



Minister for Early Childhood Education

Speech by the Hon Leslie Williams MP
Early Childhood Australia NSW Annual General Meeting 2015

Function Time 6pm - 7.35pm, Thursday 11th June 2015

Speech 7:15 pm to 7:30 pm

The YORK Conference & Function Centre at Level 2, 99 York St, Sydney

Let me begin by acknowledging that we are meeting on the traditional land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I pay my respect to Elders, past and present, and to all other Aboriginal people here tonight.

Acknowledgements

It is a great pleasure for me to be asked to attend this year's Early Childhood Australia NSW Annual General Meeting and to speak with you all this evening.

I see this as an opportunity to build the relationships that are so important in achieving our joint priorities for early childhood education and care.

Early Childhood Australia nationally and in NSW has a central role representing the needs of children across the breadth of the sector including –

- preschools,
- long day care,
- family day care,
- outside school hours care,
- training organisations and universities.

So there is a clear advantage in working together to achieve our shared goals for early childhood education and care.

I am particularly pleased that my roles as Minister for Early Childhood Education, Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, and Assistant Minister for Education allow me to make connections across sectors.

It is these very connections – within and across sectors – that will help us achieve the best possible educational outcomes for children in New South Wales, including those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

Tonight I would like to reflect on what has been achieved over the past few years in early childhood education and care and touch on our Government's agenda and priorities.

The quality reform agenda

Early Childhood Australia NSW has been a lead organisation in supporting the significant reforms under the National Quality Agenda in the early childhood education and care sector.

The National Quality Framework has enabled every state and territory to work towards the same quality outcomes for children, no matter where they live.

It has raised the bar for early childhood education, pedagogy and practice through the Early Years Learning Framework and the law and regulations.

Early Childhood Australia played a role in implementation of the National Quality Framework through its development and delivery of the National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program.

This resource hub provided an important forum for connections and information sharing across the sector and helped providers and educators understand and implement the Framework.

Collaboration between the Government and peak bodies such as Early Childhood Australia has helped the sector to respond to these reforms and will continue to do so as we build on what has already been achieved.

The Review of the National Quality Framework has provided an important opportunity for sector feedback on how the reforms are being implemented and I will speak a little about this tonight.

As you know, the NSW Government is strongly committed to the National Quality Agenda.

And that's because we know that quality early childhood education is vital for the learning and development of children in New South Wales.

We have come a long way since the Agenda was first rolled out.

Services and regulators have both undergone a major change process, one that has involved new thinking as well as new processes and requirements.

Perhaps the most significant change has been to move the emphasis away from inputs, to a focus on outcomes and the factors in each service that make for quality and continuous improvement.

For example the previous *NSW Children's Services Regulation 2004* included very specific requirements on the physical environment and layout such as the number of toilets, nappy changing areas and separate dedicated administrative areas.

These have given way to a broader more interpretative approach under the *Education and Care Services National Regulations*, requiring the service to provide adequate facilities for these purposes.

This common sense approach means that the onus is now on services to make the case that they are providing a quality environment for children in their care.

It's been a steep learning curve - and not just for services.

Regulators, too, have had to develop new relationships with services and approach their work with a different lens, involving fewer checklists and more engagement.

The journey continues, but the promised destination is one where every child is school-ready and best placed to take advantage of what school has to offer.

After these first few years, it is appropriate that we take stock and consider what adjustments, if any, are needed to make the system work better.

Review of the National Quality Framework

This has been the task of the Review of the National Quality Framework which commenced last year.

The Review aimed to draw together the experience of services in working with the NQF and the experience of regulators in managing it.

It has looked at those areas that are working to enhance quality provision.

And it has identified areas where changes can be made, taking into account the experience of families, services and regulators as well as issues and risks to quality that have emerged since the NQF was launched.

The package of changes that will proceed from the review can best be described as evolutionary rather than radical.

This Government has advocated for the rolling back of existing requirements seen as burdensome by New South Wales services.

NSW has also been concerned to see more 'common-sense' approaches to some requirements.

In putting these approaches on the national table, NSW has listened to the sector.

And I take this opportunity to thank all those who have worked tirelessly over the past few years to highlight these issues to Government.

One of these issues, perhaps the most prominent one for services in NSW, has been the process for the quality rating of services.

Specifically, some concerns have been raised about the length of time being taken to rate all services and the need for greater consistency of rating outcomes.

This issue has been directly addressed through the Review.

NSW officials led national work to reform the process and we will be rolling-out our revised approach in NSW from September this year.

Amongst other improvements, the new approach will provide:

- more transparent use of information provided by each service in the final rating report;
- better mapping of evidence to each outcome;
- more structured and efficient use of time spent at each visit;
- a redesigned and streamlined Quality Improvement Plan; and
- better communication with services about the process.

These changes will help us to keep the momentum going on improving our performance.

As at the end of March this year, NSW had rated 61% of its services.

This compares to the national rate of 56% for the same period.

The Department of Education and Communities, the regulatory authority in New South Wales, is working hard to meet the challenging assessment and rating demands of the growing early childhood education and care sector.

Family day care in particular has grown by almost 200% since pre-NQF times.

All governments are working collaboratively on putting in place measures to make sure that this increase is not at the expense of quality or standards.

New South Wales has established the most stringent controls nationally on entry to the sector and we will continue to explore new ways of safeguarding the interests of families using family day care services.

The good news is that NSW along with other States and Territories is now in a position to continue with the quality reform journey following the recent commitment in the Federal Budget to extend the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda until June 2018.

Through our connections with other states and territories and through national forums, we have opportunities to develop nationally consistent strategies to address issues such as this.

New South Wales reforms

I would like to talk about ongoing New South Wales reform initiatives designed to support early childhood profession and improve access to early childhood education.

Supporting the early childhood teaching profession

New South Wales has led the nation for many years in recognising the importance of qualified staff in early childhood settings by requiring early childhood teachers in both preschool and long day care services since 1989.

I am pleased that the national reforms recognise the important role that tertiary qualified staff play in the delivery of quality early education for children.

We have now moved a step further with the introduction of the *Teacher Accreditation Amendment Bill* to Parliament in September last year.

Parliament assented to the Bill in October 2014.

This enabled the *Teacher Accreditation Act 2004* to be amended to extend the definition of “teach” to cover people undertaking teaching duties in early childhood education centres.

And it allows for an accreditation system to recognise early childhood teachers as professionals similar to their colleagues in schools.

The system will be equivalent to the K-12 teacher accreditation process, but will reflect the varied nature of early childhood workplace settings and the specific context of early education.

Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) is currently working with stakeholders to develop an appropriate accreditation system that will be comparable and transferable across early childhood settings.

BOSTES is proposing that all early childhood teachers with appropriate qualifications will have their accreditation deemed in 2016.

I understand the members of the Early Childhood Australia NSW Executive are working with BOSTES to ensure that early childhood teachers are properly supported through the accreditation process.

To support teachers to meet qualification requirements, the Government is providing opportunities for educators working in the sector to further develop their skills.

In 2013 and 2014, the Department of Education and Communities awarded 102 Early Childhood Teaching Scholarships to educators wishing to upgrade their qualifications from a diploma level to become an early childhood teacher.

The first scholarship recipients are taking their new skills and knowledge back into the services where they are employed.

So far two recipients have completed their degrees. Both have said that the scholarship really helped them.

For one it was the deciding factor in her decision to upgrade her qualifications.

Over half of those awarded scholarships are working in services in rural and remote communities.

Three scholarships were awarded to Aboriginal educators.

Recognising the unique challenges that educators in rural and remote services can experience, the Government has committed to an additional scholarship program.

This will be targeted specifically to educators working in rural and remote services and will assist them to become qualified early childhood teachers.

The Preschool Funding Model

A key New South Wales reform priority is the Preschool Funding Model which we introduced in January last year.

The Government's aim in developing the Preschool Funding Model was to promote universal access and to target funding support to the children who need it most.

The model makes available \$150 million to the community preschool sector – 20% increase on previous funding levels.

This funding is targeted to 4 and 5 year old children in the year before school and 3 year old children from disadvantaged and Aboriginal backgrounds.

After only 6 months of implementation, enrolment data from the August 2014 community preschool census, showed that the Preschool Funding Model is already having a positive impact.

Overall enrolments of children from the target cohort have increased by 2% since 2013.

And enrolments of Aboriginal children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds have increased by 5%.

Preschool Disability Support Program

In addition, we have established the Preschool Disability Support Program by combining the former Intervention Support Program (ISP) and the Supporting Children with Additional Needs (SCAN) program.

Now an additional \$2 million dollars that was previously spent on administrative overheads is going directly to supporting children with a disability.

And the universal disability loading is supporting all preschool services.

Rural and Remote funding initiatives

I recognise that services need to accommodate not only the different needs of their children but also the different circumstances of their communities.

The Government is committed to ensuring that early childhood education services in rural and remote communities are responsive to the needs of families.

Under the Preschool Funding Model, there is additional support for rural and remote preschools in recognition of the additional costs associated with service delivery in these areas.

Outer regional services receive a service loading of \$850 per funded child.

This rises to \$1250 for remote and very remote services. This is a 47% increase in the loading available under the previous funding model.

A loading to recognise the unique costs of mobile service delivery is also part of the new opt-in contracts will be offered to mobile preschools from 2016.

These fixed term contracts will include agreed service delivery targets aimed at improving service delivery and universal access in rural and remote areas.

As part of its *Rural and Remote Education Blueprint for Action*, the Government is investing \$4 million in early childhood education in rural and remote areas.

This will include grants to assist services in outreach to their local communities and another round of scholarships specifically for rural and remote educators.

The Commonwealth Families package

In relation to broader funding across the sector, the Commonwealth's Families Package will mean significant changes for families and services.

The move to simplify its subsidy system will help families more easily identify the early childhood education and care support available to them.

I also welcome the commitment to extend the Universal Access National Partnership until December 2017.

This funding is an important step in providing certainty for services, children and families and to allow us to continue to achieve our universal access objectives.

Details of the package are still emerging, but New South Wales will work with the sector to identify any potential implications for this state over the coming months.

In particular, I want to identify the impact on vulnerable and disadvantaged children, and the proposal to extend the In Home Carer Subsidy Programme to nannies.

I understand the Commonwealth is planning additional consultation on the Families Package and I look forward to your input.

Transition to School Statement

I spoke before about how connections within and across sectors are helping us to achieve our priorities.

We are also looking at how connections can help children's educational and developmental outcomes.

Connections between early childhood education services, families and primary schools are crucial in supporting an education continuum, in which each child is encouraged and nurtured to transition between one education setting and the next.

Evidence suggests that children who have a positive start to school are likely to engage well and experience academic and social success over the longer term.

With this in mind the Government introduced the Transition to School Statement last year.

The Statement makes it easier for a child's prior to school learning and development to be communicated to their new school.

It gives early childhood teachers a way to share their knowledge, helps school teachers to connect with children when they start school, and gives families a voice in communicating their child's strengths.

The first year of rollout of the Transition to School Statement has been extremely successful.

Feedback from a broad variety of stakeholders has been overwhelmingly positive.

I understand Early Childhood Australia members have been involved in providing valuable feedback as part of the evaluation of the Statement's first year of implementation.

Thank you for the time you put into supporting and evaluating this initiative and providing constructive insights.

The evaluation has identified some vital elements for successful transitions:

- Respectful, reciprocal relationships between families and the service,

- Strong connections and collaboration between sectors, and
- Deeper understanding of the continuity of learning across settings. This includes how the Early Years Learning Framework complements much of the early primary curriculum.

However we still have work to do:

- to enhance primary teachers' understanding of early childhood pedagogy and the Early Years Learning Framework; and
- to strengthen early childhood educators' understanding of the knowledge and skills that students will need to develop through the Primary Curriculum.

The Department will use the feedback and evaluation results to further refine the Statement for 2016.

Early childhood education services and schools

We know that close connections between early childhood services and schools are vital for ensuring successful transition and learning continuity.

This is why the Government recently launched an initiative to support public schools to partner with community preschools and other early childhood education providers to co-locate early childhood education facilities on school sites where possible.

Two demonstration sites are to be established – one in the Inner West of Sydney and one in Tamworth. These demonstration sites will identify opportunities for schools and services to collaborate.

Such collaborative connections will provide valuable insights into how to strengthen relationships between the early childhood and primary education sectors.

Conclusion

The past few years have seen significant reform in the early childhood education and care sector and stronger focus on quality in early education.

I thank Early Childhood Australia NSW for the leading role it plays in supporting sector reform in New South Wales and providing constructive feedback on implementing the NQF and quality reforms.

The Government and the sector have achieved important outcomes in early childhood education in just four years and I am excited and encouraged about our plans for the future.

In 2015, for the first time in the history of the New South Wales Government there is a Minister for Early Childhood Education.

This is a clear message about the important position that early childhood education holds in our Government's priorities.

We have more busy years ahead of us.

Considering the Government's agenda for the coming year, I look forward to working with your new Executive on the "where to from here":

- The *Rural and Remote Education Blueprint*,
- Early childhood teacher accreditation,
- Streamlining the National Quality Standards while maintaining quality, and
- Working towards full implementation of the Preschool Funding Model in 2017.

My aim is to work with the sector to make sure that New South Wales is in a position to provide the best quality early childhood education possible for children in our state.