OUR PRIORITIES: IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

HIGH EXPECTATIONS, CLOSING THE GAPS

Increasing access to preschool

The NSW Government is committed to ensuring that all children in NSW can participate in 600 hours of quality preschool education in the year before school, no matter where they live or what their circumstances are. This is consistent with the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education.

Research shows that children who participate in this way are more likely to arrive at school equipped with the social, cognitive and emotional skills they need to engage in learning. The benefits endure well beyond primary school. Higher levels of educational attainment, economic participation and family wellbeing have all been linked to moderate levels of participation in early childhood education.

In 2016, the NSW Government announced the Start Strong funding scheme, allocating an additional $115 million to support universal access to early childhood education in community preschools and long day care centres. This will help ensure that affordability is not a barrier for families with young children.

A new parent awareness campaign in 2016 – It Makes You Think – also promotes the benefits of participating in early childhood education to parents, and encourages them to enrol their child in an early education program in the year before school. Up to 90 per cent of a child’s brain development occurs in the first five years of life, making it a critical window. The campaign website, startstrong.nsw.edu.au, provides an engaging tour of the developing brain of a child. It also presents key research facts, provides information about enrolling in services, and about how the Start Strong program funds early childhood education in NSW.

In 2016, the Preschool Disability Support Program provided targeted funding for more than 2,600 children with disability.

Giving young children the best start at school

In 2016, the department released a refined version of the NSW Transition to School Statement, with the aim of making it easier to use for early childhood educators, families and schools. The statement incorporates the recommendations of an evaluation conducted in 2015 by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, and will support further implementation across NSW.

Relationships between early childhood services, families and schools are crucial to ensure a positive transition to school. As part of the Multicultural Plan 2016-2018, eight schools engaged with the Beginning School Well initiative to support refugee children and their families as they start school.

The Best Start Kindergarten Assessment was conducted in all NSW public schools, involving 71,138 children and more than 3,700 teachers. This year, 93 per cent of Kindergarten students achieved Level 1 or higher on at least one aspect of the numeracy assessment and 78 per cent achieved Level 1 or higher on at least one aspect of the literacy assessment.

Targeted interventions supported students at risk of not achieving expected literacy and numeracy levels in the early years. The Targeted Early Numeracy initiative resulted in 116 new trainers and 29 lead trainers. More than 10,000 students participated in Reading Recovery, which was delivered by 1,106 teachers. With support from 111 trainers, 2,343 teachers implemented the Language, Learning and Literacy program.

In 2016, the department began developing the Regional and Remote Early Childhood Education Strategy and the Aboriginal Early Childhood Education Strategy, both of which aim to ensure all children are given the best possible start at school, regardless of their background or location. These are due to be finalised in 2017.
Implementing the National Quality Framework

The National Quality Framework aims to improve the quality and consistency of early childhood education across Australia through an integrated approach to the approval, quality assessment and compliance of services. This framework applies to more than 5,300 services in NSW, including long day care, preschool, family day care and outside of school hours care services.

The department accepted the recommendations of the NSW Auditor-General’s performance audit report, Early childhood education, released in May 2016.

In 2016, the department cooperated with other jurisdictions to implement changes arising from the review of the National Quality Framework.

In addition, the department has been working with the NSW Department of Planning and Environment to align the state’s planning system with the requirements of the Education and Care Services National Law Act 2010 for the establishment of early childhood centres. The reforms will streamline local planning approval and national law approval processes, generating time and cost savings in setting up new child care centres, or expanding existing facilities. They will be implemented via local planning instruments and policies, which are expected to take effect in early to mid-2017.

At the end of 2016, the department had rated 84 per cent of the more than 5,300 services that fall within the scope of the National Quality Framework. NSW accounts for approximately 35 per cent of the early childhood sector in Australia, and has conducted the highest number of assessments and ratings nationally.

The department also monitors compliance with legislative requirements, investigates complaints and responds to incidents. In 2016, these activities involved more than 2,700 compliance visits to services, 30,000 telephone enquiries, 8,800 email enquiries and dealing with more than 3,900 applications and 16,600 notifications from approved service providers.

To ensure that quality remains a focus, the department has implemented a number of improvements. These include a structured methodology system for conducting assessments and ratings, streamlining approvals processes, and a new policy to improve safety and quality outcomes for children in outside of school hours care services on departmental school sites.

QUALITY TEACHING AND LEADERSHIP

Building the knowledge and skills of early childhood educators

The Rural and Remote Early Childhood Teaching Scholarship program, established in 2015, recognises the importance of having qualified teachers to deliver quality early childhood education. The aim of the program is to help diploma-qualified educators working in community preschools and long day care services in rural and remote areas upgrade their qualifications and become early childhood teachers. Over the period 2016 to 2019, up to 30 scholarships are available each year, offering up to $10,000 to assist with study costs. In 2016, the department awarded all 30 scholarships.

During 2016, the department developed 10 courses, registered by the Quality Teaching Council, to help maintain the accreditation of early childhood educators. The department worked with the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA, formerly the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards [BOSTES]) and early childhood agencies to develop the Proficient Teacher Evidence Guide for Early Childhood Teachers.

To increase Aboriginal participation in early childhood education, the department engaged Ngroo Education through the 2015-16 Sector Development Program. Early childhood directors and educators received support and resources to help them engage Aboriginal communities and families. This included training on reducing barriers to access, building relationships with local Aboriginal communities and families, and mentoring by an Aboriginal Elder or community member.
Our priorities: In early childhood

NEW AND BETTER WAYS OF DOING BUSINESS

Reforming the funding of early childhood education

The additional $115 million funding that is available through Start Strong (as discussed on page 11) includes $85 million for community preschools. The extra funding adds to the $150 million already allocated under the Preschool Funding Model, making 600 hours of early childhood education more affordable for all families. It also includes $30 million towards supporting the most disadvantaged children in long day care centres. This extra funding will remove most of the fees for Aboriginal children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Start Strong reform responds positively to the 2016 NSW Auditor-General's performance audit recommendation for a refined funding approach for the community preschool and long day care sector. The refined model better targets funding to vulnerable and disadvantaged children who need it most, while encouraging 600 hours of participation for all children in the year before school.

Under Start Strong, per-child base funding rates will increase across all socioeconomic bands, starting at $4,250 and increasing to $6,600 for services in the most disadvantaged areas. This means that the vast majority of services will see an increase to their funding in 2017, growing financial sustainability in the sector and ensuring that preschools continue to provide early childhood education to children across NSW.

Working in close partnership with Community Child Care Cooperative and Community Connections Solutions Australia, the department delivered a regional roadshow series on Start Strong across NSW during October and November. These information and training sessions were aimed at early childhood service providers.

Preschool Partnership Pilot

During 2016, the department implemented the Preschool Partnership Pilot. This initiative is part of the NSW Government’s election commitment to provide additional support for public schools to partner with early childhood providers to co-locate facilities. The two pilots, which aim to identify opportunities for collaboration and connection, are located in Tamworth (Hillvue) and the inner west of Sydney.

The Hillvue Public School Early Learning Engagement Centre supports collaboration and connection between early childhood and primary school teachers and a range of community services. It aims to assist transition to school, using the Transition to School Statement, as well as promote the importance of attendance in quality preschool education.

The Inner West Virtual Community of Practice (IWVCoP) promotes a smooth transition to school by enhancing connections, strengthening collaboration and supporting continuity between early childhood services and schools. The IWVCoP also aims to foster a shared understanding of the importance of early learning between organisations.

In July 2016, the IWVCoP established an online forum to stimulate discussions on transition to school measures. It also aimed to share strategies to support vulnerable and disadvantaged communities, and trial the use of technology for recording and exchanging information in the transition to school process.

An advisory group, established in 2016, supports the IWVCoP. This group comprises academic practitioners; early childhood peak bodies and services; public, independent and Catholic primary schools; NSW Health; community health centres; local councils; and multicultural, refugee and other community services.

The department will evaluate both pilots in 2017.

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 outside of school hours care 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.

In 2016, schools without an outside of school hours care service were able to use the funding to create a new service. Schools and councils with an existing service were able to expand their service. Successful applicants presented a need for increasing the number of approved places and showed the potential to meet the regulator requirements for doing so, including the identification of a suitable site.

The inner west of Sydney