Preschool Director's Association of SA  
Position paper on Integration of Children's Services

Context
Kindergartens in South Australia have, for the past 100 years, provided educational programs for young children prior to entry into school. Although originally established as a philanthropic response to the needs of young children living in inner city, industrial Adelaide, kindergartens now provide high quality early childhood programs throughout metropolitan and rural areas of the state. As of November 2002, sessional kindergarten is provided in numerous locations.

The history of kindergartens in South Australia positions them as a visible and constant reminder of the contribution that strong and visionary women, such as Lucy Morice, Kathleen Mellor, Catherine Helen Spence and Adelaide Meithke, have made to the state. Their support for educational programs that embodied alternative perspectives on learning, the child and the curriculum was revolutionary, but continues to influence how education is understood in kindergartens today. In 2002, kindergartens in South Australia continue to develop programs and curriculum that are congruent with the historical and philosophical roots of early childhood education. Principles such as play, the whole child, child-centered and child-initiated curriculum, the total learning environment and the respect for the child within the context of their family are embedded in the contemporary practices of early childhood educators working in kindergartens today.

Despite the suggestion that kindergartens, with their sessional structure of four half day sessions per week, are no longer relevant to the South Australian community, data would suggest otherwise. Currently, statistics demonstrate that 92% of children access public kindergartens in the year prior to starting school. Given that attendance at kindergarten is voluntary, such statistics point to the fact that the services and educational programs provided at these centres are highly valued by South Australian families. Feedback gathered through the annual Quality Assurance Process would also support the notion that kindergarten services in the state are highly valued, as does recent correspondence from a District Superintendent noting that “complaints about kindergartens are so few and far between, that there is no point in gathering this data” (Majewski, pers. communication). Preschool Directors in South Australia, with their knowledge of local communities, would also argue that such a high participation in an optional program is, in fact, not surprising. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that there is a strong cultural attachment to ‘going to kindergarten’ prior to starting school within the state. In addition, many grandparents of the current kindergarten generation were integral in building the local kindergarten that their grandchildren now attend.

Family involvement in kindergartens is a hallmark of kindergarten education in the state. Whilst local management of educational services is a growing trend throughout the world, it should be noted that kindergartens have always presented the community with a model of local management. Since their inception, when local communities fundraised and built a kindergarten for children in their local area, to the present, a committee of management and a Preschool Director has always managed the local kindergarten. This strong relationship with parents is reflected in the ongoing and active involvement of families in the kindergarten today who, in addition to volunteering as members of Governing Councils, mow lawns, feed animals, water the garden, cover books, participate in excursions, raise funds, and contribute to the multiple aspects of the kindergarten program.

Guiding Principles
As an educational field, it is acknowledged that early childhood education has never been static (Cuffaro, 1991; Spodek, 1991). That a diverse range of early childhood services in South Australia, for example, sessional kindergarten, long day care, Family Day Care, bilingual support
services, early entry into kindergarten for Aboriginal children and children with additional learning needs, occasional care, and respite care services, currently exists to meet the needs of young children and their families, reflects the evolving and responsive nature of the field. The Preschool Director’s Association of SA acknowledges the innovative and imaginative ways in which the field of early childhood education has traditionally responded to the needs of young children and families and it supports the notion that as communities change and develop it is essential that services are continually evaluated in terms of their quality, accessibility and appropriateness.

The Preschool Director’s Association of SA is committed to working collaboratively with local communities and the Department of Education and Children’s Services to ensure that services for children in their kindergarten year are of the highest quality and are accessible and appropriate for the needs of the local community. To this end, the Preschool Director’s Association believes that any changes to the current structure of kindergarten education in South Australia should be guided by the following principles:

The needs and interests of the child are foregrounded. This is a significant challenge since what may be in the child’s best interests may also be in direct contrast with the needs or wishes of the family. However, since it is the child who is, ultimately the recipient of the educational program that is delivered in the setting, it is essential that her/his needs and interests are at the forefront in both the consultation and decision making phases of evaluation.

An authentic consultation process with all stakeholders, including young children, families, professional associations, bureaucrats, academics and the Australian Education Union, is undertaken. The Preschool Director’s Association maintains that an authentic process, the voices of all stakeholders are listened to and heard. A range of options is available and final decisions are not made until the consultation process has been finalised. Those making the final decision should ensure that these decisions reflect the true desires of the local community.

A commitment to early childhood perspectives on teaching, learning and curriculum must be maintained. It is well established that early childhood education exists as a specific field of education with unique historical and philosophical roots that are separate to and different from but not less than, that of school education. The Preschool Director’s Association maintains a commitment to the belief that early childhood educators can bring to a dynamic educational landscape differing perspectives on the child, on learning and on the curriculum and that this is both significant and important.

The leadership of the early childhood centre must remain with an early childhood educator. The Preschool Director’s Association of South Australia recognises early childhood as an internationally acknowledged and specialized area of education and therefore supports high quality leadership as an essential provision in any educational service with children aged between the ages 0-8. The Association is committed to models of early childhood leadership that supports optimum learning outcomes for children. Therefore, we assert that only persons with qualifications in early childhood education should hold leadership positions in education services for children aged 0-5 (refer to Position Paper – Early Childhood Leadership.)

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References:

Preschool Director’s Association of SA                Position Paper – Integration of Services               Updated October 2002