



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY

The future provision of preschool education

Report Number 1
Standing Committee on Education
September 1998

Committee membership

Ms Kerrie Tucker MLA (Chair)

Mr Wayne Berry MLA (Deputy Chair), appointed 25 June 1998

Mr Harold Hird MLA

Mr Simon Corbell MLA (Deputy Chair), discharged 25 June 1998

Secretary: Ms Judith Henderson

Administration: Ms Kim Blackburn

Resolution of appointment

The following general purpose standing committees be established to inquire into and report on matters referred to it by the Assembly or matters that are considered by the committee to be of concern to the community:

...a Standing Committee on Education to examine education, schooling, training services, children's, youth and family services and sport and recreation and any other matter under the responsibility of the portfolio minister.

Minutes of Proceedings, No 2, 28 April 1998, pp 15-19.

Terms of reference

- 1 Review *Auditor General's Report No 1 1998—Management of Preschool Education*
- 2 Inquire into and report on the future provision of preschool education with particular reference to
 - access
 - the changing demographic patterns in the ACT
 - the need to consider a greater range of program options to meet the needs of the community
 - any other related matter.

Standing Committee on Education, *Minutes of Proceedings*, 4 June 1998.
Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, *Minutes of Proceedings*, No 13,
25 June 1998.

Preface

This inquiry was held in response to the release of the Auditor General's report on preschools. Even though the report found that the preschool service was very effective, it found that efficiency could be improved in building utilisation and staff costs. Particular preschools were named in the report as being inefficient in these areas, and understandably there was concern in the community about the future of these preschools. During the inquiry it became clear that there was also a more general concern about how the preschool sector was being managed, and in particular the lack of long-term planning and co-ordination of early childhood services.

The present system of year-by-year adjustments to preschool operations and lack of any long-term plan has resulted in the community constantly being in 'defence mode' and individual preschools devoting a great deal of energy towards protecting their own preschool. Because individual communities have not been able to see a clear rationale for Government decisions which affect them, many have become angry.

It became very clear to the committee that the community highly values preschools. The Auditor General did find preschool services to be very effective. That finding was confirmed by this inquiry. It is a credit to the ACT that preschools are on the whole easily accessible, affordable, and of such high quality. We need to be proud of this and not allow the service to be diminished, but rather encourage it to develop further to meet the needs of families in the next century.

In doing this, it is now time to challenge our thinking about how early childhood services, of which preschools are a vital part, can meet the needs of contemporary families.

There still is a considerable number of children who do not access a government-funded preschool because of their daycare arrangements. While this is a choice some parents make, others have no choice.

The Government has recently introduced some more innovative models where preschool and childcare are provided on the one site. However, in their implementation, the Government has failed to take a strong leadership role in supporting these new models through ongoing evaluation and in coordination of policies and practices.

The committee has recommended that the Government develop, by the year 2000, a long-term plan for the provision of government-funded preschool education within the context of early childhood service provision. This is very important if we are to avoid inconsistent or even inappropriate responses from Government. The plan must also address mechanisms for ongoing community consultation.

In the meantime, until the long-term plan is developed, the Government should continue with its process of annual adjustments. However, the Government's budget decision to link funding with enrolments may have repercussions for particular preschools. Also because of the new enrolment process there will be less time this year for the community to be involved. It is very important that no major changes occur until a long-term plan is accepted.

Other important issues which became apparent during the inquiry were concerns about the level of professional support to preschool teachers and assistants and the level of support for children with special needs. The committee has made recommendations accordingly that these matters be reviewed.

Once again the importance of early intervention in general has been raised. The committee heard on several occasions that, while there are resource implications initially, dollars spent in the early years of a child's life result in long-term savings and benefits for society as well as for the child.

I would like to thank all those who participated in this important inquiry. We had a very short timeframe in which to work and were impressed with the level of community and Government response. Thank you also to the other members of the committee, Wayne Berry and Harold Hird for their contributions, and to the committee secretary, Judith Henderson.

Kerrie Tucker MLA
Chair
9 September 1998

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List of recommendations

Recommendation 1

The committee recommends that, for 1999, the Department of Education and Community Services, in consultation with the community, apply its usual process of adjustment of the preschool system and that it does not introduce any major changes until a long-term plan has been developed. (Paragraph 6.11)

Recommendation 2

The committee recommends that the Department of Education and Community Services, in consultation with the community, develop by the year 2000, a long-term plan for the provision of government-funded preschool education within the context of early childhood service provision in the ACT. The plan to include:

- a statement of purpose which articulates a vision and purpose for early childhood services with a particular focus on preschool services;
- strategies to maximise access to preschool services in an environment of a changing demographic structure and declining enrolments;
- strategies to improve staff utilisation rates;
- a plan for building utilisation including identification of other uses for preschool buildings;
- a statement on different models of service delivery for consideration in future provision; and
- ongoing mechanisms for community consultation. (Paragraph 6.26)

Recommendation 3

The committee recommends that the Department of Education and Community Services examine ways of increasing the proposed level of professional support to teachers and assistants. (Paragraph 6.29)

Recommendation 4

The committee recommends that the Department of Education and Community Services review the adequacy of support provided to children with special needs accessing government preschools. (Paragraph 6.31)

1. Introduction

1.1. There is no doubt that preschool services in the ACT are effective and highly valued. Not only do they provide an excellent education program to children, they are also of great value as a community resource. The following comment of the ACT Ministerial Council for the Family encapsulates the views on this issue contained in over 50 of the submissions to the inquiry¹.

Preschools are a significant community resource and are used as a community meeting place not only for preschool attendance but for playgroups, play school, and after school care and other community groups. Factors such as community network building and equity of access for families with preschool age children should not be overlooked in the decision making process which will determine the future of preschools in the ACT.²

1.2. The value of quality education programs for young children has been documented by a number of researchers. Professor Graeme Vimpani of Newcastle University has calculated that every dollar not spent on the early years of a child's life in the provision of quality education, costs our society \$8.95 a year until the child reaches 27 years of age. This figure represents remedial costs, social security payments and costs associated with addressing the effects of extreme antisocial behaviour.³ A study of the benefit-cost return on the High/Scope Perry Program in the USA estimated that the public saved \$7.16 for every dollar spent on the program. This study affirmed that significantly improved academic and productivity outcomes resulting from early intervention is greatest for children aged from three to six.⁴

1.3. The issues for consideration by this inquiry are how, in the future, as Canberra spreads further and the number of four-year-olds declines:

¹ For example submissions 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28, 32, 33, 35, 36, 42, 44, 45, 47, 48, 49, 51, 53, 55, 56, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 70, 71, 72, 73, 75, 84, 85, 87, 91, 92, 94, 95, 96, 97, 102, 103, 114, 115, 117.

² Submission 41.

³ Transcript, p 74.

⁴ In Weikart David P, 'Impact of early education on school performance and productivity', *Abstracts Early Childhood Development —Investing in the future*, April 8-9 1996, p 9.

- reasonable access can be maintained to preschool programs; and
- services to preschool aged children and their families can be strengthened and improved.

1.4. Preschool services in the ACT have been the topic of much discussion since the early 1980s. The Department of Education and Community Services reported that since 1982 there have been nine reports of note on preschool and childcare which impact on the ACT. Each has grappled with changes to the demographics and employment patterns both in the ACT and nationally and a common theme has emerged of improving efficiency and linkages across early childhood services.⁵

History of reports on preschool services

1.5. A summary of the findings of the many reports on preschool services follows. The summary is largely based on information provided by the Department of Education and Community Services.

1.6. *The ACT Preschool Task Force Report* of 1982 highlighted a strong opposition to amalgamating preschools with primary schools but recommended better links between preschool and primary school curriculum. Preschool staff, preschool parent associations, primary schools and individuals were consulted. The task force investigated enrolments, staffing and management issues.

1.7. *A Review of Preschool Education* in the ACT was undertaken in 1989 following community concern with the levying of a \$6 per week compulsory fee for preschool attendance. The report recommended the abolition of the preschool fee. It also recommended immediate cost reduction strategies. Suggestions for rationalisation of service provision were made, including amalgamation of part-time with neighbouring preschools. The role and contributions of parents were affirmed.

1.8. *The ACT Preschool Task Force of 1990* looked at rationalising services which were not cost effective and the provision of a model of service delivery which would meet both educational and community needs. Three models were trialed. These were a co-location model in the

⁵ Submission 107, p1.

central district, a cluster model in Woden/Weston and administrative linking in Belconnen.

1.9. The *Discussion Paper on a Proposed National Framework for Children's Services in Australia* was developed in 1995. In proposing to reform children's services in Australia within the parameters of the Council of Australian Governments, the paper proposed reforming the roles and responsibilities of governments and improving service delivery and linkages. The Senate inquiry report *Childhood Matters* of 1996 established the need for greater cohesion between preschool and childcare services and noted the similarity in educational goals.

1.10. In 1996 the Economic Planning Advisory Commission reported on future demand for best practice in and links between childcare and other children's and family services.

1.11. Surveys of childcare service vacancy patterns were conducted in 1997 by the ACT Children's Services Resource and Advisory Program Inc.

1.12. A review of the ACT preschool enrolment policy and process was undertaken in 1997. The review included extensive community consultation and produced an agreed set of factors to be considered when viability of preschools is being considered.

1.13. The Auditor General released a report on the management of preschool education in the ACT in May 1998. This report found that while preschools are very effective, they are inefficient and uneconomical, especially in relation to building and staff utilisation.

1.14. In many of these reports the issues of changing demographics and better linkages between services were raised. The Department of Education and Community Services noted that, while staff and communities have yet to agree on future directions, there is a growing view from groups closely involved in preschool education that a strategy is needed to address the issues. Implementation of recommendations from these reports has been uneven. For example, the Preschool Task Force (1990) report was partially implemented when six preschools were relocated into primary schools and two preschools were closed.

Current preschool services

1.15. The Government advised that its provision of preschool services operates on the principle that preschool education is an entitlement for four-year-olds. It also advised it has established and maintained a system of universal provision of services in partnership with the community.⁶

1.16. The Government guarantees 10.5 hours per week of preschool education for children who turn four before 30 April in the year before they attend school. Preschool services are provided through the Department of Education and Community Services. Responsibilities include the development and implementation of early childhood policy, including early education policy, licensing and advice to childcare providers, professional leadership, advice and support to preschools, financial and human resource planning and administration for preschools.

1.17. As at February 1998, there were 82 preschools catering for 3,975 students, including 142 children attending early intervention units (EIUs). EIUs are provided for children aged three to five years who have a range of developmental needs including physical, intellectual, communication and other functional difficulties.

1.18. Services are delivered in a range of ways including stand-alone, single, double and triple units. Some have three or four sessions per week and one preschool has two extended days. A full-time unit generally has a capacity of 50 students and a half-time or part-time unit has a capacity of 25 students. The larger triple units have a capacity of 150 students.

1.19. Of the 24 part-time preschools, there are 19 stand-alone part-time preschools, and five⁷ which are co-located with a primary school. Of the 33 full-time single unit preschools there are 30 stand-alone centres and three which are co-located with a primary school. In addition, there are six preschools operating one full-time unit and one part-time unit; 11 preschools operating two full-time units; three preschools operating two full-time units and one part-time unit; and three preschools operating three full-time units.

1.20. Regardless of the arrangement or lengths of sessions, all eligible students receive 10.5 hours of preschool education per week. While the

⁶ Submission 107.

⁷ Includes the Cooperative School and excludes Uriarra.

curriculum draws on the national profiles and the ACT curriculum frameworks, at this stage there is no specific early childhood curriculum.

1.21. There are some innovative models in the system which are tailored to meet the needs of particular communities which experience disadvantage, for example the Koori preschool program. Other models include various co-locations such as within primary schools, with long daycare, and co-location with occasional care and school-age care. These models are outlined in greater detail in Chapter 5.

1.22. The parental financial contribution of approximately \$4 per week remains voluntary, unlike most other States including NSW where there are compulsory fees for the majority of services.

Other early childhood services

1.23. Preschool education is an important part of the array of early childhood services available to the ACT community. Early childhood education is undertaken in long daycare centres as well as in the government preschool system.

1.24. A number of services for four year old children and their families are provided by non-government and private providers as follows.⁸

- There are 80 long daycare centres with a capacity of 3,946 places for children from birth to school entry. Some 30 per cent of long daycare centres are privately owned and 70 per cent are operated by non-profit community organisations.
- There are seven family daycare schemes with a capacity of 2,560 places which provide care for children in carers' own homes for children of all ages.
- There are 14 occasional care centres in the ACT for children from birth to school entry with a capacity of 527 licensed places.
- Five independent preschools offer educational programs for three to six year olds and are licensed under conditions similar to long daycare centres.

⁸ Submission 107, p 5.

- There are 17 playschools offering regular activity programs for three to six year olds.
- There are 189 playgroups in the ACT.

Conduct of the inquiry

1.25. On 4 June 1998, the Standing Committee on Education resolved to conduct an inquiry into the future provision of preschool education in response to many concerns expressed by the public about possible preschool closures in the wake of the release of the Auditor General's report on preschools.

1.26. On 24 June 1998, the Assembly ordered that the committee report on the inquiry on 14 September 1998.⁹

1.27. On 25 June 1998, the Assembly referred to the Standing Committee on Education *Auditor General's Report No1/1998 Management of Preschool Education* for examination and report.

1.28. Following the committee's decision to conduct the inquiry, an advertisement covering the second term of reference was placed in local newspapers in mid June 1998. In addition on, 9 June 1998, letters advising of the inquiry were sent to all preschool parent associations and other organisations known to have an interest in the matter.

1.29. These organisations were subsequently advised of the committee's further role, namely, to examine and report on the Auditor General's report on preschool education.

1.30. In response, 119 submissions were received and the committee held four public hearings. Details of submissions received are at Appendix 1 and of witnesses who gave evidence at public hearings at Appendix 2.

1.31. The committee regrets that, as a consequence of the tight time-frame for reporting imposed by the Assembly, it was unable to visit programs. However, the committee will maintain an ongoing interest in preschool education and plans to visit some programs as soon as time

⁹ Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, *Minutes of Proceedings*, p 88.

permits. The time-frame also placed stress on the community to prepare submissions in a short time.

1.32. The reporting date of 14 September 1998 meant the committee did not have available for consideration the information from the September Preschool Survey. The survey provides information on current enrolments and more importantly for future planning, information on registrations for enrolment in 1999. Therefore, in its consultations with the community, the committee was unable to take into account this essential information. The committee expects that the Department of Education and Community Services will consult with individual communities if, on the basis of the preschool survey, any operational changes are to be made to preschools for 1999.

Acknowledgments

1.33. The committee wishes to thank all those who took an interest in this inquiry. The committee was impressed with the quality of the submissions from the community.

2. Auditor General's Report No 1/1998

Management of Preschool Education

Background

2.1. *Auditor General's Report No 1/1998—Management of Preschool Education*, was presented to the Assembly on 27 May 1998.

2.2. It is a performance audit which examined whether management of ACT preschools is effective, efficient and economic.

2.3. The report concluded that:

- preschool services are very effective; and
- provision of preschool education services is inefficient and uneconomic.¹⁰

2.4. The audit cited a large number of positive findings which supported the opinion that preschool services are very effective. The audit identified some areas where there is potential to generate improvements in effectiveness.

2.5. The few findings which were not positive related to the objectives and purposes of preschool education, the type and structure of some programs, limited access to professional development, and the lack of work-based performance appraisal for teachers and assistants.

2.6. In relation to efficiency and economy, the audit concluded that overall ACT preschools are not being run efficiently or economically because building utilisation is poor and teacher salaries are high. The audit also concluded that there are opportunities to improve the staff utilisation rate.¹¹ With the exception of the Northern Territory, preschool services in the ACT are more expensive than in other Australian jurisdictions compared. (New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia were excluded from the comparison as suitable information was not available.) Further, the audit calculated that using the department's

¹⁰ *Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 Management of Preschool Education*, p 3.

¹¹ *ibid* p 10.

book values of schools, there is the potential to produce once-off income of \$3.3m by disposing of some significantly underutilised preschool buildings.¹²

2.7. In terms of the ACT's current output budgeting and reporting model, according to the Auditor General, this means that the cost to the ACT community of 'Output 5.2 Preschool Education' is significantly higher than it could be.

2.8. The audit was managed by the Audit Office with the assistance of Price Waterhouse. It used 1996 and 1997 data.¹³

Committee approach

2.9. The committee received comment on the audit findings from the Minister for Education, the Australian Education Union, the Canberra Preschool Society and number of preschool parent associations, playgroups and individuals. In fact most of the submissions listed in Appendix 1 commented on the Auditor General's report.

2.10. The audit findings and an outline of Ministerial and other comment is given in the following sections of this chapter.

Audit findings and comment

2.11. The audit findings are outlined on pages 3 to 16 of the Auditor General's report. They can also be found at Appendix 3 of this report..

Comment on methodology

2.12. Several submissions raised questions about the methodology employed in the Auditor General's assessment. Most of these concerns related to interstate comparisons and are discussed later in this chapter. A small number of submissions expressed the view that the value of the Auditor General's report is limited because it failed to take into account the provision of early childhood services other than government

¹² ibid p 11.

¹³ ibid p19.

preschools.¹⁴ However, a wide ranging examination of early childhood services in the ACT was not the scope of the audit. Its scope was 'to obtain high level assessments of the effectiveness and efficiency of ACT preschools, and where necessary, to examine systems and processes in detail'.

2.13. One submission pointed out that there were omissions such as details of the response level to surveys, the size of groups consulted and the number of respondents supporting particular views.¹⁵ The committee discussed all these matters with the Auditor General. The Auditor General and the consultant detailed the research methodology and clarified that sample groups were appropriate for such reports.

2.14. The Auditor General advised that of the 107 teachers surveyed, 44 provided a response. As part of the survey teachers were able to make additional comments and of the 22 who made additional comments, six made the specific comment that preschools and childcare remain separate. At least three other teachers made comment praising the education qualities of a preschool program without making a direct comparison to childcare. The group of parents which took part in the process of finalising the performance attributes and indicators comprised about 15 parents from six different preschools who were nominated by preschool teachers.¹⁶

Comment on the effectiveness findings

2.15. Overall, preschools were found to be providing a high quality of service. The substantial amount of evidence received by the committee strongly supports this view.

2.16. The audit suggested that for the present level of effectiveness to be sustained, the few negative findings should be addressed. The committee supports this position. The negative findings are now discussed.

Objectives and purposes of preschools

2.17. The audit found that there is no comprehensive statement of objectives and purposes for preschools.

¹⁴ For example, submissions 69, 106.

¹⁵ Submission 106.

¹⁶ Government Audit Office, correspondence dated 10 August 1998.

2.18. The Minister for Education advised the committee that an early childhood statement of objectives and purposes would be developed in consultation with staff and the community between February and June 1999.¹⁷

2.19. The Government submission stated:

A statement of purpose will articulate a vision and purpose for early childhood services in the ACT with a particular focus on preschool services. It will be a foundation for delivery of quality early childhood services in the ACT. Features could include:

- the best interests of children as the paramount consideration;
- a quality framework designed to promote children's social and intellectual development;
- access to services based on eligibility and need;
- valuing the diversity of individual children, families and the ACT community;
- services that are responsive to needs of families, including parents who work or study, parents at home with their children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, families from culturally diverse backgrounds, children and parents with a disability, and socially or economically disadvantaged families;

¹⁷Submission 107, p 16.

- affordable services that maximise outcomes while avoiding unwarranted cost to families and government;
- linkages with a range of programs for children and families; and
- planning systems that are responsive to changing needs.

2.20. The submission also noted that consultation with key groups, in 1998, indicated that an operating objective would provide a useful reference point for addressing the challenges facing preschool education in the ACT. Groups included in the consultation were the Canberra Preschool Society, the Australian Education Union, the Preschool, Teachers' Professional Association and the Community and Public Sector Union. The following operating objective was suggested by the group.

To ensure a strong and viable preschool education system in partnership with parents that meets community needs and is financially responsible. Our preschool system needs to be effectively and efficiently planned, to ensure demographic trends and economic pressures do not erode a viable effective system.¹⁸

2.21. Many other submissions also supported the need for the development of such a statement.¹⁹

2.22. The committee strongly supports the development of a statement of objectives and purposes for preschools as part of a vision and purpose for all early childhood services. The committee stresses that consultation on its development must reach beyond the current preschool sector and provide opportunities for input from a wide range of early childhood groups as well as parents, unions and early childhood experts.

2.23. The statement of objectives and purposes should provide a foundation for long-term planning for the delivery of early childhood services in the ACT in the future.

¹⁸ Submission 107, p 15.

¹⁹ For example submissions 39, 69, 103, 104, 106.

Program type and structure

2.24. The audit commented that there may be a lack of innovation in some programs and also an overemphasis on teacher organised activities at the expense of child directed play as a medium for learning.

2.25. The Australian Education Union and the Preschool Teachers Professional Association disputed this finding.

2.26. The committee discussed with the consultant, Associate Professor Anne Stonehouse, the reason for this finding. She told the committee that she based the comment on visits to the preschools selected and from listening to staff talk about various aspects of their practice during visits. Apart from visits, she also attended one and a half days of professional development. The comment was not necessarily meant as a criticism, rather as a statement. She stated that:

I was actually surprised that there seemed to me, in the visits that I made, particularly more sameness than I had expected from a very experienced and very competent teaching profession.²⁰

2.27. Further, she stated that while she saw excellent traditional preschool programs, she was disappointed not to have seen more diversity. Except for one very dynamic program the others were very similar. She suggested that staff need to be encouraged to look more deeply at what they are doing.²¹

Support for children with special needs

2.28. Feedback to the audit from staff indicated there may be a shortage in the provision of English as a second language (ESL) teachers and resource teachers. Teachers, however also stated that they believe children with special needs are being fully included in preschool programs. The audit concluded that further analysis would be needed to clarify the adequacy of the availability of specialised teachers.²²

²⁰ Uncorrected Proof Transcript 13 August 1998 p 60.

²¹ *ibid*

²² *Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 Management of Preschool Education*, pp 42, 43.

2.29. Several submissions and witnesses at public hearings claimed that the support to children with special needs in preschools is inadequate.²³

2.30. Information provided to the committee indicates that the specialised teachers providing support for children with special needs have very large case loads. For example, the behaviour support teacher has a case load of 31 students. There are two ESL teachers. In one area there are 188 children who have English as a second language and 130 in the other area. The resource teachers support 172, 121 and 146 students respectively. As a result of the high case load, specialist teachers may only be able to see a child once or twice a term.²⁴

2.31. In discussions with the Minister and the department, it was acknowledged that there is a need to review the level of support to preschool children with special needs and that the department is intending to review the additional resources provided.²⁵

2.32. The committee considers such a review is urgently needed.

Access to departmental advisers

2.33. The audit noted that access to departmental advisers by teachers and assistants could be improved. The department indicated to the Auditor General that initiatives had been implemented to satisfactorily address the issue.²⁶

2.34. The committee sought clarification on these initiatives from the department. The committee was told that in 1998, there are three executive officers who support preschools. Each executive officer spends three of the five days per week in the field, while the other days are spent on administrative tasks. Their role is to, between them, supervise 119 teachers and 119 assistants, that is an average of 40 teachers and 40 assistants each.

2.35. The proposal, for 1999, is to provide four executive officers and one administrative services officer to support preschools. However, each of the four executive officers will have a 50 per cent teaching load, effectively leaving two full-time executive officers to support preschools

²³ For example submissions 39, 88, 104, 112.

²⁴ Preschool Teachers Professional Association, correspondence dated 14 August 1998.

²⁵ Uncorrected Proof Transcript, 19 August 1998, p 29.

²⁶ Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 Management of Preschool Education, p 7.

plus one administrative services officer. Further, it is likely that since the executive officers will have a teaching load they will be entitled to school holidays and therefore will work six weeks per year less than in 1998.

2.36. The committee is not opposed to executive officers having a teaching load. The committee's concerns are about the level of support available to preschool staff and the fact that this new arrangement will reduce the number of full-time equivalent level one teachers. The committee fails to see how the new proposal will result in an improvement in the level of support. In addition, as important aspects of the proposal are still uncertain the department was unable to reassure the committee on this matter.

Professional development

2.37. Concerns about limited access to professional development for preschool staff were noted during the audit. The audit further noted that these concerns should be partly addressed by management's undertaking to provide teachers with five days attendance at approved planning and staff development activities each year.

2.38. Associate Professor Stonehouse stressed the importance of both professional support and professional development to encourage and validate innovation. In her view, professional development where ideas are shared and changes and innovations are discussed underpins informed innovation and diversity.²⁷

Comment on the findings on efficiency and economy

2.39. The audit findings on efficiency and economy generated widespread comment. Each of these findings is considered below.

Utilisation of staff and preschool buildings

2.40. The audit was critical of both preschool building utilisation and preschool staff utilisation. The audit findings were based on 1997 information. While analysis of the February 1998 preschool census shows changes have occurred in a number of preschools, the overall picture is largely unchanged. There are still many preschool buildings which are

²⁷ Uncorrected Proof Transcript, 13 August 1998 p 61.

underutilised by preschool programs and staff utilisation has not improved.

2.41. Each of the audit findings on utilisation of buildings and staff is now discussed in detail.

2.42. The audit found that utilisation of preschool buildings in the ACT is poor with roughly half of the preschools being utilised at less than 50 per cent capacity, with approximately another 12 preschools (14 per cent) being utilised at less than 70 per cent.

2.43. The Minister for Education advised the committee that he had no real reason to doubt the Auditor General's assessment of building utilisation.²⁸ The department advised that the recurrent costs of staffing the buildings are more important.²⁹ The need to plan for waves of children in new suburbs as Canberra has developed has been a major factor contributing to low utilisation in many areas in 1998.

2.44. The Canberra Preschool Society, a number of preschool parent associations and parents of preschoolers³⁰ claimed that the audit did not take into account the utilisation of preschool buildings by programs other than sessional preschool.

2.45. It was also claimed that at least one vacant transportable unit which has not been needed for many years and which the preschool has requested be removed was included in that preschool's assessment of utilisation.³¹

2.46. The Auditor General told the committee that while the report made some reference to the use of preschool buildings by community groups, it did not take into account that use. The reason being that the audit's primary purpose was to focus on the preschool program and the preschool funding and to examine whether the resources for that funding were being properly utilised.³² The Auditor General's Office advised that it was not provided with very comprehensive information of building utilisation by rent-paying organisations.³³

²⁸ Transcript, p 6.

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ For example submissions 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 13, 15, 16, 17, 21, 26, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 43, 44, 45, 46, 48, 49, 53, 57, 62, 63, 72, 81, 84, 86, 87, 96, 100.

³¹ Submissions 34, 38, 98.

³² Uncorrected Proof Transcript, 30 July 1998, p 12.

³³ *ibid*

2.47. The Minister provided information to the committee on the activities conducted in preschool buildings.³⁴ Analysis of this information indicates that there is a significant amount of underutilisation of preschool buildings.

Table 1 Preschool building utilisation 1998

	Number	Vacant units	Operating full-time	Not operating full-time
Double unit buildings	39#	18	17	22##
Demountable attached to a double unit building	10	4*	3	3
Single unit buildings	42	0	22	20**
Demountable attached to a single unit	5	3	2	0

* # Excludes Evatt and Taylor which have childcare programs in the second unit

*A Koori program operates in two of these one session per week

four operate with three groups of children, 14 operate with two groups of children and four operate with one group of children.

**Operate with one group of children

³⁴ Minister for Education, correspondence dated 28 July 1998 and 7 September 1998.

2.48. A range of activities is conducted in vacant preschool units. These include playgroups, playschools, music programs and after-school programs. Some are charged rent and some, such as playgroups, have free use of the building, although they usually contribute to the parent association's funds.

2.49. Seven of the 18 vacant units (excluding demountables) are used by rent-paying organisations for a total of 23 sessions per week. Sessions vary in length from two to three hours.

2.50. Playgroups also operate in these units. Of the 74 playgroup sessions per week operating at 53 preschools across the ACT, 29 sessions per week operate from vacant units. Playgroup sessions vary in length from one and a half to two and a half hours.

2.51. In total, vacant units (excluding demountables) are used either by rent-paying organisations or community groups for 52 of the possible 180 half-day sessions per week.

2.52. Playgroups which do not operate from vacant units, use the preschool premises when there are no preschool classes, for example, in teacher non-contact time or in the case of part-time units on days when there is no preschool program.

2.53. The audit found that 12 ACT preschools, with a total book value of \$3.3m, have building utilisation rates of around 45 per cent or less. The audit suggested that the option of closing some underutilised preschools identified with significant real estate value should be examined.

2.54. This suggestion drew a strong reaction from both the Minister and the community. The committee received no evidence in support of the real estate values of underutilised preschools being a consideration when making decisions about the operation of a preschool.

2.55. In his media statement accompanying the release of the education budget, the Minister stated:

Notwithstanding the comments of the Auditor General, the real estate values of our preschools is not a consideration which the Government takes into account in making the annual changes to the preschool system.³⁵

2.56. The Minister reiterated this view at a public hearing when he told the committee that the Government certainly does not agree with placing a dollar criteria on preschool sites.³⁶

2.57. The department told the committee that some stand-alone preschool buildings require expensive maintenance.³⁷ However, no preschools were listed as being in an unsatisfactory state of repair in information requested by the committee.³⁸ In oral evidence, the Minister indicated that vandalism contributes to maintenance costs in facilities that are not used frequently and that repairing damage done by vandals is often costly.³⁹ Many of the stand-alone buildings are also located some distance from their feeder primary school.

2.58. There is support for more stand-alone preschools to be relocated to primary school buildings.⁴⁰ The committee raised the possibility of disposing of some stand-alone preschool buildings and relocating those preschools in primary school buildings. In the early 1990s, seven stand-alone preschools were relocated in a primary school building. There were costs associated with refitting part of the building to meet preschool requirements, however there were also may benefits especially in relation to reduced physical and professional isolation for staff.

³⁵ Minister for Education, 'Preschool funding maintained', *Australian Capital Territory Budget 1998*, 23 June 1998.

³⁶ Transcript, p 2.

³⁷ Submission 107, p10, Transcript, p 18.

³⁸ Minister for Education, correspondence dated 28 July 1998.

³⁹ Transcript, p 18.

⁴⁰ For example submissions 60, 75, 104, 105.

2.59. Two former stand-alone preschools have been sold and the other five are leased to non-government organisations.⁴¹ Funds from the sale of preschool buildings could be used to cover refitting costs in primary schools.

2.60. The committee believes that this matter needs to be addressed as part of a long-term plan for the provision of preschool education.

2.61. The audit concluded that addressing the underutilisation of buildings and staff would require some preschools to be closed and this could result in inconvenience for some parents. The report suggested that alternative transport arrangements may have to be considered if inconvenience for these parents is seen to be excessive, however, as many preschools are situated within 2 kilometres of a neighbouring facility excessive inconvenience should not be great.⁴² This matter is addressed further in the discussion on access.

2.62. The audit also found staff utilisation rates to be low in some preschools. It pointed out that although the average staff utilisation rate across all ACT preschools is 85 per cent, approximately a third of individual teachers' utilisation rates were below the average by varying amounts ranging to as low as 44 per cent. Further, staff at approximately one quarter of ACT preschools were utilised at 76 per cent or less of their capacity.

2.63. In 1996-97 employee costs (excluding some salary-related costs) comprised 73.2 per cent of total preschool costs.⁴³ When salary related costs such as Comcare, finance services and personnel services are included salary expenses represent 88 per cent of preschool costs.⁴⁴

2.64. Furthermore, the audit noted that there are opportunities to improve the across ACT average staff utilisation rate of 85 per cent given the number of schools operating with teachers utilised significantly below their capacity. For example, alterations in the preschool enrolment policy in 1997 stopped short of rationalisation which would have had the potential to improve efficiency in the utilisation of staff and buildings.

⁴¹ Minister for Education, correspondence dated 19 August 1998.

⁴² *Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 Management of Preschool Education*, p 14.

⁴³ *Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 Management of Preschool Education*, p 20.

⁴⁴ Minister for Education, correspondence dated 28 July 1998.

2.65. In 1997, the preschool enrolment policy and processes were reviewed. One of the issues considered was minimum group size for viability. The maximum group size for most preschools is 25 students. Therefore a single unit preschool operating part-time (ie offering 10.5 hours per week to one group of students) could enrol a maximum of 25 students. A single unit preschool operating full time (ie offering 10.5 hours per week to each of two groups of students) could enrol a maximum of 50 students. A preschool operating one and a half units could enrol a maximum of 75 students. A double-unit preschool could enrol a maximum of 100 students.

2.66. As part of the review the Department of Education and Community Services considered three options for the minimum viable preschool group size. Preschools not meeting the minimum viable group size based on the mid-year census would change operation the following year.

2.67. The options considered are set out in Table 2.

Table 2 Minimum viable size of preschool groups considered⁴⁵

	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
	students	students	students
Part-time unit	17	17	20
Full-time unit	34	42	40
1 1/2 units	67	67	70

2.68. The Department of Education and Community Services decided to adopt option 1 as the minimum viable group sizes for preschools. This position was endorsed by the Early Childhood Advisory Committee.⁴⁶ Under option 1, a preschool with 34 enrolments would be staffed full-time and in such a case the staff utilisation rates would equate to 68 per cent. As the Auditor General pointed out the staff utilisation rate would improve significantly with the adoption of options 2 or 3.

2.69. However, as many submissions noted, access is an important consideration. Under the option adopted, a preschool with projected enrolments of 33 for the following year would be required to reduce its operation from one full-time unit to a part-time unit. This would mean that eight priority students on the waiting list would need to be accommodated in another preschool. If option 2 were adopted, 17 priority

⁴⁵ Source: *Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 Management of Preschool Education*, p 71.

⁴⁶ Uncorrected Proof Transcript 19 August 1998 p42

students would need to be accommodated in another preschool. Access to preschool is discussed in more detail later in this report.

2.70. The department advised the committee that the reasons for adopting option 1 were that the other options would result in more children not being able to be accommodated in the preschool of their choice as well as more stand-alone part-time preschools.⁴⁷

2.71. The department further advised that decisions about the level of staffing are not solely based on registration for enrolment at a particular preschool. Criteria agreed by the community during the consultation process on the enrolment policy are also considered, for example, socio-economic areas and past enrolment patterns. For a full list of the criteria refer to Appendix 4.

2.72. These criteria are considered in conjunction with the concept of a preschool as part of a cluster—a cluster being defined as a group of preschools in a certain geographic area.⁴⁸ The committee sought clarification on the cluster concept and in particular how the community was made aware of the cluster it belongs to. The department explained that in making decisions about the staffing level for a particular preschool, the effects of any decision on other preschools in the area (the cluster) would also be taken into account.⁴⁹ The committee believes the community does not have a clear understanding of the cluster concept and how it affects staffing decisions. This is a concern to the committee because it is clearly a major factor in the Government's decision making process.

2.73. A number of preschool parent associations reported increases in enrolments in 1998 compared with 1997 leading to better staff utilisation rates.⁵⁰ Analysis of information in the February 1998 Preschool Survey and information provided on preschool operations indicates that overall the situation with staff utilisation has not changed. There are still almost one quarter of preschools with staff utilisation rates of 76 per cent or less. If semester 2 enrolments of some early entry students were able to be taken into account the situation may have improved marginally.

⁴⁷ Uncorrected Proof Transcript 19 August 1998 p42.

⁴⁸ Transcript, p 13.

⁴⁹ Uncorrected Proof Transcript 19 August 1998 p 6.

⁵⁰ For example submissions 13, 42, 45

Teacher salaries

2.74. The audit found that the salary rate scale for ACT preschool teachers is the highest in comparison with other Australian jurisdictions which provided data suitable for comparison. It also found that a very high proportion of ACT preschool teachers are being paid at, near, or above the top salary rate of the general scale for teachers.⁵¹

2.75. The audit noted that the preponderance of teachers at or near to the top of the salary scale, while contributing to the quality of the system, also contributes significantly to the cost.

2.76. Many submissions pointed out that the experience of teachers contributed to the quality and effectiveness of the service and were opposed to any attempts to change the teacher profile to reduce cost.⁵²

2.77. The department advised the committee that the age profile of teachers is significant for two reasons. The first is the overall cost of the education service because older teachers are usually more experienced and at the top of the salary scale. The second is that over the next five to ten years a large proportion of teachers will retire and will need to be replaced. So as not to be faced with a very inexperienced teaching service in the future, plans are now in place to recruit more younger teachers which will improve the teacher profile. This should mean that the service will not be losing one large chunk of experienced staff at the one time. It will improve the cost of the system over time.⁵³ However, as the Auditor General pointed out, and the department acknowledged, because teachers move through a 12 point salary scale it is not possible to make significant cost savings, as in 12 years, beginning teachers will be at the top of the salary scale.⁵⁴

Comparison between ACT preschools of salary expense per child

2.78. The audit found that analysis of the ACT's salary expense per child showed a wide variation in cost between preschools.⁵⁵ This is largely

⁵¹ Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 Management of Preschool Education, p 58.

⁵² For example submissions 50, 72, 86, 96, 103, 104.

⁵³ Transcript, p 4.

⁵⁴ Uncorrected Proof Transcript, 30 July 1998, p 21. Transcript, p 5.

⁵⁵ Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 Management of Preschool Education, p 9.

caused by wide variations in group size and has been discussed earlier in this chapter.

2.79. The Deakin Preschool Parent Association claimed that full-time salary costs rather than part-time costs had been used in the calculation by the Auditor General of Deakin's annual salary expense per child.⁵⁶ The Auditor General's office advised that this calculation was based on a cost model provided by the Department of Education and Community Services. The office acknowledged that there seemed to be a problem.⁵⁷ However even if the salary costs were reduced by half, Deakin Preschool would still have had one of the highest annual salary expenses per child because of its very low enrolments in 1997.

Total Costs

2.80. The audit found that preschool services provided in the ACT are more expensive than in the other Australian jurisdictions compared, except the Northern Territory. The audit noted that, although the ACT system is small, the services are delivered in a high density urban environment, which should allow cost advantages in comparison to most other jurisdictions. The audit reported the following.

For both annual cost per child including overheads and annual cost per child excluding overheads, the ACT ranks second highest behind the Northern Territory amongst predominantly government-funded preschool programs.

For both annual cost per child per hour of service including overheads and annual cost per child per hour of service excluding overheads the ACT ranks second highest behind the Northern Territory amongst predominantly government-funded preschools.⁵⁸

2.81. Many submissions questioned these findings. Some were critical of the findings because they claimed that there was no comparison of effectiveness with other jurisdictions.⁵⁹ Others were critical because the report acknowledged difficulties in ensuring comparability of information

⁵⁶ Submission 53.

⁵⁷ Uncorrected Proof Transcript, 30 July 1998, p 19.

⁵⁸ *Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 Management of Preschool Education*, p 79.

⁵⁹ For example submissions 65, 72, 87, 96, 103

from other jurisdictions.⁶⁰ While others were critical that some States were not included in the comparisons.⁶¹

2.82. The Auditor General told the committee that the audit looked at all jurisdictions. New South Wales and Victoria were not included in the report because of the difficulties in obtaining student costs in a user-pays system. In New South Wales and Victoria fees are high, on average \$30 per week.⁶²

2.83. The Auditor General also told the committee that information from other jurisdictions cannot be conclusive. It can only be used as indicators as the audit relied on other jurisdictions to provide the data and factors such as quality and accessibility could not be verified as part of the audit.⁶³

2.84. In fact, in 1997, the report by the Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision noted that in its review of preschool services across the country, only the ACT provided any information on quality and only four State and Territory governments provided information on the representation of children from culturally and linguistic diverse backgrounds in their preschools.⁶⁴ The audit report makes it quite clear that the costs reported should be taken as indicative only and not precise information.⁶⁵

Other significant findings of the audit

2.85. In addition to the findings on effectiveness, efficiency and economy the audit made findings on preschool session times and parent contributions. These findings are now outlined and discussed.

Preschool sessions in ACT preschools

2.86. The audit argued that the wide range in session times and longer sessions being provided by some teachers indicate that classes of longer duration could be provided where this is not already being done. The

⁶⁰ For example submissions 15, 48, 67, 72, 116.

⁶¹ For example submissions 72,

⁶² Uncorrected Proof Transcript, 30 July 1998, p 24.

⁶³ op cit p 26.

⁶⁴ Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, *Report on Government Service Provision, Volume 2*, p 473,474.

⁶⁵ Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 *Management of Preschool Education*, p 79.

audit also noted that the wide range of session lengths and times did not appear to have any great impact on preschool accessibility.

2.87. The audit went on to suggest that the flexibility in sessions and the time available indicate that teachers may have time available in excess of 21 hours for increased contact hours.⁶⁶

2.88. The committee noted that, under current conditions applying to the teaching service in the ACT, level one teachers teach for 21 hours per week. No changes to the number of hours of face-to-face teaching could occur without a change in conditions.

Parent contributions per child

2.89. The audit noted that given the high quality of preschool education and that the level of parent contributions has not restricted access there were no indications that the current contributions are not set appropriately.⁶⁷

2.90. Most submissions which addressed this matter supported the continuation of the system of voluntary contributions.⁶⁸ There were some, however, that called for the voluntary contributions to be made compulsory—the rationale being that, except for disadvantaged families, all parents should contribute equally to the costs of running a preschool.⁶⁹

Conclusions

2.91. The Auditor General's finding that preschools are very effective was supported in evidence to this inquiry. The committee considers that any changes to the way services are delivered must not impact negatively on the quality of the programs but result in greater diversity and innovation.

2.92. Of the effectiveness findings which were not positive the committee is concerned about how the level of support to preschool staff is being addressed. The committee is not convinced that the proposed arrangements to increase the number of executive officers from three, providing full-time support, to four, each of whom will have a 50 per cent

⁶⁶ Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 *Management of Preschool Education*, p 73.

⁶⁷ op cit, p 12.

⁶⁸ For example submissions 49, 61, 72, 90, 91, 94, 95, 96, 103, 106.

⁶⁹ For example submissions 52, 70, 77, 85, 93, 108.

teaching load, will result in any improvement in support even though their administrative load will be reduced.

2.93. The committee is also concerned about the level of support available to children with special needs and urges the Department of Education and Community Services to conduct a review.

2.94. The committee strongly supports the development of a statement of objectives and purposes and believes that this statement must form the basis of a long-term plan for early childhood services, of which preschool education will be an integral part.

2.95. The Auditor General observed that the need to staff preschools with low attendance levels reduces overall utilisation of both staff and buildings.

2.96. The committee notes, that since the audit, building and staff utilisation rates have improved in some preschools as a result of increased enrolments in those preschools, however enrolments have decreased in others and overall there has been little change. There is still significant underutilisation of preschool buildings and staff.

2.97. The Auditor General did not take into account in the assessment of building utilisation, utilisation of preschool buildings by community groups, such as play groups or organisations paying rent. This utilisation is not extensive, however, the committee considers the value of preschool buildings as a community resource must not be underestimated and this needs to be considered in making decisions about the future of individual preschools. Many submissions claimed that their preschool is the only community facility in the suburb.

2.98. However the Minister told the committee buildings are not the biggest recurrent cost. Salary costs are by far the largest expense.⁷⁰

2.99. The major component of preschool costs is employee expenses. Employee expenses could be reduced with better staff utilisation rates which could be achieved with an increase in the minimum group size. However the department did not support an increase in the minimum group size, as modelling done at the time the enrolment policy was being reviewed indicated that it may result in the establishment of more part-

⁷⁰ Transcript, p 8.

time preschools as well as increasing the number of families who may not get their first choice.

2.100. The committee was not convinced by the arguments that increasing the minimum group size would lead to an increase in stand-alone, part-time preschools. The committee understands that the modelling was done before the full impact of the new enrolment policy was known. The committee believes that further modelling needs to be done taking into account actual 1998 enrolments.

3. Changing demographic patterns in the ACT

3.1. The ACT has experienced very high rates of population growth over the past 25 years. The population of the ACT increased from 160,000 in 1972, to 309,800 in 1997. The population growth rate in the ACT until 1997 was well above the Australian average of 1.7 per cent per year.

3.2. During the time of high population growth the increasing population was largely accommodated by greenfields development in areas like Belconnen, Woden, Weston Creek and Tuggeranong. These new residential areas were predominantly established by young families with young children resulting in a high demand for community facility infrastructure such as schools and preschools.⁷¹

3.3. A typical preschool enrolment profile of a suburb at the time indicates that enrolments peaked at about seven years after a suburb was first settled. This trend is followed by a number of years of enrolment decline until a stable long term level is reached at about 20 years.⁷²

Population forecasts

3.4. Canberra's population is not growing at the rate it did in previous times. The current growth forecast 0.5 per cent, increasing to 1 per cent in the year 2002 is much lower than the population growth in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s. The slight increase in growth forecasts to the year 2002 is much lower than the national average.⁷³

3.5. According to the Government's forecast, the major and most consistent component of Canberra population increase is growth from natural increase. However, due to the continuing decreases in fertility and general ageing of the Canberra population, the predominance of natural increase is forecast to decrease. Another factor is that as the Canberra

⁷¹ Submission 107, p 7.

⁷² *ibid*

⁷³ Australian Capital Territory, *Population Forecasts 1998—2013*, Department of Urban Services, Canberra, June 1998, p 5.

economy and labour market improve the current high levels of net interstate migration out of Canberra are forecast to decline.⁷⁴

Decline in preschool enrolments

3.6. This decline began a few years ago. Over the last three years there has been a significant decline in preschool enrolments as illustrated by Table 3.

Table 3 Preschool enrolments by year, ACT and non-ACT residents
(Compiled from Government Preschool Survey Bulletins)

Year	ACT resident enrolments		Non-ACT residents cared for in the PEA		Other non-ACT residents		Total	
	Feb	Mid year	Feb	Mid Year	Feb	Mid year	Feb	Mid year
1993	4143	4210	33	26	33	38	4209	4274
1994	n/a	4225	n/a	36	n/a	41	n/a	4302
1995	4204	4336	36	40	42	53	4282	4429
1996	4025	4196	35	31	25	54	4085	4281
1997	3965	3907	45		25	93*	4035	4000
1998	3904					71*	3975	

Notes

n/a There was no preschool census in February 1994 due to industrial action.

* In September 1997 and February 1998 there was no category for non-ACT residents cared for in the priority enrolment area (PEA)

3.7. Table 3 shows that since 1995 there has been a gradual decline in preschool enrolments among ACT residents at both the February and mid-year censuses.

⁷⁴ Australian Capital Territory, *Population Forecasts 1998—2013*, Department of Urban Services, Canberra, June 1998, p 5.

3.8. With the exception of 1997, the February enrolments have been lower than those at mid year.

3.9. Since the mid-year census in 1994, there has been a decline in ACT-resident enrolments between the mid-year census and the following February census. The largest of these declines (333) occurred between the mid-year census of 1995 and February 1996.

3.10. The February 1998 preschool survey noted that only two areas of Canberra recorded increases in enrolments from February 1997—they were Belconnen South, which recorded a 6.6 per cent increase and Gungahlin, which recorded a 12.1 per cent increase.⁷⁵

3.11. Non-ACT-resident enrolments at February each year have varied between 60 and 78. With the exception of 1993, between the February and mid-year censuses there has been an increase of about 20 in non-ACT-resident enrolments.

Preschool enrolment projections

3.12. Over the next ten years, the number of four-year-old children, that is, those of preschool age is forecast to gradually decline from 4,500 in 1998 to 4,100 in 2008.⁷⁶

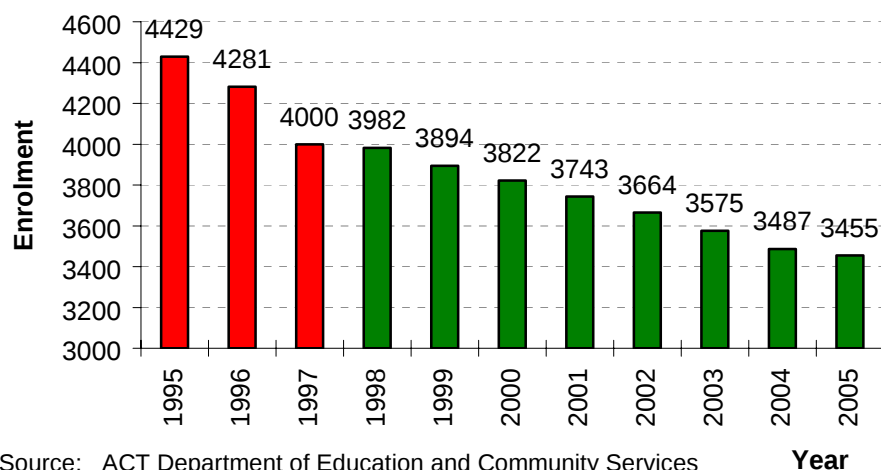
3.13. The Preschool Enrolment Projections published by the Department of Education and Community Services project a decline of preschool enrolments of 1.9 per cent or 442 students over the same period. The department advised that a decline of 400 students would mean a loss of eight full-time units across Canberra.⁷⁷ The trend in preschool enrolments and projected preschool enrolments is shown at Figure 1.

⁷⁵ ACT Department of Education and Training and Children's, Youth and Family Services Bureau, *Government Preschools Survey Bulletin*, February 1998, p1.

⁷⁶ Australian Capital Territory, *Population Forecasts 1998—2013*, Department of Urban Services, Canberra, June 1998, pp 30, 31

⁷⁷ Transcript, p 35.

Figure 1 Actual August/September Government Preschool enrolments 1995 to 1997 and projected August/September enrolments 1998 to 2005



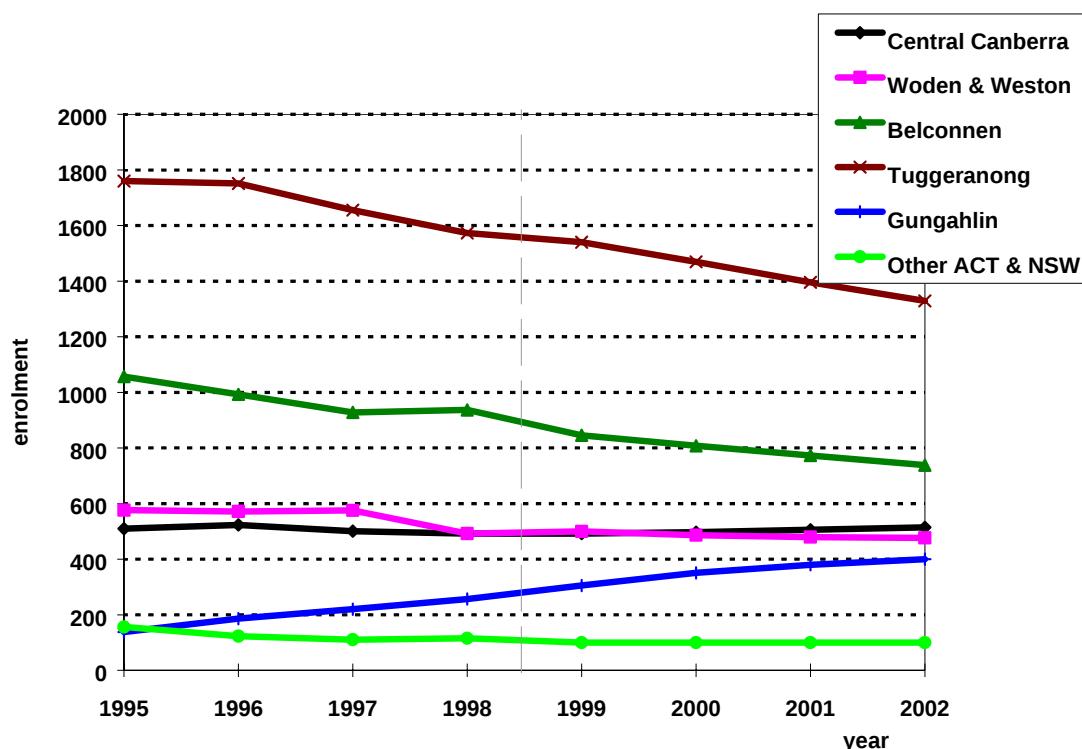
Source: ACT Department of Education and Community Services

* Enrolment figures include mainstream students, Uriarra and Cooperative Primary Schools, Koori programs and EIUs

3.14. The Department of Education and Community Services advised that although total preschool student numbers are declining across the ACT, in Gungahlin the number of resident preschool students is increasing and in southern Tuggeranong resident preschool students are at their peak. Over the next four years enrolments are predicted to increase in one region, Gungahlin, to decline in Tuggeranong, Belconnen, Woden/Weston and to remain largely unchanged in Central Canberra and the rural areas.⁷⁸ The actual and projected enrolments by district are shown in Figure 2.

⁷⁸ Submission 107, p 9.

Figure 2 Preschool pupils resident by district, actual 1995-1998, and projected 1999 - 2002



Source: ACT Department of Education and Community Services

Mobility of the Canberra population

3.15. By national comparisons, the population of Canberra is very young and very mobile. People move in and out of Canberra and also move within Canberra. Data from the 1996 census demonstrate that in the five years prior to the census more than half of the people in Canberra had moved to their current residence with nearly a quarter of the population having moved from other suburbs in Canberra.⁷⁹

3.16. Many submissions to the inquiry from preschools identified as underutilised by the Auditor General, claimed regeneration to be occurring in their suburb. These communities included Hawker, Weetangera, Florey, Lyons, Deakin and Cook.

3.17. However, the evidence is quite clear that although suburbs are constantly regenerating, it is highly unlikely the numbers of preschool-

⁷⁹ Australian Capital Territory, *Population Forecasts 1998—2013*, Department of Urban Services, Canberra, June 1998, p 22.

age children that existed when the suburb was first settled will ever be reproduced (assuming the number of dwellings in the catchment area remains the same).

3.18. Changes to the preschool enrolment policy, decided on in 1997, resulted in more flexibility for parents in choosing a preschool for their child. Until these changes, staffing planning was based on enrolments from each preschool's designated priority enrolment area and included children living and cared for in that area. As a result of the changes, outside area registrations are considered in addition to priority enrolment area registrations when planning staffing for each preschool. This has made the task of projecting future demand for each preschool more complicated.

The effect of declining enrolments on the system as a whole

3.19. Rationalisation and matching provision to enrolments is not new and according to the Department of Education and Community Services has had minimal effect on overall access over the years. Annual adjustments are made to preschools with some increasing and some decreasing to match provision with changes in enrolments. For instance in 1997 there were seven changes and in 1998 there were 14 changes. Since 1991, three preschools have closed. A further six preschools relocated to primary school sites.⁸⁰

3.20. Decisions are made annually to adjust to declining enrolments with reductions in the number of groups operating in many preschools. This has led over time to an uneven distribution across districts. For example, in February 1998: in the South Tuggeranong area, 9 preschools catered for 24 per cent of the preschool population; in Woden 10 preschools catered for 8.7 per cent of the preschool population; in South Canberra eight preschools catered for 7.2 per cent of the preschool population; and in North Canberra 10 preschools catered for only 8 per cent of the preschool population.⁸¹

3.21. The department reported that one major effect of staffing this uneven infrastructure has been to double the number of part-time preschools in the last ten years. In 1998, there are 24 part-time

⁸⁰ Submission 107, p 9.

⁸¹ Submission 107, p 10.

preschools. This represents 29 per cent of all preschools. Staffing the uneven infrastructure also lowers the staff utilisation rate.⁸²

Conclusions

3.22. There has been a decline in preschool enrolments during the last few years due to a decline in the number of eligible children in the community. This trend is expected to continue for at least the next ten years. During this time preschools in some new suburbs will open with the result that Canberra's preschool services will need to be spread over a greater area. This will create challenges for planners.

3.23. There is some evidence of regeneration in some of the older suburbs. However, the extent of this is unclear from the evidence. Based on historical information, enrolments in a suburb peak after seven years, followed by a decline until a stable long-term level is reached about 20 years after the suburb was first settled. This would indicate that regeneration in suburbs over twenty years old will maintain rather than increase the level of demand for preschool places in the suburb.

3.24. Changes to the preschool enrolment policy, implemented in 1998, while providing much greater flexibility for parents, also make the process of forecasting demand for individual preschools more complicated.

⁸² Submission 107, p 10.

4. Access

4.1. All four-year-olds are entitled to 10.5 hours per week of preschool in a government preschool in the year immediately prior to their entry into primary school. Approximately 90 per cent of eligible children attend a government preschool.

Neighbourhood concept

4.2. From the beginning of the preschool system in Canberra until the beginning of 1998, the preschool enrolment policy was based on the neighbourhood concept. Planning of preschool services was based on the number of children registered on the waiting list who were resident or cared for in the preschool's priority enrolment area.

4.3. For many years following the establishment of the first government preschool in Canberra, preschools were built within walking distance of most homes in a suburb. In fact, the older suburbs such as Deakin, Griffith, Yarralumla, Narrabundah, Ainslie and O'Connor had more than one preschool. These preschools were not located adjacent to a feeder primary school as is the case now. Often they were co-located with a child health centre. Children who attended these preschools were able to go on to the feeder primary school, either in the suburb or, in the case of Deakin and O'Connor, which had no primary school, in an adjacent suburb.

4.4. During the 1960s, preschools began to be located close to, but not adjacent to, their feeder primary school. The 1970s saw another planning change with preschools being built adjacent to the feeder primary school, and today preschools are generally built very close to the feeder primary school.

4.5. Some of the preschools which were built in the early stages of Canberra's development, such as at Yarralumla, North Ainslie, Red Hill, Turner, Mawson and Campbell have been relocated within their feeder primary school. The resulting vacant stand-alone preschool buildings have been handed back to the Government. Some have been redeveloped for other uses such as childcare services. Others are rented and others are still vacant.

4.6. As Canberra has grown and the need for preschool services in some areas has reduced, some preschools have closed. Examples of where closures have occurred are in Deakin, Griffith, Narrabundah, Dickson, Fisher and Holder.

Changes to the preschool enrolment policy

4.7. In 1997, changes to the preschool enrolment policy were negotiated and agreed to. Effective from the 1998 school year, these changes resulted in outside area registrations being considered in addition to priority enrolment registrations when planning for staffing for each preschool.

4.8. Under the new policy registered children, who live in or are cared for in the priority area, are given first preference followed by those from outside the priority area. Staffing is no longer based on the number of registrations from within the priority area providing much more flexibility for parents in deciding on a preschool for their child.

4.9. In choosing to enrol their child in a preschool outside their neighbourhood, parents are also demonstrating a preparedness to travel. Reasons for choosing a preschool outside their neighbourhood are varied and can be proximity to work or proximity to the school of other children.

4.10. Analysis of the February 1998 *ACT Government Preschool Survey* indicates that 13 per cent of preschool enrolments are from outside the priority enrolment area⁸³. This compares with 7 per cent in February 1997.⁸⁴ The fact that many parents are choosing preschools outside their neighbourhood demonstrates that, for some, close proximity of preschool to the home may not be an issue.

⁸³ ACT Department of Education and Community Services, *Government Preschools Survey Bulletin*, February 1998, p 9.

⁸⁴ ACT Department of Education and Community Services, *Government Preschool Census*, February 1997, p 8.

4.11. For others, close proximity of the preschool to the home is of paramount importance.⁸⁵ Home-based carers were identified in several submissions as a group whose livelihood could be affected by closure of a preschool in their suburb.⁸⁶

4.12. In discussions with the Auditor General, the committee noted that in the areas of Canberra settled before the 1980s there are some preschools which are very close, often less than two kilometres apart.⁸⁷ Planning in more recent years, for example, in the southern part of Tuggeranong and in Gungahlin, has generally resulted in greater distances between preschools.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds

4.13. There are some communities identified as disadvantaged. Access to preschool for children from these communities is an important aspect of addressing their disadvantage.

4.14. The committee received submissions from several preschool parent associations and playgroups identifying as disadvantaged.⁸⁸

4.15. The Department of Education and Community Services has developed a definition of disadvantage which is applied to school communities when making decisions about the distribution of the Schools Equity Fund. For this purpose, disadvantaged community is defined by reference to the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSED) based on census collection districts as derived from the 1996 census. Schools with over 25 per cent of their enrolments resident in communities classified as disadvantaged are classified as 'priority schools' and eligible for funding from the Schools Equity Fund. In 1998, 14 schools have been identified to share the funds. They are 13 primary schools and one high school. Preschools are not eligible.

4.16. While preschools are not eligible for funding under the Schools Equity Fund, preschools are part of the same communities identified as disadvantaged.

⁸⁵ As noted, for example, in submissions 29, 30, 34, 36, 64, 70, 71, 72, 82, 84, 85, 90, 91, 94, 95, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102, 104, 105, 108, 110, Transcript, p 41.

⁸⁶ For example submissions 27, 42, 48, 61, 90,

⁸⁷ Uncorrected Proof Transcript, 30 July 1998, p 8.

⁸⁸ Submissions 1, 20, 48,

Children in long daycare

4.17. Results of a May 1998 survey of long daycare and independent preschools conducted by the Department of Education and Community Services indicate that there are 540 children in long daycare, who are eligible but, who do not attend preschool. There are also 74 children eligible for government preschools who attend independent preschools and 324 children in long daycare centres who also attend a government preschool.⁸⁹

4.18. Submissions from some parents, the ACT Children's Services Resource Advisory Program, CSIROCARE, the Association of Long Daycare (Community Based) Directors ACT and the ACT Children's Services Association raised the matter of access to government-funded preschool programs for children in long daycare.⁹⁰ Many parents who work full-time do not have sufficiently flexible working arrangements to enable them to transport their children between preschool and childcare during a day. Unless the long daycare centre is located adjacent to a government preschool, eligible children miss out on access to a government-funded preschool program.

4.19. Many long daycare centres employ qualified preschool teachers. However they receive no government funding. Long daycare is now totally funded by parental fees. Some suggested that there needs to be more flexibility and equity in the provision of funded preschool education so that parents can have an option of a preschool program in a government preschool or a long daycare centre.⁹¹

4.20. Based on their experiences in having children participate in government preschool programs as part of their long daycare arrangements, two submissions expressed disquiet about the impact of any changes on these arrangements.⁹²

⁸⁹ Department of Education and Community Services, *Access to preschool and childcare services in the year before school*.

⁹⁰ Submissions 19, 69, 74, 79, 80, 89, 106.

⁹¹ submissions 19, 69, 79, 80, 89.

⁹² Submissions 56, 113.

Access and part-time preschools

4.21. As Canberra has grown, preschool services have needed to be provided over a wider geographical area without increased resources as enrolments have been declining. In the last ten years the number of preschools has increased from 76 to 82, whilst the number of children attending preschools has declined.⁹³ There has been a doubling in the number of part-time preschools over the last ten years.⁹⁴

4.22. The Department of Education and Community Services expressed concerns about the growing number of part-time preschools. It also stated that it has difficulties in maintaining an increasingly expensive part-time system.⁹⁵ The department advised that staff isolation in part-time preschools is also a significant concern. The contact hours for part-time staff result in greater difficulty for staff to connect with their peers for support, professional development, sharing of ideas and best practice.⁹⁶

4.23. While the Australian Education Union (AEU) stated that it has no problem with part-time preschools where the need can be sustained, it expressed concerns about staff working conditions, the number of sites an executive officer has to manage and supervise and underutilisation of physical infrastructure.⁹⁷

4.24. The Canberra Preschool Society was of the view that part-time preschools ensure access.⁹⁸

4.25. The committee fails to see how maintaining viable part-time preschools can be expensive. Analysis of the February 1998 preschool survey indicates that of the 24 part-time preschools, 13 had staff utilisation rates of 90 per cent or more. In fact, eight had a 100 per cent staff utilisation rate. There were three with a staff utilisation rate of 80 per cent or more, three with 70 per cent or more and five with a staff utilisation rate of less than 70 per cent (one of these is in a disadvantaged area and one is in rural area). Staff utilisation rates for some of the preschools below 100 per cent would be expected to increase as the year progressed. Later figures were not available to the committee.

⁹³ Submission 107, p 4.

⁹⁴ Submission 107, p 10.

⁹⁵ Submission 107, p 16.

⁹⁶ Submission 107, p 10.

⁹⁷ Submission 104, p 1, Transcript p 59.

⁹⁸ Transcript, p 43.

4.26. If the minimum group size for a full-time unit were increased it could result in more viable part-time preschools. Modelling needs to be done to determine the effects of a small increase in the minimum group size in preschools operating one full-time unit and those operating one full-time unit plus one part-time unit.

Conclusion

4.27. It is clear that the community wants reasonable access to a preschool of their choice. The new preschool enrolment policy allows for more choice for families, in that a family may elect as their first priority a preschool outside their suburb's priority enrolment area.

4.28. There are some inequities between inner and outer suburbs of Canberra in terms of distances between preschools.

4.29. There are some communities which should continue to be able to access a preschool program in their area even though low enrolments will result in low staff utilisation rates. These areas include rural areas and disadvantaged communities.

4.30. There is a group of children in long daycare not able to access preschool.

4.31. The maintenance of part-time preschools will ensure access in areas of declining enrolments.

5. Program options to meet the needs of the community

5.1. The Auditor General's report suggested:

It could be useful to look at the contemporary needs of families with children under school age, not just four-year-olds, with the aim of assessing the sorts of currently unmet needs for support for children and child rearing that could potentially be met by the provision of a variety of early childhood services in preschool settings.⁹⁹

Current range of preschool models

5.2. The Department of Education and Community Services advised that there are several models in existence in the ACT which could serve as a basis for further development. The department pointed out that any further development of these models would continue to involve effective consultation with staff, the Canberra Preschool Society, unions and other interested parties. The models are as follows.¹⁰⁰

Early intervention units (EIUs)

5.3. There are ten EIUs providing educational placements for children with developmental delays and disabilities from the age of three to five years. Within these units one is a specialised language unit, providing for children whose primary delay is in the area of language and another provides for early intervention for children who have autistic spectrum disorders.

5.4. All EIUs except the autism unit are located in preschools. They offer specialised education programs in groups of up to 12 children. The ten EIUs draw their enrolments from across the ACT. They are located where there are modelling opportunities with mainstream students (except the language¹⁰¹ and autistic units), appropriately trained staff and appropriate space. For this reason EIUs, other than the autistic unit,

⁹⁹ Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 *Management of Preschool Education*, p 15.

¹⁰⁰ Submission 107, p 13.

¹⁰¹ Submission 78.

occasionally move location. Many children attend EIUs away from their home area preschool for some sessions and return to mainstream preschool in the larger group of up to 25 students for up to 10.5 hours per week in all.

Early childhood school

5.5. The O'Connor Co-operative School is an early childhood school for children aged four to eight years from preschool to year two. It provides an example of a community and government partnership in the provision of early childhood care and education. Preschool aged children benefit from 10.5 hours per week of preschool similar to other government preschool programs and in addition are able to attend for extended hours up to five days per week.

5.6. The ACT Government provides the school building and preschool staff. Additional costs for the preschool are met through the parent community, which also manages the long daycare and after school care program. Because the classes are all on the same site, siblings are able to spend time together during lunch times and after school. There are also possibilities of staff sharing their skills across groups of children of different ages. The advantages of this model are its ability to meet the needs of families requiring a longer day, and the educational benefits of bringing together early childhood expertise on the one site.

Preschools co-located with primary schools

5.7. In 1991, six preschools relocated to primary school buildings. This approach has the advantage of reducing isolation and providing opportunities to connect with other early childhood programs. These preschools are not administered by the primary school. According to the Department of Education and Community Services this can be a costly approach. Preliminary estimates of the current cost of moving a preschool would be approximately \$170 000- \$190 000, depending on site conditions. The department advised that two former government preschool buildings were sold in recent years.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Minister for Education, correspondence dated 19 August 1998.

Preschool provided in long daycare, occasional care and private preschools

5.8. In the ACT, several childcare centres offer a high quality preschool program with qualified early childhood teachers. In 80 long daycare centres, 46 group leaders (or 58 per cent) have a three or four year early childhood teacher qualification. In 14 occasional care centres, three group leaders have three or four year early childhood teacher qualifications. Five independent preschools have at least one teacher with a three or four year early childhood teacher qualification. In 17 playschools there are five similarly qualified staff.

Diverse government preschool programs

5.9. Some preschools have been developed to meet the needs of their communities. For example, at Yarralumla Montessori a program has evolved where government preschool is provided in the Montessori philosophy for three- to five-year-old children with an extended hours program for older children, cost recovery for three-year-olds and preschool after school care.

5.10. At Tharwa Preschool two long days are offered to cater for the needs of rural families.

Co-located early childhood services

5.11. There are a number of co-located early childhood facilities including Nicholls and Ngunnawal in which preschool and childcare programs share the same building. Taylor Preschool shares preschool and occasional care in the same building. Many other preschools have other early childhood facilities, such as long daycare within easy access.

5.12. The committee was particularly interested in the programs operating at Ngunnawal. It received differing views about how successfully the childcare and preschool programs were integrated. The committee was concerned that at Ngunnawal, which has been operating since February 1997, there is no protocol in place to guide practice in relation to children and in relation to sharing facilities. The committee understands that efforts began in July 1998 to develop a protocol which will become the 'shared understandings' for practices at the Ngunnawal Early Childhood Centre. The committee was surprised and disappointed

at the lack of coordination and leadership shown by the department in its management of this new project.

5.13. In its submission the ACT Children's Services Resource and Advisory Program provided some 'lessons' to be learnt from the new model. They are as follows:

New models of early childhood education need more than a building to make them work well for children, staff and parents.

Commitment must be provided by all parties to the development of the model so that it works well for children, staff and parents.

'Management' must take the initiative to guide this process and to ensure its development.

Assurances must be made to assess new models to ensure the best possible outcomes are being provided for the children enrolled.¹⁰³

5.14. The committee considers that it is time to evaluate the Ngunnawal model.

Special needs programs

5.15. At Causeway Preschool three-year-old children have access to the program. In addition, in 1998, there was a larger than usual number of younger preschool children so an additional preschool assistant was provided for a term to assist with the program until these children developed the maturity and familiarity with the routines to fully benefit from the program.

5.16. The Narrabundah Early Childhood Education Centre also provides early childhood programs for three-year-olds and a program catering for children under the age of three with their parents, in a group led by the teacher.

¹⁰³ Submission 106.

Koori preschool program

5.17. The Koori preschool program¹⁰⁴ was initiated by the Department of Education and Community Services in response to the National Policy on Aboriginal Education (1991). The program is available to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

5.18. There are three Koori preschool programs operating as part of ACT government preschool provision. They operate at Holt and Wanniasa Hills preschools and at the Narrabundah Early Childhood Education Centre (NECEC). Children from across the ACT access these programs. Each caters for a maximum of 15 children aged from birth to five years who attend one, three-hour session per week. Children under three years attend with an adult. Children of eligible preschool age attend this extra session in addition to the 10.5 hours per week of preschool.

5.19. The Holt and Wanniasa Hills programs are staffed by a teacher and the Koori Family Liaison Officer attends with the teacher. At NECEC, a teacher and assistant already employed at NECEC work in the Koori program and are supported by the Koori Family Liaison Officer. Responsibility for supervision of the program rests with the Aboriginal Education Unit.

5.20. At February 1998, there were 13 children enrolled at Holt, eight at Wanniasa and 15 at NECEC.

Variety of services available in preschool venues

5.21. A number of children's services operate in preschool venues. These include playschools for three-year-olds, playgroups for parents with young children including babies and play sessions organised by Family Daycare Schemes for family daycare workers and children in their care. School-age care programs (before and after school care) operate in two preschools for children aged from school entry age to eight years.

5.22. Playgroups have been encouraged to use preschool venues for their sessions since the late 1970s. Currently 74, of the 189 playgroups in the ACT, operate in 53 preschool venues catering for approximately 1,100 children.

¹⁰⁴ Minister for Education, correspondence dated 19 August 1998.

The need for a more diverse range of programs

5.23. The Senate inquiry into the early childhood services sector noted that until relatively recently, education and care were treated as two distinct early childhood services. While this division is no longer accepted by many of those with an interest in those services, the remnants of that attitude are still very evident in many aspects of service provision and delivery, such as pay and conditions of staff, the way services are organised, and the different way in which the two services are viewed by some.¹⁰⁵

5.24. For some parents the way childcare and preschool services are organised creates great logistical difficulties. For some, who wish to access one service only there are no difficulties and there are others who see value for their children in two distinct settings being available.¹⁰⁶

5.25. Associate Professor Stonehouse told the committee that the separate origins of preschool and childcare have hampered the development of a system which best meets the needs of the family in the 1990s. In her view, as an early childhood professional, it no longer makes sense to have two separate systems that sit side by side.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, *Childhood Matters*, July 1996, p 1.

¹⁰⁶ For example 65, 69, 84, 93, 96, 113. Transcript, p 49.

¹⁰⁷ Uncorrected Proof Transcript, 13 August 1998 p 55.

5.26. In its submission the Government stated that:

it regards the provision of early childhood education in a variety of settings as important and appreciates the need to continue to develop more integrated services which will meet the changing needs of the community and the increasing demand for affordable childcare and early education services.¹⁰⁸

5.27. Further, when discussing the current model the submission stated:

...it is not always the model best suited to the needs of all families. Access to preschools should be considered in the overall context of early childhood care and education, and the changing needs of families.¹⁰⁹

5.28. While the Canberra Preschool Society and the Preschool Teachers Professional Association were of the view that the preschool system provides adequate choice,¹¹⁰ many submissions expressed a view that there needs to be a greater range of program options to meet community need. Some indicated that session times need to be longer at their preschool to better cater for the needs of working parents.¹¹¹ The length of session times is a matter determined by the preschool community. The committee suggests that those communities that would like change raise the matter with staff and the preschool parent association.

5.29. Others suggested a greater range of programs be available for three-year-olds and that such programs operate in preschool premises.¹¹² Some playschools for three-year-olds operate very successfully in preschool premises on a user-pays basis. The committee suggests the need for more activities for three-year-olds be considered as part of a long-term plan for early childhood services.

¹⁰⁸ Submission 107, p 5.

¹⁰⁹ Submission 107, p 5.

¹¹⁰ Submissions 39, 103.

¹¹¹ Submissions 52, 54, 76, 110.

¹¹² Submissions 5, 14, 20, 48, 76, 94, 108, 109.

5.30. Some suggested that ‘after preschool programs’ and long daycare programs be established to enable children to stay longer at preschool.¹¹³ Evidence from a number of witnesses indicates that this suggestion needs careful examination, especially in relation to any effect on current long daycare services. It must be considered in the context of overall planning of early childhood services.

5.31. There was another group which advocated for funding to be provided to long daycare centres to give families a choice about where they access their 10.5 hours per week of government-funded preschool and to ensure equity for eligible children not able to access preschool because of their long daycare arrangements.¹¹⁴

5.32. Two notable early childhood professionals, Ms Tonia Godhard from New South Wales and Associate Professor Stonehouse from Victoria stressed the importance of integrated programs, where there is no separation between ‘preschool time’ and ‘care time’. Associate Professor Stonehouse told the committee that it does not make sense to accentuate the care and education differences within a program. She described a model which is fully integrated. In this model there is a qualified teacher who works across all groups the whole day.¹¹⁵

5.33. Sydney Day Nursery, a community-based provider of long daycare does not support or practice a model where the preschool teacher comes in for a session each day. In their programs the teacher is part of the program all day. Their teachers are also paid four per cent above award teacher rates to compensate for the different conditions between sessional preschool and long daycare.¹¹⁶

5.34. In responding to the question of whether long daycare centres should be funded to provide a government-funded preschool program, the Canberra Preschool Society stated it would have no problem with the Government providing some funding.¹¹⁷ The Minister advised the committee that he would be prepared to have a look at the matter, however, it is a complex issue requiring further investigation.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Submissions 37, 52, 53, 86, 102.

¹¹⁴ Submissions 19, 69, 79, 80, 89, Transcript, p 98, p 101.

¹¹⁵ Uncorrected Proof Transcript 13 August 1998, p 70.

¹¹⁶ Transcript, p 97.

¹¹⁷ Transcript, p 50.

¹¹⁸ Transcript, p 32.

5.35. One submission suggested that preschools be amalgamated with and administered by primary schools.¹¹⁹ When this suggestion was raised at hearings with the Department of Education and Community Services and other witnesses there was little support. The Preschool Teachers Professional Association was supportive and other witnesses were supportive of co-location with primary schools, but not administration by primary schools.¹²⁰

Research

5.36. In discussing how early childhood services in the ACT can be improved to better meet the needs of contemporary families, the committee was interested in research findings which could inform any debate on the matter.

5.37. Associate Professor Fleer told the committee that there is a lack of Australian research which supports particular models. Most of the information available is anecdotal or based on overseas research where the cultural contexts can be different.¹²¹

5.38. One area of concern to most of the early childhood professionals appearing before the committee is the effect of multiple care arrangements per week on a child. The Senate inquiry reported some research which suggests that multiple care arrangements in a day can result in long-term effects on a child's ability to form attachments and relationships.¹²²

Preschools—where do they fit?

5.39. The Canberra Preschool Society, the Preschool Teachers Professional Association and many preschool parent associations were of the view that the administration and management of preschool education should be returned to the Schools Directorate.¹²³ In 1996, the Children's, Youth and Family Services Bureau was established within the Department of Education and Community Services to provide a more focussed and co-ordinated approach to services for children and young people. The management and administration of preschools was

¹¹⁹ Submission 59.

¹²⁰ Transcript, p 143.

¹²¹ Transcript, p 101.

¹²² Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, *Childhood Matters*, July 1996, p 4.

¹²³ Submissions 39, 62, 90, 103.

transferred to the Children's Services Branch from the Schools Directorate. Other functions of the Children's Services Branch include licensing and regulation of children's daycare services and the provision of assistance to young people under 12 who have development problems and functional difficulties through the Child Health and Development Service.

5.40. Arguments supporting the return of preschool administration to Schools Directorate were based on the view that preschool is 'education' not 'childcare'.

5.41. It is important that preschools develop linkages with other services concerned with young children and their families, such as health services, family support services, childcare services and primary schools.

5.42. Where preschools fit in a departmental administrative structure will not necessarily ensure better linkages with one sector or another. Preschools should be a pivotal part of the array of early childhood services. What is important is that there be a commitment to ensuring preschools become closer to other early childhood services and to primary schools. The committee did not receive any evidence which indicated that preschool children are being disadvantaged or their education adversely affected because of the new administrative arrangements.

Conclusions

5.43. Within the preschool system there are a few programs which are specifically designed to cater for children with special needs or particular communities. Many preschools have, in recent years, changed their session times to offer three longer sessions per week rather than four shorter sessions, to better meet the needs of families.

5.44. At Ngunnawal and Nicholls in Gungahlin a new approach has been taken where preschools and childcare centres share the same building. However, as the committee was told, sharing a building does not necessarily mean that the two programs adopt common policies or practices. For this approach to be effective there needs to be a commitment to shared values and philosophy. This will not happen automatically. There needs to be support from both sets of management to develop shared understandings which will underpin practice. The

committee was surprised that at the time of the inquiry no evaluation of the approaches at Nicholls and Ngunnawal had been planned. An evaluation strategy should be developed for any new approach.

5.45. There is interest in the issue of government funding of preschool programs within long daycare centres. This could be a way of ensuring even better access to government-funded preschool programs as well as improving equity of access. However, there would be issues to address relating to funding non-government service providers to provide a service which is now wholly government provided.

5.46. There is also interest in further developing the services offered from preschool buildings. Such development should not be done on an ad hoc basis, but be considered as part of a long-term plan for early childhood services.

5.47. The effects on children of different program models and care arrangements have not been extensively researched, although great concern was expressed about the possible detrimental effects on young children of multiple care arrangements in a week.

5.48. The committee received no evidence to indicate the current arrangements for the administration and management of preschools are having any adverse effect on preschool services.

6. The way forward

6.1. This chapter draws together conclusions about the major issues raised and sets out the committee's recommendations on how to proceed from here on.

6.2. While the committee acknowledges the concern some of the Auditor General's findings has caused for many communities, overall the committee does not have any reason to question those findings on the basis that the Auditor General was examining the use of resources provided for the output 'preschool education'. There is no doubt that government preschools are effective. There is also no doubt that there are some inefficiencies.

6.3. The current Government has made a decision to limit the amount of funding it will allocate to preschool education on the basis of student numbers. If the Government continues to adopt this approach the community will be faced with further rationalisation of preschool services.

6.4. The need for sensitive and planned rationalisation of preschool services in the future was supported by the Australian Education Union, the Preschool Teachers Professional Association and a number of other participants in the inquiry.¹²⁴

6.5. The Canberra Preschool Society stated that any closures must only be carried out when all other options have been exhausted and not purely as the result of financial rationalisation of the preschool service.¹²⁵ Preschool Parent Associations own most of the equipment in a preschool as well as some outdoor equipment.

6.6. Most of the submissions from individual preschool parent associations advanced a case for their preschool to retain the status quo in relation to operation. The submissions indicated that communities obviously value their local preschool.

¹²⁴ For example submissions 27, 38, 39, 40, 58, 67, 68, 76, 86, 104, 110, 114.

¹²⁵ Submission 103.

6.7. During the inquiry it became very evident that the community finds the annual decision making process on preschool operation very unsettling and uncertain. The Department of Education and Community Services also acknowledged that there are very real difficulties with the current system of year-by-year planning.¹²⁶ Participants who addressed the planning issue called for the development of a long-term plan, which is supported by the committee.

Planning for 1999

6.8. The committee believes that it would be totally unrealistic to attempt to develop and implement a long-term plan by the beginning of the 1999 school year. In the 1998-99 budget, the Government maintained funding for preschools in real terms. The Minister stated that:

After taking account of technical adjustments and the impact of enrolments the budget has been increased by three per cent.¹²⁷

6.9. When the 1998-99 budget was released the Minister also indicated that there would be no major changes to the preschool system in 1999. He said:

Each year the system is adjusted to meet the needs of families, and ensure that preschools are accessible to all families who need them. This approach will continue to be guided by the same factors it has in previous years.¹²⁸

6.10. The committee accepts that there will, however, need to be some adjustments for 1999 to cater for changes in enrolments such as decreases in some preschools and increases in others. In the last two years the time available between the September preschool survey and the staffing rounds has been shorter. This is obviously of concern with the

¹²⁶ Transcript, p 35.

¹²⁷ Minister for Education, 'Preschool funding maintained', *Australian Capital Territory Budget 1998*, 23 June 1998.

¹²⁸ *ibid*

current year-to-year approach because it reduces the possibility of meaningful consultation with the communities affected. This is another reason why a long-term plan is needed.

Recommendation 1

6.11. The committee recommends that, for 1999, the Department of Education and Community Services, in consultation with the community, apply its usual process of adjustment of the preschool system and that it does not introduce any major changes until a long-term plan has been developed.

Long-term planning

6.12. The committee strongly supports the need for long-term planning, however believes that adequate time must be allowed for a process of consultation and consideration of options. This cannot be done before the commencement of the 1999 school year.

6.13. Based on the evidence, the committee considers there are many issues which need to be taken into account in the development of a long-term plan. These issues are outlined below.

Development of a statement of objectives and purposes

6.14. The committee considers that the development of a statement of objectives and purposes for early childhood services, which includes preschool services as an integral part, is a fundamental component of a long-term plan. The department advised the committee that it would be developing such a statement in the first half of 1999.

Building utilisation

6.15. The Auditor General did not take into account in the assessment of building utilisation the use of preschool buildings by community organisations. While this use is not extensive, preschool buildings are an important community asset. The committee would like to see greater community use of preschool buildings and believes that Government needs to take much greater responsibility as asset managers and develop

strategies to improve community usage for inclusion in the long-term plan.

6.16. Where it will not have a negative impact on access, and can be shown to be in the community's interest, consideration also needs to be given in some circumstances to possible relocation of stand-alone part-time preschools in primary school buildings.

Employee expenses

6.17. Employee expenses represent by far the largest proportion of the preschool budget. An increase in the minimum group size for full-time and multiple group preschools would be expected to result in more efficient staff utilisation rates and reduced employee expenses. The Department of Education and Community Services indicated that it was reluctant to take such action because modelling at the time of the development of the new enrolment policy, in 1997, showed that it could result in an increase in the number of part-time preschools as well as some families not receiving their first choice of preschool. It is the committee's view that this matter needs to be readdressed on the basis of modelling done on 1998 data.

Disadvantaged communities

6.18. Preschool education has been demonstrated to be of significant importance for children and families in disadvantaged communities. This has been recognised by the Government with the special programs operating at Causeway and Narrabundah and the Koori preschool program. There are some other areas in Canberra considered to be disadvantaged and the committee requests that preschools continue to be provided in areas identified as disadvantaged.

Children in long daycare

6.19. There are over 500 children in long daycare whose parents are unable or unwilling to take them to a government-funded preschool. Some suggested that there needs to be more flexibility and equity in the provision of funded preschool education so that parents can have an option of a government-funded preschool program in a government

preschool or a long daycare centre. The committee is of the view that this matter be further investigated.

Part-time preschools

6.20. The committee considers that continued operation of viable part-time preschools is essential to ensure reasonable access. The committee was not convinced by the department's concerns about isolation and the difficulties part-time staff have in connecting with their colleagues. Part-time preschools are no different from single unit full-time preschools in terms of isolation. Together, part-time and single unit, full-time preschools comprise 70 per cent of government preschools. The committee believes that there are strong reasons to continue providing part-time preschools.

Different program models

6.21. Time limitations did not allow the committee to conduct an in-depth analysis of the views and the research on different models of service delivery. Nor was the committee able to travel to other jurisdictions to observe different models. There has been no evaluation of the more recent innovative models existing in Canberra such as the Ngunnawal Early Childhood Centre. The committee considers that an evaluation needs to be done urgently to inform future planning.

6.22. The evidence before the committee pointed to a need for more diversification. However much more work needs to be done before decisions can be made on any models to adopt. The committee suggests that the Department of Education and Community Services develop a discussion paper to form the basis for community discussion on how preschools could better meet the needs of the community in the next century.

Closer links between early childhood services

6.23. In planning future early childhood services all early childhood services need to have opportunities for input. There are some forums where links between the preschool and childcare sectors are being developed, for example the 'Closer Ties' forum, the Australian Early Childhood Association initiatives¹²⁹ and the Early Childhood Advisory Committee.

¹²⁹ Submission 118.

6.24. The committee was told that, although the terms of reference of the Early Childhood Advisory Committee are inclusive of all early childhood services, until 1997, there was no representation from the childcare sector.¹³⁰ One representative has now been included. Full details of the terms of reference and composition of the Early Childhood Advisory Committee are at Appendix 5. The committee believes that even more representation of the early childhood sectors is required on the Early Childhood Advisory Committee to enable broader input into planning and the development of early childhood policies.

6.25. Another area where strong links are important is between preschools and primary schools. Many individual preschools have developed strong links with their feeder primary schools.

Recommendation 2

6.26. The committee recommends that the Department of Education and Community Services, in consultation with the community, develop by the year 2000, a long-term plan for the provision of government-funded preschool education within the context of early childhood service provision in the ACT. The plan to include:

- a statement of purpose which articulates a vision and purpose for early childhood services with a particular focus on preschool services;**
- strategies to maximise access to preschool services in an environment of a changing demographic structure and declining enrolments;**
- strategies to improve staff utilisation rates;**
- a plan for building utilisation including identification of other uses for preschool buildings;**
- a statement on different models of service delivery for consideration in future provision; and**
- ongoing mechanisms for community consultation.**

¹³⁰ Transcript, p 126.

Matters for immediate consideration

6.27. The committee identified two matters which need to be considered urgently, namely, the level of support for preschool staff and the level of support for children with special needs.

Support for preschool staff

6.28. The committee is most concerned about the proposed level of support to be provided to preschool staff by advisers. The Auditor General noted that the arrangements in place in 1998 for access to departmental advisers could be improved. As outlined in Chapter 2, the committee is not convinced that the proposed arrangements to increase the number of executive officers from three full-time, to four, each with a part-time teaching load will result in any improvement on the 1998 arrangements. The committee is not opposed to the concept of advisers having a part-time teaching load. However, it is most concerned about their work load and their availability to support teachers and assistants.

Recommendation 3

6.29. The committee recommends that the Department of Education and Community Services examine ways of increasing the proposed level of professional support to teachers and assistants.

Support for children with special needs

6.30. The audit report raised some concerns about the level of support available to preschool children with special needs. The matter was also raised in this inquiry and, on the basis of information provided to the committee, the committee concludes that there is an urgent need for a review.

Recommendation 4

6.31. The committee recommends that the Department of Education and Community Services review the adequacy of support provided to children with special needs accessing government preschools.

Kerrie Tucker MLA
Chair
9 September 1998

Appendix 1 Submissions received

- 1 Ms Fran Maher, Causeway Preschool Parents Association
- 2 Ms Jane Barnett, Convenor, Yarralumla Tuesday Playgroup
- 3 Reidar Jorgensen, Duffy Preschool Parents Association
- 4 Mrs Rose Unwin, Co-ordinator, Weetangera 'Wombat' Playschool
- 5 Ms Michelle Walker
- 6 Ms Bronwyn Buckley and Mr Anthony van Herwaarden
- 7 Mrs A M Mitchell
- 8 Ms Aviva Cameron, Chairperson, Save Our Preschools Committee
- 9 Ms Julie Stewart
- 10 Ms Anita Holmes
- 11 Mrs Chris Clarke
- 12 Mr Graham & Ms Lynn McDonald
- 13 Ms Sally-Anne Hutcheson, President, Deakin Preschool and Parents Association
- 14 Ms Alison Sewter and Mr Thomas Kopal
- 15 L J Matthews & L D Russell
- 16 Ms Barbara Roche
- 17 Ms Louise Flood

- 18 Ms Joanne Mues
- 19 Ms Sara South, Director, CSIROCARE Black Mountain Early Childhood Centre
- 20 Ms Helen Zurek, President, Narrabundah Early Childhood Education Centre
- 21 Ms Sandra Kelly
- 22 Ms Jo Newton
- 23 Mr Clive Hilliker
- 24 Ms Jo Hilliker
- 25 Ms Mary Stewart, President, St Thomas Aquinas P & F Association
- 26 Ms Leanne Narayan
- 27 Ms Lynne Sheville
- 28 Ms Jennifer Farrell
- 29 Ms Susan Gillard and Mr Dean Gillard
- 30 Ms Robyn Schipp, Convenor, Lyons Playgroup
- 31 M McElligott
- 32 Ms Gillian Ramage
- 33 Ms Lorraine Bevan
- 34 Mr Phil Mayne
- 35 Ms Louise Frawley
- 36 Ms Prue Clarke, Principal, Ainslie Primary School

- 37 Mr Luke Morwitch, Secretary, Tharwa Preschool Parents Association
- 38 Mr Mike Woods, Chair, Fraser Primary School Board
- 39 Ms Lorraine Batterham, President, Preschool Teachers Professional Association
- 40 Ms Sally Green, President, Latham Parents Association
- 41 Mr Terry O'Brien OAM RFD
- 42 Ms Helen Mitchell, Fraser Preschool Parents Association
- 43 Evatt Pre-school (Ms Roslyn Chan, President and Mr Cameron McMorro, Vice President) and Gumnut Place Childcare Centre (Ms Maureen Butt)
- 44 Mr Dominic De Marco, Convenor, West Belconnen Local Area Planning Advisory Committee
- 45 Weston Pre-school Parents' Association Inc
- 46 Ms Gillian Sinclair
- 47 Mr Mark Smith, McKellar Preschool Parent Association Inc. Committee
- 48 Lyons Preschool Parent Association
- 49 Chris Dennis
- 50 Mr Shaun Whitehouse, President, Allen Main Memorial Preschool Parents Association
- 51 Ms Lisa Hall, President, Cranleigh School P&C Association
- 52 Ms Linda Steadman, President, Palmerston District Preschool Parent Association
- 53 Ms S A Hutcheson, President, Deakin Preschool Parents Association

- 54 Ms Carolyn Turner, President, Pre-school Assistants Association (A.C.T.)
- 55 Ms Christy de Looper, President, Page Preschool Parents Association
- 56 Ms Bronwyn Papa, Director/Owner, Honey Tree Early Childhood Centre
- 57 Mr Olwen Conran, President, Campbell Preschool Parents Association Inc
- 58 Mr Phil Aungles, President, Curtin North Preschool Parents Association
- 59 Ms Vicki Bresnan, Teacher-in-Charge, Duffy Preschool
- 60 Mr Stephen Van Gerwen, President, Charles Conder Preschool Parents Association
- 61 Ms Tracey Roscoe, President, Flynn Pre-school Parents Association Inc
- 62 Ms Ann Willoughby, Chair, Hawker Primary School Board and Mr Murray Badger, President, Hawker Primary P&C Committee
- 63 Ms Bronwyn Buckley, Cook Preschool Parent Association
- 64 Ms Stephanie O'Meara, Maribyrnong Pre-school
- 65 Ms Judy Johnson, President, Baker Gardens Preschool Parents Association Inc
- 66 Ms Anne Foster, Director, ACT Playgroups Association Inc
- 67 Ms Jenny Dunstan, Vice President, Griffith Bannister Gardens Preschool Parents Association
- 68 Ms Jayne Murray, Teacher-in-charge, Giralang Preschool
- 69 Ms Jenny Lenard, President, ACT Children's Services Association

- 70 Ms Kathy Mudford, President, Charnwood Parent Association Inc
and Ms Jan Hackett, Teacher in Charge, Charnwood Preschool
- 71 Ms Larissa Dunn, President, Hughes Preschool Parents Association
Inc
- 72 Mr Frank Quinlan, President, Miles Franklin Preschool Parents
Association
- 73 Ms Grace Campbell, President, Higgins Preschool Parent
Association
- 74 Ms Dianne Mead
- 75 Glenn
- 76 Ms Cassandra Schmidt, President, Calwell Preschool
- 77 Bonython Preschool Parent Association
- 78 Ms Maree Goodwin
- 79 Ms Janet Fuller, President, Management Committee, Bruce Ridge
Early Childhood Centre
- 80 Ms Glennis Beazley, Director, Bruce Ridge Early Childhood
Centre
- 81 Ms Johanna Bruinsma, Village Creek Preschool
- 82 Ms Janine Gibson, President, Aranda Parents Preschool
Association
- 83 Ms Margaret Harvey, Principal, Nationwide Realty
- 84 Ms Glynis Mayer, President, Hawker Preschool Parents
Association Inc
- 85 Ms Jennie Webster, President, Scullin Preschool Parents
Association

- 86 Ms Lyn Stadtmiller, President, Farrer Preschool Parent Association
- 87 Mr Jason Coutts, President, Macgregor Preschool Parent Association
- 88 Ms Christine F Kallir Preece, President, Australian Early Intervention Association (A.C.T. Chapter) Inc.
- 89 Ms Glennis Beazley, Convenor, Association of Long Daycare (Community Based) Directors ACT
- 90 Mrs Brideen Allen, Vice President, Mount Neighbour Pre School Parents Association Inc.
- 91 Ms Lynette Cook, President, Macarthur Preschool
- 92 Mr Glenn Givens, President, Waramanga Preschool Parents Association Inc.
- 93 B Hale, President, Taylor Pre-school Parents Association Inc
- 94 Ms Jill McCarthy
- 95 Mr Mark Bishop
- 96 Ms Karen Neill
- 97 Mr Robert Luton
- 98 Mr Paul & Ms Virginia Dixon
- 99 Ms Kim Findeiss
- 100 Ms Roisin Berjaoui, President, Curtin South Preschool Parent Association
- 101 Ms Sue Terry, Chairperson, Lyons Primary School Board
- 102 Ms Michele England, President, Gowrie Preschool Parents Association Inc.

- 103 Ms Mary Ann Ryan-Brown, President, Canberra Preschool Society Inc.
- 104 Mr Clive Haggard, President, Australian Education Union ACT Branch
- 105 Mr Trevor Cobbold, Hon. Secretary, ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations Inc.
- 106 Ms Josephine Hall OAM, Chairperson, Children's Services Resource and Advisory Program, ACT Inc.
- 107 ACT Government
- 108 Ms Natalie Gresham, President, Ngunnawal Preschool Parents Association
- 109 D McDonald
- 110 Ms Clare Webster, Kaleen Preschool Parents and Citizens Association
- 111 Mr Mark Smith
- 112 Dr Andrew Brien
- 113 Ms Diana Marshall
- 114 Mrs Mary Matthews
- 115 Mrs Mary Ileris
- 116 Mr Anthony Field, President, Garran Preschool Parents Association.
- 117 Ms Susan Buchanan
- 118 Ms Norma Williams, University Preschool and Child Care Centre
- 119 Dr W Neville and Mrs H Neville

Appendix 2—Witnesses appearing at public hearings

Tuesday 11 August 1998

For the Department of Education and Community Services

Mr Stefaniak, Minister for Education
Ms Fran Hinton, Chief Executive
Ms Jill Farrelly, Director Children's Services

For the Canberra Preschool Society

Ms Mary Ann Ryan-Brown, President
Ms Dianne Gazzoli, Coordinator

For the Australian Education Union, ACT Branch

Mr Clive Haggard, President

For CSIROCARE

Ms Sara South, Director

For the ACT Branch of the Australian Early Childhood Association

Ms Deanna Hazell, President
Ms Julia Zachara

Wednesday 12 August 1998

For the Sydney Day Nursery and the Australian Early Childhood Association (National)

Ms Tonia Godhard, Executive Officer, Sydney Day Nursery and
National Executive Member, Australian Early
Childhood Association

For the University of Canberra

Associate Professor Marilyn Fleer

For the Canberra Institute of Technology

Ms Liza Carroll, Head of Department, Child Studies

For the ACT Children's Services Resource and Advisory Program

Ms Jenny Jones, Program Manager

For the Preschool Teachers Professional Association

Ms Lorraine Batterham, President

Ms Leone Eyre

Ms Felicity de Plater

Thursday 13 August 1998

For the ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations Inc.

Mr Trevor Cobbold, Secretary

Ms Paulene Kibble, Vice President

For the ACT Children's Services Association

Mrs Evelyn Callaghan

Mrs Janette Morphett

For the ACT Playgroups Association Inc.

Mrs Anne Foster

**For the Association of Long Daycare (Community Based) Directors
ACT**

Mrs Glennis Beazley, Coordinator

Mrs Dawn Sword

For the ACT Auditor General

Associate Professor Ann Stonehouse (Monash University) Consultant*
Mr Greg Martin, Audit Manager

*Associate Professor Stonehouse also appeared in her capacity as an early
childhood expert

Wednesday 19 August 1998

For the ACT Department of Education and Community Services

Mr Bill Stefaniak MLA , Minister
Ms Fran Hinton, Chief Executive
Ms Jill Farrelly, Director Children's Services

Appendix 3 Audit findings

Effectiveness findings

The opinion that preschool Education services are very effective is based on the following positive audit findings.

Access to preschools

- An estimated 90% of eligible four year old children attend preschool indicating that access is widely available.
- The geographical locations of preschools provide excellent access for children.
- The amounts of parents' voluntary financial contributions, and other expectations of parents, do not appear to be deterrents to children attending preschool.
- The length and timing of preschool sessions does not impact on the general accessibility for children to preschools.
- Access for children with additional and special needs is generally available.

Outcomes from children's preschool experience

- Preschool attendance has a positive impact on children's development.
- Preschool attendance makes a significant contribution to preparing children for the transition to full time schooling.

Quality of service provided in preschools

- A good range of preschool experiences were observed addressing social, physical, emotional, intellectual, creative and communication needs of children.
- There was some visual evidence of attention to cultural diversity.
- Teachers generally are excellent role models for children and the level of cooperation by children and their ability to function in a group was most impressive.
- The quality of the equipment and materials, the range number and quality of books, the presence of computers and the availability of art and craft materials was most impressive.
- Close connections were observed between preschools and parents, and between teachers and parents.
- Preschools have links with a wide range of community services, organisations and agencies.
- Generally there is adequate attention to the health and safety of children attending preschools.

Staff issues

- There were no indications that staff morale or enthusiasm are significant problems.¹³¹

¹³¹ *ibid* pp 5,6.

The report noted a few findings in relation to effectiveness which were not positive. These are as follows.

Objectives and purposes of preschools

- There is no comprehensive statement of objectives and purposes for preschools.

Program type and structure

- It appears there may be a lack of innovation in some programs and also an overemphasis on teacher organised activities at the expense of child directed play as a medium for learning.

Staff issues

- Responses from some teachers and assistants indicated that there may be a shortage in the provision of resource and English as a second language (ESL) teachers; however the audit also revealed other evidence which showed that children with special needs are being adequately catered for.
- During the audit it was noted that access to Departmental Advisers by teachers and assistants could be improved; however management have recently implemented initiatives which should satisfactorily address this issue.
- Concerns over limited access to professional development were noted during the audit; these concerns should be partly addressed by recent management undertakings to provide teaching staff with 5 days attendance annually at approved planning and staff development activities.

- While there is a performance appraisal system addressing teachers' professional development, there is no work-based performance appraisal system for teachers and assistants.¹³²

Economy and efficiency findings

The opinion that provision of preschool education services are inefficient and uneconomic is based on the following findings.

Building and staff utilisation in ACT preschools

- Utilisation of preschool buildings in the ACT is poor with roughly half of the preschools being utilised at less than 50% capacity, with approximately another 12 preschools (14%) being utilised at less than 70%.
- 12 ACT preschools with a total book value of \$3.3m have building utilisation rates of around 45% or less.
- Recent alterations in preschool enrolment policy stopped short of rationalisation which would have had the potential to improve the efficient utilisation of staff and buildings.
- Although the average staff utilisation rate across all ACT preschools is 85%, approximately a third of individual teachers utilisation rates are below the average by varying amounts ranging to as low as 44%.
- Staff at approximately one quarter of ACT preschools are utilised at 76% or less of their capacity.

¹³² *ibid* p7.

Teacher Salaries

- The salary rate scale for ACT preschool teachers is the highest in comparison with other Australian jurisdictions which provided data suitable for comparison.
- A very high proportion of ACT preschool teachers are being paid at, near, or above the top salary rate of the general scale for teachers.

Comparison between ACT preschools of salary expense per child

- The annual salary expense per child across 76 ACT preschools varies between \$1,000 and \$3,000 depending on which preschools the children attend.
- The wide range in salary expenses per child is largely caused by the wide variations in the numbers of children attending individual preschools.

Total Costs

- For both annual cost per child including overheads and annual cost per child excluding overheads, the ACT ranks second highest behind the Northern Territory amongst predominantly government-funded preschool programs.
- For both annual cost per child per hour of service including overheads and annual cost per child per hour of service excluding overheads the ACT ranks second highest behind the Northern Territory amongst predominantly government-funded preschools.¹³³

Other significant findings

Preschool sessions in ACT preschools

¹³³ *ibid* pp 8-10.

- Amongst ACT preschools, sessions vary in length from 2 to 4 hours with session lengths ending at all quarter hour intervals within this range.
- Although all teachers provide the same number of contact hours to children, most provide eight face to face sessions weekly leaving 2 for preparation and administration; some teachers however arrange their programs to provide six longer face to face sessions with 4 sessions for administration and preparation.
- The wide range in existing session lengths and programs indicates that flexibility exists which could potentially be used to improve efficiency in utilisation of staff and/or buildings.¹³⁴

Parent Contributions Per Child

- ACT parent voluntary contributions and community fundraisings, provide the equivalent of around an extra 1% annually for preschools' expenditure.
- ACT weekly parental contributions are similar to contributions in other Australian jurisdictions where preschools are predominantly government-funded.

¹³⁴ Auditor General's Report No 1/1998 Management of Preschool Education p 11.

Appendix 4 Criteria endorsed by the community to be considered in planning preschool education

- *socioeconomic areas*, where it is considered that if the preschool is not available, the families would not be able to transport the children to another suburb;
- *where a cluster of rental housing* impacts on numbers during the year in cases when family relocations are made (eg Defence) after the annual survey is completed;
- where an existing *Early Intervention Unit* is operating and concurrent groups are needed for integration;
- *minimum size to ensure a viable group* to deliver a quality program;
- *location* of the preschool in order to maintain support to staff and the community;
- *past enrolment patterns and configuration of preschools in close proximity*. Preschool staffing decisions are based on the cluster of preschools **in** an area rather than on individual preschool units; and
- *viability number* being a threshold of 17 registrations for a part-time preschool and 34 for a full-time preschool used only in conjunction with other factors.

Appendix 5 Early Childhood Advisory Committee

EARLY CHILDHOOD ADVISORY COMMITTEE TERMS OF REFERENCE

CONTEXT

As we manage the change process in early childhood provision in the ACT we need to take the opportunity to be proactive in the evolutionary planning of our vision for early childhood education.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

1. Formulate and recommend policies in participation with interested stakeholders in early childhood provision.
2. Develop initiatives that will enhance the future directions for early childhood provision across preschool, childcare and the first years of schooling.
3. Review national agenda/early childhood literature and make recommendations to Executive as to the implications these initiatives may have for early childhood provision.

Focus for topics to be negotiated at the beginning of each school year, however at the same time remain responsive to matters as they arise.

Focus areas 1997 were:

- Preschool Enrolment Policy and Process Review
- ACT Early Childhood Conference (May 23, 24)
- 1st Years Of Schooling Conference (ACT January 1998)

Focus areas 1998:

- Behaviour management
- Curriculum/literacy
- Enrolment and planning
- Early childhood information

MEMBERSHIP

A representatives from each of the following groups/organisations, chaired by the Executive Director, Children's, Youth & Family Services Bureau

Canberra Preschool Society
Early childhood teacher in school
University of Canberra
Australian Education Union
Community and Public Sector Union
Child Health and Development
Australian Early Childhood Association
Manager Studies Section
Aboriginal Literacy Advisory Group (when formed)
Primary Principal's Association
P&C Council
Children's Services Branch
Early Childhood Services Unit
Children's Day Care Services
Schools Directorate
Preschool Teachers Professional Association
Preschool Assistants Association
Community childcare

Meetings to be held every 6 weeks or as the need arises.

Sub-committees to be formed to pursue specific areas when required. These will seek to involve current participants (ie parents and staff) of services in the sub-committee work.

Appendix 6 Acronyms

EIU	Early intervention unit
ESL	English as a second language
NECEC	Narrabundah Early Childhood Education Centre