

Focus on what makes kindergartens unique ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There are five main factors that set kindergartens apart from other forms of childcare, and the Heretaunga Kindergarten Association (HKA) should be thinking carefully about how it's approaching the challenges it faces to maintain its identity and secure its future, says ChildForum chief executive Sarah Alexander.

Involved in the early childhood sector for many years, including being a kindergarten head teacher, Dr Alexander said that while the HKA was stuck between a rock and a hard place in its efforts to secure its member kindergartens' future, the crossroads it faces could be an opportunity to do things differently, and take a positive stance rather than a reactive, competitive one.

"Now is the time, when it's considering redundancies and hours of attendance, to say do we see kindergartens as a business, or do we hold onto what makes kindergartens kindergartens."

She said the approach the association was taking was playing into the hands of the Government and risking kindergartens' current position that was covered by the State Sector Act.

Under this act a legally free kindergarten was defined as an early childcare service whose licence permitted no child to attend for more than four hours a day, and currently the government was still responsible under the act to fund wage increases.

She said kindergartens made the choice some years back to retain 100 per cent qualified teachers, however if a child attended for more than four hours a day it would lose its classification as a kindergarten and would be treated like any other early childcare service, only receiving funding for up to 80 per cent qualified teachers, with no obligation for the government to continue to fund wage increases.

The recent move by the Auckland Kindergarten Association to investigate increasing hours to seven hours a day meant it faced this risk, Dr Alexander said.

"The Heretaunga association should be considering these long term implications now as it could be even more serious in the future.

"There's wider political implications for going down the road of being like any other childcare service."

She said if kindergartens wanted to stay within the State Sector Act, they needed to focus on the unique attributes they offered.

There were five main attributes: Offering morning and afternoon sessions (which allowed the kindergartens to offer more places for children within their licences), qualified teachers (even on skeleton staff), a free, clearly donation-based service (no compulsory fees), an emphasis on group and peer play to assist children to gain independence and learn through play (not just changing nappies), and a child focus (not just being there to provide care while parents worked).

She suggested the HKA's consultation period could be extended and the kindergarten communities could look at the direction they wanted to take, rather than just respond to the current financial crisis.

"If this association wanted to retain 100 per cent funding it could market itself as high quality sessional care, it could link in with other home-based providers and community or family support to top up the rest of the hours.

"Why join the competition when you can stand apart from the competition?"

She said the HKA should be congratulated for what it was doing, but that this was the ideal time to resist the temptation to see children in terms of dollar signs, get parents on board and review the direction of the organisation and its unique offering.

-reprinted from Hawke's Bay Today

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