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My interest in EC policy and advocacy started soon after I graduated. I was invited to attend an international conference in London, where I planned to work. At this conference I met and heard from people from many nations who were passionate about quality experiences for young children and support for families. I began to develop a better understanding that what I had learnt about and observed in services in Australia was in fact a right of very few young children in the world. Upon my return to Australia I was fortunate to work with a 'master teacher' who mentored me and showed how when working as a teacher in a centre we could be informed about policy and its impact on young children's experiences and teaching in EC settings. This included learning something about the opportunities available for practitioners to play a role in influencing policy and helping those outside the profession, including families, to understand the importance of the early years.

Thus, I became an advocate in my work as a teacher in an EC centre and in my contacts with the local community. I soon realised that if I wanted to be involved in trying to promote better quality services for all young children at the level of government policy then I would need to be a member of a group where members shared similar values. Early in my career I became a member of the Australian Preschool Association, which is now Early Childhood Australia (ECA). This shaped my belief that to be effective in influencing policy, active membership of advocacy groups is an important way to share one's passion with colleagues and to work together over an extended time to achieve commonly held views for change. Over the years a lot of the advocacy work I have been involved with has related to policies which centred on maintaining or improving the quality of education and care services for young children and trying to enable universal access to high- quality services, including making them affordable. Some key things I have learnt from my journey so far include:

- the influence that leaders can have and therefore the need to be well informed about the context in which any change to policy is being sought
- the development of strategic alliances
- the use of multiple strategies in a planned approach to achieving change
- the role of evidence and practitioner wisdom.

The following gives a brief description of some Australian policies that I have been involved with over the years that relate to improving the quality of children's services. I discuss these in relation to two key points I think are important when striving to influence policy. The first is a strategic and planned approach and the second is understanding the context, along with building relationships and alliances.

1 Multiple strategies and a planned approach

It is essential that any policy change that is being sought can be clearly and succinctly expressed even though there is a need for multilayers of information behind the key message. I was a member of a taskforce set up by the New South Wales government to make recommendations around a change from a one- to- five ratio of staff for under two year olds to a one- to- four ratio. The report with recommendations was completed but included a minority report from one member of the taskforce. The members involved in the majority report agreed that a further campaign was required so the matter did not slide off the government agenda. Community Child Care Co- operative (NSW) took on a facilitating role and established a planning group with a commitment to the change. This not only reduced the workload of an already very busy group of people, but enabled the sharing of strengths

and interests. Some people had important media contacts, others were happy to speak to the media and others could work on keeping practitioners involved and informed. There were meetings with the minister, the opposition and senior bureaucrats. Strategies to raise the profile of the campaign included a march to Parliament House, and extensive use of the media including press releases, appearances on television and radio, and stories in local and state-wide newspapers. The slogan 'one to four make it law' was catchy and an easy message to then explain and to use in gaining publicity.

2 Context, relationships, strategic alliances and evidence

In 2013, the Productivity Commission was asked by the Commonwealth government to undertake an Inquiry into Child Care and Early Learning. The inquiry had a number of objectives including examining and identifying future options for:

- childcare and early learning that supports the workforce participation particularly of women
- a system that addresses children's learning and development needs
- a system that has financially sustainable funding arrangements to support more flexible, affordable and accessible quality childcare and EC learning.

The EC sector, after becoming aware of the inquiry, was first involved in reading an Issues Paper circulated by the Productivity Commission, which made it clear that consultation was an essential part of the process, including written submissions to the issues paper and later to a draft report, attending public hearings and providing evidence. The sector was quick to recognise the need to work together to develop common positions where possible and to assist each other in providing evidence to support positions being put forward. All major advocacy groups had it on their agenda, and strategic alliances were formed to work together first in identifying common principles that needed to be promoted and argued for by all groups in such a wide ranging inquiry.

As the process proceeded, it became apparent where the greatest threats to the rights of children and the quality of services lay. One of these was a threat to the requirement to have qualified staff working with under two year olds in services with little or no recognition of the importance of a planned program. The minister had said in a forum attended by many national and state-wide advocacy groups that training was not required and lots of grandparents would love to work with this age group. This was then followed by an interim report from the Productivity Commission saying there was a lack of evidence to support a requirement for qualified staff to work with this age group and in particular EC teachers.

The strategic alliances that had been formed then worked on responding through written submissions, giving evidence at hearings and at individual meetings with members of the commission. Help was sought from academics and others who were researching in this area and who were familiar with the research evidence. They also put in submissions and attended and gave evidence at public hearings. It was acknowledged that the input of other disciplines was essential, so forums were organised and commission members were invited to hear the views of a wide range of professionals with expertise in areas including economics, health, political science and social policy. At the same time, services were also involved in advocacy informed by the peak group of which they were a member.

It sounds simple, but the reality of change is that it is a complex process and as an individual you are listening to a diversity of views. Gaining consensus to move forward as a group requires pragmatism, and a willingness to compromise while learning from the views of others. For me, the test was, 'Will what we are arguing for be in the best interests of young children?'