

HONOURABLE H. L. PICKERING

Thank you for inviting my wife and me to join you this evening, on the occasion of your Union's Annual General Meeting. Only six weeks ago I had the pleasure of speaking at the Free Kindergarten Teachers' Council Meeting in Wellington.

Some of the things I said then are also of interest to this meeting. For instance, I think you will agree with me that until quite recently kindergartens were not generally regarded as educational institutions. The community at large accepted the value of kindergartens in bringing children of the same age together, but to large numbers of people a kindergarten was no more than a child care centre.

Over the last five years there has been a world-wide upsurge of interest in pre-school education. Much of this interest is due to the work of such theorists as Piaget, Bloom and Bruner, who have emphasised the learning taking place in the early years of a child's life. Now, of course, it is widely accepted that much more learning occurs before the age of five than was previously recognised. Our kindergartens must therefore cater for the child's intellectual and thinking life as well as his social and emotional aspects.

Naturally, the first and most important learning environment for the pre-schooler is the home. But few homes can provide the systematic broadening of a child's experience that can be offered in a pre-school group. Few homes can offer the specially planned space and equipment, and the regular association with other children found in the kindergarten. Only in an organised pre-school group can we expect the guidance and support given by trained adults; who can plan the day's activities so that each child is working at his own particular level of development. Those of us involved in education in New Zealand now recognise the value and place of this stage of the whole education process.

The next step is to make every family aware of its value and to provide enough facilities to enable all who want to benefit from pre-school education to do so. Today about one in three of children under five is enrolled for some form of recognised pre-school education. In 1971, 25,530 children attended 329 kindergartens. (We expect 20 more this year. 30 more next year). In fact, well over 40 percent of 4 year olds attend a pre-school institution.

These are very high figures, by world standards, and yet this development has been achieved through an unique association between Government and voluntary organisations. Such a partnership has proved to be of great strength and value, and the more recent Committee of Inquiry fully recognised this. For this reason, the Committee reversed the suggestion of the earlier consultative committee in 1947 and recommended that pre-school education remain in the hands of voluntary associations.

However, if this area is to continue to expand until pre-school facilities are available for everyone who wishes to use them, we need to develop an integrated method of administration which will co-ordinate all systems of pre-school education. The Committee of Inquiry has recommended the setting up of a National Advisory Council on Pre-school Education as well as District Pre-school Councils. Together these bodies would provide much greater liaison between the groups involved in pre-school services, both voluntary and Government.

You will know that recently officers of my Department convened a meeting of representatives of your Union and of the Play Centre Federation. This meeting was held at my request for the specific

purpose of establishing the lines of development which, in the minds both of the Union and the Federation, seem to hold the highest priority at the present time. The meeting was attended by your President, Mrs S. Muir and Mrs H. Downer. I understand that the meeting was most constructive and that it has given rise to a number of suggestions which are now being explored by the Department.

Of particular importance is the whole matter of the servicing of pre-school education. Exploratory discussions are now being held with the Education Boards Association in this connection. Very important too, is the recommendation of the Hill Report for the establishment of District Councils.

This recommendation raises a number of policy issues, including the setting up of co-ordinating machinery. I am expecting, within the next few weeks, to receive a report from my Department and when I have this I shall then be considering the next steps that I should be taking. The recommendations of the Committee of Inquiry are of course directed at long term developments in pre-school education. It is possible that the working parties which will be considering priorities in all aspects of education may put forward some further proposals. As in all levels of education our primary aim must be to provide what is best for our children.

Although I said earlier that the recommendations of the Committee were directed at long term pre-school education developments, I would like to point out just how many the Government has already approved. Firstly, the Government will support the expansion of pre-school services under the control of voluntary organisations. Secondly, the Government will help children with handicaps of various kinds. Thirdly, the Government will endeavour to ensure that pre-school programmes cater fully for children nearing school age. Fourthly, the Government already has approved the granting of loans (through the State Advances Corporation) to enable kindergartens and play centres to be established much more quickly than has been possible in most places in the past.

In addition, this scheme will relieve the burden on local groups, (especially those in the less affluent areas), which the Government particularly wishes to help.

I may mention in passing, at this point, other steps the Government has taken to help areas with special needs for pre-school education. Extra groups of children, with extra staff, have been enrolled in certain kindergartens. One interesting scheme will work along the lines of Tairangi Kindergarten in Porirua. It involves extra children and staff at Petone Kindergarten, and an extension unit of the kindergarten to be housed in the Wharehoa Polynesian Centre in Petone.

Fifthly, on 11 August, in conjunction with the Minister of Maori Affairs, I announced the expanded pre-school building programme for 1972/73. This year the kindergarten building programme is going to be a record one. There are 19 new kindergarten projects on the current list and 3 of these are high priority projects qualifying for the extra financial assistance given in areas of special need.

In addition, there will be further projects started under the new loans scheme which I have just mentioned. Applications have been invited for loans and we do not anticipate any delay in getting these projects started.

Also, it is possible that a few more subsidy cases may be approved this financial year as part of the usual review of the building programme, and this will add to the total number of projects for the year.

To meet the cost of these a substantial sum has been provided on the supplementary estimates to add to the sum of \$590,000 provided in the main estimates for the purposes of building subsidies and annual grants. As well, the final stage in negotiation for increased kindergarten teachers' salaries has been reached, and, although not as liberal as we had hoped, it will be a step in the right direction.

Another matter that gives me satisfaction is a move forward in the training of more kindergarten teachers. You will know that the Report of the Committee of Inquiry is being closely studied, and that some of its recommendations, such as loan finance for kindergarten buildings, as I mentioned earlier, have already been implemented. I am pleased to tell you that I have now approved a further step which is in line with one of the recommendations dealing with the training of our teachers. From the beginning of next year it is proposed that 40 kindergarten students should be trained at the primary teachers' college in Hamilton and that 30 kindergarten students should be trained at the North Shore Teachers' College in Auckland. The 30 students at North Shore will be in addition to those at the Auckland Kindergarten Training Centre.

The kindergarten trainees at Hamilton and North Shore will not be absorbed into the larger primary student body to the point where they lose their identity as potential kindergarten teachers. However, while constituting a specialist pre-school group, they will be associated with their primary student colleagues in many academic and other college activities. They will, of course, be on kindergarten trainee allowances and kindergarten training lecturers (paid on the kindergarten salary scales) will be employed to undertake the training in association with the teachers' college staff.

The pre-school group in Hamilton will be under a regional council of management, which will have representation from the college as well as from the kindergarten associations, and will work in the closest association with the Hamilton Teachers' College Council. In Auckland, both the present kindergarten training centre and the pre-school unit at North Shore Teachers' College will be under a regional council of management which will work in the closest association with the Auckland Teachers' College Council.

There are still some details of the two schemes to be discussed, but now that we know the bodies concerned agree in principle, I am sure all details will be settled before the beginning of the next school year.

I should like to thank the kindergarten associations concerned, the Kindergarten Union and the two teachers' colleges who have co-operated so effectively with the Department in making possible the planning of this important step towards closer co-ordination in the training of primary and kindergarten teachers.

There is a great quickening of interest in your work, and this upsurge of interest in pre-school education is not confined to New Zealand. In varying degrees the tendency is reflected throughout the developed world, where the New Zealand system is regarded as being relatively advanced. But there is no room for complacency. Because the demand for education continues unabated, there is a constant need for evaluation and research at all levels in our education system. Nowhere is this more true than in the pre-school sector. Expansion alone is not the answer. More important is the quality of the education provided. If pre-school education is not to remain static - perhaps eventually lose ground - regular assessment of the quality of the teaching programmes, staffing needs and training, equipment, environment,

and the relations of the groups with the community are all necessary.

One of the desirable features of pre-school education as we know it in New Zealand at present is its diversity. This feature we hope to retain as well as variety, flexibility and innovation.

When I first took office earlier this year I said that I was particularly interested in pre-school education as an important branch of our whole education service. It gives me personal pride and pleasure, and I know all New Zealanders are pleased to see pre-school education gaining a firmer foothold and establishing itself as the "front line" or first line of our education system.

Pre-school education is at the threshold of its development. Co-operation, involvement, research and development will take it across this threshold to a challenging system of educational motivation.

May I wish you a successful meeting and valuable and stimulating discussions.