

CHiLD POVERTY ACTION GROUP

Child Poverty Action Group

www.cpag.org.nz

Submission to Early Childhood Education Task Force 31 January 2011

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) offers the following responses to Task Force key questions:

1. What configuration of public investments in early childhood education are likely to yield the best returns over the coming years?

Child Poverty Action Group NZ considers that universally available, high quality, free early childhood education should be the government's top priority. National and international research categorically demonstrates the long-term cost-benefit returns to the nation of children, particularly those who are socio-economically marginalised, having attended a quality early childhood education programme (Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Wylie, Hodgen, Ferral, & Thompson, 2006). This is supported by a growing body of evidence from comparative longitudinal studies which have followed children through their life experiences, as well as the evidence of recent neurolinguistic research.

The USA High/Scope Perry Preschool study has reported that 40 year olds who as children who received a high quality early childhood programme were more likely to have graduated from high school, had higher earnings, better employment, and had committed fewer crimes than those who did not have this opportunity in their early years (Schweinhart et al., 2005).

Neuroscience has added further weight to the evidence in support of the importance of early life experiences, demonstrating the necessity for “communities to create more viable systems of child care that do not tolerate unsafe and unstimulating settings, actively promote and reward high-quality care, stem the tide of staff turnover, and enable parents at all income levels to avail themselves of quality care for their children” (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p. 327).

2. What policy changes could ensure all children benefit from at least some engagement with early childhood education services?

Child Poverty Action Group NZ questions this terminology. “At least some” is not good enough. All children should have access to **high quality, free** early childhood education. High quality education is provided when all teachers are well qualified. This should be freely and readily available for as many years (that is from birth to six years) as the parents/whānau need and seek it. Policy changes need to restore the previous government’s commitment to ensuring that all early childhood teachers hold the minimum of a three-year equivalent level diploma or degree, specialising in early childhood education.

Leading early childhood academics Margaret Carr and Linda Mitchell of the University of Waikato have recently stated categorically their concern about recent government policies that have reduced the expectations for 100% qualified teachers in early childhood services. They write: “Economic inequality will now be associated from the early years with educational inequity. The new education policy established by the May [2010] budget says that we cannot afford the financial cost of qualified teachers to provide care and education for all of New Zealand's youngest and most vulnerable of children. We say that as a nation we cannot afford not to - the long-term social, economic and educational cost is too high” (NZ Herald, Friday June 25, 2010).

3. What changes in the early childhood education sector would promote greater responsiveness to the diverse and changing needs of stakeholders?

The current government encouragement of private, for profit early childhood education needs to be reconsidered, as the incentive of many of these businesses is to derive financial benefits for themselves rather than educational benefits to their “customers”. Services such as kindergartens, kōhanga reo, Pacific Island language nests, Playcentre, and community-based early childhood (not-for-profit) early childhood education and care centres are already strategically placed to meet the diverse needs of families/whānau, and need to be supported in their endeavours to offer high quality provision, through appropriate expectations and funding.

In areas of high poverty, such as South Auckland and Gisborne, there is currently lower participation in early childhood education. Despite recognition of the long-term benefits to children and society of high quality early childhood education, in 2007 only 83% of new entrants in decile 1 schools (ie, in those communities with the greatest socio-economic

disadvantage) had previously attended ECE services, compared with 97% in decile 6 and 99% in decile 10 schools (Ministry of Social Development, 2008). Areas such as South Auckland are not well served by the private sector as they are not considered profitable. Government should fund the establishment of appropriate community-based facilities in these areas of particular need. The government should also reinstate the mobile early childhood education services to reach those in rural areas.

4. What funding and regulatory models would encourage local innovation and system-wide learning to enhance overall service quality?

High quality teacher education and the expectation that all teachers are fully qualified are key to the provision of overall service quality. Currently, many qualified teachers are hamstrung by inappropriate programme expectations imposed by unqualified management in for-profit settings. The provision of responsive, culturally and pedagogically appropriate, government funded professional development to all early childhood education settings is key to upholding and improving service quality.

Child Poverty Action Group offers the following responses to Task Force “Longer Problem Statements”:

New Zealand must be future-oriented; providing a great start for our children is crucial. The Government accords high priority to ensuring all children can participate in quality early childhood education. But funding is constrained. The Government and taxpayers need assurance that public investments in early childhood education will yield the highest possible returns – for children, their parents, and all of society.

Child Poverty Action Group agrees with the necessity for Government to assume responsibility for ensuring all children get the best possible early education. Even in recessionary times, perhaps even more so when so many more families are struggling financially, government funding and support needs to be prioritised towards this objective. New Zealand expenditure in early childhood education has historically been limited, and the 20 hours free initiative was a welcome move towards universalising early childhood education provision. Funding allocations towards prioritising early childhood education are a long-term investment, which may not be seen as strategic in terms of short-term governmental objectives. However, a government that is truly committed to an egalitarian, equitable society, and to the wellbeing of its most vulnerable citizens, needs policies that look toward the next generation rather than short term budget constraints.

Despite considerable recent growth in government funding for early childhood education services, there are still many children who do not engage with formal educational services prior to entering school. Given the research evidence of benefits from pre-schoolers acquiring a strong start in education, ways must be found to ensure all children benefit from at least some engagement with early childhood education services.

Child Poverty Action Group applauds the government's recognition of the research evidence, but goes further in considering that all children need access to the high quality provision provided by qualified teachers in well-resourced educational environments. The overall general quality of early childhood provision should not be sacrificed under the guise of redirecting funding to those currently not participating. Reasons for non-participation are complex, as the Ministry of Education's own projects and evaluative research has demonstrated (Ministry of Education, 2005). There must be greater engagement with communities, particularly low-income communities, to determine what models of EC provision are appropriate and workable. Rather than cutting funding to the sector, CPAG submits that investment in ECE must be reinstated to ensure the provision of quality early childhood education for all children, regardless of where they live or the socioeconomic status of their parents.

References

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