

ECE report won't impact govt target ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A report into early childhood education for under-threes will not have an effect on a key government target, despite finding half of services were not up to scratch.

The Government is aiming to have 98 per cent participation in quality early childhood education by 2016 as part of the Better Public Services programme.

Last month it announced participation was at 96.1 per cent, and it was intensifying engagement with priority communities to reach the target.

However, experts say an Education Review Office study of 235 services released this week should have had an effect on those figures.

The study found that while services were warm and nurturing, almost half of services were not doing enough to help babies and toddlers learn, with 30 per cent having "limited responsiveness" and 16 per cent deemed "not responsive".

Academics say the failure to uphold the curriculum sections that explicitly deal with extending children's development - communication and exploration - mean those services could not be called "quality".

However, the Ministry of Education's deputy secretary of Early Learning, Parents and Whanau Rawiri Bell said the figures for the participation rate were measured for the period six months before children start school.

Therefore the participation rate of under-threes did not contribute to the target. Mr Bell said however it was that all children receive quality learning.

"We asked ERO to carry out the study involving infants and toddlers so we could see what was happening in that part of early childhood education and where improvement is needed," he said.

The survey findings show that of the services measured, only two out of 235 solely dealt with under-twos, with the rest teaching a range of children.

However the services - which included Kindergarten, Playcentre, education and care centres and home-based - were only evaluated on the education and care of infants and toddlers, defined as children under-three.

The participation data is taken when children start school. It records how long children have been attending ECE, and for how many hours per week. Most children attend for at least two years, for between 15-30 hours a week, it says.

Yesterday, Otago University emeritus professor Anne Smith, an expert in early childhood education, said there were two parts to "quality".

"There's physical things like group sizes and staff qualifications, and process quality, which is the responsiveness we're talking about: responding when children talk and communicating with them," Dr Smith said.

"We've been saying for a long time that it's all very well increasing quantity but if you don't increase quality as well it can be harmful, particularly for those in deprived circumstances."

Education minister Hekia Parata said the report showed services were doing a good job promoting positive learning outcomes for infants and toddlers.

"But we know for a number of others there's more work to be done and that's what's ... being supported by the ministry and the sector," she said.

The Ministry would follow up on the report and help those who needed it with more professional development. A new joint initiative with the NZEI teachers' union and the ministry also had the potential to lift quality, she said, as well as other work.

The NZEI union and the Green Party criticised the Government for pushing participation when it knew there were quality issues.

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