

Submission on the state of rural kindergarten services

Introduction

Over the past two years across Victoria, kindergarten services, local governments and cluster managers have been addressing and meeting the challenges of implementing a 15 hour program.

There are some challenges that have been commonly faced however many unique problems have arisen, with innovative and creative approaches being considered and implemented across the state.

This submission is made to highlight the challenges faced by isolated, rural kindergartens in the Loddon Mallee region. A number of municipalities across this region chose to pool their initial change management funding and have taken a broad strategic approach to the Universal Access changes occurring. This has afforded an opportunity to consider regional issues, gather data on a wider, more statistically valid basis, as well as considering kindergarten service specific issues.

Small rural communities of the region

Many of the kindergarten services within this region support small rural communities that are often characterised in the following way;

- small and often dwindling populations
- areas of relative disadvantage
- small and unstable populations in the 0-4 age group that are reducing over time
- Ageing communities
- Isolated community services that provide for very large geographical catchments
- Often very isolated from other major population centres in the region

How are kindergarten services affected?

These characteristics have a direct impact on kindergarten service delivery that provide significant challenges for small rural communities. These challenges are explained further below.

1. Small and unstable populations in the 0-4 age group

One of the key issues facing many of these small rural communities is the increasingly small and unstable population of 0-4 year olds.

This impacts the sustainability of kindergarten services given that numbers of children may fluctuate and put additional strain on fundraising committees or cluster managers to cover costs. Given the numbers of children are very low to begin with (e.g. Wycheproof are looking at 7 enrolments for 2014 and this is not uncommon), the loss of even 1 child can result in an estimated additional funding gap of \$5,000-\$7,000.

At present this gap is being generally covered through significant fundraising efforts or retained profits however the capacity of some townships to continue this approach is questionable.

Ultimately some kindergartens may need to close however, a more flexible and updated small rural funding model may be advantageous in assisting with the short term fluctuations that have been experienced.

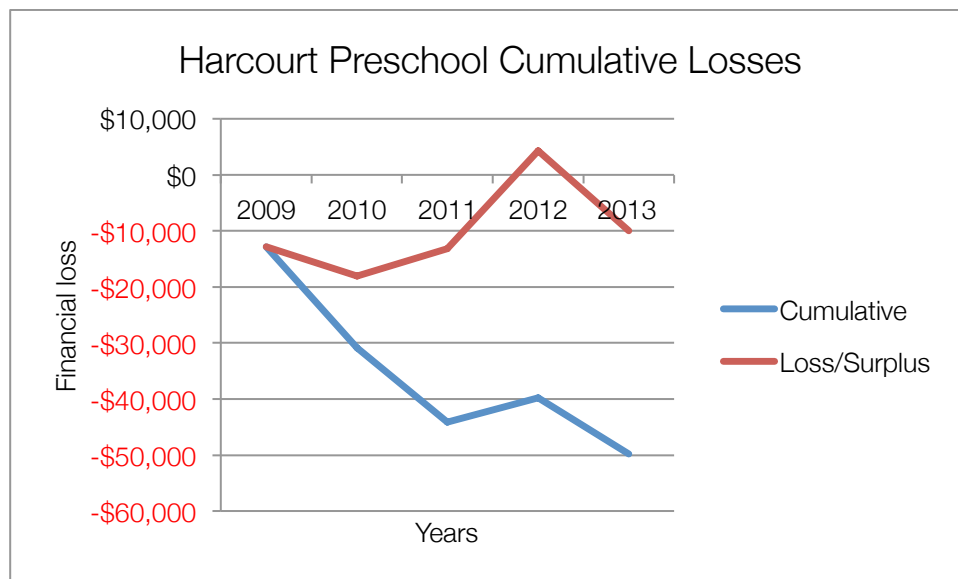
An example of this approach is provided, with some general operating figures and enrolments from Harcourt Preschool (Mount Alexander Shire). These figures include any small rural funding that was received.

Harcourt Preschool	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Funded Program	7	14	14	22	10
Pre-Kindergarten	4	20	17	8	11
End of Year Loss/Surplus	-\$12772	-\$18050	-\$13221	4266	-\$10000

Thus, over a period of five years, Harcourt Preschool has had to raise \$49,777 in funds to cover operational costs of staff, maintenance and equipment replacement. This has resulted in a dwindling balance of funds and significant pressure on a small number of families to raise funds.

As numbers decrease, more pressure is put on fewer families to raise funds to ensure a kindergarten service is provided.

Generally the retained funds accumulated in previous years by some of these kindergarten services is dwindling to unsustainable levels, providing less capacity to absorb losses as enrolment numbers fluctuate over time (see graph below).



2. Isolated services that provide for very large geographical catchments

Many of the small rural communities are not near larger population centres and are often surrounded by similar communities struggling with issues of viability and sustainability. This provides some indication that any population growth is remote from these rural communities and there is not an expectation that population growth will occur in or near these townships as major population centres expand.

Staffing remote locations also remains an ongoing challenge due to the geographic isolation and lack of proximity to larger population centres (although these larger centres also have their issues with staffing levels). Choice in the selection of staff is limited and this *can* have an impact on both quality and cost of service delivery. For example, graduate entry staff can usually be employed at a lower operational cost but may require development, training and mentoring which can increase costs to cluster managers. More experienced staff are more capable of working effectively with more limited support however there is usually a higher wage implication. Often, services are not left with any choice over staff and simply have to change budgets to suit who they can employ, rather than employ to a budget.

Provision of support staff or emergency staff is also difficult in these remote rural areas.

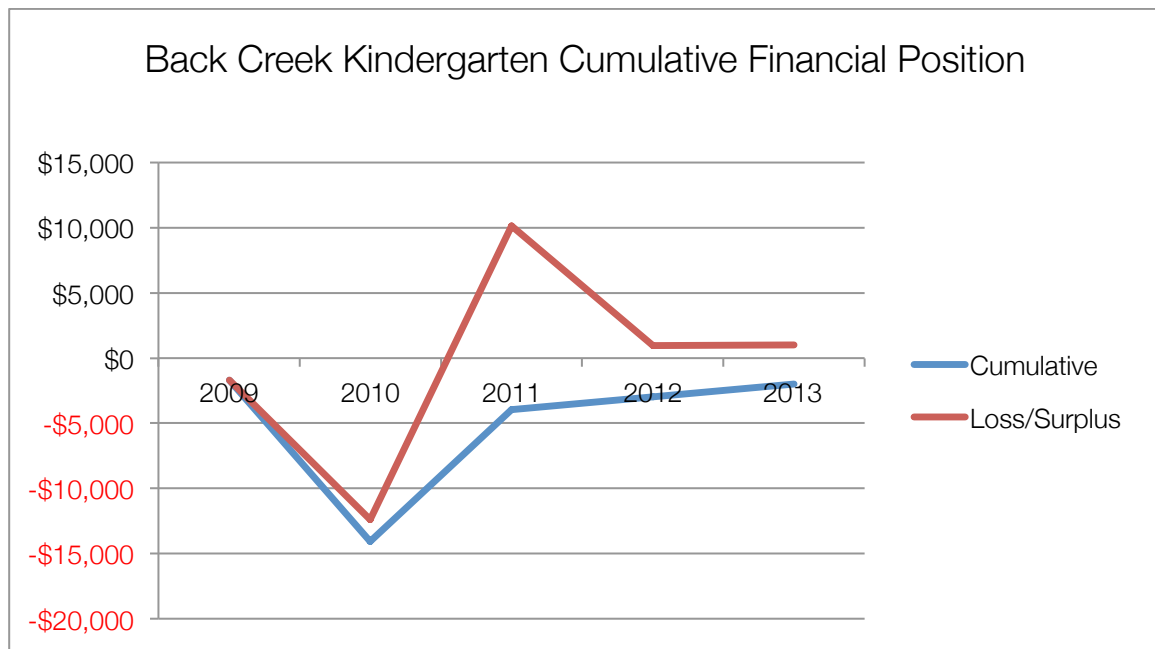
3. Reduced services to reduce budget losses

Although the shift to 15 hours of kindergarten has occurred across the state, with most services successfully transitioning to this approach, some small rural centres are finding it increasingly difficult to deliver this and are considering or have implemented reduced hours to provide a more viable service.

This shift has been brought about by the reality that after retained funds are gone and fundraising is not effectively meeting the gap, a reduced service is the only option to consider in delivering a viable service. Several communities are reaching an understanding that *some* service is better than the alternative of closure. This shift has often taken several years to achieve with communities and has often only been realised once funds are exhausted. Cluster managers and local governments are working hard to ensure that some level of innovation and flexibility in service delivery is implemented to ensure sustainability and operational viability.

Back Creek Kindergarten (Central Goldfields Shire) is an example of this situation where reduced hours have resulted in a lowering of financial subsidy required (although figures provided still take into account small rural funding).

Back Creek Kindergarten	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Program	7	7	12	9	8
Pre-Kindergarten	3	5	6	4	0
End of Year Loss/Surplus	-\$1678	-\$12400	\$10142	\$957	\$1000



This situation is not ideal, as it is not necessarily reflective of the principles of the 15-hour program approach to Universal access, however it has provided a sustainable service for Back Creek kindergarten reducing an unachievable financial burden on both the kinder service and community fundraising.

4. Small rural kindergartens and additional costs

As with any kindergarten, various cost fluctuations occur over time because of the need to cover staff costs, equipment replacement, maintenance etc.

Small rural kindergartens are often in a position of recording significant losses based on their need to replace equipment or cover extra staff costs such as teacher replacement, leave entitlements etc. Even in cases where enrolments have been maintained or in fact increased in the short term, losses can still be experienced based on these other isolated cost factors.

None of these situations relate to “upgrades” or “additions” or any extravagant purchases, but focus on basics such as,

- replacement of items that are worn out, no longer compliant or represent a risk,
- staff entitlements, higher wage scale or unexpected staff requirements, and
- separation of pre kinder children from four year old program due to numbers

Birchip Preschool provides an example of these basic operational items can shift budgets from small surplus to significant losses very rapidly.

Birchip Preschool	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Funded Program	11	11	17	17	16
Pre-Kindergarten	0	18	16	14	18
End of Year Loss/Surplus	-\$2026	-\$10173	\$2500	-\$11623	-\$14000

5. Small Rural Funding “Per Capita” is not the whole story.

At present the small rural per capita funding provides around \$5,700 per child, which is extremely valued and absolutely required in order to deliver a service that is more viable.

However, the per capita approach alone makes the fluctuations that occur in 0-4 populations a significant factor in ongoing sustainability.

A recent financial modelling exercise undertaken for Wycheproof Kindergarten provides an example of the fluctuations that can occur in losses when only 1 or 2 children are lost from a program (see below).

Kindergarten Program based on:

- Kindergarten Program operates 9-2
- No Long Day Care
- No Service during school holidays
- Based on 7 kindergarten children

INCOME

Kindergarten Funding	40,000
Kindergarten Fees	7,000
Small Rural Grant	18,000
Total Income	65,000

EXPENSE

Administration Expenses	4,100
Operations Expenses	7,800
Staffing	56,384
Staff costs/Staff Training	14,390
Total Expenses	82,674

Operating Loss 17,674

Kindergarten Program based on:

- Kindergarten Program operates 9-2
- No Long Day Care
- No Service during school holidays
- Based on 5 kindergarten children

INCOME

Kindergarten Funding	28,548
Kindergarten Fees	5,000
Small Rural Grant	20,000
Total Income	53,548

EXPENSE

Administration Expenses	4,100
Operations Expenses	7,800
Staffing	56,384
Staff costs/Staff Training	14,390
Total Expenses	82,674

Operating Loss 29,126

What are some suggested solutions?

There are no simple or “final” solutions to the population decreases and fluctuations that affect the year-to-year viability of small rural kindergarten services. The delivery of these services will require consistent review and monitoring over time. However, there are several key points that we believe are pertinent to any discussion regarding the sustainability of these services.

1. The importance of continuing the Small Rural Funding Scheme

The Small Rural Funding Scheme has been instrumental in ensuring that the variation in numbers of four year olds within small populations does not result in service closures. The funding scheme has assisted in ‘closing the gap’ with regard to losses for small rural kindergartens that have seen potential subsidy of service delivery increase following the move to 15 hours and the gradual decrease in four year old populations.

We strongly believe that the scheme should be reviewed in the near future, in conjunction with consideration of some of the other potential solutions listed below. Some suggested improvements to the scheme include:

- a. Further categories for funding to consider the very small rural services that may have extremely low numbers in very low population areas.
Consideration of evidence such as population trends should be incorporated to increase the sophistication of the model, but not the complexity of the model.
- b. More flexibility in how the scheme might be applied and more input from local DEECD staff and cluster managers on what may be required over a 2-3 year period (i.e. a strategic medium term approach) for each service.
- c. Further detailed opportunity to explain where a service is heading in the future and how this may affect sustainability and funding requirements. The aim here is more information for government and possibly more certainty for kindergartens and cluster managers.

This review of the funding scheme could form part of a series of regional strategies, focussed on improving the sustainability of rural and remote kindergarten services.

2. Consideration of mergers for some rural kindergartens

In some cases, where two (or more) non-viable services exist, it may be feasible to consider a merging or partnership between services, to increase overall numbers and create savings with lower staff requirements. This has successfully occurred in the case of Nangiloc and Red Cliffs kindergarten services where the two kindergartens have undertaken a two-step process. This process includes the following key milestones;

- a. The two kindergartens moved from running separate services to running a combined group of four year olds from two campuses.
- b. The two groups are now successfully moving toward a combined service managed under a single budget by the YMCA as cluster manager.
- c. It should also be noted that, as both campuses are still actively used, under two existing licences, state government continues to provide separate funding for the two services, with an acknowledgement and understanding that the two services are operated as a coordinated program that is delivering a more viable and sustainable service for these communities.

The process at these two centres has taken 4-5 years to complete and has been driven by the cluster managers, community and local government. We believe there may be also be a role for State Government in strategically considering where such mergers may be feasible to consider, and effectively encouraging groups to consider this option, where viable.

3. Combining of services and flexibility in how this approach meets requirements

The combining of LDC and kindergarten services has, in some cases, reduced losses in combined services. This approach has also created a new paradigm, involving some cluster managers in the business of long day care. A number of models have been actioned including combined kinder and long day care as well as kinder and long day care on different or alternate days, in order to increase income and reduce losses.

Often, this model has been developed with community and cluster managers, with some input from DEECD staff. The model that is being trialled this year in Wycheproof is a good example of this.

This type of innovation within the industry is to be applauded, however the requirements to provide LDC for 5 days per week in order to gain the Child Care

Benefit means that LDC services are either inaccessible for some low income families or potential profits, that could offset operational losses, are reduced.

Flexibility in how the CCB could be applied in these small rural areas could be highly beneficial and would provide a more accessible service for potentially low income, rurally isolated populations. For example, the combining of two LDC services managed by one management group may achieve the 5 days per week requirements and provide CCB savings for users whilst also providing further income to offset overall service losses.

4. Reduction in hours of service, where required

A short term option may also be consideration of a reduction in hours of service as required in order to still provide *some* service to a rural/remote population that is struggling with financial sustainability issues.

Our understanding is that this is currently an option and we would advocate that this be continued given the fact that unsustainable losses are currently occurring in some centres where 15 hours is currently being delivered. Once current savings are diminished or used, a reduction in hours may need to be considered as a short term measure whilst other solutions are considered by local communities.

5. Development of a “sister kindergarten” program within municipalities

Consideration should also be given to linking services in high population centres, where significant surpluses may be generated, to some small rural centres. Annual contributions to offset losses would be the cornerstone of such a program but opportunities to connect staff, programs and classes could develop the program further into an excellent opportunity to connect kindergartens in a range of ways.

Conclusion.

We thank you for the opportunity to present some ideas and provide further clarity regarding some of the complex issues facing the rural communities of the Loddon Mallee region.

As part of our ongoing commitment to consideration of solutions, we are willing to continue being involved in any further review of the Small Rural Funding Scheme and any other strategic work that government may be willing to consider.

As noted at the beginning of this submission, the Loddon Mallee region has pooled some recently received funds and has appointed a Change Management Project Coordinator over several years to assist with managing these types of issues as they arise or are identified. This is a resource that would also be available to assist in providing information to your department.

Universal Access Change Management

Introduction

Welcome to the second Universal Access Change Management Project Update!

Specific activities that have generated the research in this update have included the following;

1. **Workshops** have been conducted with services across most LGA's of the Loddon Mallee region, providing an opportunity for educators, centre managers, cluster managers and Council staff to discuss the challenges they face in delivering 15 hours of kindergarten.
2. **Further interviews**, with specific groups and industry sectors to discuss particular challenges such as rural centre viability, Kindergarten in Long Day Care settings and workforce opportunities
3. **Exploration of specific case studies** regarding the variety of approaches that are being implemented in order to deliver a 15 hour program in a sustainable manner,
4. **Survey distribution** and data input of more than 600 surveys completed by parents, children and teachers.

This has been made possible based on the more than 130 attendees of the LGA workshops and over 600 respondents from the surveys.

This has provided more than 2000 specific comments regarding various aspects of service delivery and perceived quality of services from teachers, parents, cluster managers and even the children involved in the kindergarten programs.

This is a great response and has helped us understand the challenges faced by all of you in a much clearer way. Thank you very much for taking the time to be a part of this response. You've provided really professional feedback, followed through in distributing and collecting surveys from parents and having input in workshops. We've been working over the last few weeks to input and collate some of this data, which has provided some insightful results.

Given the enormous amount of data we now have, we plan to provide a few summary updates over coming weeks, providing various results from surveys and workshops. The next section of this update provides a **summary of results from our Parent and Child surveys**.

Parents see professionals working hard for their children.....

One of the most significant results from engagement of parents is the result regarding the perceived quality of the kindergarten program their children are involved in.

From a series of set statements, parents were asked to choose two that most closely reflected their experience. The responses overwhelmingly highlighted that;

1. My child enjoys kindergarten and is full of stories at the end of each day (44%)
2. I think the kindergarten program my child is receiving is of a very good quality (36%)
3. The program has been helpful and the length of time at kindergarten is suitable (28%)
4. The day long sessions are great as they fit better with a school day/work day (18%)

The next most common comment ("The program has been helpful but sessions are too long") was noted as relevant by just 4 percent of parents. (see graph below)

Congratulations on a job well done.

Parents also made a point of describing specifically, the good work many teachers have done in delivering services with comments such as;

We couldn't be happier with the kinder program and the teacher and assistant are fantastic.

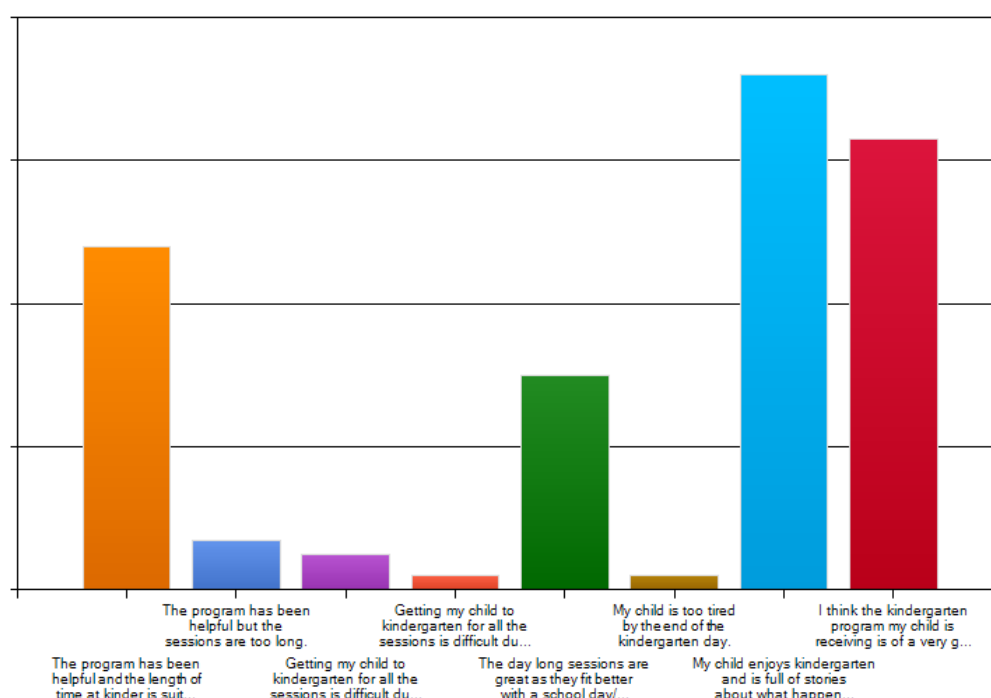
...both Kim and Belinda are really focused on providing Kinder that is relevant to the interests and needs of my child.

I think that the staff do a wonderful job with my child's kinder group.

It's been fantastic for my son and the teachers have been amazing with easing him into the program.

The program is fantastic, our teacher and assistant put in 100%, our kids are so lucky.

With regard to your child's kindergarten program, which TWO comments most closely reflect your experience as a parent?



Parents and children do well with longer sessions.

Although there were exceptions, parents generally considered their program hours to be suitable.

There were a few programs that are still not running 1.5-hour programs due to capacity issues and parents commented that they felt their child may be "missing out" because they are receiving fewer hours.

"My child only attends 2 x 5.5 hour sessions per week, due to limited spaces in the 15 hour program. There should be more spaces available for the 15hr sessions."

Generally, the 5-hour days and 7.5-hour days were well received by parents, with some expressing surprise that their children did quite well with the longer days.

"I was unsure about the 15 hour program at the start of the year but it in fact has been fantastic for my daughter."

"Realising the day is longer than school was a shock. My child copes well."

The main concerns for parents with hours have been regarding the longer 7.5-hour days. Reception to this has been mixed, with most parents still feeling their children benefit from this type of model.

"The two long days really suit our family"

"Personally, I think the day long sessions are better as they fit with a work/school day.."

"The long 7.5 hour days are a little too long, but the centre is flexible and happy for me to pick up at times suitable to my child."

"It is great for working parents and children who have been in full day childcare, my child fit in

easily to the 7.5 hours and absolutely LOVES his 2 kinder days, he can't wait to go."

Indeed, some parents in rural or remote locations indicated that the longer 7.5-hour session would be more suited to their needs given long travel times.

"I think 15 hours is appropriate but I would rather do two long days than 3x5 hour sessions because we travel a long distance to kinder. I would rather do it only twice a week."

"Considering I live out of town and travel 30 kilometres for kinder pick up, would be worth considering 2 longer days so the bus could be used both ways."

Some concerns were raised regarding the varying session times, which is different to the consistent and standardised school day. Some parents found this confusing and difficult to operate with, based on work requirements and other commitments. There was some understanding that the varying times were often to ensure a three-year-old pre-kindergarten program could also be implemented. Generally, parents that were unhappy with times wanted them to coincide more with their work or other school pickup times.

"15 hours is fine, I have no issues with that. Just fitting in around school hours would be great though."

"The finish time at 3:30 is really difficult due to school pick up"

"The session times are difficult for parents who work and have other children at school. The session times don't really mimic a school experience."

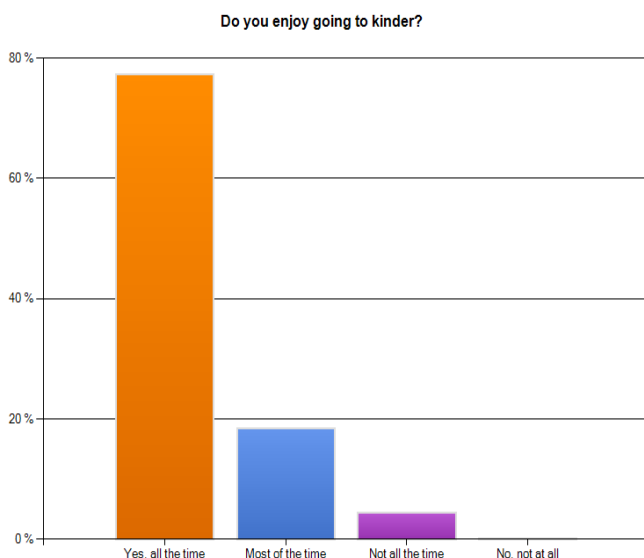
Enjoying kindergarten? A big tick from the children.

Initial results of our parent assisted, child survey indicate that, quite simply, children are enjoying their kindergarten experience all or most of the time.

Coupled with the understanding that 78 percent of responses came from families where children are in either 5-hour or 7.5-hour sessions, there appears to be no correlation between lack of enjoyment of the kindergarten experience and the hours of each session.

28 PERCENT OF ALL CHILD RESPONDENTS INDICATED THEY ATTENDED 7.5 HOUR SESSION PROGRAMS.
95 PERCENT OF THESE CHILDREN INDICATED THAT THEY ENJOYED KINDERGARTEN ALL OR MOST OF THE TIME.

More broadly, this high level of enjoyment was repeated, with 96 percent of all child respondents indicating they enjoyed kindergarten all or most of the time. (see graph below)



The Importance of teachers to children

The child survey also asked what children liked most about kindergarten. This was an open ended question so children could tell their parents whatever they wanted and list as many things as they wanted.

The most common words or phrases used to describe the things children liked about kindergarten were;

1. **Playing** (with friends, outside, pretend, with particular equipment etc.) was noted in 88 percent of responses.
2. **“My teacher”** (either by name or as my teacher) was noted in 71 percent of responses.
3. **Friends** were noted in 70 percent of responses
4. **Particular equipment** was noted in most responses however the specifics varied- it included toys, monkey bars, mini trampolines, swings, sandpit, dinosaurs etc.
5. **Particular activities** were also noted in most responses such as climbing, drawing, painting, stories, learning new things, making houses out of boxes, etc.

These responses would indicate that the structured play environment is being well developed, that teachers are generally having a strong and positive influence on the children and that socialisation with other children and a series of structured activities is an enjoyable experience and learning environment for most children.

The significance of the educators and assistant staff in creating this environment is clearly demonstrated.

What do children NOT like about kindergarten?

The most common specific response to this question was "nothing", with 31 percent of all responses indicating a broadly positive experience.

Again, this question was open ended and children were allowed to provide as many answers as they liked. Other common themes in this section included reflections on;

Lack of social connection

"Kids who don't let me play"

"When friends say go away"

"Some of the other children"

"Friends sometimes being mean to me"

Behaviour of other children

"I don't like boys when they are loud"

"I don't like naughty people"

"Just one specific boy"

"Kids being rough"

"Noisy kids who won't listen"

"The boys fighting"

Specific events or activities

"Packing up time"

"Dinosaurs"

"Naughty people putting stuff in my face"

"A boy was nasty to me and threw rocks in my hair"

Length of sessions (both too short and too long)

"I want to go every day"

"Having to wake up so early to get to kinder"

"Too long- I need a sleep on the long day"

"I don't like how long kinder goes for"

"I don't like going home"

"Waiting so long before it finishes after the boys finish school"

There were several other comments added by parents, which, although the survey was designed for children's responses, are worth noting. These were singular comments that mainly focussed on programming and included;

"The lack of artwork in the kindergarten and the slow replacement of items, lack of diversity in art activities"

"Limited variation in indoor activities"

Open learning!! The kids just do whatever they like with very little guidance.

"I was disappointed my child's group did not do a Mothers Day morning tea"

"Not enough teachers compared to the number of kids"

What words describe how children feel?

We wanted to drill into how children feel at the end of kindergarten a little more to understand the impact of a 15 hour program from a child's perspective. This, of course, is a very subjective and difficult task, given the interpretation of words can be both negative and positive in different contexts. Children were given two prompting words- tired and excited, as well as being provided with an open ended opportunity to provide any other word.

"Tired" was most commonly chosen with 59 percent of all responses whilst "Excited" was also chosen 54 percent of the time. Other words such as "Happy" and "Good" were also commonly used, indicating that children may have been tired but not exhausted or overwhelmed by their day. The additional words or phrases provided were overwhelmingly positive and included"

"Sad to leave my friends"

"Happy after a good time"

"It's so much fun"

"Definitely both. Always eager to go back"

"I'm tired and happy"

"I never want to leave kinder"

The word map below provides an overall view of all the "other" words that were used to describe how children feel about kindergarten. The larger the word, the more commonly it was used. The prompting words of tired and excited have been removed given these were the most commonly ticked. If they were added in the open-ended section they are included.



Concluding remarks

Generally, the responses from both parents and children have been overwhelmingly positive, particularly reflecting on the positive and professional work undertaken by centre staff.

The 15 hour program has in many case, been hard work to implement and trying to accommodate the program, maintain staff levels and in some cases retain prekindergarten programs or indeed retain all four year old places has been a challenge recognised by most parents who noted this situation.

In discussing the implementation of a 15 hour program across the Loddon Mallee region, there has clearly been many challenges and frustrations faced by centre managers and educators however the response from parents and, perhaps most importantly, the children appears to have provided an endorsement of the hard work undertaken.

Universal Access Change Management

Submission 1.2

Introduction

This update provides detail on responses from teachers and cluster managers from across the region and covers the challenges being faced and some of the solutions proposed through workshop discussions as well as actual examples of services providing some innovative solutions

Workforce Challenges

The most commonly raised challenges across the Loddon Mallee region focussed on the workforce.

This related to availability of staff, work conditions and requirements regarding additional administration commitments for existing staff. These are detailed further below.

Availability of staff

In most areas, the 15-hour program has resulted in more hours of work with very little increase in the numbers of educators in the workforce.

Both kindergartens and long day care centres noted a challenge in filling staff positions with some positions being temporarily filled with staff that may hold a complementary qualification (i.e. Primary School teacher).

In particular, access to relief staff when someone is sick or has other commitments has been challenging for many cluster managers as previous relief staff have been taken up as more permanent staff across a number of services. The shortage of bachelor qualified staff has been of particular concern with retirement, resignation and lack of relief staff highlighted as an ongoing challenge by cluster and centre managers.

In addition, a recent survey of students undertaking the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education indicated that only eight of the twenty students were interested in working as a kindergarten teacher after University. Many were looking at primary teaching as their first choice.

Addressing workforce shortages...

In addition to the 4 year bachelor degree, Latrobe University (Bendigo) now offers a Bachelor of Early Learning over 2.5 years, offering professionals working in the early childhood sector the opportunity to upgrade from a Diploma of Children's Services to a four-year Bachelor's qualification. It is designed for people who are currently employed in the industry and offers a flexible online mode of study suitable for full-time employees in early learning centres. This degree qualifies graduates to teach in early learning settings with children aged from birth to five years.

The aim is to address the short-term shortage in staff at a highly qualified level and provide opportunity for quality, experienced staff within the sector to upgrade qualifications and progress their career.

For further information go to:
www.latrobe.edu.au/courses/early-childhood-education

Working conditions

The challenges faced with current work conditions were numerous and included topics such as;

1. Cultural shifts from possibly 1 teacher and 1 assistant to team teaching, multiple staff and relief staff.
2. Allowing time for staff to meet together and plan/share ideas.
3. No time in day for lunch breaks.
4. Non-contact time is challenging with new transition statements and packages to put together for teachers and parents.
5. NQF requirements are difficult to achieve within work hours.
6. Pay parity/award alignment with primary school teachers is important.

7. Teaching hours are not always family friendly and many teachers are parents.

Working condition challenges represented the most diverse range of discussions for workshop participants. There were a range of detailed discussions regarding the expectations on transition statement detail and the extra work required in this area.

Addressing working condition challenges...

A number of initiatives to address working conditions were proposed by workshop participants. These included;

Time allocation for extra duties- having parent interview days, staff meeting time and staff training times.

Keeping pay parity with primary school teachers through union negotiation.

A series of presentations or discussions on how people are practically achieving transition statements.

Online training, mentoring and support for practical solutions and discussion between kinders and staff who are "at the coal face".

Development of a web based discussion forum for teachers to ask questions and hear from other educators across the Loddon Mallee region.

Further work on refining transition statements and other administrative duties under the NQF requirements.

Viability of Rural Centres

The viability of rural centres was a common discussion point, given the number of these smaller centres within the Loddon Mallee region.

A variety of viability issues were raised including the following;

1. Providing staff to remote areas, particularly relief staff
2. Meeting the widening gap between funding and costs, as hours of work increase.
3. Small number of volunteers to provide fundraising opportunities.
4. Creating a sustainable model. Fluctuations in numbers for kindergarten can make one year of kindergarten not viable but the next year may see more children needing kindergarten services.

Innovative solutions have been developed across the region, addressing a number of these issues with varying levels of success. Creative solutions that respond to community needs and expectations have been particularly successful in raising income and attendance levels.

Addressing rural viability challenges...

In response to a survey of parents, some pre-kinder programs in low enrolment centres have been extended to reflect a full kindergarten day. Parents who have to travel long distances to get children to kindergarten have welcomed this.

Elmore kindergarten has increased enrolments for three year olds by combining the pre kinder program with the four year old program for a complete session. This has allowed parents to pick up children from both programs at the same time or has allowed a long enough period for parents to undertake various other activities before picking children up.

Global budgeting for Cluster Managers is another option being considered. This approach ensures that across a cluster managed set of kindergartens, all children are catered for through services that have a combined budget.

Effectively, those kindergartens that have high enrolments and are at capacity (thus providing a budget surplus) can financially assist in ensuring that rural kinders remain open and that fluctuations in enrolment (and income) are addressed across a number of centres, rather than one.

This model relies on a global approach to funding that prioritises access to kindergartens for all children regardless of geographical location, rather than focussing on the individual viability of each centre. It provides the opportunity to consider financial sustainability across a number of combined services rather than creating singular budgets across a number of separate services.

At present, some cluster managers in the region are undertaking business planning to consider this approach.

Infrastructure challenges

Infrastructure challenges were noted across many regions with a range of concerns being raised.

These included;

1. Overall capacity to accommodate children as population grows (this was specific to some of the larger regional Councils).
2. Capacity to accommodate both four-year-old program needs and pre kinder needs within a single facility.
3. Given the expansion of staff numbers in many centres, there was concern over areas for staff to undertake administration, report writing, keep records etc. as office space was generally quite small.
4. Ageing facilities needing refurbishment or replacement.
5. The development of new early years hubs where kindergarten and long day care are often integrated raised concerns regarding the affordability (and therefore accessibility and use) of the kindergarten program when childcare fees also apply.

Across the Loddon Mallee region, the challenges of providing adequate infrastructure to meet kindergarten and pre-kinder needs are being addressed in a range of ways.

Addressing infrastructure challenges...

Through a mix of government funding (generally local and state), a range of new facilities are being developed. Generally, new facilities are following an integrated, early years hub concept incorporating opportunities for delivery of long day care, integrated kindergarten and other services such as maternal child health or other therapy services.

Lightning Reef Early Years Centre in Bendigo is a recently developed facility that incorporates these features. It has been constructed in conjunction with the complete rebuilding of a local primary school. Both the early years centre and primary school exist on the same site and provide excellent transition opportunities for local children. The Bendigo Regional YMCA manages the early years centre whilst the entire site is owned by the DEECD.

There is some anecdotal evidence that this centre is experiencing a loss of clients to other kindergartens given the stand alone kindergarten programs are free or lower cost than the equivalent program run at Lightning Reef, which attracts a childcare fee.

A number of existing stand alone kindergarten facilities have been recipients of grants to expand with an additional room. These projects are sometimes accompanied by further office space although this is not always the case. In Mildura, several local kindergartens have been or are currently being expanded with funding from state and local government.

In some cases, additional venues are being considered for pre kinder programs where current kindergartens can accommodate four year old programs but no longer cater for pre kinder. Venues are generally sought close by and programs are "allocated" to kindergartens, with some connection to teachers at specific kindergartens. This approach has been taken where possible as parents have indicated that one of the key reasons for undertaking the pre kinder programs is the connection children make to peers and teachers whom they will be involved with the following year.

Transition Programs to School

In some regions, the transition programs to schools were viewed as being disjointed, with opportunity for more collaboration and coordination between schools and kindergartens.

In some cases, a competitive environment between schools results in increasingly earlier transition programs. This can be confusing for children who may not be even halfway through the preschool year, with some not understanding that they are still going to preschool.

Although this is not strictly a result of the 15-hour program, it is an important issue that has been highlighted as part of our workshop series.

Improving Transition Programs to School

Working with local schools and levels of coordination and communication between local primary schools and kindergartens varies between municipalities.

Some examples of coordinated transition approaches exist in the Mount Alexander Shire and the City of Greater Bendigo.

Mount Alexander Shire has a committee representing all schools and each year the leadership of the committee rest with a different school. This provides for a common approach to communication with kindergartens.

In City of Greater Bendigo, a committee also exists and the approach taken involves a group meeting between most primary schools and kindergartens, with targeted discussions between kindergarten teachers and school representatives regarding transition programs.

Hours of kindergarten programs

There was a wide variety of opinion when the impact of 15 hours on class time scheduling was discussed. In many cases, particularly where capacity was not an issue, the change to 15 hours had not adversely impacted on class schedules. Many centres with one kinder group had simply moved to three days of five hours.

In other cases, where kindergartens were previously running two or even three kinder groups, capacity requirements necessitated some creative scheduling options.

Generally, where two groups existed (with one room) there was a move to the longer 7.5-hour days, with a day remaining to cater for pre kinder programs.

Larger kindergartens with three groups are also using 7.5-hour days and are generally not able to run pre-kinder programs. In some of these centres, the four-year-old program also runs as a rotational model in order to accommodate as many children as possible.

Our workshops raised questions about how effective the longer days were and whether children were being asked about how they were coping with the longer hours.

In response, we undertook surveys asking the question of both children and parents.

Responses are provided on the following page and further survey response detail is available as part of Project Update 2.

Parents and children do well with longer sessions.

Although there were exceptions, parents generally considered their program hours to be suitable.

There were a few programs that are still not running 15-hour programs due to capacity issues and parents commented that they felt their child may be "missing out" because they are receiving fewer hours.

"My child only attends 2 x 5.5 hour sessions per week, due to limited spaces in the 15 hour program. There should be more spaces available for the 15hr sessions."

Generally, the 5-hour days and 7.5-hour days were well received by parents, with some expressing surprise that their children did quite well with the longer days.

"I was unsure about the 15 hour program at the start of the year but it in fact has been fantastic for my daughter."

"Realising the day is longer than school was a shock. My child copes well."

The main concerns for parents with hours have been regarding the longer 7.5-hour days. Reception to this has been mixed, with most parents still feeling their children benefit from this type of model.

"The two long days really suit our family"

"Personally, I think the day long sessions are better as they fit with a work/school day.."

"The long 7.5 hour days are a little too long, but the centre is flexible and happy for me to pick up at times suitable to my child."

"It is great for working parents and children who have been in full day childcare, my child fit in

easily to the 7.5 hours and absolutely LOVES his 2 kinder days, he can't wait to go."

Indeed, some parents in rural or remote locations indicated that the longer 7.5-hour session would be more suited to their needs given long travel times.

"I think 15 hours is appropriate but I would rather do two long days than 3x5 hour sessions because we travel a long distance to kinder. I would rather do it only twice a week."

"Considering I live out of town and travel 30 kilometres for kinder pick up, would be worth considering 2 longer days so the bus could be used both ways."

Some concerns were raised regarding the varying session times, which is different to the consistent and standardised school day. Some parents found this confusing and difficult to operate with, based on work requirements and other commitments. There was some understanding that the varying times were often to ensure a three-year-old pre-kindergarten program could also be implemented. Generally, parents that were unhappy with times wanted them to coincide more with their work or other school pickup times.

"15 hours is fine, I have no issues with that. Just fitting in around school hours would be great though."

"The finish time at 3:30 is really difficult due to school pick up"

"The session times are difficult for parents who work and have other children at school. The session times don't really mimic a school experience."

Concluding remarks

The implementation of the 1.5 hour program has in many cases, resulted in a range of new challenges for educators and cluster managers. Maintaining staff levels, managing work levels and completing NQF requirements, rural centre viability, retaining pre kindergarten programs or retaining all four-year-old places have all been ongoing issues.

Individual centre responses to various issues have been innovative and creative. In many cases, services are responding and testing new ways of doing things, with both positive and some negative results.

We aim to provide a forum where some of this information can be gathered and discussed. We want to try developing a website as a next step for this project that can act as a discussion forum and depository of information on a variety of ways to do things.

Some next steps for our project....

Develop promotional material regarding survey outcomes for display at kindergartens.

Develop information packages to raise awareness about changes to kindergarten, choices in program delivery and three year old programs.

Construct website and Facebook presence to assist with distributing information and promoting discussion between services across the Loddon Mallee region.

Work with leading education services to improve opportunities for further training.

Develop a seminar series to be delivered across the Loddon Mallee region.

Provide more detail on program delivery innovations and other partnerships such as transition programs.

Undertake follow up surveys to continue building data on how parents and children feel about kindergarten.