OECD Reviews Policy Challenges for Early Childhood Education and Care

Improving the quality of, and access to, early childhood education and care has become a major policy priority in OECD Member countries, according to a new OECD publication, Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care. The early years are increasingly viewed as the first step in lifelong learning and a key component of a successful educational, social, and family policy agenda.

Countries have adopted diverse strategies to policy development in this field – strategies that are deeply embedded in particular country contexts, values, and beliefs. In particular, early childhood policy and provision are strongly linked to cultural and social beliefs about young children, the roles of families and government, and the purposes of early childhood education and care within and across countries. Taking a broader and more holistic approach than previous studies, this new OECD publication provides a comparative analysis of major policy developments and issues in 12 OECD countries – Australia, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States – highlighting innovative approaches and proposing policy options that can be adapted to different national contexts.

What are the most promising strategies for organising policy in ways that promote child and family well-being? The report proposes eight key elements for equitable access to quality early childhood education and care:

- A systemic and integrated approach to policy development and implementation;
- A strong and equal partnership with the education system;
- A universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support;
- Substantial public investment in services and the infrastructure;
- A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance;
- Appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision;
- Systematic attention to monitoring and data collection;
- A stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation.

Governments increasingly recognise that public investment is necessary to support a quality system of early childhood education and care. Most countries in the OECD review seek to give young children the opportunity to experience at least two years of free early childhood education and care before beginning primary school. In several countries, access to early childhood education and care services begins earlier and is a legal right: from the age of 1 year in Denmark, Finland and Sweden, from the age of 2.5 years in Belgium and from age 3 in Italy.

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In general, however, the supply of services for children under three years does not meet current
demand, and where services do exist, they may be characterised by fragmented access and poor quality of
provision. Many countries have responded by expanding this sector, and by introducing protected and paid
parental leave policies. Norway, for example, offers parental leave for one year, paid at almost 100% of
earnings. Such measures help to promote also gender equity and reconcile family responsibilities and working
life.

Another high priority across a range of OECD countries is to improve the recruitment, training and
remuneration of early childhood professionals, particularly for staff responsible for the development and
education of children under three years. For staff working with pre-school children, there is a growing trend in
most countries toward providing them with a tertiary degree. Coherent linking across the different sectors caring
for young children is also a priority, in particular, at the levels of sectoral policy-making and local delivery. The
improvement of quality through participatory approaches engaging staff, parents and children is also a need.

The publication, Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care, will be presented on
Thursday 14 June at an international conference co-organised by the OECD, the Ministry of Education and
Science in Sweden and the Swedish National Agency for Education. Minister Ingegerd Wånersson will open
the conference. Policy officials, researchers and practitioners from 50 countries will discuss the findings of the
report, share innovative national and local approaches, and explore strategies to address the major challenges
in the field. On the day before the conference, delegates will have a first hand look at the internationally-
renowned Swedish early childhood settings during a pre-conference programme hosted by the City of
Stockholm.

Journalists may obtain a copy of the report from the OECD Media Relations Division (request by fax:
33 1 45 24 80 03 or news.contact@oecd.org).

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