

MEDIA RELEASE

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More still needed in overhaul of early childhood education

The radical overhaul of Australia's preschool sector will require better legislating for the sector and increasing the number of early childhood education teachers, according to a policy paper released today by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

The policy brief, *Preschool Education in Australia*, summarises the current structure of preschool in Australia in contemplation of major policy shifts announced by the Commonwealth. It follows a Council of Australian Governments (COAG) commitment last year to a "radical makeover" of the preschool sector.

COAG promised that by 2013 all preschool children would have access to high quality education programs delivered by degree-qualified early childhood teachers.

"COAG's welcome commitment to universal access illustrates a government awareness of the long shadow cast by early learning experiences," said ACER's chief executive Professor Geoff Masters.

"But implementing this commitment will require significant cooperation between the Commonwealth and the States to ensure that preschools do reflect our society's professed care for its youngest participants."

The policy brief highlights a need for more nationally consistent and comparable preschool data. Information about the preschool sector is currently 15 to 20 years behind what is available about schools.

Inconsistencies are also noted in how early childhood education is regulated across Australian states. Stark differences can be found in the qualifications and salary of staff employed in 'stand alone' preschools and long day care settings.

"Professional opinion often favours long day care and changing workforce needs demand it," Professor Masters said. "Yet teachers in long day care work longer, appear to be paid less and often are unable to register as teachers in their home state."

Professor Masters said a quick and dramatic increase in the number of early childhood teachers was needed before universal preschool education could be implemented.

"The importance of preschool education for an individual's future life opportunities demanded a more rigorous and committed approach."

The policy paper, *Preschool Education in Australia*, was prepared by ACER Principal Research Fellow Dr Andrew Dowling and Research Fellow Kate O'Malley. It is available from the ACER website at <http://www.acer.edu.au/publications/policy-briefs.html>

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