

Wednesday 11 April 2007

KPV commends Victoria's Early Childhood Plan for the National Reform Agenda

Meredith Carter, CEO of KPV said today "Kindergarten Parents Victoria (KPV) welcomes the strong framework for early childhood education and care (ECEC) proposed by the Victorian Government National Reform Agenda Plan to be submitted to COAG. The Plan recognises the critical impact ECEC has on raising happy, healthy and resilient children as well as on outcomes in later life. Every child deserves as much."

Ms Carter noted: "There is strong accord between the Plan and KPV's *Vision 2011: A vision for early childhood education – preparing children for life.*" —available at <http://www.kpv.org.au/pdfs/vision2011/pdf>

"KPV also supports increased Commonwealth commitment in this area," said Ms Carter. "The importance of this investment is increasingly acknowledged around the world but Australia's investment is shockingly low by comparison to other OECD countries – 0.1% of GDP compared to for eg. 1.02% in Norway and 0.81% in Denmark." (OECD 2006 Starting Strong II Early Childhood Education and Care, Figure 5.4)

Similarly, Ms Carter said: "Economic benefits are warranted sooner rather than later and will flow much faster with commitment at both the Commonwealth and State levels. KPV notes the Victorian proposal leans heavily for its implementation on the Commonwealth coming to the party. Given the 10 year timeframe we urge the State Government to work towards implementation in Victoria regardless of whether it is adopted nationally."

The State Government's commitment to make four-year-old kindergarten effectively free for health care card holders is anticipated in the upcoming budget. Ms Carter said: "This is a wonderful step forward. Victoria already has high four-year-old kindergarten participation but as the Plan acknowledges vulnerable children are the most likely to miss out. These are the children likely to benefit most. "

“To this end we support continued investment towards fully funded three and four-year-old kindergarten,” she said. This will be required to realise Action 11 – ensuring *a higher proportion of three year olds have access to high quality kindergarten like services*. “KPV supports government funding so all children can attend a four-year-old kindergarten program for a minimum of 12 hours weekly and a minimum of six hours contact time for three year olds. (Vision 2011).”

Ms Carter said: “KPV urges the Victorian Government to legislate to enshrine the principle that every child deserves kindergarten without waiting for Commonwealth agreement (Action 36).” It underscores the benefits not only for individual children and their families but also for the broader community and the economy. It is programs led by qualified teachers that particularly make the difference. As the OECD has noted:

Settings that have staff with higher qualifications, especially with a good proportion of trained teachers on the staff, show higher quality and their children make more progress. ...The higher the qualification of staff, particularly the manager of the centre, the more progress children made. (OECD 2006 p.216).

Attached further detailed comments addressing key components of Victoria’s Plan.

About KPV

KPV is the leading peak organisation that develops promotes and sustains quality early childhood education. KPV has extensive membership from the broader children’s services industry, including kindergartens, childcare centres, local government, cluster managers and other affiliated organisations. Through its membership base, KPV represents over 60,000 families statewide.

Media

Meredith Carter, CEO of Kindergarten Parents Victoria is available for interview on Ph 9489 3500 or Mobile 0400 511763

Attachment

KPV response to Victoria's National Reform Agenda Plan to Improve Outcomes in Early Childhood: Additional Comments

Workforce Development

The proposal that all ECEC employ at least one degree-qualified teacher and that all new staff hold at least a post secondary school early childhood qualification is strongly supported (Actions 46 and 47). However the 2016 implementation date seems unduly modest. We acknowledge strategies must also be put in place to recruit and train new staff and upgrade the qualifications of existing staff. However this must not be used as a reason to defer the requirement for all ECEC to offer a kindergarten program to 2016.

This requirement will itself help increase the sector's attraction for undergraduates and to stem departures by those already in the field. Similarly the call for a national comprehensive ECEC Workforce Inquiry should not delay Victorian action.

KPV Child Care Benefit (CCB) and Child Care Tax Rebate Campaign

KPV is currently urging all Victorian kindergartens to register as a child care provider so that eligible parents can access CCB. We are pleased that Action 42 in the Victorian Plan proposes that *"the Commonwealth Government should amend the Child Care Benefit scheme to allow...extended hours kindergarten services... to qualify for the Child Care Benefit subsidy."*

KPV seeks extension of the 30% tax rebate on childcare fees to all working parents with children in quality childcare. In conjunction with C&K the largest early childhood service in Queensland and KU Children's Services, the largest not for profit direct provider of early childhood services in New South Wales we aim to highlight how this scheme currently discriminates against many parents. This is because the rebate for working parents is not accessible to many working parents of children in community-managed kindergartens. This directly undermines children's right to the benefits of participation in kindergarten.

Parent and Community involvement

The OECD highlights that *"organized civil society and community groups should be involved in the formulation and implementation of the ECEC policy agenda...In particular, parents need to be considered as the central partners...."* (OECD 2006 p.53)

Commonwealth Government ECEC strategies have generally overlooked the importance of and huge contribution made both by parents and community organisations. Many not-for-profit organisations are key providers of early childhood services. Some agencies provide services across the spectrum from universal to targeted and/or specialist services. In addition such organisations are frequently instrumental in developing innovative services to meet emerging needs.

Parent contributions similarly need to be more strongly acknowledged at both Commonwealth and State levels. Support for parent involvement should go beyond *sharing with parents the cost of delivering a quality kindergarten experience for all four year olds.* (Victoria's Plan p.18) and focus more on their potential to enhance both policy and participate in their children's development (as per Action 24).

Parents do make heroic efforts as fundraisers and as volunteers on management committees. Most would like to focus their efforts on the contribution they can make to their child's learning and enjoyment of their early years. To maximise the outcomes of children's participation in kindergarten and other ECEC services, strong partnerships need to be developed between service providers and the parents and families of the children in their care.

Quality assurance and curriculum frameworks as well as staff training must increasingly enhance support for parents and parenthood. An essential aim must be to develop appropriate models for the particular community and its young children in collaboration with parents. Developing integrated children's services in children's hubs as proposed in Action 33 is important. Incorporating strong links between services and communities *including opportunities for democratic participation* in such initiatives is emphasized by the OECD. (OECD p.55).

Three-year-old kindergarten and targeted CCB

The OECD particularly emphasises the importance of strong early childhood services for vulnerable children – those with *diverse learning rights*. The valuable gains state funded kindergarten programs are producing for such children are increasingly recognised around the globe.

KPV strongly supports two years of kindergarten for all children especially given the evidence of the importance to child development of appropriate stimulation in the early years of life prior to age four. KPV Vision 2011 recommends government fund a minimum of six hours weekly for three year old kindergarten with additional financial subsidies to promote participation for vulnerable children. We therefore support Action 11 which proposes targeting two years of kindergarten like programs for indigenous and other vulnerable children in the first instance. We also support targeting CCB at higher rates to promote this.

Ensuring quality services

However support for increased CCB alone will not be enough. Action 52 proposes federal government incentives for early childhood graduates to work in hard-to-staff areas. Children most in need and their families are likely to require highly experienced teachers however. Other strategies also required include incentives to providers to develop and offer appropriate programs particularly in and with vulnerable communities as proposed in Actions 10 and 11.

Vision 2011 sets out some key strategies to achieve the more generic goal of higher standards of teaching and programs including work on curriculum frameworks and accreditation to further ensure the value of this allocation of resources under the principle of Excellence and Innovation.

Staffing ratios

Similar comments apply to the importance of staffing ratios. They will be particularly important to closing the gap in health and learning outcomes for vulnerable children. They will help ensure not only that providers can provide adequate attention to these children whilst in formal care settings. They will also help ensure time for interaction with their families and the development of the strong partnerships required to best promote happy healthy and resilient children through implementation of complementary strategies across both the formal care setting and the home environment.

Transition to school

The strategies proposed in this important area such as the introduction of individual transition plans are noted. Many kindergartens already provide individual plans. Further strategies to promote stronger relationships between kindergartens and other relevant services including schools must also enhance shared understanding of the pedagogical approaches employed.

Caution must especially be exercised against the 'schoolification' of early childhood education and care. The OECD notes that better knowledge of young children and their developmental needs is growing in many countries and has led to a shift in the focus of pre-school programming. It places greater emphasis on the well-being, involvement and connectedness of young children as opposed to a focus on school like learning and skills. (See OECD 2006, p.64 and Chapter 3 more generally).

Integrated care and education

KPV strongly supports the development of strong links between early childhood education and other community services to support family-centred practice. The fragmentation of the current service and funding system supports neither professional and service collaboration nor a multi-disciplinary approach

to service planning and development. Increasing numbers of kindergartens also offer childcare and other services such as maternal and child health on site.

Co-location does not necessarily achieve integration of services or programs however. There is a need to think flexibly about how to achieve effective integration. In addition much of the infrastructure in the field has limited capacity to accommodate other services. Incentives to achieve at least strong collaboration to meet the needs of families and particularly working parents will be important. One of the aims of the KPV pilot projects with local government will be to explore these issues (Action 30).

Final comments

There is a dilemma for both government and parents in terms of ensuring both affordability and quality in early learning and care. However Australia lags well behind most OECD countries in terms of government contribution in this area. KPV appreciatively acknowledges that the Victorian Government has significantly increased the resources to the sector. However there is much more to be done. Significant investment at the state level must continue. It must be matched at the Commonwealth level to lift standards nationally. The investment will significantly enhance our economy and our children are worth it.