

A Vision for Quality Public Early Childhood Education

Progress Report

Special Report to Annual Meeting 2008

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A Progress Report

Introduction

NZEI Te Riu Roa's 2007 Annual Meeting resolved to develop communities of interest to further develop NZEI's vision for public early childhood education.

It also resolved to implement a campaign to place quality public early childhood education on the national political agenda and to educate the wider public about the concerns NZEI has with the current system.

Context

This work has been taking place in a context of significant ongoing gains in early childhood education through the implementation of the strategic plan, Ngā Huarahi Arataki, Pathways to the Future, with its three goals of participation, quality and collaboration.

In particular the past year has seen the implementation of the target of 50 percent qualified registered teachers in all services and the implementation of the 20 hours free provision policy for all three and four year olds.

The gradual move to a fully qualified registered teaching workforce and various other initiatives improve quality in services and collaboration between services. At the same time, the number of children participating continues to increase. However these gains are threatened by the rapid commercialisation of the sector, motivated by very different goals.

While the private sector is growing steadily, the community and public sector is unable to expand to meet community demand because of a lack of capital provision and resources involved in meeting the planning and licensing criteria. In order to access these resources, community services must go through a lengthy process and meet strict criteria relating to a proven need for a service of that kind, in that location. Private operators are not required to go through this process and can establish new services anywhere, even next door to existing services.

This is happening at a time when the 20 hours free provision policy has fuelled demand, but expected growth in participation may be hampered by the lack of services. This is particularly so in poorer areas.

The political context includes an election campaign where so far, policies have not featured greatly and early education policies have not been highlighted.

Provision of ECE – planning, physical provision

To date, a group of early childhood education national sector organisations have committed to strengthening the community-based sector. These organisations represent education and care services, kindergarten, Playcentre, Pasifika services, home-based services, Christian-based services and Catholic services.

The sector groups have agreed that the government needs to take a more hands-on role in planning services and providing physical premises to ensure that all localities have sufficient and appropriate facilities in a timely manner. Many community organisations do have the ability to expand to provide the appropriate, responsive services needed if physical premises and licenses can be provided.

At the same time, many of these same early childhood sector groups are critical of the automatic government fund-

ing that accrues to any private service that meets the regulations, whether or not there is a need for such a service. This contrasts with the tertiary sector where the EFTs (equivalent full time students) system, which generates automatic funding on the basis of enrolments, has been abandoned because it encourages inefficiencies and does not meet the educational needs of the nation.

Funding

The government has committed to funding the sector with limited accountability for how money is spent. For example, the sector is funded to deliver pay parity to teachers. Services have to attest to paying the minimum rates under the Early Childhood Education Collective Agreement (formerly Consenting Parties) but are under no obligation to pay more than the basic scale entry steps of the agreement, to any of their employees, whatever their experience or seniority. Nor must they adhere to other conditions in the agreement associated with delivering a quality service. Community services are agreed that there needs to be greater accountability over how taxpayer funds are spent so that money provided for

salaries is actually spent on salaries to ensure a unified teaching pay scale.

In addition, the money for new or expanded community services (available under the Discretionary Grants Scheme) remains inadequate and extremely difficult to access.

There is widespread support from within the sector for quality parent-led licensed services such as Playcentre and Kohanga Reo to receive sufficient funding to participate in the 20 hours free provision programme. This may enhance quality and increase participation as services may be able to focus on expansion if not overburdened by voluntary administrative work.

Community Administration & Management

Stand-alone community early childhood services are struggling with the requirements involved in running a single small service. Community ECE sector groups have expressed interest in the integrated schools model and other strategies of government support which allow services to focus on matters of philosophy and education and leave many compliance, administrative and property matters to the government.

Alternative models include funding of regional or national organisations to deliver backup in the areas of management and administrative support. Problems with this model include the political agenda which some national organisations may have, for example the Early Childhood Council which has historically been anti-union.

Accountability

There is limited accountability for the extensive taxpayer subsidies that go to services owned by private operators and corporate businesses. They are free to deny teachers access to pay parity by only paying the minimum they must attest to. They are also only required to offer the statutory minimum conditions, not those in the ECE Collective Agreement such as non-contact time and professional development which support quality services.

Securing political implementation

NZEI is promoting through its lobby group, its resources and through its election campaigning material, the need for a quality public early childhood system.

NZEI regularly meets with political parties and again has used these opportunities to highlight its campaign for quality public ECE, and its opposition to taxpayers' money being used for private profit.

NZEI continues to highlight early childhood education as an election issue.

Conclusion

NZEI continues to promote, on its own behalf and with other organisations, the need for a public early childhood education system so that every child has a good start to lifelong learning by having access to a suitable quality local service.

While the work is ongoing, NZEI remains committed to working towards this vision.

Recommendations:

- That Annual Meeting receive the paper A Vision for Quality Public Early Childhood Education - a progress report.
- That Annual Meeting takes action to endorse the work to build communities of interest to promote the vision of quality public early childhood education and to determine some strategies on how to reach that ideal.
- That action be taken by NZEI to continue its campaign to educate the public about the importance of quality public early childhood education.
- That action be taken by NZEI to continue to lobby political parties and seek their commitment to the vision of quality public early childhood education.

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