

APPENDIX FOUR

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION



Te Tahuu o te Matauranga

New Zealand Free Kindergarten Association Annual Conference

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Secretary for Education

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Thank you for the invitation to speak at your conference.

I can relate to the theme of your conference - "New Challenges, New Opportunities".

One quickly learns that in education there are no shortages of challenges - or views.

I think it is vital that such challenges and views are considered and debated in a forward looking way and in terms of the opportunities they create.

Kindergarten associations were pioneers in early childhood education in New Zealand. You are seen as having a position of leadership and being a lightship to the sector. Your association faces many challenges. Recent policy decisions being one of those. Your history points to your innovation and adaptability, and openness to new ideas.

Taking your theme as a reference point, I would like to talk to you today about some of the general issues facing education and the early childhood sector in particular, and about the kind of focus and capability I am trying to develop within the Ministry.

To me education has to be the most important investment an individual can make in terms of realising their personal, social and economic potential.

Given this it is not all surprising that so many people feel passionately about education and how it should be provided.

Nor given the importance of education to the economic and social development of New Zealand should it been seen as surprising that a wide range of groups outside of the formal parts of the education system are now parties to education debates.

Since joining the Ministry I have emphasised the importance of bringing a long term and strategic view to education policy.

The reality is that we live a changing world. This world is being shaped by a number of economic and social influences that directly or indirectly will impact on the demands made on an education system.

Examples of such changes in recent years can be seen in the very substantial rise in female participation in the workforce. It can be seen in the growing international dimension in education.

I think it is important that we anticipate as best we can how the future demands made on our education system are likely to change and what such changes or influences might mean for policy and providers.

There will continue to be an economic premium placed on a person's skills and the need for on going training.

We have a strong and growing international orientation. Relationships with Asian countries have become and will continue to become much more important.

There are technological influences, such as the development of distance learning opportunities. For many people this reduces the barriers of time, age and location that previously might have limited their educational opportunities.

Information technology also opens up new possibilities in terms of how children can be taught and how they can learn.

Socially New Zealand is much more diverse than it was 20 years ago.

There exists a wide range of income distribution. We have many more solo parents. Full employment is no longer a reality. We are ethnically more diverse.

We have the contrasts between the pressures of urban growth in Auckland and the challenges of declining populations in rural areas.

The inevitable reality of economic change has as its counterpart the social stresses associated with that change.

This argues that the education system as a whole has to be able to respond to the needs of a much wider range of students, families and cultures. The diversity of the Early Childhood sector provides a good example of the diversity of demand.

It points to the fact that in looking for solutions we should not assume that one size fits all. In other words we should be open to a range of solutions, a range of approaches and an accommodation of different educational philosophies and approaches.

This is not arguing that diversity should be a goal in its own right. Rather it is an observation that different students will learn best in differing environments that best reflect their needs, their values and the values of their families.

While diversity and a more heterogeneous education system seems here to stay, neither removes the bottom line concern that we do need to be confident that different approaches still meet a quality test and that they will provide good overall educational opportunities and outcomes for students.

Policy should be concerned about quality, access and affordability.

To me, policy is less about whether a government should intervene, but more about the most effective ways to intervene. In many cases the Government's role may largely be limited to setting the general regulatory and funding rules.

Policy is often about balancing trade-offs or striking a balance between competing objectives.

For example, there will never be enough money to satisfy the insatiable demands of the education sector. This inevitably makes it essential to prioritise and make trade offs between the competing needs of the different parts of the sector.

In early childhood education, what balance should be struck between providing universal support and more targeted interventions designed to help those groups who are participating least? What balance that should be struck between interventions intended to lift participation and those designed to lift quality?

In early childhood quality is clearly an important issue as it is in other parts of the education system.

Here regulation is one of the important tools in a government's policy armoury to influence quality.

Regulating for higher quality does impact on resourcing needs. Regulation can also impact on access or affordability of services. All regulations need to be administered and enforced and this inevitably means compliance costs.

But regulation is often easier in the saying than the doing. While some things like health and safety requirements are relatively easy to specify, defining education quality is much harder.

Ideally one would define minimum standards expected in terms of the minimum educational outcomes being sought.

When this is difficult, regulation tends to be couched in terms of inputs such as staff/pupil ratios, qualifications etc. While there can be strong correlations between these and the quality of education outcomes it is important to remember that such regulations do not guarantee education outcomes in all situations. They can also constrain the options and strategies available to management.

None of these trade offs are simple either/or decisions. You always try to go for an overall balance and one that meets some overall sense of priorities.

At the end of the day policy can only do so much.

Ultimately, quality will be determined by the quality of leadership provided by people such as yourselves and by the skills, motivation and abilities of your teachers.

The early childhood education sector has seen rapid growth in participation since 1990 of 35%. The number of early childhood licensed services over this period has also increased by over 30%.

One key challenge facing you and other early childhood educators will be the projected decline in the number of 0 to 5 year olds. Over the next 10 to 15 years demographic projections suggest numbers could decline significantly.

Associated with this trend for decline in the number of 0 to 5 year olds will be some very important sub trends. One will be the population drift away from rural areas to urban centres - especially Auckland.

Second, will be the growing proportion of Pacific Island and Asian students in particular. Their proportion of the total student base could double over the next 10 to 15 years.

To assist you to respond to such trends, it is important that unnecessary factors constraining your ability to be flexible and responsive are avoided. Current property ownership arrangements are one such constraint for kindergartens. I hope that our respective organisations can continue to work together positively so that this issue is addressed.

Amongst the quality-focussed policy projects that will be undertaken by the Ministry of Education over the coming year is a review of the current regulatory framework for the early childhood sector, including the role of Ministry of Education monitoring and sanctions for non-compliance.

I see it as important that we do work towards having a durable and effective regulatory regime that can accommodate the diversity of the sector, support innovative delivery and provide assurance about quality.

The recent budget included increased funding for early childhood professional development and I hope that this, along with the introduction of Te Whaariki (the early childhood curriculum) and the changes to the DOPs, will contribute to the provision of high quality early childhood education services.

In addition, the funding for professional development is now part of baseline funding. This means the Minister of Education will not have to continue to bid for funding for this purpose.

Improving educational outcomes for Maori children is also a key focus for the Ministry of Education. This focus will continue, not just for the coming year, but until such time as the disparity between the achievement of Maori and non-Maori is eliminated.

As announced in the 1997 Budget, the Government, in consultation with Maori and the community, is developing an Education Strategy for Maori. A discussion paper is currently being prepared by the Ministry of Education and Te Puni Kokiri, in order to provide a basis for community input into the shape and direction of the strategy.

Nationwide consultation will take place during the latter parts of 1997.

I hope you and other members of your organisation contribute to the development of this important area of policy by participating in this consultation process.

Another key issue facing education policy is that of reducing the prospect of children failing to get the educational opportunities that enable them to realise their potential.

Too many children do not succeed at school.

This has a number of long run implications for policy.

One is that we need to put more emphasis on developing preventative strategies. The earlier that problems can be identified and addressed the better the lifelong prospects for that child will be.

Clearly in this regard, policies that focus on developing parenting skills and create early childhood education opportunities are important here.

Second, is the importance that should attach to achieving a much greater integration between education and social policies.

I meet every two weeks with Margaret Bazely and Karen Poutasi, the CEO's of Welfare and Health.

The three of us and our staff are working with local communities to improve the effectiveness of local coordination. The aim is to bring a more integrated case management approach to assisting those families in the community that need the support of social services. It is also about finding the best ways to integrate what is done at central Government level with that being done at local levels. It is about providing services and information more effectively to those who need to access them.

Within the Ministry we are progressing getting greater integration between school support, special education, truancy, and parenting policies.

These policies are concerned with developing a more effective capability to address situations where a child might be at risk.

They recognise that an effective and coordinated welfare or health intervention can improve a child's education prospects.

While the overall policy is still under development there will be a significant early childhood component to special education.

A critical component of the work on Maori education and the education of Pacific Island children must be a concern to both lift participation and education outcomes.

There are four themes that are driving the management of the Ministry. These are:

- the importance of medium term strategy;
- the need to be more effectively integrated;
- the importance of quality implementation ;and
- the need for good relationships.

I was particularly struck when I joined the Ministry by the fragmented way early childhood issues were handled with different parts of the Ministry having different responsibility for the development and implementation of early childhood education. This policy now rests with one group manager - Kathy Smith.

These changes should enable a much more effective oversight of the range of Ministry activities which relate to the early childhood sector.

These changes are designed to:

- Improve our policy capability

It is important that policy is well informed, and is based on both empirical and practical considerations. This means strong links between research and policy, and between practitioners and policymakers.

- Achieving a better integration of policy and implementation, and across the different functions of the Ministry

I am very mindful that good policy advice must concern itself with effective implementation.

I am concerned to build into policy processes much more attention to the way policy is implemented and how different groups will be able to successfully access that policy.

This is why I have placed considerable importance within the Ministry to bring operational and policy people together. Related policy and implementation units have been brought together under group managers who have responsibility for key, strategic long term priority areas. It is why I place importance on developing strong and effective relationships with groups in the sector.

- Strong and effective relationship management

This means more open communication, an openness to new ideas and debate, improved consultation. It also means responsiveness.

Like you we have to ask who are our clients and how can we best meet their needs. Clearly the Minister of Education and his associates are an important part of the Ministry's client base.

However, educational organisations such as early childhood services, schools and tertiary institutions are also key clients. But ultimately, our most important clients are the children who use the services that we fund, monitor and regulate.

For example, a critical part of our job is the need to build strong relationships with the many groups that make up the early childhood sector. We have started to do this and this will continue to be the case.

To conclude:

Early childhood education is very important.

Its importance is being reflected in the way the Ministry has been reorganised. This is intended to bring a more strategic and integrated approach to issues affecting the sector.

I can see a number of important issues coming up which will affect the sector. Some of these are the changing demographics influences while others relate to policies concerning quality and the regulation of the sector.

I am committed to developing constructive and effective working relationships with the different parts of the sector as such issues are addressed.