

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee

Inquiry into the 2021-22 Budget Estimates - 21 June 2021 8:30am-9.20am

Early Childhood

Responses to questions on notice

EC1.

Portfolio:	Early Childhood
Witness:	Minister Ingrid Stitt
Committee member:	Mr Danny O'Brien MP
Page of transcript:	6

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, I am specifically after a number. Do you know how many children actually did not go to a kinder in the last year that should have been?

Ms LITTLE: In terms of the current participation rate, what it would have been had we not had the impact of COVID—it probably would have been around 92 per cent. The 92 to 93 per cent rate is what we have seen over recent years, so—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes. Based on the numbers in the budget paper, that is still 3000 or 4000 kids. That is what I am trying to get: have you got an actual number of how many children are not attending kinder that should be?

Ms LITTLE: We are happy to come back to you on that based on whatever the latest ABS data is. The one thing I would say is that that ABS data is an estimate, and that leads me on to my next point. In terms of the data sequence that you are pointing to, it is the case that we are below the BP3 target. The BP3 target is ambitious, and we want every child in fact to be able to go to kindergarten. The performance is—

Mr D O'BRIEN: Well, the target is only 96 per cent.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien, if you could allow Ms Little to answer the question, please.

Ms LITTLE: The performance in Victoria is strong on both an international and a national basis, but the target that has been set is an ambitious target because, as the minister has said, we do want all children, including vulnerable children, including children from newly arrived migrant communities, including children from whole range of backgrounds, to attend kindergarten.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Okay.

Ms LITTLE: So we can come back to you on the issue of the ABS data and what the range is likely to be, given the issues about what has been affected in the ABS data around that number. I will flag that there will be some elements of estimate in that because of the impact we have seen on that data through COVID and it not being as reliable last year as it would normally be around a denominator, if that makes sense.

Mr D O'BRIEN: Yes, okay. Minister, can I get to the nub of it, though. Irrespective of the denominators, COVID or not, in 2014 the budget papers show we had a 98 per cent participation rate. We are down to now 89.1 per cent. When will you commit to getting kinder participation back to the 2014 levels of 98 per cent or above?

Ms STITT: Well, we obviously take participation in kindergarten extremely seriously, and our investment in early childhood education, including the rollout of three-year-old kindergarten, includes really targeting the need for it to be universal in nature. We will be working extremely hard to lift those participation rates, particularly for children who, as I have been talking about previously, are vulnerable and stand to gain the most from universal access.

Response:

The published four-year-old kindergarten participation rate for the 2020 calendar year was 89.1%. The rate is based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) population estimates for 2020, which have limitations due to the impact of COVID-19 on international and interstate migration.

In addition to the impact on local and international migration, it is likely that some families elected to keep their children at home in 2020. In a typical year, enrolments flow throughout the year but, due to COVID-19, less children were being enrolled after the start of Term 2.

It's also important to note that as kindergarten is not compulsory, parents and caregivers make a variety of choices about their children including sending them to long day care without a kindergarten program, enrolling in family day care or keeping their child at home.

The Victorian Government is committed to doing everything we can to encourage families to enrol their child in a kindergarten program. We have invested in a range of supports to help families, including those who are vulnerable, disadvantaged and newly arrived in Australia, to engage with kindergarten. In addition to ongoing programs, a range of further supports were funded in 2020 to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on kindergarten engagement and transition to school. This included free sessional kindergarten, outreach workers to support Aboriginal children, learning from home resources, and additional funded kindergarten hours for vulnerable children in Term 4.