

## **INQUIRY INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SECTOR IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Sydney Catholic Early Childhood Services  
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**Submission from Sydney Catholic Early Childhood Services**  
**Provider number: PR 40022356**

**For the Portfolio Committee 3 – Education inquiry into the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector in New South Wales, to consider the following:**

**1. The composition of the ECEC sector and the impact of government funding on the type and quality of services**

Government funding should not be allocated to for-profit providers. As with other essential public services such as police, hospitals, education and childcare, when public funds are diverted to support investment portfolios, the focus shifts away from delivering high-quality care. Instead, services are often reduced to the bare minimum in order to maximize profits.

**Suggested change** For-profit providers could still exist; however, they do not receive government funding and families who choose to attend these services are charged full fees forgoing Start Strong funding and Child Care Subsidy.

**2. The effectiveness of the NSW ECEC Regulatory Authority**

There is a genuine willingness among most providers to collaborate with the Department to ensure services not only meet but exceed ACECQA standards. However, many providers also experience fear, anxiety, and mistrust towards the Department, perceiving its role as primarily focused on identifying faults rather than acting as a supportive partner in delivering quality care. This lack of trust can discourage providers from self-reporting issues related to child safety and wellbeing. Such mistrust may also extend to staff, who might choose to ignore concerns rather than report them. The Department's current inspectorial approach needs to evolve. As a provider, we maintain regular communication with the Department and report all incidents concerning children's safety and wellbeing regardless of how low-level the event was. Unfortunately, this level of transparency is not consistent across the sector, as some providers withhold information out of fear of negative consequences rather than seeking support for improvement.

Recently, when we sought clarification from the Department on a confusing ruling, we were simply referred to the legislation, despite the ambiguity. Our genuine attempt to understand and implement clear processes was met with reluctance to engage in constructive dialogue.

A further issue is that there are many occasions where the Department's Authorised Officers interpret the regulations differently. This leads to confusion and frustration where one 'spot-check' will deem the service compliant and the very same documentation or practise will be deemed non-compliant by another DoE Officer. This furthers the lack of trust between the regulatory authority and the sector as it feels almost impossible to get things right.

This raises the question: Is the Department under-resourced, limiting its ability to work collaboratively with providers? How could the inspectorial culture change to promote high quality provision of care and education?



### **Suggested change**

Each provider or small group of providers should have a dedicated consultancy relationship with Department personnel. This would foster positive, collaborative engagement and replace fear with trust. Such relationships would enable the Department to make more informed assessments of service quality, develop a deeper understanding of each provider's operations, and respond swiftly to any practices that could compromise the health, safety, and wellbeing of children and staff. In turn, this would help prevent problematic practices from becoming entrenched or normalised. Authorised Officers should also undergo regular training so there is agreement on how the laws and regulations should be implemented at a service level.

### **3. The effectiveness of the regulatory framework for the ECEC sector as applied in New South Wales**

The National Quality Framework in essence, provides educators, centre leaders and approved providers with the essential knowledge and understanding of what best practice looks like. The one aspect of the Framework which requires the most focus is the Assessment and Rating process. Even with the change in notice period and the option to undertake a partial A & R, this whole process of casting judgement on the quality of a centre based on a 1 or 2 day visit is not an accurate reflection of service quality. Continuous improvement is what all educators, centre leaders and approved providers strive for however the rigorous documentation required in this detracts from the value and intended purpose of centre goals.

Families make decisions on where to send their children based on location, cost, convenience and word of mouth or recommendations from family and friends. Rarely are families deciding to send their children to a centre based on the quality rating. Families' voices are not permitted in the A&R process. This absence of family input results in a lack of insight into client satisfaction.

Educators are choosing a centre to work at based on location, opportunity, philosophy, pay and conditions. Experienced educators understand that a quality rating is not an accurate reflection of the quality of the centre.

### **Suggested change:**

As highlighted above, for centres to be assigned an officer from DoE for which a positive, trusting, respectful and reciprocal relationship is built and maintained through regular visits. Centres will continue to strive for exceeding or excellent practice regardless of the rating however purely from a place of professionalism and a commitment to the wider community. The wider communities voice must be considered when assessing the quality of a service.