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Extension to Vic kindergarten fee relief welcome but not without risks

ELAA welcomes the announcement by Victorian Minister for Education, James Merlino, of an extension of sessional kindergarten fee relief into Term 3.

"The relief payment of \$230 per child for the next term will certainly help parents and give services a degree of financial stability although the effectiveness of this support will depend on COVID-19 infection rates and economic conditions trending in the right direction," said ELAA CEO David Worland.

For families who have not lost jobs or business, the extended subsidy means there's one less thing to worry about in these uncertain times but for those who have been significantly financially impacted by COVID-19 a reduced fee relief payment may be an issue depending on their situation.

"We are hoping that the reduction in the fee relief payment will be offset by families accessing the pre-existing Victorian Kindergarten Fee Subsidy scheme but not all families have a Health Care Card or meet any of the alternative KFS criteria such as identifying as being Aboriginal or holding a refugee visa," said Mr Worland.

"If families are receiving JobKeeper it appears that they do not meet the income test criteria for a low-income Health Care Card. Even half kindergarten fees may not be something these families can afford in this situation. This issue could become more widespread if economic conditions continue to worsen."

While the extension of the relief payments reduces the degree of risk for Victorian Kindergarten service providers, many will still be vulnerable should Victoria experience a 'second wave' of COVID-19.

"Right now we are experiencing a rise in infections in specific 'hotspots' in Victoria but should widespread community transmission occur we may see parents cancelling their children's places at kindergarten in large numbers or possibly just not attending for weeks on end and not paying fees," added Mr Worland. "We witnessed this during the height of the first wave. If this happens and services only receive half of their fees in the form of relief payments, but still have the same staffing and overhead costs, then they may struggle."

ELAA also welcomes the further extension of funding for extra cleaning at services during Term 3 although notes the Minister's announcement does not include any information on whether continued fee assistance will be made available to services that currently run unfunded kindergarten programs for three-year-old children.

"We will continue to advocate to the government to provide targeted assistance to those providers of unfunded three-year-old programs," said Mr Worland.

For more information or to arrange an interview with ELAA CEO, David Worland, contact James Gardener 0413 483 182

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