

## Tapu Misa: Early-childhood funding cuts miss point

By [Tapu Misa](#)

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When the flash new Kiwicare pre-school centre at Tennessee Ave, Mangere East, had its official opening a year ago, the Prime Minister was there to do the honours.

Nice photos of him are on its website, surrounded by small, brown children.

There seemed, in fact, to be no lack of those supposedly hard-to-reach Maori, Pacific and low-income children that everyone seems to have so much trouble getting into early-childhood education.

No, they weren't bribed to appear in the photos; they really were enrolled at the centre. All it took, says Heather Anderson, the founder and CEO of Kiwicare, was a bit of advertising and networking.

It seems those reticent Maori, Pacific and low-income parents are as interested in ensuring their children do well as the rest of New Zealand.

Anderson's experience shows that if you build it, staff it with qualified people, run a solid educational programme and keep the fees low, they will definitely come.

Her centre is licensed for 250, and has 380 children on its books. That includes children there for after-school care.

Some 89 per cent are Pacific and Maori, just under 2 per cent Pakeha and the rest Asian and African. It has a staff of 45, mostly drawn from around the area, and it's full.

This is, of course, exactly what the Government wants.

It is what educators, scientists and economists want: more disadvantaged children in high-quality, early-childhood education.

Education Minister Anne Tolley has said: "We know Maori and Pasifika children, and children from lower socio-economic areas, benefit most from [early-childhood education], but they are the least likely to be involved."

Much money has been spent trying to raise the number of Maori and Pacific children attending pre-school, with limited success.

Generally, 95 per cent of new entrants have had some early-childhood education when they start school, but the figure is lower for Maori (91.4) and Pacific (85) children.

This year's budget committed \$91.8 million over four years for a package of "intensive, community-led participation projects" in high priority areas. That includes the just announced \$4.2 million to build five new pre-school centres in Waitakere and Northland, catering to 234 of those high-needs children.

This looks good until it's balanced by the \$400 million funding cut that's likely to cancel out its intended gains. The funding change takes away the financial incentive for centres to employ 100 per cent qualified teachers; it will result in centres like Tennessee Ave being unaffordable to most of its parents.



Pre-school education reduces child poverty and crime rates and increases employment prospects. Photo / APN

The move makes no sense to Anderson, who says it will have the greatest impact in low-income neighbourhoods where the need for high-quality centres staffed by fully qualified teachers is greatest.

"I do not believe if I raise the fees by \$40 per week that children will still be able to participate," she says. That's just not feasible in an area like Mangere, where around 80 per cent of the centre's children come from families on benefits.

Anderson is mindful of research that shows children in decile 10 areas have a vocabulary of around 6000 words by the time they start school, while children in decile 1 schools tend to have around 1000.

The kids who come to the centre typically have few or no toys or books at home.

So the centre has dedicated teachers for maths and English. Much time is spent on language development and problem-solving. And teaching is designed around the learning needs of its children.

Indeed, one of the chief attractions for parents is that the centre acts like a school; many opt to keep their children at the pre-school until they turn 6, often because they consider it a safer and more nurturing environment than the local schools.

Anderson was on track to have 100 per cent fully qualified staff by next year, but now she's reducing that number. She's already let the nutrition expert go.

It's ironic that at a time when the Government wants more parents to work, it is making childcare in general, and high-quality early-childhood education in particular, less affordable. Evidence is overwhelming that high-quality, early-childhood education contributes to positive educational, employment and social outcomes.

As the PM's science adviser, Sir Peter Gluckman, said on *Q&A* last week: "Some of the best programmes overseas are reporting 40 per cent reductions in crime rates, massive increases in earning capacity of young people, greater entry into employment."

If we aimed to have the best early-childhood care and education in the world, we'd have a better chance of reducing child poverty and creating a solid base for future economic growth. True, it requires vision and the ability to think beyond the next election, but is that too much to ask?

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