

SUBMISSION FOR CHILD CARE

30/1/14

** the following submission is about our centre and the every day tasks and challenges our staff deal with during their time in this sector.*

My colleague and I work in a small community based long day care centre in the CBD of a capital city. We share the position of Director. The centre has been running for 28 years. We have 15 permanent staff and approximately 5 regular relief staff. We are lucky to have two male staff employed at our centre.

Between the two of us, we have been in the childcare sector for 31 years. We have seen a lot of changes over the years, from the way we program, to the reporting expectations, to the professional development needed by staff, to the rising costs of childcare to name a few. Neither of us have ever been in this career for the money, if we were we would have left the sector many years ago. One of the main reasons that we are still here is that we love working with and teaching children.

My colleague and I made the decision to work as part of a team for a number of reasons. The expectations of a Director, has increased incredibly.

- With the introduction of Accreditation and more recently the National Quality Framework, the paperwork demands have increased. Putting together a Quality Improvement Plan took a lot of time.
- We are expected to provide more professional development for staff, which is not necessarily a bad thing, but adds time to the day for the planning, the hours that the course actually takes and of course the cost of the course and paying for staff to attend.
- Managing the budget has become harder and harder each year. We as a not for profit community based childcare centre try to keep the costs as low as we can for parents. With the qualification expectations of staff and the increased ratio, which we see as finally a positive step for child care, the down side which is staff wages are costing more and more.
- We feel that working together helps us to bounce ideas of each other, and it provides support for one another, so we are not dealing with issues on our own e.g. when difficulties come up with staff or parents.
- We originally advertised for a Director, when our previous one resigned and we received only one viable candidate. We interviewed this person and employed them. Unfortunately she only stayed for 6 weeks. This left us in a difficult situation, which is when we decided to job share. Thankfully, for us, this has worked, but we hear of more and more centres having great difficulty employing a Director.
- The amount of work that needs to be done by a Director and the top wage rate of \$29.40 for our size centre, most people think that it is not worth the stresses. There is very little reward or incentive to continue. Wages in other professions, in comparable roles, are so much more.

We have made the decision to pay staff above award conditions and to employ mainly qualified staff. Two of the staff we employ have or are working towards a certificate 3 and the rest have or are working towards a diploma. We, as well as our management committee, see the value in having staff that are highly educated. It enables staff to work more as a team, as not one person is relied upon, e.g. when it comes to programming. As the majority of our staff has qualifications gained from two years or more of study, in other sectors with similar amounts of study, there is a big difference in wages.

Staff in the community is often seen as babysitters, and are not highly regarded because *'they mustn't be worth much as they are not paid much'*. The lack of professional wages is de-valuing to staff.

With the introduction of the pre-school teacher in childcare centres, a wider wage difference has been formed. In this new role, they are doing a very similar role to what child care educators have always done and are currently doing, yet they are now suddenly paid more because of a government expectation.

We have a lot of difficulty maintaining a stable relief list, as these staff would rather get a teaching job (which pays more) or work in another profession.

Some parents in our service would have the need for 24 hour childcare, as we have a number who do shift work. The cost for us to run something like that would make us not viable. We do open at 6:45am to cater for those parents who need to be at work by 7:00am close by.

Our Centre takes the task of setting its fees extremely seriously and aim to remain as low as practicable whilst not jeopardising the quality of care we pride ourselves on. The main items of expenditure are staff wages which change in each new financial year and essential associated costs. As with all household budgets, general everyday costs also increase. As a not-for-profit community service we ensure that we cover the budget and also set aside provisions for emergencies, etc. The centre will continue to set aside provisions for the much needed funds for our future and the future of this centre, as we do every year.

Current rates as at July 1st 2013

- Full day rate is \$85
- Afternoon rate is \$50
- Morning rate is \$52
- Full week rate is \$415
- We do a 50% off full rate fee for holidays booked two weeks in advance up to 15 days a year.
- Food and nappies are included in the cost.
- Most fee increases have occurred annually and on rare occasions have needed to be increased at six months. We review our profit/loss statement monthly to monitor how things are tracking financially.
- Parents are always given advance notice of exact fee increases.

For some parents, budget time is met with trepidation, as an increase in childcare fees can send some families over the edge financially. Some parents actually get to the point that one of them might as well not work, as a lot of their wages are given in childcare fees.

In the past and currently we have had up to 4 children in one week that have had additional needs. We have applied to the funding body to receive some additional money towards employing an extra staff member. Our funding body is only able to give a maximum of 5 hours per child. Sometimes the children are here up to 9 hours in a day, and some really need help with all activities and routines. This leaves a number of hours where staff become very stressed within the normal ratio levels as the child with additional needs still needs the extra attention.

The National Quality Framework and previously the QIAS have helped childcare centres to make sure that they are covering all aspects of a childcare centre well, instead of just one area. For example; a centre may be really good at program and practice, but not at partnerships with families.

It also helps to think about what more you can do in a particular area. For example if you think you are doing well with the physical environment, you may not have thought about the aspect of sustainability.

With the NQF, unlike the QIAS, it can be very subjective. There is very little information available on how to achieve the levels e.g. exceeding. It can also depend on the person you get coming out to the centre and what their opinion is.

With the day to day expectations of running a centre, we may get through a whole week without even thinking about the NQF. There is an expectation of continually adding to your QIP, as it is supposed to be a working document, but there is often very little time to do the extra things.

Staff also feels the pressure of higher expectations. Our team leaders receive 4 hours program time a fortnight and the other educators receive 2 hours per fortnight. By the time they evaluate the previous program, interpret observation, write learning stories, look at the strengths and needs of the next focus group and write up the next program (not even mentioning the little things they do in that time, like making labels, laminating photos, etc) they have run out of time. To assess how they are doing in the different quality areas of the NQF doesn't enter into their limited time. To do this work on the floor when they are with the children takes their time away from their relationships with children, another important area of the NQF.

At a recent management meeting a few comments and concerns made by parents were;

- Why are preschool teachers working in child care being paid more than child care educators when child care educators and the “teacher” are doing exactly the same role?
- Why do schools receive funding from the government and child care centres do not?
- Now that child care centres are expected to have a preschool teacher on site are we also expected to offer the preschool universal hours?

Concerns and issues raised by staff have been;

- The child care sector is very confusing at the moment, first we are promised professional wages and then it is taken away from us! Perfect example of not feeling respected.
- So many demands on us as workers to fulfil our roles but not treated in the community as equals.
- Too much questioning over the roles of teachers and educational leaders in the field, we are told to have these requirements but don't give us enough information about what they mean.
- We need incomes to support a family structure.
- As teachers and nurses strive to change their professions so must the child care industry to foster gender equality by attracting male employees into the sector.
- Good staff are leaving the sector to find work that pays a lot more for less stresses and demands on them.

The child care industry has been in the media a lot lately and most of it has been negative publicity. Workers are feeling less valued and they should be feeling the complete opposite. Working with children under 5 is demanding and challenging but also the most rewarding job one could hope for. We are told by many medical professionals that the first 5 years are the most important for brain and social development so it is vital that the people educating (not looking after) but EDUCATING these children receive the recognition and professional wages they deserve.