

Children before profits [NZ] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Women have been fighting for free child care, as it was then known, since the 1970s, so when the Government said it would provide 20 hours of free education a week for 3 and 4-year-olds at non-profit, community-run centres, the early childhood education sector hailed it as a landmark.

Well, almost all of the sector hailed it. Kindergartens, the country's largest provider of education for children aged 3 to 5 were "thrilled" that community-owned centres would be joining them in providing free education for our youngest citizens.

The Early Education Federation, which represents 17 national organisations educating 113,000 children, the early childhood teachers' union, NZEI Te Riu Roa, Colleges of Education, home-based provider organisations and academics welcomed the policy.

Only private profit-making centres opposed it, saying they were being discriminated against. How come the Government wasn't giving them taxpayers' money to provide the free education?

They did not mention that as much as 60 per cent of their income is already provided by the taxpayer and that the Budget allowed \$546 million for early childhood education and more than half of that will go to the private centres.

The Early Childhood Council, which represents private centres, commissioned a report that recommends the Government abolish its 20 free hours policy.

It's titled Putting Children First, but it would be more accurate to call it Putting Profit First.

There are three reasons why the Government chose non-profit community-owned centres.

First, community centres are more accountable and are run by parents whose priorities are keeping fees down and ensuring the centre provides quality education. They are not intent on making big profits for the owner or investing in property which can be sold at a capital gain.

Second, research increasingly shows that community-run centres provide a better quality of education. That's not surprising. Community centres exist to serve children and families, while profit-making centres aim for a return on investment.

Third, profit-making centres are usually in high-income neighbourhoods, not low-income areas where the need for free education is greatest.

The Early Childhood Council report also recommends the Government abolish the goal of having all teachers in centres qualified by 2012. Why? Because it's an added cost for private owners.

Research throughout the world indicates that the key to quality education is qualified teachers.

Parents would not want their children taught by unqualified teachers in schools, so why should children under 5 get a lower standard of education.

Parents should be aware that three big chains are increasingly dominating private centres.

Kidicorp, listed on the sharemarket, has 62 centres. The Australian-owned ABC, also listed on the stock exchange, has 20 centres, and the unlisted Kindercare has 28 centres.

However much these chains say they are committed to education, the fact is they are businesses that exist to make a profit.

This is why the Government is funding community-owned centres rather than private centres. Propping up private businesses is not one of the aims of its early childhood education policy.

By giving the funding to community-owned centres the Government is ensuring that the money is spent where it is needed.

The policy represents an investment in New Zealand's most precious resource, our children. We can't afford to see it axed.

- reprinted from the New Zealand Herald

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