

New Zealand: Early childhood teacher calls on government for pay parity with kindergarten educators ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

An early childhood teacher is calling for pay parity with kindergarten educators saying the industry's workers need better support from the government.

Presenting at the Education and Workforce Select Committee on Wednesday, early childhood education (ECE) teacher Sithembinkosi Nkawu said there was a pay gap between ECE teachers with the same qualifications as kindergarten teachers, and that did not make sense.

The financial pressure on those teachers could be alleviated if it was mandatory to pay an ECE teacher at least \$52,000 a year, she added.

"We all do the same work, so I'm asking if the government can step in."

All teachers should be supported, regardless of who their employer was, Nkawu said. Right now, that support was non-existent.

Comparing her wage to that of a kindergarten teacher, Nkawu said it would take her years to reach a similar annual income, despite the experience she had working in the industry.

The poor wage was a result of the job being historically categorised as women's work and "a nanny job", she said.

Aside from pay, she said ECE teachers experienced a lack in release time and suffered from child-to-teacher ratios – with one teacher to five children under 2 years old. That strained personal relationships between teachers and young people that was necessary for their development.

"This is where the foundation of learning starts. Development happens in the first three years of life but how are we going to make sure that development happens when some children are supported more than the others? I feel, it is not fair."

Advice from the Ministry of Education (MoE) said with the exception of Te Kura, all teachers of early learning services were employed independently of the government, unlike employees who fall under the Kindergarten Teachers, Head Teachers and Senior Teachers' collective agreements.

So, despite an ECE provider holding a government-issued license and subsidies for its services, it was not "directly responsible" for setting teachers' terms and conditions of employment.

New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) Te Riu Roa president Lynda Stuart said the union's ECE collective agreement campaign would kick off next Wednesday, before negotiations begin in October.

The negotiation would relate to setting the minimum rates ECE teachers were paid and to push for increased government funding, she said.

The rates a teacher is paid depend on the qualification they hold and the current collective agreement. Qualified and certified teachers with an early childhood education degree, or a relevant lower level qualification, must be paid \$45,491 a year or more. Teachers with higher qualifications must be paid \$46,832 or more.

In a letter to the select committee's chair Parmjeet Parmar, MoE Education System Policy deputy secretary Andrea Schollmann said the government had, since 2007, tried to influence the sector to pay qualified teachers in early learning more, with access to higher subsidy rates if teacher-led centre-based services paid employees at, or above, "certain rates".

She added that the current pay rate was agreed on by the NZEI and over a hundred employers in the sector.

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