

Meeting with the Hon. Anne Tolley, Minister of Education – 25th March 2010

Present

For Early Education Federation: Penelope Janes, Gillian Dodson, Maureen Woodhams, Helen Baxter

For the Minister's Office: Anne Tolley, Karl Le Quesne (Group Manager Early Childhood Education, Ministry of Education), Jan Evans (Private Secretary)

Question 1:

Where do the short and long term goals of the 10 year Strategic Plan for ECE – Pathways to the Future: Nga Hurarahi Arataki now sit in the Government's plans for the future?

Federation delegates explained that they were keen to hear about the Minister's short and long term plans for the sector and to find out where the Strategic Plan for ECE now stands.

The Minister said that the government is having to address the increasing costs of ECE and look at what we are getting for it. She said costs have trebled (ie government spending has trebled) in the last several years.

Although we have made progress on numbers of qualified teachers, there are still some children not participating in ECE. The evidence shows that some children are attending for longer hours but does not show that there is much change to the number of children attending.

Looking longer term toward the future is the Minister's uppermost priority now. The coming Budget will address things on a short term basis only. The Minister wants then to start thinking about government spending over the next 10 years, and to look at quality outcomes. In particular she will be wanting to look at Transition to School. Questions like "at what age should children be starting school?" Although participation seems to have improved, schools are questioning the figures. Although families answer yes to the question "Did your child attend an ECE service?" schools suspect that this does not necessarily mean the child has attended regularly.

Revision of the rules and regulations has now been completed. Now the Minister has given the Ministry a license to experiment with some less formal structures to attract families into ECE in areas where there is low attendance. Some families don't understand the value of ECE.

Karl said that even when families do understand the value, there are still not enough services available in some areas. The Ministry has been supporting playgroups on school sites and in shopping malls to encourage families into the ECE sector. The Ministry is helping these groups with their administration responsibilities.

The Minister said that they are concerned about poor ERO reports for some services. One of the main concerns is the lack of administration skills in some communities to meet requirements.

Federation delegates raised the collaboration goals in the Strategic Plan and how actioning these could help address these kinds of concerns.

The Minister said that she agreed the 'low hanging fruit had been picked' and that now they are looking at harder issues. There are some tough decisions to be made. Treasury is pushing back hard. There will be some new money for ECE over the next few years but it will be minimal. Last year Education received 300 million of new money. Looking back over the last 5 years there has been a significant shift from parent cost to government cost.

Question 2:

When does the Government intend to introduce the 50% qualified and registered teachers requirement for under 2 year olds?

The Minister said that this initiative came with quite big costs. Therefore this issue has been pushed out in this Budget. This Budget is about:

1. 20 Hours ECE for Playcentre and Kohanga reo.
2. 20 Hours ECE for 5 year olds.

The ratio issue has been pushed out about 3 years.

Now the Minister wants to work more on targeting the grant.

Federation delegates expressed concern for under 2 year olds in ECE. They said that most agree that mother is best, but this is not always possible. It is therefore extremely important to have qualified staff in centres that cater for under 2 year olds.

The Minister said that she saw the under 2's as an important area to focus on. This will be a big area for consideration in the near future.

The questions the Ministry needs to be asking are:

1. Who are we delivering to - where is the money going?
2. What are the needs of the under 2's group?
3. What about the transition to school issues for four and a half to six year olds?

Federation delegates asked if the Minister would be looking at developing a new Strategic Plan for the sector.

The Minister said that she was not intending to. It is too early in the Government's thinking.

Federation delegates said that the sector is keen to work with the Minister on planning for the future.

The Minister said that she will be doing this at some stage over the next year. National Standards have been the focus recently. Now she is starting to look hard at ECE over the next 12 months.

Federation delegates informed the Minister about the 2nd Forum we are holding on the 5th November this year, and a 3rd Forum next year, and that we are hoping she will be able to attend. The Minister showed interest in these forums and in perhaps submitting some questions for sector delegates to work on at that time.

Question 3

What are the Minister's intentions regarding bi-culturalism in ECE as contained within the Strategic Plan?

Federation delegates said that if the Strategic Plan is to be abandoned, where does this put bi-culturalism in ECE?

The Minister is aware of and concerned about the shortage of ECE qualified teachers with Te Reo. They are looking at refocusing on Teach NZ. Te Reo will be one of the main criteria for teachers in ECE.

Question 4:

What is the timeframe for introduction of short courses for primary teachers and those with overseas qualifications to achieve an ECE teaching qualification?

The Minister said that NZQA is now doing some rethinking around this issue. They have responsibility for this area and so it seems appropriate that they should be looking at it. The proposal for introduction of short courses is therefore on hold. The Ministry of Education will still finish their scoping work but the introduction of courses will be on hold until the NZQA looks into it. There are currently around 300 primary teachers working in ECE at the moment and her first priority was this group.

Question 5:

What impact does the Minister see the introduction of the National Standards having on ECE?

The Minister said that the question she is hearing from the sector is: "What is ready to start school?"

She is not planning to set a particular standard for starting school, but she does think it would be useful to review Te Whāriki at some stage. It is probably time this was done. She said there is some concern about truancy in the first year of school. She thinks it may be useful to ensure parents are aware of the requirement that once a child is enrolled at school, even if they are not yet 6 years old, they must attend school. Some parents believe that because a child is not required to go to school until they are six years old, their attendance when they are five can be intermittent and therefore setting a pattern of truancy.

Federation delegates said that there may be a variety of areas that could be considered when assessing ready for school, for example, self management skills.

The Minister said she agreed but that we also needed to ensure children had basic literacy and numeracy skills. We need to define and get a common understanding of what "ready for school" is.

The Minister made a final comment that the government could not allow costs of education to continue to grow without evidence of good outcomes.