**Early childhood education and care and its impact on learning and development.**

During the last three decades, there has been extensive and compelling research telling us about the importance of the early years of a child’s life. Findings are unequivocal that these first several years present a critical and a not-to-be-missed opportunity for learning and development which will provide a child with the necessary foundation for later academic and social success.

The Australian Government has, over the last several years, placed early childhood education as a key focus of effort. At the national level good progress is being made through a range of policies and strategies to better support the early years of a child’s life. Likewise the Tasmanian Government is also responding to evidence on the importance of early childhood through its proposed changes to the Education Act.

The focus on quality early learning is clearly backed by the evidence; this is also about offering greater equity and universal access.

Our kids deserve the best educational and learning opportunities and these are best commenced early. We need to improve our poor retention rates and provide a high quality education for all that promotes lifelong learning from an early age.

It is in this context that I support the intent of Tasmanian Education Bill 2016 and its focus on early learning and education. The provision of higher-quality early childhood education for young Tasmanians will enable more of our children to participate in richer learning environments, sooner; this is particularly important for children who may be living in situations of disadvantage.

Access to quality early learning is the key to overcoming the impact of early disadvantage on educational outcomes and life opportunities.

The reality is that Tasmania has far too many children and young people not receiving the rich play-based developmental opportunities that will be critical to them living successful lives.

The move to offer parents the opportunity to enrol their child in kindergarten, up to six months earlier than is currently possible will be a boost to the development of many children. This decision will remain with parents as to whether they enrol their child into this non-compulsory kindergarten play-based environment. Parents and caregivers are critical partners in all efforts to improve a child’s educational and developmental outcomes.

This education must provide rich play-based early learning opportunities. It is important that any changes to the current system and to what is offered to children be of a high standard and play-based.

Whilst I have and continue to offer my support for these changes to early learning it must be on the proviso that the government over the next three and a half years invests in early childhood teacher training, upskilling of existing teachers where required and more work towards meeting the National Early Childhood Education and Care Standards (ECEC).

The part childcare has to play, prior to children enrolling in kindergarten and preschool, is also of great importance. Benefits of high quality child-care for children aged 0 to 4 include greater social skills, more advanced vocabulary and greater impulse control. Many young children will greatly benefit by high quality childcare, followed by high quality kindergarten and enrolment in a school system that is carefully designed to support their full development.

If we provide to all Tasmania children, and from an early age, access to higher quality learning and development opportunities, we will see a transformation in educational outcomes that will not only benefit the whole state but will see a whole new generation of Tasmanian young people live happier, healthier and more productive lives.

Researchers in educational and social research at the University of Tasmania have, in recent years, clearly demonstrated the powerful results that can be achieved for young people when the school system is characterised by high expectations, high energy and a strong collective commitment.

The draft legislation changes being proposed to early education are a great start.