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Countdown to Quality Reforms in T minus 7 months...

Prue Warrilow, National Convenor

The countdown is on to 1 January 2012 when the first exciting children's services changes are implemented. There are still some unknowns and elements that are being worked out by the Australian and State and Territory Governments. Much of this working out is the negotiation and agreements between all governments around what is and is not in the National Quality Framework (NQF), refining the ratings, and looking at ways to ensure national consistency when each jurisdiction starts to implement the NQF.

I recently attended, as your ACCS representative, a NQF Stakeholder Reference Group (SRG) meeting in Melbourne. We received initial feedback from the Regulations consultations and submissions and looked at the Regulations again. Currently all feedback and submissions are being coded and analysed and then reviewed to see what changes need to occur.

I will be attending, as an ACCS representative, another two meetings. First, 3 June to provide feedback on the rating and assessment process and on the first draft of a possible communications strategy and sector support and training strategy. And secondly, 28 and 29 June to look at possible changes to the draft Regulations before they are finalised.

Some continuing key questions discussed at the SRG are:

- What will services be called while they are waiting to be assessed under the NQF? One option might be to say

'waiting assessment – high quality [old NCAC rating]'; and

- What are appropriate skills and expectations for a supervisor, including the person who is the supervisor on a short term basis, for example from when a children's services opens and the director/co-ordinator arrives (7am to 9am) and similarly at the end of the day? See Division 1, 44(1).

Please let your State/Territory representatives or me know your thoughts on these questions.

I have been receiving feedback from many not-for-profit, community owned children's services staff that they feel that they are not being listened to, they are worried about not knowing what they are meant to be doing and what will happen on 1 January 2012. It's difficult when there is no information, or no regular information coming from governments. In the absence of information people create their own stories and these gain traction as the vacuum of silence continues. Don't lose heart – please continue to read drafts and provide feedback NOW. Don't think that someone else will do it. We are all responsible to ensure that Australia's children receive the best possible care and education and your chance to influence is right now. Don't wait until the final draft comes out as it will be too late!

Remember these changes will be implemented from 1 January next year – only 7 months away!

ACCS website!

You can find information about your national peak body by visiting

www.ausccs.org.au

Your Peak Body In Action

Barbara Romeril, National Secretary

ACCS is busy providing positive messages through mainstream media to support the quality reforms that will improve outcomes for Australia's children.

In a very exciting development, ACCS will shortly be launching a national on-line discussion board which will enable our members to communicate across Australia; it will enable branches in the various states and territories to support each other in engaging members in local campaigns and advocacy and the national Executive will be able to quickly consult with and start a dialogue with members at grassroots level. We are looking forward to discovering the initiatives that will become possible with this new communication tool.

ACCS met with the staff of the senior Minister in the Federal Government Peter Garrett to continue our discussions about urgent investment required to build the children's services workforce – we lay some claim to contributing to the positive initiative in the Federal Budget to support Recognition for Prior Learning for children's services qualifications.

We put out a press release prior to the Budget calling for improvement in CCB for low and middle income families and provided this to the Opposition at their request; we will follow up with a letter congratulating the Government on the RPL initiatives.

ACCS responded to the Exposure Draft of the National Regulations - see the website www.ausccs.org.au

ACCS continues to participate in:

- the National Quality Framework National Stakeholder Reference Group
- the community alliance convened by Families Australia to support implementation of the national child protection framework
- National Children's Services Forum – the biannual lobby day is coming up in August in which we collaborate with other national peak bodies to represent key issues to Members of the Australian Parliament – an important opportunity to raise awareness and build support for children, families and the services that support them

ACCS also continues to meet with United Voice the child care union (previously LHMU) to find common ground in campaigning for workforce reform to support improved quality.

ACCS Advocacy

Federal Budget 2011-12

Prior to the Federal Treasurer handing down the Budget for 2011-12 ACCS composed the following press release outlining ideas for making child care both affordable and high quality.

Federal Budget Can Make Child Care Affordable

As the national peak body advocating for the rights of Australia's children to access quality, not for profit, community

children's services, ACCS calls on the Commonwealth Government to use the upcoming Federal Budget to get rid of the Child Care Rebate and boost Child Care Benefit for low and middle income families. This would not cost taxpayers any additional money, but would enable the Government to direct more subsidy through the Child Care Benefit to those income groups most in need of support.

Of course families get nervous when they hear governments are thinking about limiting the Child Care Rebate – but there are much better ways that our tax dollars could be used to make sure that every family can afford the child care they need.

ACCS supported the Federal Government's decision last year to cap the Child Care Rebate at \$7,500 per child per year – but the funds saved must be rolled into improved rates of Child Care Benefit for low and middle income families.

Child Care Benefit is a progressive system of support for families, offering the highest assistance where it is most needed.

We know the cost of fees is a barrier for many low and middle income families so Government must reform the funding made available to families. But the Child Care Rebate is a flawed mechanism for public support of families as most of the support goes to those who need it the least - higher income families.

We call on the Government to abandon the Rebate and roll the funds into increasing Child Care Benefit fee subsidies for low and middle income families.

ACCS does not support tax deductibility of child care as this favours families on higher income. A revised Child Care Benefit formula with a shift of dollars to low and middle income families is what this nation needs.

ACCS Response to the Draft National Regulations

ACCS submitted a response to the Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) on the next stage of the National Quality Reform Agenda, The National Regulations Exposure Draft.

The ACCS response made an important general comment that the Regulations need to be clear, understandable and unambiguous and made more specific comment on regulations that were omitted in the draft but should be included in the final Regulations, which were;

- That the regulations should specify there are 2 staff, one of which is to be qualified, on the premises at all times
- That children's services premises should be checked before staff leave to ensure children are not left behind
- That there should be a maximum centre based service size

The ACCS response also sought clarification on some of the Draft Regulations, and welcomed a Draft Regulation stating Educators included in ratios must be working with the children.

You can read ACCS' detailed response on the website www.ausccs.org.au

Reports from ACCS Representatives

DEEWR Consultation on ISS

Linda Davison, CCC (ACCS Vic)

I represented ACCS at the working group convened by DEEWR to discuss problems with the Inclusion Support Subsidy; this group was formed after national peak bodies at the National Children's Services Forum alerted DEEWR to difficulties arising from:

- limiting ISS to a single subsidy when there is more than one child in a room with additional needs
- requiring a new ISS assessment when a child moves to a different room within the same service
- inadequacy of ISS given the full cost of employing an additional staff member to support inclusion of a child with additional needs

The meeting was very productive, ECA chaired well and DEEWR was open to hearing the sector's concerns; we outlined the risks of children being excluded if these problems are not sorted out. Although there was no tangible outcome I came away with the impression that DEEWR had heard our arguments for increasing the dollar value of ISS and of the benefits of simplifying administration.

ARACY Webinar: Does collaboration really change things? May 4 2011

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth hosted a webinar in May looking at collaborative practice. The discussion was lead by Sarah Schulman who has been involved in work incorporating design principles with a ground up approach to policy to tackle social policy questions.

The technology used in the presentation was also quite impressive – we were involved in a real time lecture with power point presentation from Sarah who was based in North America and participants could write in questions via the webpage that the moderator (ARACY) then asked of Sarah. It felt very interactive.

The presentation essentially focussed on how Sarah's team has incorporated ethnographic research with families and has utilised a new form of collaboration between professionals and families in the development and delivery of services for vulnerable families.

If you are interested you can download Sarah's presentation from the ARACY website http://www.aracy.org.au/index.cfm?pageName=adv_collaboration_events#pdf

Big Steps in Child Care – United Voice

United Voice – formerly known as the LHMU – have been travelling around the country promoting their Big Steps campaign. This campaign is based on the workforce crisis facing the sector and the need for the Federal Government

to step up and pay professional wages as a critical aspect of the implementation of quality reforms. United Voice held meetings for directors and educators across Australia in April and have reported that they gathered great interest in the campaign.

United Voice has prepared an accompanying document 'The Childcare Workforce Crisis' which is available for download from the website (below).

United Voice now plan on hosting larger summit meetings in July/August and are still planning to host an employer summit towards the end of the year.

You can download information and stay updated as the campaign progresses from the website www.bigsteps.org.au

ACCS in the Media

Childcare centres get heavy on fees

Ken McGregor, The Advertiser, 19 May 2011

Childcare centres have been forced to use collection agencies to extract unpaid debts from families.

One of Australia's largest debt-collection agencies said unpaid fees to childcare centres had emerged as a significant problem for the industry.

Prushka Debt Recovery chief executive Roger Mendelson said the number of parents with unpaid fees had increased by 15 per cent during the past year.

The firm is pursuing 30 cases from eight centres across SA.

He said childcare centres were generally more lenient towards defaulters than other businesses, but the growing number of outstanding debts meant many were now being forced to escalate their debt-recovery activities.

"In a clear sign of financial pressure, some low-income parents are getting into debt even though they are eligible for a 100 per cent care rebate, which means they are only required to pay a gap of \$24 per day for two days of childcare each week," he said. "Removing children from childcare is a last resort, because of the impact on the parent's ability to earn an income, which creates additional financial pressures, and in some cases causes a household to spiral out of control."

Prushka has been pursuing interstate families for debts as small as \$50.

Mr Mendelson said financial hardship was causing many parents to build up credit with one centre until they were asked to remove the child, only to find another centre and repeat the process. He said Prushka had noticed this alarming trend across the country.

"Debts owed to childcare centres are difficult because parents with debts are often unemployed, earn little in the way of income and don't tend to have assets that assist the recovery process," he said.

Australian Children Community Services national secretary Barbara Romeril said childcare owners were often victims of their own "soft hearts".

“Some are reluctant to be tough and allow large debts to build up - we encourage them to be vigorous to make sure this does not happen,” she said.

Ms Romeril said she had talked to many people throughout the childcare industry who insisted there was no increase in the use of collection agencies.

Blue Skies Childcare assistant director Alison Runner said the use of the agencies had been common for many years.

“In the past we have had some problems but we have new owners now and they are making sure the clients’ debts do not get out of control,” she said.

Corporate Child Care – A Quick Blog on What Went Wrong

Corporate Crime Starts with Failed Business Models

John Steen, Blogging Innovation, May 2, 2011

Every economic bust launches criminal charges against executives of failed companies. It’s been a few years since the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the onset of the Global Financial Crisis but the court cases in many instances are still ongoing. One of the most notorious cases in Australia was the child-care centre empire of ABC Learning Centres. The entrepreneur-founder Eddy Groves and another director are facing charges relating to shifting money out of the business in the months leading to the collapse...

While we tend to focus on late-stage actions that end up in the courts... beginnings of these cases often start with bad strategy. While ABC Learning ended in white collar crime charges, it started with the belief that education services could be made profitable through economies of scale that

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To find out more information about the Everyday Learning Series, or to obtain a subscription for your families visit: http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/everyday_learning_series/special_offer_for_services.html.

were achieved by multiple acquisitions. Anyone involved in education knows that relationships are the core of education and relationships are really hard to scale up. In hindsight the flaw was obvious but everyone bought the growth story, including the Singaporean government who bought half a billion dollars in shares in a 2007 capital raising to fund a major acquisition in the US...

Lesson Learned? The Ongoing International Experience With Corporate Child Care Chains

Be wary of large-scale day cares, warns U of C sociologist

Emily Kreiberg, Calgary Herald, May 9 2011

Well-known author and University of Calgary sociologist Tom Langford is warning Alberta parents to watch out for large, corporate child care facilities coming to the province.

In 2007, the Alberta government removed the 80-child cap on the maximum number of children that could be accommodated in a child care facility.

With the size deregulation, Langford said corporate day care centres that look after 200 or more children are in Alberta’s immediate future.

“At this size, corporate day cares will be larger than some of our local elementary schools,” says Langford, an assistant professor at the U of C who wrote a book called, *Alberta’s Day Care Controversy*. “Attending them will be a very different experience than our current stock of smaller non-profit and commercial day cares.”

Langford argues that since the capital for corporate day cares is provided by investors expecting sizable returns on investment, generating profits rather than putting children first becomes the bottom line.

“The commercial chains do well when the market is expanding,” he said. “They fill up new centres, make a profit and everything’s good.

“But when we’re in a recession, the vacancy rate goes up, they run into trouble, and the commercial chains are forced to not reinvest in child care. They no longer invest in new curriculum or programs for the kids, quality goes down, and their centres aren’t as attractive to potential investors anymore.”

But the provincial minister in charge of day cares argues the current child care scene in Alberta doesn’t reflect a situation of large, corporate day cares.

“We aren’t experiencing situations where child care providers want to exceed that original cap of 80 children,” said Yvonne Fritz, minister of children and youth services. “The regulation was lifted in 2007 because it was a non-issue.”

Fritz said only three per cent of child care centres in Alberta accommodate more than 80 children.

“The day cares that currently hold over 80 children are non-profit groups — they aren’t large corporate centres. They’re non-profits offered by groups like the YMCA, and they’re held to the same criteria and standards as smaller centres in the province.”

To become licensed, any child care centre coming to the province must meet certain standards for adequate supervision, staff-to-child ratios, child care provider training, net floor space, and safety requirements.

Non-compliance with government standards can result in termination of the licence and the child care facility being closed.

“Parents can be confident that our priority is to ensure that their children are safe and well cared for in their licensed child care program,” said Fritz.

Leslie Wulf, CEO of Education Learning Universe (EDLEUN), said there’s no reason for people to believe that a larger child care centre means less quality.

“Many other countries believe that smaller is better for child care centres,” Wulf said. “But Edleun spends an awful lot of money remodelling the centres that we buy to bring them up to our standards. Quality is No. 1 for us.”

The Edleun chain of child care centres came to Alberta in May 2010 and currently operates 20 child care centres in the province, with three new Calgary-area learning centres under construction.

Edleun is the only publicly traded child care corporation in Canada, and stated in its financial prospectus last May that it intends to own 10 per cent of all child care spaces in Canada within the next six years.

“We’re a Calgary-based, Canadian company with a lot of interesting stuff on the horizon,” Wulf says.

One of Edleun’s largest child care centres to date is currently being built in Chestermere. The Chestermere Lakes Learning Centre, a 2,300-square foot facility, will accommodate 247 children — including 45 kids from six to 12 years old in the before- and after-school program. The remaining 202 spaces are set aside for children six weeks to five years old.

“When you walk into that centre, you won’t even notice there’s over 200 kids in there,” says Wulf. “Everything’s going to be compartmentalized. It’d be just like if you walked into an elementary school of that size.”

In recent weeks, Edleun has purchased eight more centres in B.C. and is looking at further expansion here and across Canada.

“There’s a need for more child care spaces across the country, and we don’t have a problem investing in child care in Alberta,” Wulf says. “We’re not afraid to spend the capital.

“We’re going to continue to grow in the province and provide a quality child care environment. We are going to be part of the community, just like the library, the grocery store, and the bank.”

Langford, however, points to Australia’s failed ABC Learning Centres child care chain as an example of large-scale corporate child care operations gone awry.

By the time ABC Learning collapsed beneath \$1.6 billion of debt in November 2008, it had grown from a single centre in Brisbane to include 1,200 Australian child care centres, as well as 1,000 centres in the United States, 116 in New Zealand and 112 in Britain.

“When ABC went belly up, hundreds of centres closed and families and children were thrown out on the street,” Langford says.

“My argument is this, we have had day care chains such as KinderCare and Educentre go bankrupt in Alberta before. With young children, stable learning and care environments are important. It’s risking too much to have large corporate child care systems take over. Their track record in Alberta and around the world is too much of a risk.”

Langford predicts large child care corporations will make sweeping moves into the province in the next period of economic expansion.

“We’re going to have to wait for another boom for this to happen, but that’s what the future could hold for Alberta’s child care system.”

“Parents should ask themselves, do they want a child care system where child care facilities could go bankrupt, or should we build a child care system where that type of a calamity won’t happen?”

As a result of the Alberta government’s Creating Child Care Choices plan, a total of 15,138 new spaces were created in day homes, preschools, day cares and out-of-school care programs in the past three years.

Branch Reports

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Verity Bierenboim, Convenor ACCS SA

ACCS SA is continuing to try and engage with politicians such as Kate Ellis, Hon. Jay Weatherill (SA Minister for Education) and representatives of DECS (Dept. Education and Children’s Services) to keep abreast of changes in - and importantly to be clear about the effects of these changes on – the education and care sector.

ACCS SA together with our state association CCCSA (Community Children’s Centres SA) met with the Hon. Jay Weatherill in April and discussed numerous issues of concern. One of the issues we raised was regarding funding for infrastructure, firstly due to the fact that many of the Children’s Centres are ageing. Secondly there will be a need to increase the size of some centres due to changes in ratios and the once a year intake to school, which will have an impact on our waiting lists. We also asked why the funding for Universal Pre School is taking so long to be made available to the Child Care sector, and when it is made available why we are not receiving the same conditions as the Pre Schools run by DECS. We informed the Minister that we support the new NQA but feel there is still a lot more to

be done in relation to quality care. We will be meeting with Kate Ellis at the end of June.

We have had an early AGM this year holding it on the 1st of March. Alison Wells has stepped down as Convenor due to a heavy work load. We thank her for the great work she has done over the past eighteen months. Verity Bierenboim is the new Convenor and Robyn Geisler will continue on as Treasurer/Secretary. Robyn has done these jobs for many years and has contributed greatly over this time. Our guest speaker for the AGM was Miriam Daly, Director of Strategic Initiatives Early Childhood Services. Miriam spoke to us about Workforce Development and State Reform a Child Friendly State.

Also members of ACCS have all been busy sitting on different Committees and spending a lot of time reviewing the final Draft of the National Regulations. South Australia is also in the final stages of reviewing the State Regulations in line with the National Regulations.

VICTORIAN BRANCH

Barbara Romeril, CCC Victoria

CCC has been busy in the last quarter contributing to the large number of government inquiries and consultations on issues of concern to children, families and the community services that support them including the Exposure Draft of the National Regulations, the Inquiry into Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children and the review of the Victorian Government Human Rights Charter.

We also commented on the first Budget of the new Coalition Government in Victoria.

We continue to collaborate with sister organisations on a number of fronts, including working with child welfare organisations in a coalition to communicate with the new Victorian Government about working together for protection of vulnerable children.

In 2011 we will be celebrating CCC's 40th year with acknowledgements of key contributions from our members.

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