AT THE MURESK FORUM IN DECEMBER LAST YEAR, I SPOKE ABOUT CERTAINTY AND QUALITY FOR COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE REGION. WHILE I KNOW I’M NOT TELLING YOU ANYTHING YOU DON’T ALREADY KNOW, I THINK IT’S WORTH REPEATING WHY I THINK REED IS SO IMPORTANT FOR OUR WHEATBELT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES.

GIVEN THE GOAL OF ENSURING THAT YOUNG CHILDREN ACROSS THE WHEATBELT REGION HAVE ACCESS TO QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE, IT’S HELPFUL TO REMIND OURSELVES WHY QUALITY IS SO IMPORTANT.

IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE 21ST CENTURY, THERE WAS SOMETHING OF A REVOLUTION IN UNDERSTANDING ABOUT HOW YOUNG CHILDREN DEVELOP AND IT WAS RECOGNISED THAT INVESTMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IS AN INVESTMENT FOR LIFE.

THE HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN IS DEPENDENT ON THE ENVIRONMENTS AND EXPERIENCES THEY ARE EXPOSED TO IN THEIR HOMES AND COMMUNITY. PARTICULARLY IN THE EARLY YEARS OF LIFE, CHILDREN NEED A LOVING, SUPPORTIVE AND SAFE ENVIRONMENT TO GROW.

THE PERIOD BETWEEN BIRTH AND AGE 8 – THE EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS - IS THE FOUNDATION OF A CHILD’S FUTURE HEALTH, GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT AT SCHOOL AND THROUGHOUT LIFE. EXPERIENCES DURING THESE EARLY YEARS SHAPE BRAIN ARCHITECTURE AND HAVE A DIRECT IMPACT ON SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND LEARNING SKILLS, SO THE FIRST FIVE YEARS OF A CHILD’S LIFE REPRESENT AN IMPORTANT WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY IN A CHILD’S DEVELOPMENT.

THERE’S RECENT RESEARCH SHOWING THAT DURING THE FIRST FEW YEARS OF LIFE, APPROXIMATELY 700 NEURAL CONNECTIONS ARE FORMED EVERY SECOND. THESE CONNECTIONS ARE DICTATED BY THE INTERPLAY OF A BABY’S GENETICS, ENVIRONMENT AND EXPERIENCES, ESPECIALLY THE CHILD’S INTERACTIONS WITH ADULTS. THESE ARE THE CONNECTIONS THAT BUILD BRAIN ARCHITECTURE — THE FOUNDATION UPON WHICH ALL LATER LEARNING AND BEHAVIOR DEPEND.

ANOTHER U.S. RESEARCH STUDY LOOKED AT THE HOME ENVIRONMENTS OF CHILDREN AT AGE 4 AND AGAIN AT AGE 8, AND THEN OBSERVED THEIR BRAIN STRUCTURE IN LATE ADOLESCENCE. THEY FOUND THAT THE AMOUNT OF COGNITIVE STIMULATION AVAILABLE AT AGE 4 AFFECTED CORTICAL THICKNESS, WHICH HAS BEEN LINKED WITH INTELLIGENCE, WHEN THESE CHILDREN’S BRAINS WERE SCANNED MANY YEARS LATER. AND CONSISTENT WITH THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY EXPERIENCE, COGNITIVE STIMULATION AT AGE 8 DID NOT SHOW THE SAME EFFECTS.

RESEARCH FROM THE CENTRE FOR THE DEVELOPING CHILD AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY SHOWS THAT DIFFERENCES IN THE SIZES OF CHILDREN’S VOCABULARIES FIRST APPEAR AT 18 MONTHS OF AGE. ON AVERAGE, CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY HAVE HEARD 30 MILLION FEWER WORDS THAN THEIR MORE AFFLUENT PEERS BY THE TIME THEY TURN AGE 3. BY AGE 5, HALF OF ALL CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY ARE NOT ACADEMICALLY OR SOCIALLY READY TO START SCHOOL. NOT ONLY DO THESE CHILDREN START SCHOOL AT A DISADVANTAGE, MANY NEVER CATCH UP.

EARLY LEARNING NOT ONLY SUPPORTS THE DEVELOPMENT OF COGNITIVE, SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL AND MOTIVATIONAL SKILLS, BUT DRIVES LATER LEARNING AND ACHIEVEMENT, WHICH IN TURN CONTRIBUTES TO THE “HUMAN CAPITAL” WHICH UNDERPINS THE ECONOMIC WELL-BEING OF THE BROADER COMMUNITY. FINDINGS ALSO MAKE IT CLEAR THAT THE BETTER THE SERVICE, THE GREATER THE IMPACT.

WHEATBELT CHILDREN DESERVE THE BEST AND IN TURN THE WHEATBELT REGION AS A WHOLE WILL BENEFIT.

THE FORMAL PROCESS FOR ASSESSING QUALITY SITS WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE EDUCATION AND CARE SERVICES NATIONAL LAW AND THE NATIONAL QUALITY FRAMEWORK (NQF) RECOGNISES THAT CHILDREN LEARN FROM BIRTH. THE FRAMEWORK SETS A HIGH NATIONAL BENCHMARK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE. THE NATIONAL QUALITY STANDARD WHICH IS LINKED TO NATIONAL LEARNING FRAMEWORKS HAS SEVEN QUALITY AREAS AGAINST WHICH SERVICES ARE RATED.

PUBLICATION OF RATINGS IS ONE WAY THAT PARENTS CAN FIND OUT ABOUT THE QUALITY OF THE SERVICES AND IS INTENDED TO HELP THEM MAKE CHOICES ABOUT THE SERVICE THAT MIGHT BEST MEET THEIR CHILD’S NEEDS. WORD OF MOUTH AND COMMUNICATION VIA SOCIAL MEDIA ALSO INFORM THE DECISIONS PARENTS MAKE.

IN THE WHEATBELT REGION, PARENTS DON’T GENERALLY HAVE THE LUXURY OF CHOICE WHICH MAKES IT EVEN MORE IMPORTANT THAT EVERY SERVICE IS CONSISTENTLY OF THE HIGHEST POSSIBLE STANDARD – NOT JUST AT THE TIME OF THEIR ASSESSMENT.

HOW GOOD WOULD IT BE IF A WHEATBELT-WIDE CAMPAIGN COULD PROMOTE THE VALUE OF ECEC? THIS COULD LEAD TO A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE IMPORTANCE OF SERVICES - NOT JUST FOR CHILDREN AND PARENTS BUT ALSO FOR THE WHOLE OF OUR REGION. IT CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR INDIVIDUAL SMALL SERVICES TO GENERATE THAT KIND OF PUBLICITY, BUT THIS IS SOMETHING THAT REED WILL BE ABLE TO DO.

REED WILL IMPROVE MARKETING AND COMMUNITY AWARENESS OF SERVICES AND THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF EDUCATORS, AS WELL AS THE UNDERSTANDING OF EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING.

CERTAINTY WILL BE ENHANCED BY MANAGEMENT TOOLS SUCH AS MATCHING STAFF NUMBERS TO THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN ATTENDING ON A PARTICULAR DAY, SOUND BUDGETING AND FEE SETTING, BOTH OF WHICH ARE CHALLENGING IN SMALL COMMUNITIES, BUT ESSENTIAL FOR VIABILITY AND CERTAINTY – AND CRITICALLY - UNDERSTANDING THAT UTILISATION RATE IS THE LIFEBLOOD OF A SERVICE.

CERTAINTY THAT A SERVICE IS AVAILABLE AND OF HIGH QUALITY IS IMPORTANT FOR THE FAMILIES WHO ALREADY LIVE IN THE WHEATBELT. CERTAINTY AND QUALITY ARE ALSO IMPORTANT WHEN FAMILIES ARE DECIDING WHETHER OR NOT TO MOVE TO THE WHEATBELT FOR WORK OR BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES.

OBVIOUSLY THE ANNUAL FLUCTUATIONS IN THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN BORN IN A COMMUNITY IMPACTS ON THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN ATTENDING AN ECEC SERVICE FROM YEAR TO YEAR. THE QUALITY OF ECEC SERVICES ALSO AFFECTS SERVICE UTILISATION RATE.

REPUTATION IS DRIVEN BY QUALITY WHICH IS IN TURN A DRIVER OF UTILISATION. QUALITY STAFF AND QUALITY PROGRAMS ATTRACT PARENTS.

THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS OF EDUCATORS ARE IMPORTANT DRIVERS OF QUALITY. I’VE VISITED ECEC SERVICES THROUGHOUT THE REGION AND THERE ARE SOME AMAZING EDUCATORS. HOWEVER, IT’S WELL KNOWN THAT ONE OF THE SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES FOR SERVICES IS RECRUITING AND KEEPING SKILLED EXPERIENCED EDUCATORS.

THE 2011 CENSUS OF POPULATION AND HOUSINGIDENTIFIED THAT THE CHILDCARE WORKFORCE OF THE WHEATBELT WAS LESS EDUCATED COMPARED TO WORKERS IN GREATER PERTH WITH WORKERS MUCH LESS LIKELY TO HAVE FINISHED HIGH SCHOOL OR POST-SCHOOL EDUCATION AND WORKERS IN GREATER PERTH BEING 61.0% MORE LIKELY TO HAVE DIPLOMA AND DEGREE QUALIFICATIONS. A QUICK LOOK AT 2016 CENSUS RESULTS SUGGESTS THE SITUATION HASN’T CHANGED MUCH.

WE WANT THE EDUCATORS WHO WORK WITH OUR CHILDREN TO HAVE THE SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE THAT WILL ENABLE THEM TO PROVIDE THE VERY BEST EDUCATION AND CARE, AND WE WANT TO KEEP EXPERIENCED EDUCATORS IN OUR SERVICES. REED WILL OFFER A CAREER PATHWAY – AND WILL HOPEFULLY ENCOURAGE MORE YOUNG PEOPLE TO BECOME EDUCATORS AND NOT LEAVE THE REGION.

REED WILL PROVIDE REGION-WIDE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENRICHMENT FOR ALL STAFF THROUGH THE CLUSTER MANAGERS WHO’LL BE EXPERIENCED EDUCATORS WHO’LL BE IN REGULAR CONTACT WITH THE SERVICES IN THEIR CLUSTER AREA.

WORTHY ASPIRATIONS ARE FOR ALL OF THE SERVICES THAT BECOME A PART OF REED

* TO ACHIEVE RATINGS OF NOT JUST MEETING, BUT EXCEEDING, QUALITY STANDARDS
* TO THINK OF QUALITY NOT JUST IN TERMS OF ACEQA ASSESSMENT BUT SOMETHING THAT’S EMBEDDED IN PRACTICE EVERY DAY OF EVERY WEEK
* TO NOT HAVE TO RELY ON WAIVERS BECAUSE OF UNAVAILABILITY OF APPROPRIATELY QUALIFIED STAFF
* TO SHARE COMMON GOALS WHILE KEEPING THEIR LOCAL FLAVOUR
* TO BE WIDELY RECOGNISED FOR THEIR QUALITY AND CONTRIBUTION TO CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

REED WILL ALSO ASPIRE TO

* DEVELOP STRONG FEELINGS OF CHILDREN’S SELF WORTH AND SELF CONFIDENCE
* ENCOURAGE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT CHALLENGES CHILDREN TO EXTEND THEIR SKILLS AND TAKE CALCULATED RISKS, TO LOVE LEARNING AND BE PROUD OF THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENTS
* ENSURE AN ATMPOSPHERE OF WARMTH AND LOVE WHERE CHILDREN FEEL SECURE AND FREE TO GROW
* DISCOVER EACH CHILD’S UNIQUENESS, SPECIAL NEEDS, TALENTS AND STRENGTHS
* PROVIDE A STIMULATING ENVRONMENT
* REINFORE AND CHALLENGE EACH CHILD’S NATURAL DEVELOPMENT SOCIALLY, EMOTIONALLY AND INTELLECTUALLY

AS I SAID IN DECEMBER ‘WE ARE ONE BUT WE ARE MANY’ IS AN APT THEME SONG FOR REGIONAL EARLY EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT.

KYLIE HELGESEN

21.07.2018