

Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee

Inquiry into the Provision of Childcare

Submission from Australian Federation of University Women In



A. F. U. W.

Submitted by Dr Jennifer Strauss AM
President AFUW Inc

2/12 Tollington Ave, Malvern East VIC 3145
Phone/Fax: (03) 9885 8132
Email: jstr0036@bigpond.net.au

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Thank you for the opportunity to make a late Submission to this important Inquiry.

Our reason for wishing to make an intervention – in relation in particular to item (d) of the terms of reference – is that there appears to have been too little attention paid, other than in the Submission by the National Foundation for Australian Women, to the matter of out of school hours and vacation care for school age children.

While this is understandable given that the initial impetus to the Inquiry came from the collapse of ABC Learning and its impact on childcare provision for pre-school children, we submit that the Inquiry can and should be inquiring into the possibility of a national system of childcare for children up to the age of about twelve to fourteen.

The parents who need childcare for young infants and pre-school children in order to maintain their maximum workforce attachment will continue for the same reason to need affordable and accessible out of school hours and vacation care for their school age children. These children need age-appropriate and stimulating programs in a safe environment before and after school hours and during school vacations. Their parents need to be able to concentrate on their own work and training commitments without the distraction of anxiety about the welfare of their children, and employers could well do without the interruptions to productivity caused by parents having to be absent from work because of their need to care for their children.

The Australian Federation of University Women is an organization that supports the education of women in order for them to be able to develop to the full their potential talents, become financially self-sufficient and participate in public life and decision-making as well as in family life. If our primary concern is with the well-being of women, we recognise that childcare is a matter of well-being for families (women, men and children) and believe furthermore that its social and economic implications are such that it does indeed require national involvement in its oversight and provision.

While the involvement of AFUW has been mostly directed towards tertiary education, we have become increasingly aware of the importance of lifelong learning and the growing body of evidence that indicates that early childhood is a crucial period for laying the foundations of all future educational development. Consequently AFUW participated vigorously in the WomenSpeak consultations on childcare conducted in 2006 under funding from the Office for Women.

AFUW agreed with the conclusion drawn from those consultations that the system needed a comprehensive and complete overhaul, with areas of particular concern being

- the overall lack of childcare that was available, accessible and affordable;
- the difficulty experienced by parents in making an informed choice of childcare due to lack of information and the complexity and diversity of arrangements;
- the quality of services, including issues of staff numbers, qualifications, and retention; and

- the variable extent to which childcare offered experiences appropriate for the child's intellectual and social development

We submit that it is now time for that total overhaul to be undertaken and, in the light of recent developments, we believe that the best way to undertake it is by a Reference to the Productivity Commission.

The Commission has the resources and expertise to undertake such a complex task, although the fact that it has already gathered a great deal of relevant information in the process of its Inquiry into Paid Parental Leave would mean an economy of time and effort. Perhaps more importantly the Commission has demonstrated in the Paid Parental Leave Inquiry a capacity not only to understand and balance the varying needs of individuals and the workplace in relation to parenting, but also to make practical and rational suggestions to meet those needs.

The need for out of school hours and vacation care was a major element in the submission made by Security 4Women to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Women's Workforce Participation. AFUW was one of the organizations assisting in the preparation of that Submission and we believe that the evidence and arguments contained therein, along with the material from the earlier WomenSpeak community consultations, provide compelling grounds for a Productivity Commission reference for an Inquiry into the Provision of Childcare that will include these forms of childcare as well as those forms needed for pre-schoolers. Such an inquiry offers the best way of arriving at recommendations for a childcare system that will enable the maximum engagement of parents in the workforce while also ensuring that the next generation of Australian citizens receive a standard of care that will result in healthy physical, intellectual and emotional development.

Thanking you again for your consideration of this Submission,

Jennifer Strauss, on behalf of the Australian Federation of University Women