

Meeting the needs of families in small rural communities– Integrating pre-prep and prep provision

CEP is strongly supportive of the Government's pre-prep initiatives to provide 1800 hours of free 3 and 4 year kinder to all children. CEP understands the VSBA policy of constructing new early years facilities on state school sites in towns and regional centres across Victoria is necessary to accommodate the growth the initiative requires.

However, the one-size-fits-all approach of the VSBA fails to recognise the diversity of schooling provision in rural Victoria, the challenge of distance and travel and consequently the needs of local families and communities.

Small government schools in small towns or serving hamlets around regional centres lack the critical mass to require a dedicated kinder facility. Families of children who live in these communities and will enrol at these schools will now need to travel beyond their locality to fully access the 1800 hours of pre-prep provision.

The current approach presents few good options for these families. For some, the travel demands will be too great and often inhibit their children from attending kindergarten. For others, with school-age siblings, this will be exacerbated by the inconvenience of multiple drop-offs and pick-ups.

Some parents will choose to transfer their children from the local school to the larger school with the co-located early learning but in doing so they remove the entire family from their local community. This will be at a significant cost to their local community. They will inevitably, not be eligible for access to a school bus or a conveyance allowance.

CEP would like to see a more diverse set of Department models for provision, and in particular a model which allows for the integration of pre-prep and prep programs within small schools. In this model prep and pre-prep would be combined within a single room supported by a dual qualified teacher.

Much is made of the benefits of colocation of school and kinder and it is recognised as a necessary condition for streamlining the transition, learning and development process from pre-prep to school. However, it is not sufficient in itself and sadly there are many examples where co-located early learning services and schools work in isolation from each other.

In a small school with integrated provision, isolation is not an option, transition is not an issue, continuity of learning is inbuilt, and the efforts of the schools and the teachers can be fully focussed on meeting the learning and development needs of each child, tracking every child effectively along with designing and implementing interventions to support progress.

For parents with multiple children attending primary school and kinder it is more convenient; done well, it is a superior model to that being implemented across Victoria.

CEP would like to see

1. In principle, support from the Government and the Department for an integrated model in small schools

2. Promotion of the model through the Area-based workforces of the Department both school, early childhood and Quality Assessment and Regulation Division .
3. Identification of potential sites through the provision planning processes of the VSBA, which includes effective consultation with local communities and local government
4. The development of a facilities program to enable schools to refit prep rooms and play spaces to ensure they are fit for purpose and comply with the Education and Care Service National Law and Regulations
5. Practical support for the establishment of these programs through the Area workforces
6. Support for existing teachers to achieve dual-qualified (Early Childhood/Primary) status through Department engagement with University qualification providers and the provision of study leave and scholarships to support growth in the number of dual-qualified teachers

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