



Hon Alannah MacTiernan MLA  
Chair  
Community Development and Justice Standing Committee  
Western Australian Legislative Assembly  
Parliament House  
PERTH WA 6000

Dear Ms MacTiernan

I refer to your letter dated 11 December 2008 regarding the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee inquiry into the adequacy of services to meet the developmental needs of Western Australian children.

Within the *School Education Act 1999*, the first year of pre-compulsory education is called kindergarten. Children are eligible to enrol in kindergarten from the start of the year in which they reach the age of four years and six months. Enrolment figures show that over 90% of all age-eligible Western Australian children enrol in a kindergarten program; approximately 70% at a public school which children may attend free of compulsory charges (though parents are asked to contribute up to \$60 per year in voluntary charges).

Kindergarten teachers in Western Australian public schools hold a four year university qualification, work alongside trained teacher assistants and enjoy parity of pay and conditions with other primary and secondary teachers. The maximum child to staff ratio of kindergartens at a public school is 1:10 which sets the benchmark for early childhood education across Australia.

Western Australia currently leads Australia by guaranteeing universal access to 11 hours of kindergarten for a full year prior to children commencing full-time schooling in their pre-primary year. Through the Universal Access element of the COAG Early Childhood Education National Partnership, this will increase to 15 hours per week of kindergarten, 40 weeks per year by 2013. An important extension to kindergarten provision made possible through funds provided under the Universal Access initiative is that the current guarantee of a kindergarten and pre-primary place at a public school will be extended to guarantee a kindergarten and pre-primary place at the child's *local* public school. At present, the guarantee of local access applies only to the compulsory years of schooling which start at Year 1. This change will significantly enhance the continuity of provision that the Department of Education and Training is able to offer because some children currently have to attend a different (non-local) school for kindergarten and/or pre-primary when places at their local school are not available.

The Department is also exploring opportunities to offer more integrated education and care on school sites. This may be through expanded provision of Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) services in a larger number of communities with identified needs and unmet demand. While children attending OSHC must necessarily be enrolled in a school, this service would apply to children enrolled in kindergarten and pre-primary and would assist many working families by offering quality assured child-care for their children either side of the school day. Another form of more integrated education and care services may take the form of Early Learning and Care Centres (ELCC) which will be located on school sites. These Centres will offer Long Day Care for children from birth to the age of five, and will be jointly funded by the Australian government and industry partners. Negotiations have commenced in relation to the establishment of an ELCC in Karratha, Port Hedland, Mirrabooka and Darch.

The fact that kindergarten in Western Australia is integral to a cohesive K-7 primary school program means that transitions (of place, relationships, routines and learning programs) for children are minimised as they proceed from kindergarten to Year 7. The location of kindergarten within the schooling sector also means that kindergarten programs are included within the same regulatory mechanisms that apply to all schools. This includes implementation of the *Curriculum Framework*, Western Australian College of Teachers (WACOT) membership for all kindergarten teachers and a well established quality assurance framework which enables the Department of Education and Training to plan for improvements in areas of identified need.

While the provision of services and/or programs for children prior to kindergarten is outside the *School Education Act 1999*, the Department of Education and Training recognises the value of building strong relationships with young children and their families long before children are eligible to enrol in kindergarten. Accordingly, many public schools offer programs for younger children accompanied by their parents. Such programs are focussed on (in collaboration with health professionals) the early identification of language delay and/or growth and developmental difficulties, parent education sessions, playgroups, and sessions for parents to support transitions and readiness for school.

In addition, culturally inclusive and age-appropriate kindergarten programs are provided for Aboriginal children from the age of three at 28 metropolitan and regional Aboriginal Kindergartens and at all Remote Community Schools in the Kimberley, Pilbara, Midwest and Goldfields. A key element of Aboriginal Kindergartens is the pivotal role of Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AIEOs) who work in partnership with early childhood teachers to ensure that cultural perspectives are incorporated into the kindergarten program.

National Partnership bilateral agreements currently being negotiated with the Australian Government present a significant opportunity to consolidate, expand and improve the provision of early childhood education and care already provided to children, families and communities by the Department of Education and Training.

Key initiatives being progressed through the Early Childhood Education National Partnership include:

- development of an *Early Years Learning Framework* which seeks to articulate, lead and support the nature and importance of learning through early childhood regardless of setting (school, childcare or home);
- a *National Quality Framework* for early education and care which will articulate the key elements of quality standards and a quality rating system;
- national roll out of the *Australian Early Development Index*, a population-based measure of child development which enables communities to assess how whole communities of children are developing by the time they reach school age; and
- Universal Access for all kindergarten aged children to a 15 hour a week program.

As well as the above, the integrated nature of service provision in early childhood education also provides the following:

- High quality early intervention for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students is imperative to their development and long term educational, social and emotional outcomes. The Western Australian Institute for Deaf Education (WAIDE) currently provides early intervention for 43 children (aged 0-6 years). WAIDE anticipates children requiring early intervention will increase to 60 within five years, due to the improvement of newborn screening and audiological diagnostic technology.
- The Vision Education Service (VES) provides early intervention (aged 0-6 years) to 26 children across the State. This includes access to resources, equipment and Braille services immediately after diagnosis.
- The Department and Education and Training *Enrolment* policy (p.18) enables students to enrol in one of 28 statewide Aboriginal kindergartens or remote community schools if they turn four years of age by the 31 December of the same year.

The Department of Education and Training is committed to providing information and advice to the Committee to assist with the inquiry.

Yours sincerely



SHARYN O'NEILL  
DIRECTOR GENERAL

16 FEB 2009