



Funding shortfall, glut of services puts kindergartens at risk of closure

In an unprecedented move, one of New Zealand's largest and longest established kindergarten associations is considering closure of four of its services, as underfunding and an oversupply of early childhood education services threaten the network's viability.

Kidsfirst Kindergartens, a not-for-profit organisation, has 72 services throughout Canterbury, Westland and Central Otago, and has been operating for more than 100 years. It is proposing the closure of two kindergartens (Hillmorton and Kaiapoi North in Canterbury, and two early learning centres in Franz Josef (South Westland) and Aranui (Christchurch)). The organisation has also proposed the disestablishment of 40 Kindergarten Support Staff positions. Consultation is underway with staff. The Kidsfirst Board will not make a final decision until that feedback is received, all options have been explored and it has met with parents to discuss what is happening and hear their thoughts.

Kidsfirst Kindergartens Chair, Viv Ruth, says the board, management, staff and parents of the organisation are devastated that it has become necessary to consider closures, but that Kidsfirst cannot continue to sustain funding shortfalls without putting the whole network at risk.

"We have exhausted the reserves that have been subsidising most of our Kindergartens for a number of years. Our funding from government was cut by around 14% in 2011 and today the hourly rate we receive is less than it was in July 2008, while costs have continued to rise. Our waitlists and rolls, like those of other services, have reduced due to the unchecked growth of early childhood services being licensed for operation.

Kindergartens are committed to trained, registered teachers, a strong community-based ethos, and providing learning spaces that enable children to explore and enquire as they learn. Any surplus produced by a Kidsfirst services is returned to the network to be reinvested in kindergartens and early learning centres and areas that contribute to quality teaching and learning, including professional development."

Since 2012, Kidsfirst has been offering free hours over and above the 20 Free ECE hours available to all 3-5 year olds in New Zealand. This was the association's way of giving back to communities following the

Christchurch and Canterbury Earthquakes and the Pike River Mining Disaster. It will no longer offer all of the free extra hours from the end of 2018, but a range of additional changes are now required to ensure the future of local kindergartens is sustainable.

“The sector has been in crisis for a number of years now, and while we welcome the work that is being done by the Minister of Education’s ECE Ministerial Advisory Group which could eventually address the oversupply and underfunding issues, some of our Kindergartens have other complex challenges that do not appear to have solutions in the foreseeable future. These include needing expensive building repairs and a declining population of under 5s in some areas.”

Last year in New Zealand, 35 centre-based Early Childhood Services closed their doors, up from 24 the year before. The vast majority of these were Education and Care services. Three hundred and forty centre-based ECE services closed in New Zealand over the past decade – and only 6 of them were kindergartens*.

“Given the commercially driven nature of the sector it has always been a fact of life that a number of commercial ECE services will come and go in any given year. However, it is a different story for kindergartens. We have a commitment to maintaining 100% qualified and registered teachers working with the tamariki, and hold to a social imperative that means we consider many more factors than just the bottom line. We truly believe in the value of not for profit, community based ECE delivering quality teaching and learning to all - regardless of socio economic background or the wealth of the local community.”

The consultation process underway with staff around the proposed changes will take as long as it needs to, in order for the board to be sure all options have been considered.

“We need to have all the information it takes to make good decisions to find solutions that are sustainable in the long term while not compromising quality teaching and learning across the network.”

Should the proposed changes go ahead, 57 staff would be impacted.

* <https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/early-childhood-education/services>. (closed services excel table)

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