

Notes on UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre Report Card 8: The Child Care Transition. A League Table of early childhood education and care in economically advantaged countries.

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This report is a first attempt to provide a tool with which to evaluate and compare how countries with advanced economies provide for the care and education of their youngest citizens. It proposes 10 internationally applicable and minimum-standard benchmarks aimed at protecting the rights of children during their youngest, most vulnerable and formative years. The report highlights both long-term opportunities and risks from the perspective of article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child which states that in all actions concerning children, “the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”.

The report strikes a good balance between arguing the benefits of early childhood education and highlighting the evidence, and remaining questions, about the potential for harm from early childhood provision that is “too early and for too long”.

From a NZ perspective this report enables us to see ourselves in relation to the 24 other OECD countries included in the report. This highlights a number of things about the way New Zealand provides for its youngest citizens:

1. We receive ticks on 6 of the 10 benchmarks: This ranks us within the fourth highest scoring group of countries alongside Belgium (Flanders), Hungary and Slovenia. Countries that do better than this are the Scandinavian countries of Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, Finland and Norway; and France. The latter group of countries mainly receive 8 ticks with Iceland getting 9 ticks and only Sweden scoring full marks at 10 ticks.
2. The report card confirms that New Zealand's early childhood care and education policies are an area of strength. In particular, New Zealand reaches three of the four benchmarks that gauge quality of provision; the quality benchmark we do not meet relates to the percentage of GDP that is spent on early childhood services. We are among the most advanced in the OECD countries in meeting the benchmarks of having:
 - a national plan with priority for the disadvantaged;
 - subsidised and regulated child care services for 25% of children under 3;

- subsidised and accredited early education services for 80% of 4 year-olds;
- 80% of all child care staff are trained;
- 50% of staff in accredited early education services are tertiary educated with relevant qualifications;
- Minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education.

Indeed, in at least three of these areas, in 2008 New Zealand now exceeds the minimum benchmarks (compiled from 2004 data), sometimes significantly, as follows:

- over 60% of our under 3s (vs 25% in the benchmark) access subsidised and regulated child care services (Education Counts, 2007 figures) and thus is on a par with where Denmark and Iceland were in 2004;
- New Zealand participation rates for four-year-olds in licensed services stands at 100% (Education Counts, 2007) vs the OECD minimum standard of 80%, so here too we have caught up with the participation rates reported for Belgium, France, Italy and Spain in 2004; and
- 60% of New Zealand early childhood teachers working across **all types** of early childhood services have 3-year diploma or degree level early childhood qualifications vs the OECD benchmark level of 50% tertiary qualified in early education services. This shows us as having a more highly qualified early childhood workforce across all service types than the benchmark minimum standard that the OECD set for services regarded as educational ones.

3. The report card also highlights where we need to do better:

- we do not as yet have a parental leave entitlement of one year at 50% of salary which the top ranked five Scandinavian countries, and France, provide;
- we spend less than 1% of GDP on early childhood services;
- our child poverty rate is higher than 10%; and
- we do not meet the minimum standard of a near-universal outreach of essential child health services.

These areas are cause for concern. Indeed they provide a clear agenda for the coming years as we seek to make wise decisions about how to provide better for our children today and in the future.