



PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Western Australia has gone through a process of review and reform which has fundamentally transformed preschool education in that state, and which shows it can be done.

Making preschool education a priority

Following a change of government in February 1993, a Ministerial Task Force chaired by Hon Barbara Scott MLC was asked to review and report on precompulsory education in Western Australia. The consequent Ministerial Statement endorsed a four day week for the pre-primary program, the establishment of a Director of Early Childhood Education Policy in the Education and Policy Coordination Bureau, and further review of changes to entry age and of sessional hours for kindergarten.

In 1995 the Minister for Education announced the *Good Start* Program. Both pre-primary programs for five year olds and kindergarten programs for four year olds would be transferred into the public education system and all children would be guaranteed access to these services.

All five year olds would have access to pre-primary programs at local schools, to *ensure continuity of education in single settings and ensure that the discrepancy that exists in charges will be removed, with the only charge being the schools' amenities fees.* (EDWA 1994-1995)

In 1997 the Education Department began to take responsibility for programs run for four year olds, and all children were to be guaranteed a place in an Education Department sessional kindergarten program by 1999. Since then, almost all community preschools have moved into schools. About 73% to 75% of schools now have a kindergarten program for four year olds.

All children are guaranteed a place in kindergarten or pre-primary programs at a government school, but not necessarily their local school.

Change of entry age and hours

The WA Government has also increased the preschool and school entry age, to bring it closer to the other states and territories.

This has meant that from 2001, children will have access to kindergarten in that year if they turn four before 30 June, rather than four by the end of the year as was previously the case. From 2002, they will have access to pre-primary if they turn five before 30 June in that year. This will subsequently have flow on affects to the starting age for the compulsory years.

In effect this means that in 2001, only half what would previously have been the cohort will attend kindergarten. This half cohort will move up through pre-primary, primary and secondary levels in subsequent years.

Attendance hours have also been increased. From 2001, children can attend kindergarten for four half days per week, or two full days, depending on individual school programs. And from 2002, children will have access to five full days of pre-primary, rather than the four currently offered.

Facilities

The decision to relocate precompulsory education within the school sector required a substantial resource commitment. It was initially suggested that the provision of upgrading of accommodation and equipment on school sites would cost \$27m.

Some 60-70 transportables and 10 purpose-built facilities have been established in each of the last three years. A further \$10m has been committed for each of the years 2000-01 and 2001-02, to cover the cost of some 150 additional early childhood facilities.

The new purpose-built centres are generally described as 'wonderful'. They are spacious rooms, clustered around a central activity area, including kitchen and wet areas, toilets, and space for numerous activity areas. The transportable early childhood facilities offer many of the same features but they are not as spacious.

Staffing issues

Substantial numbers of additional teachers and aides have been required as a result of these changes. In 1998 alone, 750 teachers and 750 aides were required to expand kindergarten programs.

The recommended class size for kindergarten is a maximum of 20 and for pre-primary, a maximum of 27 for a purpose built permanent pre-primary classroom and 25 in other rooms.

Full time teachers of kindergarten and/or pre-primary receive DOTT (release for duties other than teaching) of 320 minutes, compared to 180 minutes for primary teachers of years 1-7. This recognizes the particular nonteaching duties of teachers in the precompulsory years, including the need to work very closely with parents.

WA is moving towards the reduction of class sizes in the early primary years to 24 by 2003.

Curriculum and educational issues

The underlying concern of many early childhood educators is anxiety about the possibility of transferring the more formalised curriculum structures and culture of the compulsory years to the precompulsory years. They want to make sure this does not happen.

As one early childhood educator commented, over time the inclusion of precompulsory years will force change on schools that will have wider, positive ramifications for children's educational experiences.

At the schools visited, this change is already in evidence, and far from being forced, it is being approached with eagerness. Teachers demonstrated enormous enthusiasm and commitment to early childhood education and many had developed creative and exciting ways of maximising the educational opportunities afforded by their environment. A K-3

approach provides new developmental learning opportunities for older children as well as ensuring appropriate learning experiences in the precompulsory years.

Benefits

Discussions with early childhood education practitioners emphasised strong support for guaranteed universal access, for provision of qualified teachers and assistants and for quality control eg in relation to equipment. Pay parity for early childhood educators was also seen as a strength of the system.

For teachers, the move to one site provides positive opportunities for team work, mutual support and stability. A number of teachers in schools visited commented on how much they enjoyed being part of the school and being able to work together, to share ideas and problems.

There is also a view that the integration on one site strengthens the links to local communities: parents get involved early on with their children's education and with the school, get to know the staff and the environment and come to understand and support a K-3 philosophy.

For children, there is also seen to be a positive affect from the continuity and stability of staffing throughout the early years. They get to know teachers in the early childhood centre, whether or not they are working with them directly; they feel confident in the environment; and in many cases they learn to work across groups that are part of their immediate context.

Principals have an important role to play in ensuring the successful development of early childhood education.

Conclusion

The Western Australian model of preschool education shows that substantial, positive reform is possible with commitment, planning and appropriate resources.

Sources: see Kronemann 2001, *The Western Australian Model of Preschool Education*, at www.aeufederal.org.au
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