

MEDIA RELEASE

12 June 2012

Performance Audit Report

Early Childhood Schooling

Today the 'Early Childhood Schooling' report was presented to the Speaker for tabling in the ACT Legislative Assembly by the ACT Auditor-General, Dr Maxine Cooper.

The report provides an independent opinion to the Legislative Assembly on the results of a performance audit on the administrative effectiveness of the Education and Training Directorate's (ETD) delivery of the following early childhood schooling programs and services:

- the Early Childhood Schools initiative;
- Koori Preschool Programs;
- Early Intervention Programs; and
- Preschool Early Entry Programs.

Audit Conclusion (extract only – for full conclusion see pages 6 and 7 of the report)

While ACT children are, on the whole, performing well academically compared to their counterparts in other jurisdictions, there is evidence to indicate that children from particular groups within the community need additional support and development opportunities. The early childhood schooling programs and services considered as part of this audit do provide additional support and development opportunities for many of these children. However, there is potential for their reach to be extended to other children in need.

Although ETD's early childhood schooling programs and services are delivering benefits to children and their families, there are shortcomings in ETD's planning, management and delivery of the programs and services. The purpose and objectives of the programs and services are unclear and children and families who need additional support are not targeted or given priority. This creates a risk that the programs and services do not achieve desired outcomes and that those most in need do not receive the additional support. Specific findings are as follows:

Early Childhood Schools

The four Early Childhood Schools were established in 2009 to focus on early childhood education and early intervention. The schools are premised on the idea that children (and their families), particularly those who are vulnerable, will benefit from attending a single establishment that offers integrated early childhood services from birth to eight including health, community and childcare services, as well as schooling from Preschool to Year 2.

While Early Childhood Schools provide programs and services for all children, it was expected that they would provide support for ACT children (and families) who are socially or economically disadvantaged. The schools' integrated service delivery model would likely offer significant benefits for these children. However, ETD has not specifically identified and targeted children who are socially or economically disadvantaged for potential enrolment and is unable to identify how many children at the schools represent this group. Without a strategy of planning for, and engaging with, socially or economically disadvantaged families, there is a risk that the schools become 'schools of choice' for ACT families, who recognise the benefits of the model and the

suite of services that are delivered. In advancing such a strategy, however, it will be important for the schools to continue to accommodate children from diverse backgrounds.

The Early Childhood Schools are comparatively more expensive, compared to other ACT public primary schools. The smaller size of the Early Childhood Schools, unlike larger ACT public primary schools (e.g. Preschool to Year 6 schools), means that economies of scale and efficiencies in administrative and operational costs are not achieved. In 2012 the notional recurrent income per student at the schools is expected to range between \$12 806 and \$18 722 across the four schools. This is higher than nearby larger ACT public primary schools, where the figure on a total school population basis is expected to range between \$9 520 and \$11 644 per student. As the Early Childhood Schools cost comparatively more than nearby P-6 schools, it is important that the schools' services and programs are actively promoted, particularly to those most in need.

Service delivery costs incurred by the Community Services Directorate and the Health Directorate, which are not recognised in the schools' budgeting, also add to the overall cost of the initiative.

Koori Preschool Programs

The five Koori Preschool Programs are providing an important service for some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Parents/carers of children attending the programs provided positive feedback on the benefits of the programs for their children and the broader community. However, generating enrolments in the programs is an issue and there is evidence to indicate that a disproportionately low number of eligible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are enrolled in the programs.

There is only one Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander staff member across all of the programs. A concerted effort needs to be made to engage with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to encourage interest and enrolments in the programs.

Early Intervention Programs

The Early Intervention Programs provide valuable support to many students and their families. Parents/carers of children attending the programs provided positive feedback on the benefits of the program for their children.

In recent years, the programs have been characterised by declining attendance and the closure of a number of services. ETD's practice is to locate the programs in schools where there is available physical space, and not necessarily where there is a need for the services. This means that there are no services in some parts of Canberra and there is only one service in the growing suburbs of Gungahlin.

Recommendations

The audit made 11 recommendations (see pages 14 to 21 of the report). The Director-General of the Education and Training Directorate agreed with the recommendations. The Director-General of the Community Services Directorate supported the recommendations that were relevant to its operations, while the Director-General of the Health Directorate had 'no issue with the publication of the final report.'

The report

Copies of the report are available from the ACT Auditor-General's Office website, www.audit.act.gov.au and the Office (please call 6207 0833 or go to 11 Moore Street, Canberra).