



## Proposal for a trial of school-based playgroups in the ACT

### **Outline:**

To trial an enhanced prior-to-school transitional program designed to support children and parents prior to school enrolment. This community-based, parent-led playgroup in school program would be initially trialled in five sites across Canberra. Initial trial site selection could be based on interest from schools as well as targeting areas of social disadvantage and identified AEDC vulnerability criteria.

Cost Estimates: \$25-30,000



### **Playgroups in the ACT**

ACT Playgroups currently supports over 2,000 young Canberra families meeting in over 200 community playgroups each week. Prior to the ACT Government's 2006 Towards 2020 School Strategy playgroups operated in more than 75% of ACT preschools and were an effective transition strategy for many thousands of young Canberra families into kindergarten and primary school. Changes to the schools strategy and universal preschool access has meant that the ACT has now lost all of these groups and in fact (according to Telethon Institute data) has the lowest level of playgroup participation prior to school entry of any Australian State or Territory:



*The AEDC data suggest that about 15% of Australian children attended one or more playgroups prior to starting school. Playgroup attendance was below the national average for children living in the Australian Capital Territory (10.6%), New South Wales (11.1%) and the Northern Territory (13.4%). Between 15% and 18% of children attended playgroups in each of the other jurisdictions, except for Tasmania where a high 33% of children attended playgroups prior to starting school.*

This data shows that not only are Canberra children missing out on valuable play-based social development at an early age, but that parents are missing out on attachment development opportunities with their children as well as with other parents and carers.

**Rationale:**

ACT Playgroups are interested in partnering with the Education Directorate (EDU) and selected local schools to trial a transitional program of child and parent support prior to school enrolment.

The most recent (2015) AEDC data indicates that although the ACT is still tracking above the national average, it is not really at a level commensurate with the demographic profile of Canberra families. More concerning is the decline of results in this jurisdiction from the 2012 process. Instead of increasing the resilience and capacity of young Canberra children over the past three years, this survey showed an increase since 2012 in developmental vulnerability both overall and on four of the five domains.



New research from the Telethon Kids Institute (using AEDC data) indicates that children who don't attend playgroups are twice as likely to be developmentally behind those who do by the time they start school. A new study by the Centre for Urban Research at RMIT and using the LSAC concluded that community playgroups have significant social and economic benefits for parents and carers.

This proposed trial also aligns with the ACT Children and Young People Outcomes Framework, including Outcome 3 for families (Individual needs of families are recognised and supported) and Outcome 2 for communities (Adequate family support services to meet the needs of parents).

**Background:**



This program would be based upon the highly successful Launching into Learning (LiL) playgroup initiative in Tasmania as well as the Western Australian Enhanced Transition to School (ETS) project.

The LiL longitudinal study 2007-2014 demonstrates that regular participation in LiL playgroups consistently and significantly improved educational outcomes across all main educational performance measures.

Data from the Tasmanian program has been reported as:

*“Launching into Learning started in about 30 schools in 2007 providing activities for children up to three years old and their parents. LiL is now offered at almost all primary schools – 114*

*in total – and early assessment shows the children who participate regularly outperform their peers in maths and reading once they reach kindergarten and prep.”*

*“Perhaps most promisingly the biggest performance gains were from children in lower socio-economic areas.”*

Recent findings show LiL is nearly halving the number of students failing to achieve the minimum prep reading or maths standard (from 20% to 10% in reading and 18% to 11% in maths). This program now reaches over 1500 children per year across participating schools.

Early anecdotal data from the much more cost effective WA model shows similar results. Schools hosting family-run playgroups report wide ranging benefits including:

- Children in kindergarten who started in playgroup are transitioning well.
- Decrease in separation difficulties.
- Parents are confident and willing to help at school.
- Parents and children are more connected with other school families.
- Sense of belonging, trust and ownership built with families.

The WA program is funded at about \$1.2m over two years and the Tasmanian version runs at several million per year.

**Proposal:**

ACT Playgroups believes that we can establish a community-based parent-led playgroup in schools program for a fraction of the cost of LiL, but retaining its evidence based outcomes - and even adding a greater parent/family support component (using the WA ETS model).



Our suggestion is to select five key school sites where we believe that such a program could have significant benefit for children, families and the school community. The WA program has demonstrated that a parent-led model can operate effectively in many different primary schools through existing resources, staffing and funding. The parent-led model means that a minimum of staffing is required at each school and most groups can make effective use of existing school equipment and resources.

Initial trial site selection could be based on interest from schools as well as targeting areas of social disadvantage and using AEDC vulnerability data. We could also combine this with our knowledge and experience of demand and need gained from over 200 active community playgroups in the Canberra area.

These school-based playgroups could begin from Term 4 2016 and primarily target those children eligible for preschool in 2017. Younger siblings and other carer types would be welcome at every session - we believe in the importance of engaging as much of the family as possible in the life of the child and the school.

### Costing/Resources

We estimate that to initially trial this program in five sites would cost about \$5,000 each (just in terms of family recruitment, staff time and support for each playgroup and a few younger-age group resources if the school needs it). The school commitment



would depend on each setting, but could be as little as ½ an hour per week (just to help the group into a space and make sure that it is safe and appropriate). This support could be done by anyone from the school (ie could be support or admin staff – doesn't need to be a teacher or executive role). However, the more involvement that the school has with the group, obviously the better the outcome will be for both the playgroup and the families attending (in terms of programming and transition, but also integration with the school's activities and community).

The three main school requirements are space, interest/commitment and a small amount of staff support (less than 5 hours per term). This can be managed without any staffing support from the school, but the WA experience is that it makes for a much more robust and integrated program if the school has some role in helping/owning the group.

ACT Playgroups will work in partnership with each participating school, but also with the Education Directorate on programming, resources, curriculum, feedback, evaluation and referral processes.

We would be happy to meet with you or any school or Directorate staff to answer any questions or refine this proposal further.

