



The Hon. Adrian Piccoli MP
Minister for Education

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Speech to Early Childhood Education & Care Stakeholders

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We know that quality early childhood education and care gives children the best start in life.

One of our key election commitments was to move responsibility for preschools to the education portfolio.

I'm pleased to say that not only have we done that in our first 100 days in office, but we have gone further. We have moved responsibility for all of the early childhood education and care sector including Out of School Hours Care, Vacation Care, Occasional Care and Mobile services, as well as Family Day Care into the Department of Education and Communities.

We did this because it is no longer appropriate for early childhood education and care to be within the community services portfolio along with other children's services. I know that many of you raised this with the previous government and wrote to a previous Premier seeking to be moved into the education portfolio but nothing happened.

The COAG National Quality Reforms, which we support, make it clear that the primary role of preschool and long day care services is the provision of early childhood education and care.

And I can tell you that at the meeting of the Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) which I attended in April, Ministers agreed that we should stop using the words "childcare" to communicate with parents about what we do and instead, to talk about early education and care.

We believe that early childhood education and care services are first and foremost a universal, mainstream service which is available to all children and families and whose key focus is on early childhood education and development. That's why we believe that placing early childhood education and care in our Department of Education and Communities is the right thing to do.

It means that I am the Minister for all education for everyone in NSW, from young children through school to higher education and on to whole of life learning.

As well, it brings us into line with the rest of Australia. In every state and territory (except WA), as well as federally, Ministerial responsibility for early education and care services already rests with either the Minister for Education or a Minister for Early Childhood, and it is part of the Department of Education.

It also recognises the need for the clear separation of early childhood education and care from the statutory responsibilities for child protection, as is again the case in every other state and territory.

I want to assure you that in doing this we have taken into account important issues that I know you are concerned about.

- We are committed to maintaining the integrity and identity of early childhood education and to ensuring that there is no "push down" of curriculum frameworks from school into early childhood.

- I know that the Department of Education and Communities is very large and it is critical that early childhood education has its own recognised high level presence and separate status.

We have therefore established a new Directorate of Early Childhood Education and Care within the Strategic Planning and Regulation Division. This is headed by John Mason as Executive Director, who reports directly to Leslie Loble, the Deputy Director General. Leslie also has responsibility for Higher Education; State Training Services; Planning & Innovation; and External Relations Policy.

All the functions that were in Children's Services in Community Services, plus those that primarily involved funding or regulating children's services either at Ashfield or in regions, have all transferred to this Directorate in the Department of Education and Communities.

- I know you are concerned about the DEC preschools. We understand it is critical to ensure that the Department's role as a provider of preschools is kept completely separate from the policy, regulation and funding of early childhood services roles, to ensure there is no conflict of interest.

The DEC preschools therefore remain in the Schools Division of the Department, reporting through a different Deputy Director General and are completely separate from the Early Childhood Education and Care Directorate.

- We know early childhood services play an important role in early intervention and the support of vulnerable families and children, as well as supporting the inclusion of children with high support needs in mainstream early education services.

We are committed to maintaining early intervention through our Family and Community Services programs.

We also want to maximise the opportunities for children with additional support needs and their families to be supported seamlessly as they transition from early childhood settings to primary and then secondary settings.

I believe having all these areas in my portfolio will help us to do that.

I know you are all keen to know what we are doing in relation to the National Quality Reforms.

I want to assure you that the Government is committed to quality early childhood education and care here in NSW and to the Reforms.

I also want to tell you that I know personally how important quality early childhood education and care is. I have a 3 year-old and a 5 month-old and I am fortunate to be able to experience first-hand what a quality service is all about at the Dorothy Wade Centre in Griffith which is run by Neville Dwyer, who many of you will know.

I can tell you that last week the Premier wrote to Minister Kate Ellis confirming our Government's agreement to the Implementation Plan for the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care.

However I know many of you are concerned about the implementation process, and we are too. We are strongly committed to the reforms but we also want to make sure that implementing them doesn't place an excessive burden on families or providers.

The proposed new Assessment and Rating Instrument has major challenges and it's important that we get that part of the NQA right. We are also concerned that the cost of quality early childhood education and care doesn't become unaffordable for families or reduce women's participation in the workforce by adding unnecessary administrative burdens for providers that might then flow through to families in the form of additional cost increases or a more limited supply of places.

The Premier has raised the need to resolve these issues in his letter to Minister Ellis and I can assure you that I will be putting them on the agenda at the MCEECDYA and making sure our voice is heard.

I know there are many issues still to be resolved so I want to tell you where we stand on some of them and what is happening.

I don't have all the answers yet but my Department and I want to work with you to make sure we get the best outcomes for our children.

Firstly, ratios.

A number of people have asked if we will be rolling back the 1:4 ratio. The answer is: No.

We also believe that the 1:5 ratio is appropriate for the 2 to 3 year-olds. It is already in place in several states and we think that with proper planning and phase-in, services in NSW should be able to implement this by the COAG deadline of 2016.

Secondly, qualifications.

We support the need for university-qualified early childhood teachers in services but our main concern here is whether there will be enough teachers available to meet the COAG timeframes and this is an aspect we will be looking at in more detail.

We also support the requirement for all educators to have at least a Cert III, but again there are still issues to be resolved about the timing of this and how we recognise prior skills and experience.

Thirdly, the draft National Assessment and Rating Instrument.

This is a key issue and we have to make sure we get it right before we agree to its implementation. I will need to be assured that it is reliable and valid, that it is truly useful for parents, and that it doesn't impose an excessive burden either on you as providers or on my Department as the Regulator. That may mean that I will seek to have the quality assessment and rating part of the new system delayed until this is resolved. While we may need to take more time to get this part right, this would not mean we need to delay the January 2012 commencement of the National Quality Framework.

A key factor in this will be the role of new Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) which will be responsible for the new system. We need to make sure that it focuses on the goal of a quality national early childhood education and care system in Australia while ensuring that the interests of NSW children, families and providers are well-represented on its Board.

That's why I'm very pleased to announce that I have nominated Tonia Godhard who many of you know and who is here today, as the NSW representative on the Board of ACECQA. Tonia is well known for her strong and passionate commitment to quality early childhood education and care and I know she will represent us well.

Another issue which is of concern for preschools is how we will implement the 15 hours per week access for all children in the year before school. I know that the discussions about this have now dragged on for 18 months and many of you are frustrated and concerned as you will be enrolling children for 2012 very soon and you need to know what enrolment patterns you can offer.

This is something that should have been resolved by the previous Government and my Department is working on achieving a sensible outcome with the Commonwealth which meets the specific needs of NSW families.

In the meantime you should continue to offer enrolment on your existing patterns for 2012 but you will need to advise all parents that the patterns may change for 2013.

I know that successive Labor Governments have failed to fund preschools sufficiently, so that in NSW we now have the most expensive preschools in Australia. I also know we have a complicated funding model which is in need of review.

We need to make sure we make the best and most equitable use of the funds that are available and also develop a sound way forward for future funding.

As a result I've asked my Department to undertake a review of NSW Government funding of the early childhood education and care sector, including the Preschool Resource Allocation Model. The terms of reference, process and timing for the review are being developed and I will be seeking your input to it.

I know there are other issues I haven't covered today such as the payment to services under the Early Childhood Teacher Cost Contribution Scheme, the effect of the reforms on family day care services, out of school hours adult-to-child ratios and group sizes, and the call for pay parity for teachers. I can assure you I will be considering all these issues and look forward to discussing them with you.

Finally, I know many of you have been frustrated about what you see as the lack of real consultation and involvement with you by Community Services over the past few years. Too often "consultation" has been about your attending a meeting and being shown a powerpoint presentation, with no real opportunity for input.

I can tell you that I have been appalled to find how far NSW has slipped behind other states in the area of early childhood education.

Just as in other areas of Government, we will be working to make NSW Number One again in this important area and I will be seeking your help in doing so.

For further information please contact:-

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