



Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

LESSONS LEARNED FROM SETTING OUT QUALITY GOALS AND REGULATIONS

This section summarises country experiences as “lessons learned”. It aims to be a quick read about challenges and risks to consider when implementing policy initiatives.

Lesson 1: Prioritise and make the objectives SMARTT – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timely and Time-bound

A key lesson learned from **Flanders (Belgium)** is that goals and objectives of ECEC must be made clear to all stakeholders, and they must be agreed upon if they are to be met. Flanders prioritised its goal to increase the use of child care by all children, including target groups, by making day care less expensive for parents through increasing the number of places with a means-tested fee. While this goal was prioritised, other projects were put on hold for two or three months.

Lesson 2: Effectively communicate the need for high quality standards

Slovak Republic learnt that it is important to give and explain the arguments for high standards in preschool education and its positive effects on the general development of the child. Slovak Republic found it useful to organise conferences, seminars and media discussions on this. It increased support for the proposed changes in standards and also ensured involvement of different relevant stakeholders in the drafting process.

Slovak Republic also found it important to use the media to report on the debates and progress of finding an agreement between the government and ECEC providers on revising quality standards. Additionally, having the media in favour of the revisions positively influences the process of coming to an agreement.

A lesson learned from the **Czech Republic** is that it is highly relevant to explain why standards need to be regulated or revised. The country widely informed stakeholders of the need for high quality standards spelled out in a regulatory framework. The main reason for the regulatory framework was to help the early education sector adapt to new values, ideas and expectations of 21st century preschooling. Since the regulatory framework was expected to improve the level of quality and since the standards would be made relevant for modern society, stakeholders widely agreed on the regulatory framework for preschool provisions.

Prince Edward Island (Canada) pointed out that it is important to inform people about any plans you undertake in reaching your policy goals as well as the progress of the plan. In doing so, it is important to share the *same* message with all stakeholders. Progress reports informed people about where the plan was standing, which helped to ease stress and tension for people directly involved in or affected by the plan.

Lesson 3: Be cautious in defining or re-defining at which government level minimum standards should be set

It is often debated whether the regulations should be set at the national level or at a different government level. **Finland** emphasises that minimum standards are necessary to safeguard the quality of service and safety of children at the national level while the administration is decentralised. Finland has learnt that, when standards are set at the national level, legislation can ensure an even minimum quality level across ECEC institutions throughout the country.

Lesson 4: Consult a wide range of stakeholders when changing curriculum goals or standards

Australia established a national Stakeholder Reference Group to act as a key consultation forum during the transition to and implementation of the National Quality Agenda. Members of the reference group represent the ECEC and school age care sector and include peak bodies, unions, academics, training organisations and special interest groups. Thorough consultation with a wide range of stakeholders was found to be necessary and important when seeking their engagement in implementation of the reform of the quality goals and standards. Consultation with these stakeholders also increased “buy-in” for implementation.

New Zealand’s Ministry of Education carried out intensive consultation with the ECEC sector on all regulatory proposals regarding standards from 2003 up to the implementation of the new regulatory framework in late 2008. In this way, the country achieved strong acceptance of proposals for regulatory change and workable mechanisms for implementation.

Slovak Republic has been organising meetings with ECEC providers to discuss pros and cons of current standards in Slovakian education and care. The evidence from the State School Inspection on the positive impacts of ECEC on disadvantaged groups of children has helped a lot in convincing providers to agree on proposed changes in regulations. Media were also engaged in the discussion. Slovak Republic has learnt that involving different stakeholder groups can create greater stakeholder “buy-in”.

Spain learnt that opening channels for information exchange and communication with stakeholders contributes to improved knowledge on Spanish ECEC provisions and a better understanding of structural, regulatory and curricular issues. It also supports decision making processes in policy design, which benefits quality in the education system as a whole.

Sweden set up a reference group when revising the curriculum. The country learnt that having a reference group with broad and different competences is highly relevant in finding suitable guidelines and goals reflecting the needs of different professionals and children with different backgrounds. Sweden also highlights the importance of involving researchers, as their input and consultation formed the essential basis of Sweden’s revisions.

The **Netherlands** learnt that when different stakeholders are involved in the development or revision process of either goals or standards, there is very little resistance to new regulations. Before standards in child care were set in the Netherlands, field organisations were invited to share their opinion, as were the national parent organisation BOinK and representatives of the child care sector. These stakeholder groups advise the Minister about quality standards and goals. Due to their involvement, there was great support for quality standards in Dutch child care; and, in 2010, the Development Opportunities through Quality and Education Act came into force.

Manitoba (Canada) used a consultative process for regulation changes to meet the needs of stakeholders and members of the child care field as well as reflect best practices that encourage positive outcomes for children. They found that community consultation and engagement is an important and useful approach in finding agreement on changes in standards and finding commitment.

In **Prince Edward Island (Canada)**, individuals asked to serve on the Kindergarten Transition Team and Work Groups were either decision makers or had access to decision makers. Giving people the authority to get the job done ensured quick decision making, which is necessary when time and financial resources are limited. Additionally, involving experts and specialists and other key people related to ECEC helps ensure smooth implementation.

Lesson 5: Allocate sufficient time to inform and implement changes

In **Japan**, kindergarten group size standards were changed by reducing the number of children in each class from 40 to 35. Instructions were given to systematically lower the number of children to 35 over a time period of ten years maximum. This ensured that providers had time to prepare themselves for the change regarding human and financial resources.

Lesson 6: Provide supporting materials and tools for awareness-raising and implementation

Portugal found that distributing supporting equipment and materials, such as informative booklets, on the standards and the country's goals regarding ECEC improved the quality of preschool education. Staff and management were more aware of the standards that centres should meet and were more motivated to work towards meeting the quality goals.

Korea learnt that informing practitioners and parents of changes in regulations needs to take place through the use of various media forms, such as printed materials, websites, seminars, television advertisements and posters in the subways as well as by mobilising relevant institutions and local authorities. The *Childcare Guidebook*, published and distributed annually to all child care centres and family day care, is particularly efficient in providing highly detailed information about new regulations. City and provincial Offices of Education and 180 District Offices of Education disseminate changes in regulations swiftly through electronic mails to individual kindergartens.

British Columbia (Canada) learnt that it is important to train ECEC teachers and childminders about the revised regulations as well as the licensing inspectors and the operators of ECEC facilities. It was found that all day, face-to-face workshops in addition to training guides and videos were very useful in educating them about the changes.

Slovenia learnt that it is necessary to raise the quality of management to ensure a high level of quality in preschools, compliance with standards and attainment of goals. Headmasters of preschools have the possibility to regularly attend courses in management. This has been found to improve their management skills and knowledge of the standards and quality goals; and it has led to quality improvements in several preschools across the country.

Lesson 7: Design a step-by-step action plan with the right balance between access, affordability, equity and quality

Sweden learnt that implementing new ECEC policies targeting certain children and families can be an effective method in meeting quality goals. In Sweden, mainly due to increasing parental

costs of ECEC, unemployed or part-time working parents often opted out of using ECEC services for their children. Therefore, the goal of providing all children quality early education could not be met. As a result, in 2001, the government took the first step in reforming the ECEC sector and its costs. Children of unemployed parents received the right to preschooling, both in terms of obtaining a place and keeping a place they might already have. A year later, it was also extended to cover children whose parents were at home under the parental insurance scheme for taking care of another child. A year later, a maximum fee was introduced, and all municipalities introduced the fee even though it was not mandatory to do so. Through this reform package, ECEC became a truly fundamental part of general welfare that would benefit all children since fees were either low or non-existent. Additionally, it increased access to and participation in quality ECEC for children with different backgrounds.

Prince Edward Island (Canada) established the Public Kindergarten Commission in May 2008. The mandate of the Public Kindergarten Commission was to develop a detailed [action plan](#) for the smooth transition of kindergarten into the public school system. This plan was sent to all people in the Kindergarten Transition Team and Work Groups, who were responsible for guiding the implementation of integrating kindergarten into primary schooling. Clear mandates and responsibilities were described in the plan, which ensures that everyone is aware of their tasks. In addition, Prince Edward Island has established an Early Years Steering Committee to monitor the implementation of the Preschool Excellence Initiative. This committee is comprised of government and community stakeholders.

Lesson 8: Plan to monitor when new or revised regulations are to be put in place

Mexico learnt that having a monitoring process can improve the level of quality in ECEC provisions. A monitoring process verifies whether providers and staff apply standards. In Mexico, when ECEC centres are unable to comply with standards, the Ministry of Education offers them additional strategies or initiatives which support them in complying with standards. This was found to benefit the level of quality of several ECEC centres.

Based on **Australia's** experience, an important part of implementing new standards and regulations is assessing and monitoring compliance with the changes. The country notes the value of testing the assessment. When developing a new assessment and rating system, the government conducted trial assessments of about 200 ECEC services, which helped identify challenges and highlight any changes that should be made to contribute to quality improvement. Australia also learnt that they needed to strengthen monitoring of private for-profit providers after the collapse of ABC Learning Centres, which held the 25% share of Long Day Care (LDC) services at the time of closure in 2008. Australia's 2010-11 Budget announced plans to assess the financial viability of large LDC providers with 25 or more services and reassess the providers each year. There are also provisions to engage an expert to carry out an independent audit where a provider is found to be experiencing significant financial difficulty. Other steps taken in response to the collapse of ABC include: operators must give 42 days' notice before they close a child care centre; and a new civil penalty regime has been introduced.

Lesson 9: Align incentives for successful implementation of new or revised regulations

In **New Zealand**, a range of teacher supply initiatives, including scholarships and grants, were put in place to encourage teachers to gain a recognised qualification. In addition, the early childhood education funding system provides a financial incentive to services to employ higher proportions of registered teachers. This helped providers meet the standards regarding staff-child ratio and have the minimum number of qualified staff in service.