



## **Labour Party, Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand and Te Pāti Māori – Early Childhood Education (ECE) Public Hearings report, November 2024**

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On 25<sup>th</sup> July 2024, Labour Party, the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand and Te Pāti Māori announced a united front against the Government's review of the early childhood education (ECE) sector. The Government's changes to the sector were, and still are, rushed and ideologically motivated, targeting not improved outcomes for tamariki but increased profits for stakeholders. Together, the opposition parties and NZEI Te Riu Roa held public hearings across the motu to discuss these changes and the risks they pose. Beyond this, we also wanted to hear from the sector what changes do have to be made to ensure that our kaiako and tamariki can thrive.

The three Parties would like to take this opportunity to thank NZEI Te Riu Roa union members, parents, whānau, and community members who came to public hearings to have your voices heard. So much was gained from hearing your lived experiences, especially those of kaiako / teachers and kaimahi / workforce across the motu. You have our gratitude for all that you do every day, with grace and dignity, often under immense pressure, to put the needs of our youngest ākonga / learners first. This report outlines the main themes we heard repeated at every meeting and suggests actions that any government with the wellbeing of children in mind can take to allow the sector to do what it does best – help our children take their first steps along their educational journey. What is clear is that Aotearoa should be a country with a world leading early childhood sector, to match our world leading curriculum Te Whāriki. But there is much to be done to achieve this.

What is also clear is that there are two competing visions for early childhood in Aotearoa at the moment. This report, and the feedback throughout the process, shows that what the majority want is a sector upholding the highest quality, in which tamariki can thrive.

We have split this report into three overall themes: tamariki, teaching conditions, and policy settings. A set of recommendations is outlined at the end of each section. These recommendations are intended to help guide the Parties on their future policy work and review of the Early Learning Action Plan (ELAP).

### **Tamariki – what we heard.**

The single greatest concern that we heard up and down the motu was for ECE centres to be safe places for our tamariki to thrive and grow. It is clear that any and all future developments in this space need to have our children in mind in order to enjoy the support of concerned whānau and practitioners. With this in mind, a number of key themes emerged regarding how early childhood education centres should best serve our children both now and in the future.

*a. Prioritising the needs of tamariki Māori.*

Ensuring tamariki Māori can thrive requires investing in Reo Māori education in all communities. Linked to this is prioritising training and development for kaimahi Māori for Puna Reo, Kōhanga Reo, and all Reo Māori immersion services.

*b. Health and safety of children.*

First and foremost, the health and safety of children in ECE centres should be the primary concern and focus of every organisation. Health and safety is the foundational block required to build a strong ECE sector where our children can thrive. However, rampant de-regulation and reduction of governmental oversight are sure ways to make ECE centres less safe for our children. Concerns for safety were strongly linked to numbers of qualified staff, therefore a strong workforce plan is needed to attract and retain teachers to the sector.

*c. Need for additional Learning Support.*

Children have a diverse set of needs, not all of which are easily serviceable with limited resources and staff. For our children to thrive, their needs must be met – and no child deserves to be left behind because of a lack of resourcing. As we strive to create an education system that is more inclusive of everyone's needs – and against a backdrop of conditions such as various kinds of neurodiversity being detected earlier than ever – adequately resourcing and expanding Learning Support is a key component to ensure that every child can thrive.

*d. Culturally responsive services.*

Aotearoa New Zealand has the blessing of being incredibly culturally diverse. With this diversity comes the necessity of ensuring that our tamariki do not get separated from their culture, especially during their first steps into formal education. Ensuring culturally responsive services are available: for example, an early adoption of Te Reo Māori and Te Ao Māori. It is up to each local community and ECE centre to decide how to most appropriately engage with culturally responsive practices, and it will highly depend on the tamariki themselves, but central government has a role and responsibility in ensuring that adequate resources are available to help all ECE centres be as culturally responsive as possible, and to ensure specific community needs such as those of migrant communities are prioritised.

*e. Child-centred approach.*

All future policy decisions made in the ECE space must be done through a child-centred lens. There is no room for ideological experimentation, such as with reckless loosening of so-called red tape, appeals to the whims of an unregulated free-market, or any other policy decisions that prioritise stakeholder pockets over the wellbeing of our children. All changes, decisions and plans for the ECE sector have to be done with the wellbeing of our children in mind.

*f. Community at the heart of education.*

In order to ensure that the ECE sector is culturally responsive and child-centric, community engagement is a key component. It is the community – whānau, guardians, friends and leaders – who are most in tune with the needs of their tamariki in a way that is more difficult to ascertain from afar. The community has a vital role in advising what cultural practices, for example, are most appropriate. Community, parent, and teacher governance and ownership models are best placed to deliver such culturally responsive services and need greater support.

### *Recommendations.*

The purpose of the ECE sector, ultimately, is to set up our children to thrive in education and throughout their lives. It is to give them the best possible start. This isn't achievable without an ECE sector that is child-centric, community driven, and culturally responsive. With this in mind, we put forward the following recommendations:

- Prioritise the needs of tamariki Māori by ensuring communities can access appropriate Te Reo Māori based services in all areas, such as having well-resourced and hapū and iwi-based services.
- Ensure the policy settings for ECE prioritise commitment to structural indicators of quality, such as qualified kaiako, curriculum implementation and working conditions, and are supported with regulatory settings that prioritise health and safety for tamariki.
- Adequately fund and expand access to learning support in ECE centres for all tamariki.
- Ensure ECE centres are culturally responsive, for example by increasing incorporation of Te Reo Māori and Te Ao Māori, and by adequately funding services which support specific communities such as Pasifika and new migrant communities.
- Ensure all future changes and decision to ECE are made via a child-centric lens.
- Collaborate with local communities to guide decision making and prioritise models which support governance and ownership at the community level.
- Develop outreach programmes to better inform whānau, particularly Māori, Pasifika, and migrants, about changes in ECE regulations and their implications.

### **Teaching conditions.**

The success and sustainability of the ECE sector depends on those on the front line: the teachers. It is the teachers who put theory into practice, and who guide our tamariki as they take their first steps on their long educational journey. It is therefore paramount that we ensure that the needs of teachers are met, so that they may thrive and our children thrive in turn. This will improve teacher retention, job satisfaction, content delivery and, ultimately, both the happiness and wellbeing of providers and tamariki.

### *Employment conditions.*

Kaiako have the right to enjoy their mahi in good working conditions. The work they do is challenging enough without having to deal with poor employment conditions – whether that be issues related to their place of work, unfair expectations that breach their rights to fair employment, respect of their assigned work hours, of the leave they are entitled to, and reimbursement for costs incurred by their mahi.

Employment conditions for kaiako need to both be improved and protected. However, the current drive to deregulate the sector threatens both these aims. Less regulation means less protection, less protection means worse employment conditions.

### *Pay.*

Currently, the entry level salary for an ECE teacher entering the workforce in a licensed Education and Care centre, and who holds a practising certificate is around \$57,358 a year. If their career progresses to the stage of becoming a head teacher, or centre manager, this will rise to \$85,457. When one considers the myriad of conditions that ECE teachers face, such as

issues with varying levels of employment conditions, minimal or reduced non-contact time, or even hours and hours of unpaid work, it becomes clear that the pay that ECE teachers receive is not necessarily a fair reflection of the efforts they put into their mahi.

Nor has pay necessarily kept up with the times. The current pay is still below the rate of inflation and does not take into account the average rises in rent, groceries, and other associated cost of living expenses. More needs to be done, given ECE teacher pay hasn't risen at an adequate pace and hasn't taken into account the working conditions that ECE teachers operate in, to ensure that the pay of those who work in the ECE sector is a fairer reflection of their mahi. Steps towards deregulation cannot possibly hope to achieve this. The commitment to pay parity for teachers in early childhood, with teachers in other settings such as primary and secondary schools is paramount. Recent moves to cut pay to relievers and fixed term teachers undermines the principle of pay parity and must be reversed.

#### *Non-contact time.*

The responsibilities of ECE professionals extends beyond the already great work they do with children directly. Educational, nourishing, instructive and fun days at the ECE centre do not happen spontaneously. They take meticulous planning and work. Time away from tamariki is also vital for assessing, communicating with parents and whānau, and a myriad of other responsibilities.

Kaiako should be entitled to dedicated non-contact time. Unfortunately too often, kaiako are having to work unpaid hours, or beyond their scheduled work hours, to do this vital mahi. This has knock on effects on job satisfaction, but also on exhaustion and wellbeing. It is in everyone's interest, not least our tamariki, for kaiako to get the time within normal work hours to do this important non-contact work.

It is therefore vital that the non-contact time that kaiako are entitled to is respected in practice, not just in theory. Suggested deregulation of the sector is antithetical to this principle.

#### *Adult to child ratios.*

Improving teacher to child ratios came through as a priority concern in the sector. This is because adult to child ratios determine whether or not quality education can be delivered. Alongside ensuring teaching is a valued profession which can attract and retain staff, a long-term workforce strategy with milestones is required to ensure we can build the workforce to implement lower qualified teacher to child ratios.

#### *Compliance with employment legislation.*

Put simply, employment legislation exists to ensure that the rights of kaiako to fair remuneration, hours of work, refreshment breaks and satisfactory work conditions are upheld. They are not guidelines, but obligations. However, too often we have heard, throughout the hui we held, stories from ECE professionals across the motu about having to endure breaches of their rights as outlined in employment legislation. This has led to a huge variability of standards and conditions that kaiako operate in and has negatively impacted on their ability to deliver their mahi.

It is vital, for the wellbeing of kaiako and tamariki, for the maintaining of high standards regarding working conditions, and for what whānau can expect from ECE centres, that employment legislation be fully and consistently implemented to protect the rights of kaiako.

Once again, this key responsibility is not achievable with a drive to unwind the very regulations that exist to protect ECE professionals and the children they are responsible for.

### *Recommendations.*

In light of the importance of teaching conditions for both kaiako and tamariki, and as a result of our hui up and down the motu, we recommend:

- Improve adult to child ratios in the sector.
- Regulate for 80% minimum qualified certificated kaiako.
- Increase the size of the ECE workforce, and ensure that teachers from diverse backgrounds, such as Māori, Pasifika, and migrants, are well-supported throughout their training.
- Continue funding and the recognition of centres with high levels of qualified teachers, and the removal of financial disincentives to hiring experienced staff.
- Ensure that the working conditions for kaiako are both further protected and improved upon.
- Increase the pay of those who work in the sector and update these regularly to reflect the mahi they do and the economic conditions in which they live.
- Restore and maintain pay parity.
- Ensure and enshrining kaiako right to non-contact time *within* their work hours.
- Develop a long-term workforce strategy that includes professional development opportunities and clear career progression pathways.
- Develop targeted professional development programmes to build cultural competence among all ECE teachers, ensuring that centres can adequately support tamariki from diverse backgrounds.
- Increase worker education about employment rights.
- Increase compliance with employment legislation and adopt a no-tolerance approach for non-compliance.

### **Policy settings.**

The ECE sector alone cannot unilaterally act to improve working conditions and outcomes for its kaiako and tamariki. Central government retains a vital role to play in ensuring the policy settings that govern the ECE sector are fit for purpose and maximise outcomes and wellbeing. With this in mind, central government must ensure that certain key non-negotiables are enshrined in legislation to give our tamariki the best start possible, through ECE, to their educational journey.

### *Public good.*

Given the importance of the first steps children take into education, the ECE sector is clearly a public good. It should be treated as such, and not as a commercial opportunity to generate profit at the expense of education and wellbeing. The purpose of ECE should never lose sight of the role it plays in the lives of children – the introduction of overly pervasive financial incentives threatens this. It is therefore paramount that we turn the tide on privatisation in the sector and enable greater public provision of ECE.

De-regulation invariably means privatisation. The current push to deregulate the sector therefore clearly threatens the very purpose of ECE. This deregulation therefore must be stopped to ensure that the sector remains at the service of tamariki, their whānau and kaiako and not at the service of stakeholders and their profit margins.

#### *Regulation.*

Regulation is the tool that central government can use to protect the ECE sector. It can address the pervasive influence of privatisation, provide mechanisms to resolve disputes when they arise, heighten standards and lessen their variability. It can also ensure that the sector never loses sight of its primary purpose and the tamariki whose lives and wellbeing are at stake in ECE settings every day.

Those who advocate for less regulation argue that it improves flexibility and innovation. However, they fail to mention the impact of deregulation on standards, working conditions and incentives. The ECE sector is a public good – regulation ensures it stays that way.

#### *Variability of standards.*

As repeatedly mentioned throughout this report, one issue that kaiako and ECE providers face is the variability of standards – whether this be in working conditions, learning environments, or other factors. It is vital, for the wellbeing of both kaiako and tamariki, to ensure that standards are both raised and maintained so that all those involved can have minimum expectations of what support and instruction they will receive.

Deregulation, by definition, means an increased variability of standards. It increases the volatility of the sector and invariably means that kaiako and tamariki will be exposed to unacceptable standards regarding teaching and working conditions.

#### *Ensuring fair and adequate funding.*

One issue that was recurrent throughout our hui was the complicated nature of funding, or funding rules which sometimes create perverse disincentives. Successive government policies and “freeze” on ECE funding rates, particularly from 2008 to 2017, mean that rates are well below what is needed. Too often, this leads to cost cutting, which affects delivery. The funding model clearly requires a change, so that ECE centres don’t have to implement cost cutting measures and can thus return to what they want to do – putting children ahead of profit.

#### *Recommendations.*

There is a clear role that central government must play to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi and to ensure ECE centres, and those they serve, can thrive. As such, we recommend:

- Recognise ECE as a public good, and governments commit to developing and shifting towards secure, public provision of ECE.
- Recognise the unique status and autonomy of Kōhanga Reo and Puna Reo, and the importance of Kaupapa Māori services.
- Ensure the regulatory settings that govern the ECE sector are centred on the voices and experience of kaiako and tamariki.
- Streamline the funding model for ECE to reduce confusion and improve accessibility to allow services to focus on what they do best.

- Explore options and opportunities for improvement on school improvements on whole-of-system solutions that promote cohesive communities of learning across sectors.
- Review and update the Early Learning Action Plan (ELAP).
- Maintain and promote Te Whāriki - Early childhood curriculum.
- Recognise the significance and status of parent led ECE services within the provision of the Early Childhood network.
- Ensure that Pasifika ECE centres are well-resourced to support the provision of services for families who struggle to afford childcare.
- Improve transparency and accountability for the use of public funding across all early learning services.
- Envisage ECE centres as community hubs that could support and assist whānau on a variety of issues.

### **Concluding remarks.**

The current Government's actions are clearly a threat to the wellbeing of the ECE sector as a whole, and subsequently its kaiako, tamariki and their whānau. As opposition Parties, we are united in our desire to improve the sector, so it is a place where its main aims are the wellbeing and flourishing of those it serves – rather than for profit. We have heard the concerns of the sector up and down the motu, and we are committed to being their advocates in politics both locally and in Parliament. Deregulation, in particular, threatens the sector. Alongside the latest [Kōriporipo report](#), our efforts to hear those it affects has already beaten the Government's measly six-week consultation process. This is, however, only the beginning. A long road ahead awaits us all.

### **Full list of recommendations.**

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