

The last 17 months have been hectic in the ECE advocacy space, so as we prepare for the changes ahead it's a useful opportunity to glance in the rear-view mirror to move forward and discuss the potential changes ahead.

The Early Childhood Education (ECE) sector is about to enter two major reviews which could ultimately result in either minor or fundamental changes to the sector that could be both beneficial and or alternatively damaging with unintended consequences depending on your views on how ECE should be delivered and its purpose. It is therefore vital to engage in the processes that the government have and will set up and work together with officials to ensure ECE in Aotearoa is focused on what's important to us all and to Te Rito Maioha - quality education and care.

At the beginning of 2024 Te Rito Maioha wrote an [open letter to the Prime Minister](#) and called on all politicians to put affordable, quality early childhood education for all young tamariki at the heart of their policies as a matter of urgency.

We asked them to:

- 1. Improve child-teacher ratios – currently among the worst in the OECD – so that tamariki can thrive, learn and be safe with quality education and attention from teachers.*
- 2. Tackle teacher shortages with a meaningful strategic workforce plan to attract, retain and develop a professional, culturally responsive ECE teaching workforce from within Aotearoa New Zealand.*
- 3. Fund ECE services sufficiently to deliver pay parity for kaiako and quality education to tamariki without charging high fees to parents.*
- 4. Continue to invest in initial teacher education as a priority to attract new teachers.*
- 5. Urgently replace the outdated, dysfunctional ECE funding model to meet the real needs of today's working whānau, tamariki and ECE services.*
- 6. Simplify regulations to support quality education delivery without over-burdening ECE services with labour-intensive administration demands from multiple agencies.*

For much of 2023 we reiterated those points while also having to contend with policies that had significant unintended consequences.

As an example, new ECE rules outlined in the 2023 budget would have had devastating consequences for the sector with the government seemingly believing that the 20 hours free for two-year-olds would be fully funded. Whilst the policy's intent was a great one, this policy was costed for the minimum ratio of teachers while including no further funding for additional costs. By proposing to legislate against the ability of providers

ability to pass on those costs, the Ministry was effectively reducing the funding per two-year-old for the first 20 hours thereby reducing revenue for services to cover costs.

This policy debacle demonstrated just how broken the funding model is and reinforced the need for the sector to try and work alongside Ministers and the Ministry to ensure future changes to policy did not have unintended funding consequences.

A further policy that should have delivered a win for the sector was Pay Parity. If funded appropriately, this should have been beneficial for the whole sector. However, this concept was significantly undermined by a lack of funding that set off a cascade of unintended consequences and poor processes. Consequently, the consultation process was one of the poorest and confusing the sector has ever experienced. This financial quagmire only added to existing concerns about the funding system. In response we wrote an open letter to the then Education Minister and Prime Minister.

*“The Pay Parity Consultation has been an unmitigated failure. There is no possible way to convey how disappointed the sector was in this process, and the suggested outcomes. It was insulting to be “invited” to provide feedback on a Consultation document about a Pay Parity Funding Review that simply seeks to shift already-constrained funding within a system that is already significantly underfunded.*

*The lack of rigour and foresight in relation to the questions posed, and the context in which the narrative was presented, demonstrated a lack of understanding and interest in the significant challenges being experienced across the sector, and dismissed the genuine goodwill of providers looking towards a sustainable future.”* Excerpt from open letter the Minister of Education.

The unfortunate reality was that the previous government introduced a policy without adequate funding (either because there wasn't adequate funding available at the time, or through budgeting failures). Regardless, this ineptitude has helped to place what was a good policy at severe risk under the new government.

The disappointment fermented by these two policy failures brought the sector together to try and speak with a more unified voice, to ensure both Ministers and the Ministry were listening and to use the expertise that exists at every level in ECE to prevent these avoidable mistakes. This remains the stance that Te Rito Maioha continues to promote, especially in a political environment with potentially significant changes coming.

Following the election the current government followed through on their election manifesto and the '20 hours free' policy was replaced with 'Family Boost' that was sold as providing rebates directly to parents. While a much smaller investment, we welcomed the policy but noted there are concerns as to whether the rebates will reach the parents that most need the additional financial support. Other issues such as

accessing the rebate and affordability are outlined in the media release [Will Family Boost funding reach those families who need it most?](#)

*“Families with limited access to computers and limited knowledge of the Inland Revenue Department, could well struggle to access the rebates which is a real equity concern, however we hope that the implementation will have some easy and sound solutions.”*

*“A further worry is that those families that are already struggling and not participating in ECE will be unable to pay the upfront costs of ECE, given the rebate requires three months of fees before a claim can be made. That could mean families trying to find thousands of dollars in upfront costs, and then waiting for the IRD to process the claim. That could be a real barrier that excludes families on lower incomes.”*

*“The policy is also structured per household. That means that families with a higher number of children will receive a reduced rebate per child which will disproportionately affect the funding per child for some families. Further, whether the policy will reach all parents remains to be seen.”* Excerpt from Media Release 26/03/24.

## **Future Policy Direction**

The ECE policies areas that have been outlined by Minister Seymour broadly consist of removing unnecessary regulation and the implementation of a funding system review. The Minister has also publicly raised the issues of Pay Parity and Network Regulation which fall into the regulation work programme.

The outcomes of the two reviews (regulation and funding) have the potential for both benefit and harm to the sector, depending on the direction the government takes. It is therefore vital to provide accurate information into the reviews, and ensure the public understand the benefits of quality education for our tamariki, and the actions that support or hinder that outcome.

As an aside, while the debate about whether ECE is just childcare was thought to be over, there is a real threat that any potential dumbing down of the qualifications or a move away from acknowledging the importance of Te Whāriki would be extremely detrimental to ECE. There are no indications this is on the horizon, but this long fought-for-recognition must be retained in a political environment where strategies such as ‘relationship’ education are being removed from schools against expert advice and common sense. It’s a volatile time, and to safeguard the gains that we celebrated at Te Rito Maioha’s 60th birthday last year our advocacy will need to be effective.

## Regulations

In Aotearoa we have an uneven and almost dysfunctional approach to regulations in ECE, however, it is incumbent on the sector to ensure that an appropriate balance between affordable access, reducing cost and safety is struck. We need a framework that ensures both the quality of education and the safety of tamariki while removing unnecessary bureaucracy. We have already discussed this issue with the Minister and will work with the Minister's new Regulation Ministry to try and get the balance right. We urge all of you across the sector to do the same.

*... We look forward to continuing to work with the Minister to progress a better regulatory framework that focuses on the safety and quality of our tamariki while not creating unwelcome costs for services and parents.*

*"That's the key. A framework that ensures the quality education and safety of tamariki. So often in Aotearoa we have a pendulum swing from overregulated to under regulated. Unlike the housing market and the subsequent leaky building disaster, we don't get second chances if our tamariki are hurt by too little regulation, or their quality education suffers. The task at hand for the sector and the Minister's new Regulation Ministry is to get the balance right," says Mrs Wolfe.*

Media Release 16/04/24

The Terms of Reference for the review are currently being consulted with ECAC, (which has wide representation including Te Rito Maioha. The work on regulations should begin at the end of May with a report scheduled to Cabinet for the end of October.

Our sector survey on Regulations will be closing soon and can be found [here](#). Results will be disseminated to our membership in May.

The dangers in an unregulated system are not insignificant, nor are the issues that will arise should we move to a system where quality education and the safety of the child is not paramount. Conversely, the benefits of enabling providers to lead and manage quality services, teachers to spend more quality time with tamariki are significant as are the potential savings from removing excessive bureaucracy and the costs associated with red tape. The key to success is ensuring we work with the Minister and officials, to get that balance right and keep the public and sector informed.

## Funding System Review

A similar approach is required to the review of the funding system. While the current system is broken, it doesn't mean a review couldn't create an outcome that is detrimental to the current provision of services. We continue to call for an independent review, so that the process is not captured by the Ministry alone or politically motivated. We will continue to advocate for a system that is simpler and fairer, and that promotes affordable, accessible, quality education for our tamariki.

There are no details of this review yet, and while we are advocating that elements such as the ratio of teachers to children should be included, there are no details as to what is included or excluded, or a specific timeframe other than the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 2024.

## Qualified Teachers

While Minister Seymour hasn't raised this specific issue, it was signaled by the previous Minister responsible for ECE, Penny Simmonds. Te Rito Maioha remains fully committed to ensuring that the value of qualified teachers is not undermined. This is something that we believe is vital to ensuring that ECE remains focused on quality, and we reiterated this stance to the relevant Ministers (including Minister Seymour) in our Briefing to Incoming Ministers, (BIMs).

*Te Rito Maioha is committed to high quality, teacher-led ECE, which is crucial when teaching the basics brilliantly and giving tamariki the best start to their life-long learning journey.*

*Both best-practice and research support the use of qualified professionals, as opposed to unqualified staff as the teachers for our tamariki<sup>1</sup>. To end the ECE teaching shortage, we must value and attract teachers by publicly valuing their teaching skills, their knowledge of a child's development from zero to five and appreciate the training and the role ECE kaiako have.*

*To ensure the basics are taught along with ensuring tamariki develop the emotional, social, and cognitive skills needed to become lifelong learners, a meaningful Education Workforce Strategy and Action Plan is required to address teacher shortages from ECE to primary to secondary. Te Rito Maioha stands ready and willing to support the incoming government to develop a meaningful strategy. We believe this is the only sustainable and practical solution, to enhance teaching practices with an appropriately trained professional workforce including avoiding a future shortage crisis.*

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, L., & Kelly, B. B. (Eds.). (2015). Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation. Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. <https://doi.org/10.17226/19401>

*There are some fundamental elements that are required of qualified ECE teachers. They must:*

- have undertaken at least undergraduate study for at least three-years or equivalent or more*
- understand the unique heritage, language, identity and culture of learners including te reo and Te Tiriti o Waitangi*
- have knowledge and understanding of how children learn and how they progress in their learning*
- cater for each child, knowing their strengths and weaknesses and adapting teaching strategies to meet the child's learning aspirations*
- understand the pedagogy underpinning the curriculum which informs intentional teaching practice*
- be equipped to effectively implement the curriculum*
- establish age-appropriate learning environments to facilitate the learning needs of each child and promote engagement*
- have knowledge and skills to assess, progress and report children's learning*
- understand and meet diverse learners' needs*
- build stable and enduring relationships with whānau*
- continue to develop their pedagogy and teaching practice*
- have effective teaching practice and high levels of ethical behaviour*
- maintain the currency of their teaching knowledge and practice (certification)*
- be accountable to their profession and uphold professional standards.*

*Further, there is significant research<sup>2</sup> that shows the qualifications of adults working with tamariki matters and is a key indicator of quality<sup>3</sup>. The goal of a 100% qualified workforce is supported by this research which demonstrates a direct link between the qualifications of staff and the quality of education and care provided.*

*In summation, both best-practice and research supports the use of qualified professionals, as opposed to unqualified staff as the teachers for our tamariki<sup>4</sup>.*

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<sup>2</sup> OECD (2012), *Quality Matters in Early Childhood Education Care: Finland 2012*, OECD Publishing.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264173569-en>

<sup>3</sup> *Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)* - Research Brief OECD

<sup>4</sup> Allen, L., & Kelly, B. B. (Eds.). (2015). *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*. Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. <https://doi.org/10.17226/19401>

*The sector is also concerned that the shortage of qualified ECE teachers will worsen over time if we do not recognise the qualifications, skills, and competence of ECE teachers. ECE teachers are teachers and are just as qualified and vital as primary teachers.* Excerpt from the BIM to the Minister of Education.

While we would strongly disagree with any move to reduce the required percentage of qualified teachers, this is an area where there have been mixed messages from the previous and the current Minister, which may be linked to funding. However, we have a shortage of teachers, we need to attract people into teaching, we have an ageing workforce, and we need to progress current teachers into leadership roles.

### **Other political challenges and solutions**

One challenge that that our ECE Minister might focus on, is the shortage of ECE teachers, though public comments have indicated Minister Seymour thinks we are training sufficient teachers taking into consideration the current immigration settings. That conflicts with the viewpoint of other Ministers and the sector as a whole who can evidence the daily struggle to recruit teachers.

Minister Simmonds who was to have had responsibility for ECE, suggested at our 2023 Kete Kete Mai ECE conference (while the opposition spokesperson), that a reduction in the percentage of qualified teachers could be an option to dealing with the kaiako shortage. The audience vehemently and openly disagreed with those comments, whereas similar comments made at the ECC conference in 2023 were enthusiastically greeted by that audience. This points to different parts of the sector having diverging views on the value of qualifications.

So where do we stand? Te Rito Maioha as a teacher education provider clearly is committed to training teachers, but putting that aside, we do not believe sufficient teachers are being trained. You only have to see the evidence in the many advertised roles locally, look at the demand in Australia and around the world to know that we fundamentally need to train more teachers.

Minister Seymour has been clear that ECE in NZ has high compliance costs that he intends to reduce. One potential solution (that we do not agree with) is the reduction of wages. The Minister has not publicly suggested this option, however he has [indicated](#)

[Pay Parity is a hindrance](#) to the sector, and has spoken about the differences between rural and city providers being hampered by current policy.

The phrase we often use is, 'A teacher is a teacher is a teacher'. We will continue to strongly encourage the Minister to look at other options should he be looking at further reducing costs, and we will continue to promote the value of our amazing ECE and primary teachers.

The Minister has stated that Network Regulation will cease with a short consultation period before alternatives are put forward. To continue the theme of unintended consequences, Network Regulation was a policy that much of the sector supported. It was designed to manage supply and demand to ensure that parents had choice of service types, all services were sustainable and that there were teaching staff available for providers to employ.

*“Unfortunately, the implementation did not meet the expectations of the sector with the policy significantly increasing the costs for the development of new centres and creating considerable apprehension for owners as the policy operated without adequate transparency. Decisions could take place without purposeful feedback or judicial review. This created significant trust issues within the sector.”*

*“Further, the MoE expanded the policy, without consultation, so that if a provider needed to reduce licensed numbers when enrolments fell the MoE could then refuse to increase them back. This kind of behaviour provided little certainty to the sector and may well have reduced the number of services opening at a time when a record number of services have closed.”*

*“The question here is whether we’re throwing the baby out with the bathwater,” but one thing is for certain, the idea of network management and agreed outcomes post consultation was good, the implementation of this policy has been flawed and the sector has been let down by sub optimal implementation,” says Mrs Wolfe. Excerpt from Media Release 16/04/24*

Te Rito Maioha is finalising our submission on Network Regulation due on 6/05/24.

In positive news, Minister Seymour has indicated there will be an increase for ECE in this year’s budget. While welcome, we are hopeful the investment is above normal CPI adjustments and population growth, otherwise the increase will be illusionary in nature. We are also hopeful the announcement does not provide unintended consequences elsewhere in the delivery of quality ECE.



## **Summary**

ECE Providers have been under increasing pressure over the last few years with ongoing closures, a workforce shortage and challenges such as COVID to cope with. All indications from the ECE workforce are that teachers | kaiako are stressed and tired. At the same time, regulations that should have been beneficial to the sector were poorly thought out and poorly implemented placing further stress on the sector. The unintended consequences of policy with good intentions have created the political opportunity to fundamentally break the sector.

Two of those resets are in areas where the sector has been calling for significant change - regulations and the funding system. This creates an opportunity for these major reviews to provide positive change for the sector, while at the same time, it may potentially create substantial risks.

Our call to you and the whole sector is the need to engage with good faith in the policy discussions, and bring parents and caregivers along for the discussions by being open and focused on the goal of what is best for our tamariki and their learning – an affordable, accessible, quality and safe ECE system.

Our tamariki deserve an education, it is up to us to ensure we influence the decision makers.