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GROUP

Submission on the Strategic Plan for Early Learning

To the **Minister of Education**

This submission is from:

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Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) is an independent charity that strives to achieve the elimination of child poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand. We work to provide evidence about the causes and effects of poverty on children and their families, and to inform the public, policymakers, media and politicians of the changes to policy needed to reduce child poverty. CPAG believes that New Zealand's high rate of child poverty is due to policy neglect and a flawed ideological emphasis on economic incentives. Through research, CPAG highlights the position of tens of thousands of New Zealand children, and promotes public policies that address the underlying causes of the poverty they live in. Our vision is for an Aotearoa where all children can flourish, free from poverty.

We wish to make the following submission on:

[The Strategic Plan for Early Learning](#)

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our submission in further detail.

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Submission on the Early Learning Strategy 2019

Introduction

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) welcomes the intention by the Ministry of Education to review its policies for delivering Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Aotearoa-New Zealand. We have expressed concern across a number of issues that have impacted on the ECCE sector over the years, including funding freezes, reduced levels of qualifications among staff and pay parity issues, alongside a pressing need to address more inclusive care and education opportunities for all children. We believe there is a significant opportunity with this review not only to make critical changes to improve the standard of care children receive, but also to address the inequities that exist. Our thoughts on the draft Strategic Plan for Early Learning are offered below.

1. Draft's use of 'Early Learning' rather than 'Early Childhood Care and Education'

The terminology 'Early Learning' reflects a schoolification orientation rather than affirming the holistic way in which young children who are well cared for learn and grow, spiritually, emotionally and physically, as well as cognitively. The centrality of 'wellbeing' in the vision (p. 7) for education, and the understanding of the value of a whole-community, wrap-around approach, demands a holistic approach to describing the sector and clearly identifying this focus. For the wellbeing of all children, we recommend that this holistic identity be informed by the notion of whakamana. The phrase 'early childhood care and education' is more in keeping with the current government's across-the-board policy priority of wellbeing, whilst 'early learning' is a narrow cognitivist lens that was more in keeping with the previous government's equally narrow priority of literacy and numeracy.

Recommendation:

Adopt the term Early Childhood Care and Education as opposed to Early Learning (ECCE).

1. 100% Trained teachers

Well-qualified teachers are a key factor in ensuring the provision of high quality culturally responsive practice. Poor quality early childhood experiences can be harmful, whilst high quality, culturally responsive provision can ameliorate socioeconomic disadvantage. Under the previous Early Childhood Strategic Plan, Ngā Huarahi Arataki (2002-2012), we should have already arrived at a 100% degree-level qualified sector seven years ago in 2012. This was thwarted by the National Government's 2008 reduction to 50%. Therefore, funding to achieve a fully degree qualified sector should absolutely be considered a priority. This funding should both provide fee allowances for unqualified teachers already working in centres to enable them complete degree level qualifications, and immediately fully fund centres that already have 100% qualified staffing. In addition to requiring all early childhood teachers to be degree level qualified, the Government should require all early childhood services to pay teachers at the same pay salary levels as the NZEI collective. This would elevate and equalise the status and morale of the profession, fostering long-term employment rather than fast turn-over, and thus contribute quality provision due to the stability of teaching teams and consistent, secure relationships for infants, toddlers and young children in early childhood centres. The Ministry of

Education should offer for-profit services pathways to become community-owned and run. A system-wide review of teacher education provision and pathways, the connection between teacher education and innovation hubs, and the role of teacher education in addressing socioeconomic disadvantage should be a top priority involving all relevant providers, Government departments, and the ERO. All providers of teacher qualifications should be able to show in their research, their curriculum, and their community work that they are active in addressing the causes and outcomes of poverty.

Recommendations:

1. Provide fee allowances to those already working in ECCE centres to support them gaining their qualifications.
2. Immediately fully fund all centres that have 100% qualified staff.
3. Require that all early childhood services pay teachers at the same pay salary levels as the NZEI collective.

2. Ratios

When in 1988 we received the first early childhood education policy document, 'Before Five' and the ratio for under-tuos was set at one adult to every five babies, we understood that this was only temporary and the short-term objective was to attain the ratio of one adult for every three babies. Thirty years on, the ration is still one to five. It is very disappointing that the draft Strategic Plan only recommends a ratio of one to four. Those of us who have been parents know how hard it is to look after one baby, let alone four, and even if you are a fully qualified teacher, trying to meet the needs of four babies is a tough call (or say two teachers supporting eight babies, or three with twelve babies). A ratio of one teacher to four babies under the age of 11 months is different to one teacher to four 18-month-olds. We suggest that for up to one-year-olds, the ratio should be one adult to two babies.

Recommendations:

1. The ratio for care of infants up to the age of 1 year should be one adult to two infants.
2. The ratio for care of babies aged between 12 months and 2 years should be one adult to three babies.
3. The ratio of care for children aged between 2 years and 3 years should be one adult to five children.
4. The ratio of care for children aged three to five years should be one adult to eight children

3. Group size and physical spaces

Another key factor in quality provision is to ensure that infants, toddlers and young children are being cared for in small groups. Currently the legislation requires that there be [one person responsible for every 50 children](#) and group sizes of:

- No more than 150 children aged 2 years and over attending at any one time
- No more than 25 children under 2 years attending at any one time unless otherwise approved by the Secretary under regulation 22A(3)
- No more than 50 children attending at any one time if children are a mixture of those under 2 years and those 2 years and over, unless otherwise approved by the Secretary under regulation 23(3)

- Large groups can be noisy and chaotic, and thus disturbing, rather than conducive to communicating, relating and learning. The 'Early Learning' plan merely seeks to 'develop advice' on this matter. There is no time-frame for implementing any changes.

The current regulations of 2.5 square metres per child inside and 5 square metres per child outside, is amongst the worst ratio in the OECD to the detriment of children and teachers occupying these spaces. The increasing use of astro turf/artificial grass in outdoor areas is contradicting the 'restful indoor spaces and natural outdoor space' for children to experience the 'rich curriculum' as per draft document.

Recommendations:

1. We recommend group sizes of no more than 8 babies and under two-year olds. For two to five year olds we recommend group sizes of no more than 30. For mixed age-groupings, no more than 25.
2. We suggest indoor space should be no less than 3.3 square metres per child and outdoor space should be no less than 7 square metres per child.
3. Where possible, natural materials should be used to furnish outdoor areas.

4. *Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Ka Hikitia* and High Quality Culturally Responsive Practice

The draft Strategic Plan is very weak on *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, merely repeating some pat phrases from *Te Whāriki 2017* on page nine. After this statement there is absolutely no further mention at all, let alone articulating specific *Tiriti* implementation strategies. This is shockingly poor. The plan also repeatedly uses the phrase 'high quality' rather than the description utilised in *Ka Hikitia*, the Māori Education Strategy, which is 'high quality, culturally responsive' practice. Repeated ERO national evaluations have highlighted the inadequacy of early childhood practices in this regard, so it is therefore far too premature to drop 'culturally responsive' from this aspirational phrase. Children who are well grounded in their identities, language(s) and cultural worldview(s) are more likely to succeed educationally and in life. Languages are best learnt from birth, from speakers of the language who provide excellent models linguistically. Fluent *Te reo Māori* speaking role models for under twos should be prioritised.

While the plan notes that the "aim of reducing disparity for children and their families underpins many of the proposals in this plan" (MoE, 2018, p. 19) the goals address outcomes rather than causes. In order to prioritise socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, the strategic plan needs to provide clear and comprehensive goals for the curriculum, for teacher education and for innovation hubs, goals that specifically address socioeconomic discrimination in New Zealand through the development of culturally responsive and anti-discriminatory practices that are integrated into all centre communities across all socioeconomic spheres. The early childhood curriculum is a critical window of opportunity to ensure all early childhood communities notice, recognise, and respond to the causes and outcomes of childhood poverty, and develop intentional curriculum and research innovations for the wellbeing of all children, whanau, and communities. This goal should inform the development of nationwide PLD opportunities and is significantly more important than a focus on digital literacy. We are additionally concerned with the introduction of 'progress tools' and the ways in which these might undermine culturally responsive

practice.

Recommendations:

1. Prioritise fluent Te reo Māori speaking role models for under twos.
2. Set goals to address socio-economic discrimination in New Zealand through the development of culturally responsive and anti-discriminatory practices that are integrated into all centre communities across all socioeconomic spheres.

5. Pacific Islands language requirements and Initial Teacher Education

Languages are the repositories of cultural knowledges and identities. For Pacific Island families living in Aotearoa, it is incredibly important that their languages are sustained, alongside te reo Māori. Pacific Islands Language Nests desperately need qualified teachers who fluently speak one or more of the range of Pacific Islands languages. Yet there is a paucity of dedicated initial teacher education programmes for Pacific Islands teachers, and the new qualifications for Pacific languages are not at degree level which disadvantage Pacific Island teachers in relation to pay. [We also penalise potential teachers by insisting that they demonstrate very difficult English languages standards in test conditions in order to enter teacher education programmes](#), which is patently unnecessary if they are intending to teach in a Language Nest (where they won't need English in this capacity). We need our Initial Teacher Education providers to ensure that they attract and retain Pacific Islands language speaking teachers, and for the Ministry to financially support these teachers during the period of their qualification.

Recommendation:

1. Support the inclusion of Pacific languages in ECCE centres by tailoring qualifications toward accommodating language retention.
2. Providing fee and allowance support for Pacific Island language speakers to qualify as teachers

6. Concerns about process of producing draft

After the unfortunate ministry-controlled process employed by the Ministry for the 'refresh' of Te Whāriki, we are disappointed that the current process is very similar. The membership of the ministry appointed 'Ministerial Advisory Group', seemed to be primarily focused on those with expertise in literacy and numeracy education, aside from two recognised early childhood education academics. The wider reference group comprised the members of two ministry appointed pre-existing advisory committees made up of people many of whom are in management positions, have no teaching qualifications or early childhood education training. The Ministry did not consult the wider early childhood sector about the membership of the taskforce panels, nor did they seek initial input from the sector as to the concerns and issues that should be addressed by the plan. The production of the draft without this wider consultation, and the format of the subsequent 'consultation' hui leads to a sense of the rubber-stamping of a ministry-driven, pre-determined exercise rather than a genuine wide-ranging canvassing of a flax-roots nature. We doubt that the voices of those often marginalised from these kinds of rubber-stamping exercises will have been heard or acted upon.

Recommendation:

Consult more widely with Māori and Pacific peoples as well as centre managers and teachers in low-income areas prior to drafting future reports.

7. Governance and support

While we understand the importance of clear and comprehensive governance, and providing support for community owned services, we are concerned that this goal might initiate a higher level of marginalisation, stigmatisation, and/or distrust for historically disadvantaged communities. That concern will be exacerbated if some communities receive more 'surprise audits' than others. The goal needs to recognise the importance of addressing the very nature of governance and the ways in which centre audits can marginalise communities. The plan needs to clearly address the limitations of the ERO in its current approach to auditing, including the funding constraints that limit its time in centres, and this could be addressed through setting strategic goals for partnerships and co-participatory relationships between ERO, relevant Ministries, health agencies, and other organisations, teacher education providers, researchers, and the future innovation hubs.

Recommendation:

1. Governance agencies should operate with transparency and in collaboration with centres.
2. Develop strategic goals for partnerships and co-participatory relationships between ERO, relevant Ministries, health agencies, and other organisations, teacher education providers, researchers, and the future innovation hubs.