

2.1 GOVERNMENT FUNDING OF KINDERGARTENS (CT)

Responsible Director: Julie Salomon

RECOMMENDATION

That Council:

- 1. Notes the concerns about the future access and quality of four year old kindergarten facing Victorian families, in light of the Federal Budget documents revealing the plan to withdraw funding for four year old kindergarten, following the winding up of the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education in June 2020.*
- 2. Joins the Municipal Association of Victoria and Eastern Metropolitan Councils in advocating for stable funding and a quality early childhood education base of fifteen hours per week to ensure that Monash parents do not potentially face unaffordable increases in kindergarten fees or additional childcare costs.*
- 3. Writes to the Prime Minister of Australia, the Hon. Malcolm Turnbull MP, the Minister for Education & Training the Hon. Simon Birmingham MP, and the Minister for Social Services, the Hon. Dan Tehan MP, along with the leaders of all major federal political parties, urging them to reconsider the Federal Budget decision and reinstate this important funding for our children.*
- 4. Writes to local State and Federal members of Parliament to seek their support to raise concerns with their Ministerial colleagues, party leaders and through Parliamentary Question Time for the Federal Government to continue its share of early childhood education funding.*

INTRODUCTION

This report seeks Council's endorsement to advocate State and Federal members of parliament (MP's) to seek their support to secure Australian Government funding for four year old kindergarten programs, following the conclusion of the current National Partnership Agreement in June 2020.

BACKGROUND

The provision of four year old kindergarten programs is a critical part of the early childhood education system and its long term benefits are supported by research into child development. Irrefutable international and national evidence links kindergarten attendance to improved education, health, social and economic outcomes that can break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage. Other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries including New Zealand, Norway, France, Spain and Sweden have introduced funded early education programs which significantly exceed the Australian provision.

In November 2008 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), as part of its early childhood reforms, endorsed the national agenda of universal access to 15 hours of kindergarten a week for four year-olds, commencing in 2013. Victorian local governments supported the reforms but strongly advocated that additional funding was required to move the Victorian system from 10 to 15 hours within the set timeframes. Since 2013, almost all Victorian kindergarteners have had access to a 15 hour program.

Under the current arrangement, the State Government provides a funding contribution towards the delivery of 10 hours per week of kindergarten and the Australian Government provides funds for the additional five hours. Further funding to support the full operating costs is obtained through parent fees and fundraising.

Because the Australian Government has never committed to ongoing funding for Universal Access to Early Education (15 hours of kindergarten), Councils, under the MAV umbrella, and other Peak Bodies, have been advocating for ongoing funding for the 15 hours of kindergarten for children in the year before they go to school. Monash Council, as part of this advocacy program, took the decision to write to a number of Federal and State politicians during 2014, which resulted in an additional year of funding being provided. A similar campaign occurred in 2015, which resulted in a further two years of funding being approved. Council was prepared to again, join the advocacy campaign in 2017, but the Australian Government announced a further two years of funding, before the Budget was announced. This funding was for two years, until the end of 2019. It is this funding that is now in question.

DISCUSSION

There has been strong uptake of the 15 hours per week of kindergarten programs to four year olds since it was fully funded in early 2013. In Monash all 30 stand-alone kindergartens and all but one of the 48 long day care centres which run a funded kindergarten program offer 15 hours per week for all children.

The Federal Government's May 2018 Federal Budget confirmed it had not committed funding beyond December 2019 for the five hours of kindergarten each week, and had withdrawn from the *National Quality Agenda* partnership overseeing regulation and quality assessment of early childhood education and care services. Whilst the Federal Budget documents reveal the decision to withdraw funding for four year old kindergarten, a spokesperson for the Education Minister said the program was not scheduled to end until June 2020, which meant there was ample time to iron out policy settings with the States and Territories.

The absence of any reference to funding beyond 2019 is also concerning. The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) has asserted that if this funding is not forthcoming, the families of 79,000 kindergarten children will face a potential fee increase in the order of 129%. This sharp level of increase would make kindergarten costs unaffordable for many parents and especially for our most vulnerable families.

The prospect of returning to 10 hours kindergarten per week is problematic and the impact for Monash children and families is significant. Currently, 1,234 four year olds are enrolled on the Monash Central Enrolment system, and approximately 700 are enrolled in long day centres across the municipality. Enrolments for 2019 are estimated to be 1,247 places.

However, parents are now enrolling their children for four year kindergarten places in 2020 in the expectation that their children will receive 15 hours per week. Should these expectations not be met, there would be considerable concern amongst families with young children who wish to access kindergarten programs in future years. A reduction in hours would also have significant implications for educators working in kindergartens.

The key messages of the advocacy campaigns over the years have been:

1. The Federal Government must include long-term kindergarten funding certainty with a budgeted commitment for 15 hours of kindergarten;
2. With Australia still considered as one of the poorest performing Organisations for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations in terms of funding our early childhood education system, it must not be left to fall further behind our OECD counterparts. Our children deserve better and we expect better for them;
3. This essential national early education program must have enduring federal funding beyond the political cycle or it will price many families out of accessing affordable kindergarten education which provides an important start for their children;
4. Without continued Australian Government investment for the additional five hours of preschool, we risk poorer learning outcomes for Victorian children, and lower kinder participation rates.
5. Victorian communities already contribute 35 per cent of the cost of preschool through fees, fundraising and local government support, including over \$300 million of ratepayer funds invested by councils to deliver 15 hours of kindergarten.
6. Parents cannot sustain exorbitant fee increases to offset government funding shortfalls if the Federal investment is not renewed.
7. An extra 1,200 teachers and educators were trained and employed to deliver additional preschool hours. We cannot afford the job losses, or risk councils withdrawing their support and extensive roles in kindergarten planning, facility and service provision.

It is proposed to make contact with the Prime Minister of Australia, Malcolm Turnbull, Minister for Education & Training Simon Birmingham and the Minister for Social Services, the Hon. Dan Tehan MP, along with the leaders of all major federal political parties, through letters, e-mails, face - to - face meetings and social media.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

A withdrawal of funding will force most kindergartens to reduce program hours or increase fees. Only programs patronised by families with the capacity to pay the additional fees would be able to continue offering the longer hours. The children of families with the least capacity to pay will be most impacted. A further consequence of reduced hours will be a reduction in employment hours for kindergarten staff.

HUMAN RIGHTS CONSIDERATIONS

The advocacy to local members of parliament is consistent with the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006*. In particular the suggested approach supports equitable access to kindergarten for all members of the community and is consistent with the principle of freedom of expression.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications for Council of the recommendations of this report, however the financial impact on families in Monash would be significant, if kindergartens maintained 15 hours of kindergarten programs per week without the Australian Government funding contribution. Should the funding not continue and kindergartens cut their hours, this will have financial impacts for educators who would experience a reduction in their hours of employment.

CONCLUSION

The future arrangements for kindergarten funding beyond December 2019 is uncertain and dependent upon a decision by the Australian Government. It is recommended that Council support an advocacy campaign that will include contacting the leaders of all major federal political parties and local members of parliament, to highlight the importance of this matter and seek their support to secure the continuation of funding, to support universal access to 15 hours per week of kindergarten for all Australian children.