

MINISTER'S SPEECH - NZFKU ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

I would like to thank you Mrs Martin (President of the New Zealand Free Kindergarten Union) for the invitation to address your annual general meeting. This time last year, was the first conference I spoke to you as Minister of Education and I'm delighted to have been given the opportunity again and to tell you of the progress we have made. I want to talk with you and raise questions, share ideas, listen to your views and concerns, and to discuss with you those matters which have a bearing upon the business of running and managing kindergartens.

I know a number of you here today. I've visited many of the kindergartens in your districts and I've spoken to many of your fellow association members. And because of my contacts with you, because on almost every day some matter of kindergarten administration calls for my attention, I'm very much aware of the considerable contribution your union and individual associations, are making to early childhood care and education in New Zealand. Our kindergartens are being well-managed, well-administered and well-cared for, and a considerable part of the credit for that state of affairs is yours individually and collectively. Be assured that your contribution to education is neither unnoticed nor unappreciated.



You know that we in Government are giving early childhood care and education a high priority. And that's not just an ideal without substance. Let me cite as evidence some of the advances we have initiated in our first twelve months of office.

Ninety new kindergarten positions have been approved to continue the phased implementation of the kindergarten staffing scheme. 10 were approved in the first budget and 80 in the second. And by the way, that represents a 7% increase in the total kindergarten teaching service. The Committee on Kindergarten Staffing reported that 403 additional teachers would be required over 5 years at the rate of 80 per year to implement fully the staffing improvements required. We have met the first year recommendation. I understand that those new positions will be advertised in next month's Education Gazette for commencement in February next year.

But there's more:

- An additional 5 groups for handicapped children in kindergartens and playcentres has been approved, as well as the establishment of a course for specialist teachers of the handicapped - to which kindergarten teachers will be admitted.

- 85 teacher relief days have been approved to help in the retraining of kindergarten teachers re-recruited from the community pool, and to assist kindergartens to accommodate to a third teacher.
- The working party considering the extension of kindergarten teacher training is meeting and hopes to report to me some time in November of this year.
- Travel reimbursement for senior teachers and senior head teachers has now been placed on a more favourable basis and should alleviate the pressure on the financial resources of your associations.

You know of my concern for equity in the field of early childhood care and education: equity of access, equity of provision and equity of funding.

Again to demonstrate the Government's belief in those principles, other areas of early childhood care and education have not been neglected. For example:

- . 4 additional correspondence school teachers approved for the early childhood care and education section.
- . additional funding for the playcentre federation.

- . \$2.5 million funding for kohanga reo.
- . \$2.7 million additional funding for child care centres.
- . and if early childhood is considered in its broad context of 0-8 years, then the 500 junior school teachers approved for the primary service, will also need to be counted, as well as 260 reading recovery teachers.

In fact, if you total the provisions made in the 2 1/2 - 5 years age range, they represent a 10.7% increase in the amount voted.

I spoke earlier of equity of access and of provision - and I want to briefly touch upon them again. There are still 42% of three year olds and about 15% of 4 year olds who do not attend any form of early childhood service. Some don't have access because of location, of the absence of a service, of the lack of parent information, or because of deliberate parent choice. Yet the sad fact is that there are some children missing out through no fault of theirs or of their parents.

Up to now the state has been reliant on organisations such as yours, on your initiatives, and your perception of need, to meet demand. You have been the main providers with state assistance, skilfully negotiated over 100 years. There has been a tradition of providing early childhood care and education services through voluntary bodies such as your associations. It has been thought to be appropriate that communities should assume responsibility for their own decisions, for matching local needs with local responses. The underlying philosophy behind this system of provision has been the recognition of the importance of retaining the parents' and communities' responsibility for the education and welfare of young children. We all share a commitment to keeping the involvement of parents central to the provision of early childhood services. The question for the future is - should this system continue? Should there be a shift to more positive policies which anticipate need rather than be reactive and respond to need only after it has been proven? It could be said that children have missed out on early childhood services due to this type of reactive decision making. It has been drawn to my attention that pre-school children have missed out on early childhood education in national development areas. Perhaps one question that your organisation could consider for the future, is whether you see yourselves as providers for all types of community need or as an organisation providing a particular type of early childhood service?

We are in a partnership - linked by mutual interest and concern to provide an appropriate service to communities. We're in business together: we are mutually interdependent. The kindergarten movement could not continue without your energy, enthusiasm and commitment - given as a voluntary contribution to the future of our young. But nor could kindergartens survive without the level of Government support received. We are not islands. We together constitute the mainland. And our energies should be harnessed together to ensure the best deal possible for young children and their families. Life's not static. Nor is the kindergarten service. Nor is the early childhood world at large. They are all evolving and developing in response to changing needs, changing ideas and changing expectations.

As part of that ongoing change and development you will know that it is the intention of the Government to gather the early childhood care and education agencies together under the umbrella of my department. It's not that I'm empire building but it seems a nonsense to fragment the early childhood services between state departments. I believe that equity, greater coordination and a better service could be offered where Government assistance was mediated through one state department, but working co-operatively with other government departments. The Department of Education has developed links with Social Welfare, Maori Affairs, Labour, Health, Ministry

of Works and Development, Statistics, and the State Services Commission as well as providing information to the New Zealand Planning Council, the Institute for Economic Research and the Social Advisory Council in order to establish a foundation for co-operative planning and co-ordination of early childhood services.

But that doesn't mean I'm wanting a bland uniformity of provision. Not at all. Diversity of service is the great strength of the early childhood world because it allows choice and options for parents. I don't want to limit that choice nor stifle diversity. But I am resolved as to the need for a greater co-ordination of services.

That's why the Government intends to transfer the major responsibility for the administration of childcare from the Department of Social Welfare to Education. I understand the working party to negotiate the machinery of Government matters and management support services necessary to effect the transition, is making good progress. I'm pleased also that the union is represented on the joint Ministers' advisory group which is looking at the issues involved in the transition.

I hope that the transfer target of 1 April 1986 will be achieved.

I'm sure that there must be some of you who have entertained qualms about the transfer. How can another slice be taken from the ECCE cake? Will all our pieces be smaller? What will we have to share with our new relation?

It is my hope that when childcare does come across to Education, that you'll welcome them as colleagues, as fellows in the crucial task of educating the young for tomorrow.

I don't need to remind you that there are also developments within the kindergarten movement itself. Your recent look at the diversification of the kindergarten service is a case in point. It is your desire I'm sure to be responsive to your communities and to meet their needs with appropriate forms of provision.

But just how responsive are you to your communities? Is the present service what people want? How do you know? What market research have you carried out on your present and prospective clientele? Are your customers satisfied? What are you doing for families? Is part-day sessional care and education what parents really want? Or would they prefer more flexible sessions - even full day sessions? And what of our Maori children? How bi-cultural and multi-cultural are our kindergartens? What is the ethnic composition of the kindergarten teaching force, of your kindergarten communities,

of your children - and even of the representatives here today? Is the balance appropriate, is it worth pursuing, and how do we achieve it? It is estimated that within 5 years 20% of children below 5 years of age will be Maori. Will our kindergartens reflect that balance or will the label of monocultural fit?

I have no ready answers, but I believe that questions such as these must be continually addressed.

Could I also broach with you the matter of the kindergarten as a learning resource. As you are aware the total kindergarten with its buildings, grounds, facilities, equipment and staff, constitutes a very expensive resource, one in which the taxpayer has made a considerable investment. And it is too valuable a resource, I would suggest, to be used for only 1,000 hours per year. What about the other 7,760 hours? Could your plant be used for other purposes? Or are kindergartens just for children? I'm sure that other potential users abound. What I'm trying to encourage is for all managers of educational institutions - as you are - to explore ways whereby frequent and extensive use of their facilities can be made by the community. You have a responsibility not only to manage your plant in the best interests of children but also to be responsive to the needs of the wider community for access to your facilities.

I believe there are two important payoffs to you in allowing greater use by the community of kindergarten facilities. Firstly, there is an build-up of community goodwill and understanding towards the kindergarten and secondly, there tends to be a considerable reduction in vandalism. Both benefits, I would suggest, are worth the effect.

I flagged a further development to you earlier, and that's the question of extended training for kindergarten teachers. NZFKTA look towards 3 years pre-service training. I know you took a broad view in your proposed terms of reference and spoke of extended training. What is so magical about 3 years? Who says that an additional year of pre-service training will produce better teachers? Might we not do better to be more rigorous in our selection strategies, as Marie O'Rourke of Auckland Teachers College suggests. In her opinion it's not so much the quantity of training that counts as the quality of the person being trained.

Certainly 3 years pre-service training followed by a supervised, monitored period of internship leading to certification and registration, would do much to raise the status of the service. A practical period, end on to pre-service training, is more akin to other professional groups and would allow a measure of quality control. One of the issues that the working party will no doubt face is how to

provide for a continuity between pre-service and in-service training, so that newly acquired skills and knowledge can be consolidated in practice.

~~And to the 80 positions to be filled from the beginning of 1986.~~

I want to return briefly to staffing. There is a question I want to ask: What are you going to do with the extra teacher? Will they merely lower the staff/child ratio? Will the programme alter markedly? Will children with special needs receive more individual attention? Will it enable teachers to make closer contacts with the families they serve? You'll remember the old adage two's company, three's a crowd. I hope that you will take the opportunity to consider other forms of organisation, of delegations, of divisions of labour in 3 teacher kindergartens.

You will have seen the television ads encouraging people to enter teaching as a career. With an expanding service it is likely there will need to be some increase in the quota of Division E trainees - but we're also going to be in the business of re-recruiting teachers from the community pool. The service can only be sustained and new positions filled by attracting qualified teachers back to the service. And I hope that individual associations will be able to assist in this

re-recruitment drive. Resources will be made available to individual associations, particularly to those which have newly created positions in their areas, to allow them to advertise for teachers. In other words the re-recruitment campaign will be targetted to areas where there are vacant positions. I know that you'll assist in this drive.

I'd like to change tack now and talk about relationships. I'd like to talk about them in the context of your standing as voluntary, independent, autonomous community-based bodies.

Government respects and is desirous of preserving your autonomy. You have the right to be self-managing, to control your own association and union affairs, and to make your own decisions as far as possible within the context of national interests. However in the exercise of that autonomy there is a need to have some regard for the public interest, for the public good. Taxpayers foot the bill for kindergarten sites, for 80% of kindergarten buildings, and 100% of teachers salaries. Their broad interests must be borne in mind as you administer kindergartens for you are the custodians of a considerable public investment.

The state is bound to guard the public interest and this it does through the advice and support given to kindergarten associations and kindergarten teachers by education officers early childhood education. They are my eyes and ears and I value their advice - as I know you do.

But the state is also bound to have regard for the equitable allocation and distribution of resources. It is bound to pursue a policy of equality of educational opportunity, of a fair allocation of resources, of equity of access, and a co-ordination of services to prevent unnecessary and uneconomic duplication.

That's why I've concerned myself with Te Kohanga Reo, with the childcare services, and with other groups moving into the mainstream of early childhood care and education. They need a place. They deserve a place. I see a role for you as senior partners in the early childhood world in developing sound working relationships with them, in allowing them to benefit from your wisdom and expertise.

I would like to touch upon the matter of legislation. Not long after assuming office it became clear to me that my department was working from an unsatisfactory legislative base. The first indication of this was a serious backlog in the making of needed regulations. More importantly, it also

became apparent that the Education Act itself is long overdue for a thorough overhaul so that it can properly reflect the present day needs of New Zealand's education system. The Act dates back to 1877, has been subject to major revisions in 1914 and 1964, and to many other amendments in the last 108 years. I have concluded that it is due for a major overhaul and have asked officers of my department to prepare for me a revised Education Act which will update and reorganise the present statute to produce a more effective and coherent piece of legislation. They are being assisted in this task by Mr A H Angelo, Reader in Law at Victoria University. Consideration will be given to the feasibility of incorporating within the Education Act other legislation in the education portfolio. Specifically, now that the integration process is virtually complete there is merit in making the present Private Schools Conditional Integration Act an integral part of the Education Act. This is an issue which was raised at the Integration Conference and I chaired last year. Another concern is to reduce the need for the very extensive regulatory framework which the present Act requires.

A basic assumption of the revision is that the present organisational structure of the education system will remain unchanged. Departmental officers will be consulting with appropriate interest groups in the course of their work on the revision. They plan to report to me on this exercise about the end of 1986.

Could I say one last thing, and that's about the Forum on Early Childhood Care and Education that I'll be hosting and chairing in the Legislative Chamber of Parliament Buildings on 4 and 5 December this year. Your Union has been invited and will have a valuable contribution to make along with the 100 or so representatives.

My objectives for the forum are several.

I want to provide an occasion to draw media and public attention to the importance that this Government attaches to early childhood care and education.

I want to provide a vehicle for all the groups associated with the provision of early childhood services to join together to identify gaps in policy, in provision, and in those areas needing increased commitment.

I want us all to discuss ways and means of improving the status of early childhood care and education and of those working in the sector.

I want your help to devise a better framework for future co-ordination.

I want to identify possible means of ensuring greater equity of access and quality of provision.

And I want to reiterate that early childhood services exist to support parents who are the first and most important educators of young children.

But I can't do it alone. I need your help and guidance. Together we could make the forum a milestone in the development of early childhood care and education in New Zealand.

I extend my best wishes to you for a most successful conference.