Our priorities: In early childhood

OUR PRIORITIES: IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

HIGH EXPECTATIONS, CLOSING THE GAPS

Increasing access to preschool

Consistent with the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education, children are supported to access high-quality early childhood education for 600 hours in the year before school.

The Preschool Funding Model (PFM), which came into effect in 2014, introduced increased base rates for children in the year before school, as well as for Aboriginal children and children from low-income families.

The PFM One Year On Report, published in 2015, showed the funding model had a positive impact on enrolments. Overall, enrolments of children in their year before school increased by two per cent following the introduction of the funding model and enrolments of Aboriginal children and children from low-income families increased by five per cent. In rural and remote areas, these figures increased by two and three per cent, respectively.

During 2015, in recognition that long day care is the preferred option for many working families, the department made up to $20 million available through the Long Day Care National Partnership Grants Program. This provided funding to support a preschool program in more than 2,000 long day care services across NSW.

The new Preschool Disability Support Program, rolled out in 2015, has provided targeted funding for more than 3,000 children with disability.

In 2015, the department provided more than $1.3 million to preschools in rural and remote communities with a high level of need for more preschool places. The grants are used to extend existing buildings or construct new, purpose-built facilities. In total, the program will deliver 362 new preschool places across rural and remote areas of the state.

Giving young children the best start at school

The Best Start initiative is an ongoing commitment in all government schools. It is designed to identify the literacy and numeracy skills and understanding that each child brings to Kindergarten. In 2015, the Best Start Kindergarten Assessment was conducted in all NSW public schools, involving 70,774 children and more than 3,700 teachers. The department’s Planning Literacy and Numeracy software enables Kindergarten to Year 8 teachers to track student learning throughout the school years against the literacy and numeracy continuums. In 2015, 89 per cent of Kindergarten students achieved Level 1 or higher on at least one aspect of the numeracy assessment and 79 per cent achieved Level 1 or higher on at least one aspect of the literacy assessment.

Early learning initiatives were supported through reading recovery, provided to more than 10,000 students who experienced serious difficulty in learning to read and write; continued implementation of the Targeted Early Numeracy intervention program, which aims to support students experiencing substantial difficulty in numeracy in the early years; and the continued implementation of Language, Learning and Literacy, which supports teachers of students at risk of not achieving expected literacy levels in the early years.

A positive transition to school is important for children. To support NSW public schools in this, the department provided professional development opportunities for staff in early childhood settings and schools. These included the Talking Transitions Conference, involving more than 400 participants from across NSW; and the Conversations: Transition to School Project, in which teachers in early childhood settings and schools engaged in professional learning, reciprocal shadowing and reflection on practice and planning to ensure a successful and positive transition process.

The Transition to School Statement also provides a common format for early childhood educators and families to provide information to schools. The statement summarises a child’s strengths, identifies their interests and approaches to learning, and suggests ways they can be supported.
In 2015, the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation completed an evaluation of the statement's first year of operation, with the key findings overwhelmingly positive:

- Eighty-six per cent of parents agreed that having a statement provided better support to help their child’s transition to school.
- Eighty-seven per cent of school principals and 90 per cent of teachers said they would use the statements, if received, for Kindergarten students starting in 2016.
- Ninety-five per cent of parents said they would like to have a statement if they had another child starting school in the future.

The evaluation recommended simplifying the statement and supporting its further implementation across NSW. It also highlighted the need for ongoing support strategies to strengthen connections between early childhood settings and schools.

**Implementing the National Quality Framework**

The National Quality Framework aims to improve the quality and consistency of early childhood education and care across Australia through an integrated approach to the approval, quality assessment and compliance of services within a national framework. It applies to around 5,200 services in NSW, including long day care, preschool, family day care and outside school hours care services.

In 2015, the department worked with other jurisdictions to review the National Quality Framework and ensure that NSW priorities were accurately reflected in it.

The department, in consultation with sector representatives, developed and implemented a new way of streamlining the assessment and rating of services. This included an integrated technological system to improve the collection of evidence, which increased efficiency and consistency of the assessment and rating process.

As of December 2015, the department had rated and published reports for more than 3,800 services. This included 73 of the department’s preschools.

The department also monitors compliance with legislative requirements, investigates complaints and responds to incidents. In 2015, these activities involved some 3,300 visits to service providers, 28,800 telephone enquiries, 13,500 email enquiries and dealing with 13,000 service provider matters.

**QUALITY TEACHING AND LEADERSHIP**

**Building the knowledge and skills of early childhood educators**

The department continues to support early childhood educators to improve their skills and qualifications and to elevate the standing of early childhood teachers as professionals in their field.

Throughout 2015, the department worked with the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) to include early childhood teachers within the accreditation system, recognising their professionalism and standing. It has worked to ensure that the unique service settings of the sector are reflected in the policies developed by BOSTES to support early childhood education and care teachers in achieving the recognition they deserve.

In 2015, the department established the Rural and Remote Early Childhood Teaching Scholarship program. The scholarships provide financial assistance to early childhood educators in regional and remote areas to upgrade diploma qualifications to a four-year bachelor’s degree. Scholarships were awarded to 30 scholars who are due to start their studies in 2016.

In 2013 and 2014, the department awarded 102 teaching scholarships to early childhood educators. Three scholars graduated during 2014 and 2015, with a further 10 expected to graduate in 2016. In 2015, 12 scholarships were awarded to teachers to undertake an appropriate graduate certificate or master’s degree program to support the inclusion of children with disability in preschool education.
NEW AND BETTER WAYS OF DOING BUSINESS

Reforming the funding of early childhood education and care

The NSW Government’s priority is to support children to access quality early childhood education for 600 hours in the year before school, in line with the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education.

During 2015, the department worked with the sector towards the shared goal of universal access to high-quality early childhood education. This included the Community Preschool Operational Support program, which helps eligible community preschools develop effective business skills with the aim of ensuring their sustainability over the longer term. This followed the successful introduction of the needs-based Preschool Funding Model for community preschools in 2014, which targets funding to those children who need it most.

In November 2015, the Minister for Early Childhood Education announced that the NSW Government would invest $83.5 million in the sector over the next four years. To support 600 hours of access to preschool education, a number of initiatives were developed for introduction in 2016. These include:

- Preschools for Sustainable Communities Program
- Community Preschool 600 Hours Incentive
- 2.5 per cent increase in base funding and loadings
- community outreach grants
- local partnerships to enhance preschool participation of low-income and Aboriginal families
- improved data collection
- capital works grants to increase preschool places.

In 2015, as part of the National Partnership, the Long Day Care National Partnership Grants program made available $20 million in funding to long day care services for preschool programs in the year before school. The program provided funding to support a preschool program in more than 2,000 long day care services across NSW.

Preschool partnership pilot

In 2015, the NSW Government announced a Preschool Partnership Pilot to provide additional support for public schools to partner with early childhood providers in two geographical locations – Tamworth (Hillvue) and the inner west of Sydney.

The establishment of the Hillvue Public School Early Learning Engagement Centre will encourage professional collaboration and connection between early childhood and primary school teachers and a range of community services.

The Inner West Virtual Community of Practice will encourage professional collaboration and connection between a range of early childhood and community services. A project coordinator will work directly with parents/carers, preschool providers and other community stakeholders to trial resources or strategies. It will also include a web presence.

These multi-agency collaborations will support transition to preschool and school in NSW and facilitate the use of the NSW Transition to School Statement. The Inner West Virtual Community of Practice will also facilitate information sharing between families, services and preschools/schools.

In 2015, both pilots were in the development phase with implementation planned for Term 4, 2016.

Before and after school care fund

The NSW Government created the $20 million Before and After School Care Fund in 2015 to help establish up to 45,000 additional out of school hours care (OSHC) places in government and non-government schools. The fund is administered by the department and guided by a cross-sectoral steering committee, which includes representatives from the Catholic Education Commission NSW and the Association of Independent Schools of NSW.

Principals and providers used funding to increase the number of approved OSHC places by creating a new service. NSW schools were successful in their grant applications when there was a demonstrated community demand supporting the establishment of an OSHC service, where an appropriate site meeting requirements was available and when they could demonstrate progress in securing an approved OSHC provider. Funds were used for site modification and fit-out costs, project management (including tendering or regulatory costs), or to pay for necessary equipment to support additional places.