

The 20 Hours (Free) Programme

Important Choices Ahead for New Zealand's New Government

The 20 Hours Free programme was implemented in July 2007 after having been one of three new education policies announced in the Labour Party's 2005 election manifesto. The new programme was the brainchild of Education Minister Trevor Mallard and provided 20 hours of government-funded early childhood education (ECE) for all three and four year olds, regardless of family income. When the Free ECE programme began, participation was large enough to affect the Consumer Price Index: 'Education prices fell 5.2 percent [for the September quarter], due to lower prices for early childhood education as a result of changes to government funding' (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). The most recent data indicate that 86% of eligible services participate and 93% of eligible children participate (Ministry of Education, 2008). With its tremendous success, the 20 Hours Free ECE programme has become the biggest, most expensive early education programme in the country. September 2008 data indicated that the government

had spent over half a billion dollars on the programme since its inception, and that it accounted for approximately 70% of the \$807 million Vote Education early childhood education budget for 2007-08 (ibid.; New Zealand Treasury, 2008).¹ An additional \$90 million was added to the early childhood education budget for the 2008-09 fiscal year.²

With the 2008 election, the National Party could have decided it would reign in spending on the new programme, but instead it chose to call for its expansion. The National Party's manifesto promised to expand eligibility to more services and to allow five year olds to participate. While this was politically expedient, National is now faced with the budgetary increases that will result from expanding access to the popular programme. This article provides a brief history of the development of the programme, a discussion of the wedge issues that arose, and an assessment of three policy options available to the government.

History of the 20 Hours Free programme

The success of the programme makes it easy to forget how controversial it was to create 20 Hours Free. After the inclusion of the new programme in the 2005 Labour manifesto, three issues arose: opposition to the exclusion of private services, opposition to the exclusion of parent/whānau-led services, and a restriction on 'top-up' fees. Only the first issue was resolved by the Labour Government. The other two developed into wedge issues, one of which the National Party resolved with the expansion of the programme to parent/whānau-led programmes in its 2008 manifesto. But the issue of 'top up' fees remains an important policy issue for National to consider.

Prior to the 20 Hours Free programme, the government already provided universal subsidies to all early childhood education services for up to 30 hours per week for each child from zero to five years of age. In addition, the Ministry of Social Development provided subsidies for up to 50 hours per week of child care for qualifying families. The 20 Hours Free programme was a stark departure from previous early childhood policies because (1) it limited participation to teacher/kaiako-led services, and (2) it marked a shift in

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funding policy from a subsidy to covering the entire cost of early education. Unlike the subsidy programmes, under which services could ‘top up’ the subsidy with parent fees, the 20 Hours Free programme prohibits top-up fees in exchange for providing a higher level of funding set to cover the average cost of care at the regulated quality level.

When the Ministry of Education was developing the proposal that ultimately became the 20 Hours Free programme, Minister of Education Trevor Mallard was firmly committed to universal access to free early childhood education in community-based services (Mallard, 2008). He believed that community-based services could expand to meet the demand; however, nearly a third of all ECE enrolments were in privately-owned centres (see Table 1) and a backlash ensued. Despite Mallard’s commitment to community-based provision, the political opposition in the lead up to the 2005 election was too great to sustain the exclusion of private services and ultimately they were allowed to participate. On a pragmatic level, expansion to private services increased the number of services that could potentially offer Free ECE by around half and thereby reduced the risk of a shortage of Free ECE spaces (Minister of Education, 2006).

The parent/whānau-led exclusion was a particularly sensitive issue because in 2002 the Ministry of Education began implementation of its strategic plan for ECE that committed the government to improving the quality of early childhood education. One of the major parts of the strategic plan was to raise ECE quality by increasing the educational level of teachers and by providing an incentive to hire more qualified teachers through the linkage of reimbursement rates to the number of qualified teachers. Both Playcentre and Te Kōhanga Reo objected to the assumption that teacher qualifications equate with quality of care and countered that there are many pathways to quality (Pilkington, 2008, Tangaere, 2008). Both the Playcentre Federation and Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust wanted to participate in Free ECE, but they did not want to change aspects of their programmes that they felt were fundamental to their philosophies. Playcentres (9% of enrolments) are unique within the sector in that they are co-operatively managed and supervised by parents with support from experienced personnel in the 33 regional Playcentre

associations under the Playcentre Federation. They provide sessional programmes for children from birth to school age in mixed-aged environments. Currently there are 466 licensed and 22 unlicensed Playcentres (Ministry of Education, 2007). Te Kōhanga Reo, literally translated as ‘language nests’, are designed to maintain te reo Māori by introducing children from birth to the Māori language and culture. Currently there are 470 licensed Kōhanga Reo accounting for 5% of total enrolment in ECE (see Tables 1 and 2). The Playcentre Federation and Te Kōhanga Reo National Trust wanted the recognition, expressed in policy, that there are multiple pathways to quality and, on that basis, participation in Free ECE. But the Labour government maintained the exclusion of parent/whānau-led services from participation in the 20 Hours Free programme. The National Party promise to reverse this policy by expanding eligibility to parent/whānau-led ECE services in its 2008 manifesto.

The final wedge issue, top-up fees, endures and presents the government with a choice of maintaining the paradigmatic shift to universal access or reverting to the subsidy approach of the past. However, the history of this issue is worth revisiting because it is likely to affect the reaction of the sector to the new government’s policy decisions. Shortly before the 2005 election Steve Maharey was appointed minister of education, and he noted that the expansion to include private providers in Free ECE would increase the cost, and that it could also increase the risk that the price paid for free provision would not be seen as adequate. He was right on both counts. The Ministry of Education estimated that the Labour Party manifesto commitment would cost \$148 million over the 2007–2010 budget cycle (Minister of Education, 2006). That led the media and the ECE sector to focus their attention on determining the funding rates. Early on in the development of the Free ECE programme, the ministry advised Cabinet to fund Free ECE based on average costs for meeting licensing standards without charging parents. Ministry of Education staff advised then minister Trevor Mallard that funding based on average cost would not cover all the costs of every service. They advised that the proposal would need to be carefully positioned to signal that the funding rate would not cover all costs, but also to signal that the government would continue to ‘subsidise’ rather than ‘fund’ ECE (Minister of Education,

Table 1: Number of enrolments in early childhood education by type of service, 1995 and 2007

TYPE OF SERVICE	1995	% of sector	2007	% of sector	% Change 1995-2007
Kindergarten	47,208	33%	43,695	26%	-8%
Playcentre	19,108	14%	14,664	9%	-30%
Education and care centres	53,769	38%	91,733	54%	41%
Te Kōhanga Reo	14,015	10%	9,236	5%	-52%
Home-based networks	6,114	4%	11,073	6%	45%
Correspondence School	901	1%	737	<1%	-22%
TOTAL	141,115	100%	171,138	100%	18%

Source: Adapted from Early Childhood Enrolments Time Series Data, Sheet 7, retrieved from http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/data_collections/ece_staff_return

2003, section 7a). Ministry staff also warned of significant fiscal risks from a government commitment to meet the costs of the strategic plan. Because the government does not set fees for early childhood services, it would be exposed to claims from services for funding increases. The Ministry staff advised the minister to carefully communicate the proposal to ensure that the government would not necessarily respond to every cost increase, or at least not respond in full (*ibid.*, section 7b). This indeed became a divisive issue in the implementation of the programme.

The Labour-led government's 2006 budget commitments to ECE included not only the new 20 Hours Free programme but also the changes related to the strategic plan. In October 2006 the minister, Steve Maharey, announced that, 'Early childhood centres will be required to have 50 percent qualified teachers in all centres from December next year [2007].' He continued: 'Cabinet has also agreed to improvements to adult to child

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ratios from 2009' (Maharey, 2006c). With these increased costs for teachers and regulatory changes in the works, the sector became uneasy with the yet-to-be-announced funding levels for Free ECE; however, the 2006 budget included increased funding rates for providers amounting to almost \$30 million over four years, to enable the early childhood sector to 'move more rapidly towards its goal of all teachers being registered by 2012' (Maharey, 2006a). The budget provided all-day services with an up to 13% increase and sessional services with an up to 11% increase. The budget also included a 9% increase for Playcentres that was intended to support the cost of administration in order to free volunteers to spend their time with children (Maharey, 2006b).

Even with these increases in funding, the controversy over Free ECE funding rates did not decrease. The ministry set the Free ECE rates based on a survey of operating costs conducted in 2005 and 2006 (personal communication, 2008). Typically the rates would have been announced in May 2007 along with the budget, but because of the high-profile controversy over funding rates, the ministry was allowed to release the Free ECE rates on 21 December 2006, a full six months early. The funding scheme reflects a cost-driver approach,

with the highest rates provided for ECE services with the highest costs. In this approach all-day, centre-based ECE with 100% registered teachers receives the highest funding rate, and services with sessional programmes, home-based and/or fewer registered teachers receive lower rates. These rates were increased in July 2007 to reflect updated cost data. The commitment of the government was to provide funding to cover the regulated quality level, which necessitates regular adjustments to the funding rates schedule.

The response from the sector to the funding rates ranged from full support to adamant opposition, with many undecided. The New Zealand Childcare Association, a membership and education organisation, immediately voiced its support of the Free ECE programme in a media release. Barnardos New Zealand, responsible for 1,800 enrolled children and half of the home-based providers, announced its participation in January 2007. The New Zealand Educational Institute, the teachers' union representing some early childhood teachers, fully supported the 20 Hours Free programme and published positive articles with titles such as '20 Hours Free ECE is a Great Advance, say Centres' (NZEI, 2007). Kindergarten Associations were undecided. New Zealand Kindergartens Incorporated, which represents two thirds of kindergartens (approximately 400) raised concerns about whether the Ministry of Education would consider the full range of costs kindergartens incur. Early Childhood Leadership (formerly the Federation of Free Kindergartens), which represents the other third, mainly in the Auckland area, criticised the ministry's reliance on operating costs to set the rates because it did not include the potential growth costs (Hotere, 2005).

Organisations opposed to Free ECE included higher-cost providers such as the Montessori Association of New Zealand (approximately 80 services) who did not plan to participate because they thought the funding rates were too low. But the most vociferous and media savvy opposition came from the Early Childhood Council. The ECC had been a vocal critic of the exemption of private providers from Free ECE and was now leading the opposition against participation in Free ECE. The organisation sent out a barrage of media releases announcing 'Thousands Face Missing out on Free Pre-school' and 'Early Childhood Education Plan Causing Problems' (Oliver, 2007; New Zealand Parents' Association, 2007). In February 2007 the council released the results of an email member survey in which only 23% of its services planned to participate in the Free ECE programme and 31% planned not to participate, and the undecided were leaning towards not participating. The survey was sent to 615 members and had a 43% response rate (Early Childhood Council, 2007a). Countering the ECC's message, the New Zealand Childcare Association released a member survey in early February 2007 indicating that 'over 90 percent of early childhood centres surveyed will either offer the government's 20 Hours Free service or are still considering the issue' (New Zealand Childhood Association, 2007). The survey was sent to its 470 members, with a 35% response rate (n=162). The two organisations sent out competing brochures. The ECC's

brochure warned parents that centres would not participate in the programme because the government rate would not cover costs of centres with above average costs. The main message was that participation in Free ECE would force centres to lower quality because the government rate was too low and centres were not allowed to charge additional fees. The New Zealand Childcare Association countered by releasing an official statement, 'Free ECE – Get the Facts Right'. The release stated: 'ECC is promulgating a number of myths. We want to set the record straight for our members' (Bell, 2007).

As the 24 June 2007 deadline approached for services to declare participation in the programme, the tide started to turn. The Auckland Kindergarten Association, which had been undecided about participating, announced its decision to do so in June 2007 (Radio New Zealand, 2007). The indecision centred around the association's decision to allow optional fees. Although kindergartens were allowed to charge fees long before the Free ECE programme was developed, the Auckland Kindergarten Association had not instituted them. In its media release, the association indicated that it was instituting a 50 cent per hour optional fee but would consider withdrawing if its financial position was threatened (ibid.). It was with baited breath that all involved waited to see whether the implementation would be a success or failure.

The minister of education announced the initial implementation to be a success: '1703 services will be offering 20 Hours Free ECE from day one, which is a great start. More centres are still coming on board so the take up rate of 62 per cent of providers will increase further' (Maharey, 2007a). The minister referred to the new programme as a 'watershed policy', stating: '20 Hours Free early childhood education is the most significant expansion of the education system since the rollout of free secondary education by the first Labour government in the 1930s. For the first time in history, the state is recognising the need to provide free quality education for under five year olds' (Maharey, 2007b). He took pains to emphasise that the 20 Hours Free programme symbolised recognition that taxpayers see education of three and four year olds as essential; however, opponents continued to answer that 20 hours was a subsidy and not free. The ECC put out three media releases on 2 July 2007 taking issue with characterising the programme as free, as well as including ECC survey data on take-up rates (Early Childhood Education, 2007b). But the media coverage dwindled after the implementation of the programme. The initial take-up rate of 62% of services was high enough for the ministry and the prime minister to claim success. Evidence of the turnaround in media attention was a *New Zealand Herald* column by political analyst Colin James crediting Trevor Mallard with Labour's 'most important initiative, its biggest idea'. James likened the 20 Hours Free programme to investing in infrastructure, just like building roads, that would provide the path through which individuals' capacity to acquire skills and lift their earning power would ultimately contribute to their socioeconomic mobility. He then directed

the government to do more for children from birth to age three (James, 2008). Clearly, 20 Hours Free, despite all the controversy leading up to its implementation, had secured its place in New Zealand early childhood policy.

Policy options for the National-led government

With the 2008 election, the National Party could have decided to reign in what had become an expensive early education programme. But the party's manifesto promised to expand eligibility to Playcentres and whānau-led Te Kōhanga Reo and to allow five year olds to participate. This effectively resolves the wedge issue created when these services were excluded from participation. However, expanded participation necessarily requires larger budget outlays. Free ECE is a demand-driven programme and the government has no control over the supply because it does not own the ECE services.³ Each individual service decides whether to participate in the programme or not. Once a service decides to participate, then it can enrol as many children as legally allowed in the facility. Without control over demand or supply, Free ECE fast approaches becoming an entitlement programme. The challenge with any entitlement programme is that the government cannot easily control the budget allocation. The current expectation is that the government will fully fund the cost of ECE at the regulated quality level. With the National-led government's manifesto commitment, that means that the funding will be for an even larger group of services and children. The cost of the Free ECE programme, combined with the increases due to the quality improvements included in the ECE strategic plan (referred to as 'Pathways to the Future: Ngā Huarahi Aratake'), will continue to have an impact on the budget for years to come. The question is whether future governments will continue to absorb the increases or try to contain them.

The major choice before the National-led government is whether it will continue the paradigmatic shift toward universal provision or whether it will revert back to a subsidy programme. As Trevor Mallard envisioned, the 20 Hours Free ECE programme is supposed to be free because it is a statement that the government is committed to paying for quality early childhood education for all three and four year olds regardless of a family's ability to pay.

The National-led government has three policy scenarios related to consider.

1. Stay the course:

The government could continue with a commitment to fund Free ECE at the regulated quality level and provide budget allotments to meet the demand. If the government chooses this option, it would achieve the quality and universal access objectives of the programme as envisioned, but it creates fiscal risk for the government. However, that risk could be mitigated by two factors. First, the reimbursement rate for Playcentres and parent/whānau-led Te Kōhanga Reo could be set substantially lower than for full-day, teacher-led services. That is because reimbursement rates are set based on the cost drivers of

providing ECE. Because these services have lower labour costs (due to reliance on volunteers) and because of the sessional structure of the programmes (in Playcentres and some Kōhanga Reo), the budget increases may be less than for other services participating in the Free ECE programme. Second, the programme already enrolls 93% of eligible children, which means that the number of new participants may be quite small. However, there are data challenges in getting accurate enrolment estimates because children who utilise more than one service to fulfil the 20 hours of free ECE are counted twice in the current data collection method. An important factor in assessing the fiscal risk to the government is to estimate the maximum participation level. If enrolments are nearly at that level, then the fiscal risk would necessarily be reduced.

2. *Reduce fiscal risk by limiting the funding rate:*

The government could reduce fiscal risk by limiting funding increases for the 20 Hours Free programme. This scenario manages fiscal risk to the government, but there are two issues to consider. First, if funding rates do not keep pace with the cost of providing ECE, then quality would be sacrificed if services are not allowed to charge top-up fees. Through the ECE strategic plan, the government invested in regulatory and funding changes that improve the quality of ECE. If 20 Hours Free funding rates do not keep pace with the cost of quality, then the government will be reversing the gains made. Second, services may opt out of the programme. If a service finds that the funding rate does not cover the cost of its desired level of quality, then it could choose not to participate. This could effectively create a two-tiered system of higher-quality ECE for those who can afford to pay for it and lower-quality ECE for those who cannot. It would maintain universal access because any child could participate (assuming there are services with space available), but it would be universal access to lower-quality ECE.

3. *Reduce fiscal risk by reverting to subsidy:*

The government could reduce fiscal risk by limiting cost increases but allow services to charge 'top-up' fees. This scenario would change the 20 Hours Free programme from a universal programme to a subsidy programme. The fiscal risk to government would be reduced and the potential to maintain quality would be preserved. But the top-up fees may decrease accessibility for families who cannot afford the fees. Prior to the 20 Hours Free programme, this is how ECE services operated. The government provided a subsidy directly to the service to reduce the cost of provision for everyone, regardless of family income. It provided another subsidy specifically for families with greater financial need. By choosing policy option three, the government would reverse the paradigmatic shift that began with the creation of the 20 Hours Free programme.

Of the three policy options, scenario two is the least preferred because it creates the potential to decrease the quality

of ECE provided by services. The government, through the ECE strategic plan, has made great strides in improving the quality of ECE and the newly-elected government would be wise to continue to fund those improvements. If services stop participating in the 20 Hours Free programme, it would also decrease the supply of ECE available to families unless they were able to pay the market rate.

Scenarios one and three represent a choice about the public realm: should ECE be publicly funded similar to primary and secondary education? Some sector advocates fiercely believe that ECE should be provided by government for all children. Former ministers of education Trevor Mallard and Steve Maharey both viewed the 20 Hours Free programme as a watershed moment in New Zealand policy because for the first time the government made a commitment to fully funding (at the regulated quality level) early childhood education for all. If the National-led government continues on this pathway, New Zealand will achieve this paradigmatic shift in government responsibility for three and four year olds. However, that policy choice has to be made with a wider lens beyond ECE. Every government always has more worthy programmes than it can afford to fund. The question for the government is the opportunity cost of the 20 Hours Free programme funding increases. Are there other public investments that are more pressing? For New Zealand the question is whether the education and care of three-to-five year olds is more important than, say, paid parental leave, expanded social welfare funding or infrastructure investments. Philosophically, the provision of ECE should be considered just as important as primary and secondary education. However, the relative importance of Free ECE can only be determined within the broader context of government priorities.

The newly-appointed minister of education, Anne Tolley, announced in November 2008 that new ECE regulations to have been implemented on 1 December would be delayed for six months to enable the ministry to consult with the sector and parents (Tolley, 2008). While those regulations were already passed into law by the previous government and will go into effect unless new legislation is passed to stop them, her action could be a signal that the National-led government wants to reassess the investment in ECE. The new government also dropped 'free' from the programme title, which could signal that the government will move in the direction of scenario three. The investment in ECE over the last several years due to both the 20 Hours Free programme and the ECE strategic plan represents a quantum leap in government support of early childhood education. The government needs to carefully consider its options and their potential impacts before reversing the course of action currently in place.

1 Note that the spending data for ECE are from July 2007 to September 2008 and the budget data are for the fiscal year.

2 In addition to Ministry of Education ECE programmes, the Ministry for Social Development spent \$150 million on childcare assistance in 2007-08, with a \$17 million increase for the 2008-09 fiscal year (New Zealand Treasury, 'Vote Social Development', M63, p.285).

3 The government does not own ECE services except for the Correspondence School, and that service serves fewer than 1% of enrolled children (see Table 2).

Table 2: Children on the regular ECE roll as at 1 July 2007 by type of service, form of ownership and age

Service Type		No. with regular roll	Age at 1 July 2007						TOTAL	% of roll
			Under 1	1 Year	2 Years	3 Years	4 Years	5 Years		
Free Kindergarten	Community-based	618	25	37	1221	16079	25973	360	43695	26%
Playcentre	Community-based	465	1731	2891	3896	3590	2465	91	14664	9%
Education and Care Service	Community-based	794	1422	5113	9006	11881	10307	443	38172	22%
	Privately-owned	1133	2800	9247	13841	15387	11986	300	53561	31%
Home-based network	Community-based	83	284	915	994	889	616	39	3737	2%
	Privately-owned	137	934	1828	1843	1452	1137	142	7336	4%
Te Kōhanga Reo	Community-based	470	607	1751	2235	2351	2181	111	9236	5%
Correspondence School	Other	1		1	4	289	392	51	737	0%
TOTAL		3701	7803	21783	33040	51918	55057	1537	171138	100%

Note: In 2007 data was not available for nine services (five Education and Care, three Home-based networks and one Playcentre). In addition, four licensed services were newly opened at the time of the census and therefore had no enrolments. These services are excluded from the number of services with a regular roll. Excludes casual education and care.

Source: Data Management Unit, Ministry of Education

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