

Let me briefly outline my situation. My 5 year old commences school in 2014 and is currently attending a Qld Government Kindy program operated by an approved childcare centre. Our centre closes for 2 weeks over Christmas. We were recently notified that our centre will not be offering care for the children heading to school in 2014 for the month of January 2014, leaving approximately 40 families without care for their 4 and 5 year olds heading off to school for a period of approximately 5 weeks. Speaking to other parents this is a common industry practice.

After speaking with the Director of my service, I have been told that legally for the month of January they have to deliver a special program for all the children who return to the service for 3 or 4 weeks then head off to school in the last week of January. They have to make a choice whether to run the program and enrol this group of children for a short period of time or turn their families away. In our particular centre's case the staff member that has delivered this program for the past two years has found alternative employment for 2014 and the centre currently doesn't have anyone who can deliver this program and hence they have had to turn children away. Also the centre has decided to make a business decision to fill vacancies from 6 January 2014 with children who will attend the service for a full year rather than having to readvertise vacancies in late January.

Legally, I can enrol my child in vacation care for the month of January 2014, however most services choose not to enrol children transitioning from childcare to school as they have a behaviour management policy the children are unable to meet; as a result these very young children are normally sent home to their parents before lunchtime each day and it isn't a practical solution for parents who need care because of work and study commitments. The vacation care providers keep saying that it's not in the best interests of the child transitioning from childcare to school to be cared for in that environment.

On another issue, there are three providers that supply outside school hours care to the school my son will be attending. One centre is closing at the end of the year and another is in receivership and also will not continue in 2014. At this stage it is not known who, if anyone will take over the operation of these services.

My main concern is that firstly my child receives continuity of care when transitioning from childcare to school. Childcare services generally have a legislated priority system when it comes to offering children places at their service with children at risk being given first priority, followed by children of single parents and children of intact families who have both parents either working or studying and the lowest priority being children with one parent who has home duties only. There is an obvious loophole here that leaves families without care for several weeks. Parents in particular who are working can use up all of their leave entitlements caring for their child because a centre chooses not to provide care for those going to school. For single parents it can be fairly dire as not attending work for 5 - 6 weeks can not only result in the household budget being significantly strained, often their job is no longer there when they are able to return to work.

The second concern that I have is the availability of childcare places. It is my understanding that currently childcare centres pay private businesses to support them and provide expert advice on meeting government regulation. My centre on the Gold Coast employs a service located in Toowoomba nearly 2 hours away. Centres need to be supported by the government agencies setting the rules. I believe that some of the centres falling through the cracks and closing are doing so because they haven't had the access to services such as Centre Support provide ongoing assistance in the operation of their business. This service needs to be affordable, free or low cost and mandatory.