

Call for early childhood shake-up ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

An eight-month report into early childhood education by a Government-appointed taskforce has suggested 65 recommendations "for leading change" - one of which would reinstate funding scrapped by National.

Taskforce chair Michael Mintrom said the steps added up to something which was "quite drastically different".

"The Taskforce proposes a bold vision for the future of ECE [early childhood education]. New Zealand's children hold enormous promise and potential but, at the same time, they are incredibly vulnerable. We must all step up to ensure our children receive the best start in life."

The terms of the Taskforce required recommendations to be fiscally neutral; even so, it recommended the Government consider funding ECE more in the future as "high-quality ECE is one of the strongest investments that can be made in New Zealand's future," Mintrom said.

Recommendations included:

- Reintroducing incentives for services with 100 per cent qualified staff which were scrapped by National
- Regulating a minimum 80 per cent of qualified staff in teacher-led ECE services
- Extra funding for priority groups including Maori, Pasifika, children with special education needs and from low socio-economic backgrounds
- A revamped funding system - based on individual children's needs, not licensed numbers - described as a "per-child-hour-subsidy"
- An evaluation of curriculum implementation
- Mandatory ECE service performance reviews with funding tied to performance
- A review of funding for home-based services, and
- A review of all ECE teacher qualifications.

The review also recommends the new funding mechanism be implemented within four years, while proposing a "cross-government investment strategy" to shift existing Government funds towards high-value investments, such as ECE.

Education Minister Anne Tolley, who established the Taskforce in October, welcomed the report and said it was "heartening" many serious issues had been identified and positive suggestions made.

"The Government was already concerned about the variability across services, the lack of accountability, poor access for many children, and the need for a more targeted funding system."

Some of the recommendations were already being addressed, she said, such as money for increased participation and the Government target of 80 per cent qualified teachers in services by 2012.

Labour Education spokeswoman Sue Moroney said while the taskforce report set out ECE as a top priority, it was compromised by the parameters set by Tolley.

The report recommended wealthy parents contribute more to their services, which would lead to lower quality education for poorer families as the recommended targeted subsidies would not make up the difference.

"From the time that the Minister ordered the Taskforce to stay within current funding but increase the number of children using the service, the Taskforce was in a no-win situation."

- reprinted from the Dominion Post

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