Maire, Q., Doecke, E. (2017).

<sup>13</sup> Department of Education and Training, Australia. (2009). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*. Creative Commons Attribution BY 4.0 International.



### 2.3 The burgeoning role of preschool

The importance of early childhood education in providing children with the skills and experiences to become confident, capable learners at school is now widely accepted within the community and among governments. Between 2008 and 2015, the proportion of children in Australia enrolled in 600 hours of preschool per year jumped from 12 per cent to 91 per cent. This was a direct result of the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education.<sup>14</sup>

Taking their cues from the evidence on early education, many governments around Australia are now investing significantly more resources in preschool programs, including for three-year-olds.<sup>15</sup> As the Discussion Paper highlights, ‘there is an emerging trend in Australian towards expanding the provision of early childhood education to children for two years before school’.<sup>16</sup> In Victoria, a second year of preschool education will be offered to all children, beginning in 2022.<sup>17</sup> In NSW, subsidies became available for a second year of preschool (in community preschools only) from 1 January 2019.<sup>18</sup> In Tasmania, free preschool for three-year-olds from disadvantaged or vulnerable families will be available statewide from 2020.<sup>19</sup> In the ACT, the government has committed to extending preschool to all three-year-olds, with a start date yet to be set.<sup>20</sup>

### 2.4 Equity of access to early learning

Unlike school education, early childhood education is non-compulsory. This raises the question: which children are able to benefit from early learning and which children miss out? As the *Lifting Our Game* report made clear, inequity of access is an ongoing problem in early learning. Access to early childhood education is limited by a number of factors related to family disadvantage and vulnerability, including: cost; access to transport; complexity of enrolment processes; and English language ability. Yet it is precisely the children in these families who stand to reap the greatest benefits from early childhood education.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Lifting our Game*. (2017). p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> Preschool is known as kindergarten in some states. Our use of ‘preschool’ here is intended to cover both terms.

<sup>16</sup> Discussion Paper, p.4.

<sup>17</sup> Universal access to a second year of preschool (kindergarten) will begin with 5 hours’ provision per week, rising to 15 hours per week by 2029. Merlino, J. (2019). ‘Giving Victorian kids great kinders and the best start in life’. Media release. 27 May.

<sup>18</sup> Berejiklian, G. (2018). ‘NSW the first state to subsidise preschool for all three year olds’. Media release. 19 June.

<sup>19</sup> Parliament of Tasmania. (2019). *Budget Paper No. 2, Volume 1, Government Services*. pp. 50, 53.

<sup>20</sup> Berry, Y. (2018). ‘Working towards early childhood education for every three year old child’. Media release. 31 July.

<sup>21</sup> *Lifting Our Game*. (2017). pp. 81-82.



Data from the landmark Early Years Education Program shows that targeted early learning support can have an extraordinarily positive impact on the IQ and social and emotional wellbeing of the most vulnerable children.<sup>22</sup>

The barriers that First Nations children face in accessing high-quality early learning have been studied in depth by ECA and SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. In a joint report released earlier this year, ECA and SNAICC identified a range of barriers to First Nations children participating in early learning, which can be categorised as follows:

- Individual barriers: such as income, employment, housing instability and health
- Service barriers: service quality and cultural competency
- Social and neighbourhood characteristics: transient communities, poor living conditions or community isolation
- Cultural barriers: centred on lack of trust and low cultural competency.<sup>23</sup>

It is essential for governments to devote particular attention to increasing the participation of vulnerable children in early childhood education. As the *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* noted, 'Narrowing these gaps [in school readiness] through high-quality early childhood learning is an equitable and cost-effective way to improve each child's learning outcomes'.<sup>24</sup>

Given the importance of equity of opportunities, the Melbourne Declaration should explicitly recognise the importance of universal access to early childhood education, extending this beyond the previous standard of one year before school.

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<sup>22</sup> Tseng, Y., Jordan, B., Borland, J., Coombs, N., Cotter, K., Guillou, M., Hill, A., Kennedy, A. and Sheehan, J. (2019). *24 months in the Early Years Education Program: Assessment of the impact on children and their primary caregivers*. Changing the life trajectories of Australia's most vulnerable children, Report No. 4. Melbourne: University of Melbourne and Kids First.

<sup>23</sup> ECA and SNAICC. (2019). *Working together to ensure equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years*. Position paper. Accessed 29 May 2019.  
<http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/SNAICC-ECA-Early-Years-Position-Paper-.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Department of Education and Training, Australia. (2018). p. 16.



## 2.5 The position of early childhood teachers

The education, training and qualifications of its workforce comprise the single biggest factor influencing the quality of an early childhood education service.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, the reforms under the NQF have focused heavily on improving the formal qualifications of early childhood educators.

Among the early childhood education workforce, qualified early childhood teachers (ECTs) have a particular role. An ECT is required to lead a formal preschool program (operating under the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education). However, ECTs working in early childhood education settings pay a penalty, earning significantly less than their peers in the school system. According to the Independent Education Union, first year preschool teachers earn \$16,583 less than a graduate teacher in a primary school, and the difference widens over time to a gap of \$33,431 per year.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the relatively low pay, teachers working in early childhood settings face longer hours and fewer holidays (compared with school-based work), and less public recognition of the value of their work. The bifurcation between school-based and non-school-based teachers is reinforced by the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, which contain only limited recognition of early childhood settings, and establish a mentoring/development system poorly-suited to some teachers, particularly those in smaller or remote early childhood settings.<sup>27</sup>

Given the lack of pay parity and professional recognition, it is no surprise that the early childhood education sector finds it difficult to attract and retain ECTs. A current workforce forecast predicts a shortfall of nearly 18,000 early childhood teachers within five years.<sup>28</sup>

In seeking to support quality teaching, the Melbourne Declaration must ensure that it explicitly includes teachers working in early childhood settings, and that professional recognition of teachers extends to the early childhood education sector.

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<sup>25</sup> *Lifting Our Game*. (2017). p. 63.

<sup>26</sup> Independent Education Union. (2018). 'IEU speaks on: Why are Australian women still being paid less than men?' Accessed 29 May 2019. <https://ieusa.org.au/ieu-speaks-on-why-are-australian-women-still-being-paid-less-than-men/>.

<sup>27</sup> Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network. (2018). Submission to the National Review of Teacher Registration. Accessed 5 June 2019, [https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/national-review-of-teacher-registration/australian-early-childhood-teacher-education-network.pdf?sfvrsn=c000f13c\\_0](https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/national-review-of-teacher-registration/australian-early-childhood-teacher-education-network.pdf?sfvrsn=c000f13c_0)

<sup>28</sup> O'Connell, M. (2019). 'Addressing the workforce challenges in early childhood education and care', *Broadside*, Community Early Learning Australia newsletter, May 2019.





### 3. Recommended changes

The Melbourne Declaration does not require wholesale change in order to better reflect the importance of early childhood education. The changes recommended by ECA maintain the integrity of the existing document, while deepening its focus on early education and highlighting the connections between early education and later learning. The changes recommended by ECA are summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2: Recommended changes to the Melbourne Declaration**

| Element of Melbourne Declaration                                      | Recommended changes   |
|---|---|
| <b>Entire document</b>  | 1. Replace 'schooling' with 'education' or 'learning', to make the Melbourne Declaration inclusive of the whole educational spectrum.   |
| <b>Preamble</b>   | 2. Include early childhood education settings (alongside schools) as playing a vital role in promoting the development and wellbeing of young Australians.  |
|   | 3. Present the link between high-quality early learning and success at school and beyond.   |
|   | 4. Make reference to the outcomes of the Australian Early Development Census in setting the context for the Melbourne Declaration's goals.  |
|   | 5. Acknowledge the role of families and communities in supporting children's learning, development and wellbeing.   |
| <b>Educational Goals for Young Australians: Goal 1</b>                | 6. Change Goal 1 to:<br><br>'Australian early education and schooling promotes equity and excellence'.  |
| <b>Educational Goals for Young Australians: Goal 2</b>                | 7. Under the description of 'successful learners', add a new attribute:<br><br>'Successful learners: develop cognitive, social and emotional skills in early childhood that support later learning in the school system'. |
| <b>A Commitment to Action</b>   | 8. Include the early childhood education sector in the commitment to achieve the educational goals for young Australians.   |
| <b>Action area: Supporting quality teaching and school leadership</b> | 9. Change 'school leadership' to 'educational leadership', to allow for the inclusion of early childhood education settings in this action area.  |
|   | 10. Make reference to the role of Educational Leader in early childhood education settings.   |
| <b>Action area: Strengthening early childhood education</b>           | 11. Declare that children have a right to early learning before commencing schooling.   |
|   | 12. Include particular reference to the importance and impact of early education in the two years before school.  |
|   | 13. Note the role of high-quality early childhood education in preventing and addressing developmental vulnerability.   |



| Element of Melbourne Declaration  | Recommended changes   |
|---|---|
| <b>Action area: Promoting world-class curriculum and assessment</b>   | 14. Make reference to the Early Years Learning Framework as a foundation curriculum document.   |
| <b>Action area: Improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds.</b> | 15. Highlight the role of early childhood education in preventing and addressing educational disadvantage.  |
|   | 16. Incorporate findings and recommendations from the position paper <i>Working Together to Ensure Equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in the Early Years</i> , prepared by ECA and SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children.   |
|   | 17. Include an additional commitment:<br><br>'Australian governments commit to ensure that Indigenous children and children experiencing disadvantage are not developmentally vulnerable on entry to school, by:<br>- ensuring provision of high-quality, culturally appropriate early childhood education<br>- addressing barriers to their participation in early childhood education, especially in the two years before school. |