

Submission to the Queensland Department of the
Premier and Cabinet

21 February 2024

Putting Queensland Kids First: C&K response to consultation draft

Where children come first.



C&K - Where every child flourishes

As a not-for-profit organisation, children are at the centre of everything we do. The core purpose of our work is to create learning environments that allow children to flourish. For C&K, flourishing means that children are confident, secure, courageous, engaged, empowered, empathetic and resilient. As a not-for-profit organisation, we re-invest profits across our portfolio so we can support thousands of Queensland families. In 2023, we welcomed 19,000 Queensland children into our centres.

Creating high-quality learning environments requires highly-qualified people, delivering quality education programs, that respond to today's children and empower them for the world of tomorrow. We achieve this through our dedicated workforce, that provide outstanding educational experiences for children and families every day. We grow our reputation as thought leaders, by actively engaging in advocacy and consultation, delivering professional learning opportunities to influence the future direction of early childhood education and care.

In 2023, C&K employs more than 2,300 staff across our Central Office, 178 State-funded kindergartens and childcare centres. As a Central Governing Body (CGB) we also support 153 Affiliated kindergartens, operated by voluntary management committees on behalf of the Queensland Government.

At C&K, we are proud of our 117-year history of creating generations of life-long learners. The secret to our longevity is simple – we keep children at the centre of everything we do, we adapt to changing environments and we innovate to ensure we remain leaders in high-quality early childhood education and care.

Executive summary

C&K welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Queensland Government's Putting Queensland Kids First consultation draft – it is a fantastic step in the right direction towards creating a holistic early childhood development system.

C&K strongly believes that the Queensland Government and community need to work collectively to address the complex problems in our society. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the backbone of the early childhood development system and plays an important role in protective measures and supporting families.

We commend the government on working across multiple departments to draft a policy that considers the long-term life trajectories of Queensland children. We would like to encourage the Putting Queensland Kids First Strategy (the strategy) goes further and broader by creating a holistic early childhood development plan and vision for Queensland's children.

C&K recommends the strategy recognises that the ECEC sector and its workforce and programs are central to its success. This detail should include the government's ambitions to expand current programs, provide a roadmap for reform and signal where investment will be provided. Initiatives like Free Kindy should be highlighted as significant milestones in removing barriers to universal access.

The strategy should include:

- Support for strong universal ECEC provision to ensure all Queensland children have access to high-quality programs and ensure none slip through the cracks.
- Proportionate universal programs, targeting the complex needs of some children and families, ensuring that families and children who need more support can receive it without barriers.
- Adequate long-term funding for programs with a strong evidence base.
- Support for the not-for-profit early childhood sector to deliver programs on behalf of the government, with partnerships to ensure infrastructure is built and maintained.
- Strong focus on the quality of provision, to ensure that children who need it most get the highest quality services.
- Acknowledgement of the ECEC sector as a backbone system, which has the knowledge and ability to provide children with seamless transdisciplinary programs.
- Building the capability of the early childhood workforce to have strong generalist skills to support children and families with complex needs and provide pathways for further specialisation.
- Building the cultural capability of the entire ECEC workforce to ensure programs and early childhood centers and environments are culturally safe.
- Building on what is already working, such as kindergarten programs delivered by a higher qualified workforce for children aged three and four and expand these qualifications and expertise to staff working with infants and toddlers.

1. What are the core principles you think should inform our early intervention and prevention approach to support children, young people and families?

C&K agrees that the principles of child-centred, prevention and early intervention, integrated ways of working, culture equity and inclusion, strength-based and evidence-informed are sound.

Critically important is that a holistic early childhood development system is underpinned by the principle of a good childhood. Drawing on the Nordic notion of The Good Childhood, the government should consider how their policy design can impact children and their childhood in all decisions.

C&K recommends that the language of the strategy shift to reflect a child's rights approach, couched in the opportunity rather than deficit. The strategy should "set children up", rather than "fix them up". Play should be an underpinning right throughout the document as it relates to the transition to school and in the earliest years of school.

Fundamental to setting children up is access to universal high quality early childhood education and care to create a pathway for lifelong learning and provide strong primary prevention for every child. ECEC should not be framed as an early intervention that only occurs when something goes wrong in a child's life. The strategy should carefully avoid medicalising ECEC or viewing it only as a mitigant disadvantage. Universal high-quality programs should be the primary strategy, not waiting for a problem to appear and then intervening.

When children are engaged in high quality ECEC, there is more opportunity to observe and refer at the earliest possible age. ECEC provides this platform, but attention needs to be given to the capability of the workforce, particularly those who are working with children from birth to age three.

Evidence is an important principle that should continue to guide the approach for children, expanded to incorporate appropriate collection and data use. Policies and interventions should be grounded in evidence, research and lived experiences of children and families, to ensure interventions are effective and responsive to needs. ECEC centres are well placed to conduct learning and development assessments, such as the Queensland Early Learning Progression Tool, embedded in the play-based curriculum. This tool strengthens partnerships with families to recognise and support their children's learning pathways.

2. What are the key protective factors in keeping children and young people on positive trajectories, and how can we further boost these?

Children and families need a range of supports during a child's earliest years and should have access to a suite of programs that best support their needs. For many families, these needs will vary.

All children will benefit from being engaged in ECEC from an early age, with centres working in partnership with families to best support the child. Much progress has already been made to support families, including access to maternal and child health, supported playgroups and early childhood education and care operating in an interconnected way.

This interconnected work would benefit from the inclusion of programs that provide seamless support for children and families. For example, referral pathway programs with timely access to specialists and allied health.

Equal attention needs to be paid to health, education, and social and community support, including housing. The roadmap should take a holistic approach so that one area is not prioritised – they need to work in sync and be adequately funded to be useful for children.

The ECEC sector will need capacity building to ensure it has strong generalist capabilities to support complex needs. Further pathways should be available for the development of more specialised skill sets.

3. Are there any other priorities you think that Putting Queensland Kids First should consider?

The ECEC sector is experiencing considerable workforce challenges which will require a range of new policy initiatives and reform, such as government investment to boost wages and conditions, support education and qualification completion, grow the pool of new and qualified workforce entrants and reimagine the career pathways to working with children.

C&K understands that similar challenges also exist in other sectors working with children, including allied health, and that rural and remote areas are in significant need of support. Recruitment in regional and remote areas requires innovative solutions and partnerships to ensure ECEC centres have qualified staff, remain open and viable, and children and families have access to the allied health support they require.

C&K would strongly support the strategy of taking a robust role in the development of the workforce that works with and supports children in their first 2,000 days. Growing a strong and capable workforce should be a shared responsibility across jurisdictions and C&K encourages the Queensland Government to take a leadership role in responding to the national discussion on the ECEC workforce.

C&K would like the strategy to recognise that babies learn from birth. The first 2,000 days of a child's life is the most critical period of development and shapes their long-term outcomes. This evidence is agreed upon and is a focus of infant and maternal health organisations. However, there is currently a significant gap in investment and focus on the first 2,000 days, which provides an opportunity to build evidence on this age group and create greater connectivity and support for children under 3 before they start kindergarten.

Failure to acknowledge this evidence-base, and provide the best possible environments for the learning and development of infants and toddlers, is remiss and will prove costly in later remedial investment.

4. How can we best support connection to culture and community for children, young people and families?

C&K strongly supports the voices of children, young people and families to be at the centre of decision-making. The shifting of language to reflect a child rights approach, will further support a sense of belonging within the strategy.

The strategy must be developed in direct consultation with First Nations communities with a view to growing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector and the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the ECEC workforce.

There is an opportunity for the strategy to build the capability of the entire ECEC workforce to ensure programs do no cultural harm and require all providers to demonstrate culturally-safe environments.

5. What would it look like for us to work together as partners, all committed to improving outcomes for children and young people?

C&K strongly believes that the government, community and ECEC sector needs to work collectively to address the complex problems in our society. The strategy should have partnership

at its heart – where the responsibility for ensuring the wellbeing of Queensland’s children is shared by all. An early childhood development system should be highly connected, both in terms of the experience of families and children, and in the government frameworks and strategies that support it.

Community responsiveness and localised settings, developed in partnership with communities, is critically important. Children, families, and communities have unique and diverse needs. A connected system should embrace and enable this, especially in First Nations communities.

Elements of the early childhood development system should be complementary, supportive, and easy for families to access. While much of this work is already happening in Queensland, it is often in a fragmented and inefficient way.

C&K would support the strategy considering how to build on what is already working well, with strategies to connect, fund and improve that work. There is an opportunity to build the capacity of the whole ECEC workforce to deal with complexity, a strength that exists in many centres already.

C&K would support initiatives to:

- Identify where existing infrastructure could expand to accommodate transdisciplinary hubs.
- Grow partnerships with the early years of schooling to deliver play-based learning and improve smooth transitions to school.
- Provide intensive support services for families in need, as currently delivered by the C&K Dixon St Early Years Centre model.

Early Years Education Program – Case Study¹

The Australian ECEC program with the highest quality evidence and most positive outcomes to date, is the Early Years Education Program (EYEP), which was undertaken as a multi-disciplinary Randomised Control Trial (RCT) by a team from The University of Melbourne’s Departments of Economics, Paediatrics and Education and the Melbourne Institute, commencing in 2011 and concluding in 2018. The program was the first of its kind in Australia. The trial achieved remarkable developmental and learning outcomes for children who received the intervention in the trial, including large and significant impacts on outcomes relating to children’s cognitive development (IQ), language skills and social and emotional development.

The model is analogous with a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) in the child health service system, and:

- Provides a targeted intervention for a specific cohort of children until they have the developmental and educational capacity to take advantage of the universal ECEC system.
- Requires highly trained, specialist, well supported and committed staff working as a multidisciplinary team to provide optimal education and care for the children and their families.
- Requires a higher level of investment than usual, or universal care, with the long-term benefits for the children outweighing the initial cost of investment.

The Parkville Institute is currently funded by the Australian Government, Victorian Government and philanthropy to replicate EYEP with our service partners in three centres, now operating in Wendouree, Victoria, Richmond, Victoria and Strathpine, Queensland. C&K operates the centre in Strathpine. The replication phase, based on implementation science, aims to:

- Apply the model in different contexts to test the original findings.

¹ Edited excerpt from the Parkville Institute’s submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care, 14 February 2024, [Submission 231 - Parkville Institute - Early Childhood Education and Care - Public inquiry \(pc.gov.au\)](#). Reproduced with permission from the Parkville Institute.

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the Parkville Institute's support to the participating ECEC centres, replicating the model to ensure fidelity, with evaluation being conducted by the Melbourne Institute, University of Melbourne who also evaluated the original RCT.
- Identify challenges and enablers of implementation of the model.
- Provide data to inform recommendations for stepped scaling up.

EYEP was initiated by Kids First, previously the Children's Protection Society (CPS), an independent not-for-profit child and family services organisation based in the north-east of Melbourne which was founded in 1896. The program was designed and implemented by CPS in collaboration with Associate Professor Brigid Jordan and Dr Anne Kennedy.



The Creche and Kindergarten Association Limited
257 Gympie Rd Kedron, Qld 4031

candk.asn.au



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