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Social Justice In Early Childhood

Media Release

Federal Capital Early Childhood Funding a Potential Free For All

Social Justice in Early Childhood, a national children's peak body promoting equity and social justice for children, claims that a Federal Government early childhood policy is so general that tax payers' money could be used by for-profit operators for their own profit generation.

In the last Budget the Federal Government announced the investment of \$114.5 million to build 260 additional 'early learning and care centres' by June 2014. The first 38 'priority centres' will be built and operational by June 2010, which includes six Autism specific centres. Social Justice In Early Childhood is concerned about the unannounced details of the capital funding arrangements the Government will implement for the building of these new centres. The Government's 'Questions and Answers' sheet (<http://www.oececc.gov.au>) explains who would be eligible to apply for the capital funding:

The Government is looking to achieve best value for money and is open to opportunities for co-investment from government or other interested parties, including local government, community organisation and private enterprise.

The Questions and Answers sheet goes on to explain the obligations of the individual/s or organisation/s that are successful in receiving the capital funds:

If the land is State Land, the state will own the facility. If the land is owned by a community group, ownership of the facility will rest with that community group unless otherwise agreed. In all cases, the Australian Government will require a purpose agreement (or other safeguard) to ensure that the land and facility is used for the provision of a high quality learning and care program for an appropriate period of time.

Social Justice In Early Childhood is concerned that this policy leaves open the possibility of private enterprise using government funding to purchase land facilities for their own profit generation, and that in time, these assets could be used for purposes other than providing high quality learning and care programs for children. Recent well-publicised difficulties with early childhood corporate sector ownership, particularly with enterprises receiving millions of dollars in taxpayer subsidies each week, reinforce concerns of the not-for-profit sector.

Social Justice In Early Childhood would like the Government to publicly respond to these questions:

- How will the Government ensure that all centres that receive capital funding maintain a 'high quality learning and care program' for the entirety of their operation? How long is 'an appropriate period of time'? How has/will this period of time be determined?
- Assuming the Autism Specific Centres operate with higher overheads than mainstream centres, how will the Government fund and sustain a necessary higher operational cost for these centres?
- If the centre is deemed by the owner/operator to be unviable before the 'appropriate period of time' has expired, will the purpose agreement or safeguard cover all loopholes to ensure the centre remains open and is not used for alternative interests of the owner in question?
- Will developed purpose agreements and safeguards ensure that land and facilities are returned to the state if and when a centre can no longer viably operate?

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