a preferential treatment of such applicants over applicants who already have one or more children. The existing policy based on ex-cathedra pronouncements of so called 'experts', and on popular beliefs, should be discontinued.

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OUT-OF-SCHOOL TERRITORY: THE

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SUB-COMMITTEE, A.C.T. CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL WELFARE*

The Children's Services Sub-Committee of the Consultative Committee on Social Welfare has recently examined the adequacy of out-of-school programmes in meeting the needs of families in the ACT. The sub-committee initially consulted with several organizations that provided holiday care and after-school care programmes. Child-care workers expressed the view that there is a high level of dissatisfaction amongst users of out-of-hours care programmes. On the basis of this consultation the sub-committee discovered that:

(a) some holiday care programmes reported recent changes in enrolment patterns, especially that children who had been attending in the past were no longer doing so, and that the average age of the children attending had declined;

(b) some programmes had ceased to operate through lack of enrolments after the first two or three days;

(c) many after-school programmes had developed slowly and existing programmes were often under-utilised. Some child-care workers reported that it had taken twelve months to build up enrolments to economically viable levels in after-school care programmes; and

(d) there was an awareness by organisations that in most suburbs there were significant numbers of 5 to 12 year olds returning to empty houses after school and that there appeared to be resistance on the part of children to attending programmes, not just reluctance on the part of parents to send their children to such programmes.

In the light of this information, the sub-committee decided to carry out further consultations on out-of-school care programmes which involved both parents and children. The Executive Officer of the Children's Services Sub-Committee sought the views of schools and Parents and Citizens Associations and arranged interviews. Committee members visited and talked to both children and parents at seventy primary

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schools in Canberra about out-of-school care. Some of the schools visited had their own after-school care programmes.

Children who were attending after-school care programmes expressed a reasonable satisfaction which was highest with respect to the more informal types of programme and lowest for the more formal ones, especially where it was attached to a school. The sub-committee became aware of the high proportion of children who did not attend an after-school care programme. The majority of primary school children over the age of 9 whose parents were both working did not attend a formal programme but rather went home to an empty house. These children were happy with this arrangement; the key around their necks or waists gave them a feeling of independence. They enjoyed entering the house, finding themselves something to eat and being able to watch television for the rest of the afternoon. It was common for children to give as a reason for not attending any after-school-care programme that it did not enable them to do quiet activities, if they felt like it, especially watching television.

While it may be accepted by both teachers and parents that children in fifth and sixth grades are capable of caring for themselves at home, such is not generally the case for younger children. Yet the sub-committee found that the younger age groups also preferred care at home by an older sibling or care in somebody else's home to out-of-school care programmes. The younger children who used such programmes, like the older ones, enjoyed them, but a surprisingly high proportion of young children were not using these programmes, even if they were conveniently located and readily available. When parents were questioned about after-school care programmes many felt that there was a lack of variety for children who attended them daily. It was also felt that there was a need for activities closer to home, so as to overcome transport difficulties. Concern was expressed at the poor physical surroundings of some programmes. Parents, moreover, felt that children ten years and over had generally outgrown after-school-care programmes.

The general level of satisfaction of children with their after-school activities was not found when the sub-committee discussed with children their activities during school holidays. "Boredom" is the best way to describe the common attitude of children whether they attended a holiday programme or whether they remained at home. So the comments children made about holiday care programmes were generally negative. From just one school came the following comments: "I'd like to stay home with Mum and Dad"; "It's too far too walk"; "It costs too much, particularly when there is more than one in a family"; "I have more interesting things to do at home"; "You can't watch television at a holiday programme"; "The activities they put on don't amuse you"; "You play lots but get only a little supervision". Other negative comments were: "There's not enough sport" or "The activities are geared too much to the younger kids; there's too much discipline"; and another very common comment was "There are not enough outings". Children did, incidentally, express dissatisfaction with staying home every day of their holidays watching television. Some children who were resigned to staying home in their holidays put in a plea for television stations to take into account the fact that in holidays they have many child viewers.

When asked what sort of activities they would like to engage in during school holidays, the children were very positive. Most of their suggestions involved outings and outdoor activities, especially sport. To make their holidays more interesting children suggested ice-skating, using a mini bike track, bush walking and learning bush skills, outdoor sporting activities, more camping and horseriding. The indoor activities featuring prominently on the list of preferred activities were amusement centres, discos for children and the viewing of films. It soon became clear to the sub-committee that what children wish to do in school holidays is generally very different from what they do during school term and indeed very different from what they are able to do in most after-school care programmes at present.

Parents' attitudes to holiday care programmes focussed on over-organisation and lack of staffing, especially in relation to the younger children. Most parents thought that supervision was insufficient and that the needs of younger children were not adequately catered for in most of the programmes. Concern was also expressed that children in the same family are frequently split into separate groups and sometimes even have to go to different holiday care programmes. Some commented on the variable quality of programmes as well as their cost.

What, then, is the significance of the sub-committee's findings on the attitudes of children and parents in the ACT to out-of-school care? The evidence highlights the point that many of the current out-of-school care programmes in the ACT may not be catering for the needs of children. There are two possible policy responses. First, an effort could be made to upgrade the quality of existing programmes (for example, increasing the outings component of holiday care programmes and increasing the informality of after-school care programmes). In an effort to encourage programme administrators to be more adventurous and more quality conscious the ACT Regional Administration of the Department of Social Security conducted a one-day workshop. But it is likely that even this may not increase the utilization rate significantly. A second and more appropriate but probably more difficult policy response would be to make out-of-school care programmes, especially holiday activities, more local in their focus. Many children who are housebound, because they do not wish to be in an organised daily activity, would welcome the opportunity of an arranged outing two or three times a week. Transport problems or lack of mobility seem to be a severe handicap in increasing the variety of children's activities during the school holidays. It would be worthwhile exploring the feasibility first, of more out-of-school activities taking place in local parks, being funded by the Department of Social Security's Office of Child Care; and second, of establishing 'street mothers', as is done in some European countries, who could act as:

(a) a contact point for children whose parents are not at home when the children come home from school; and

(b) be the focal point for organising the transport to take children to some of the activities that they desire, especially during school holidays.

'Street mothers' could be paid by the Office of Child Care and they could be a relatively cost-effective method of providing some care for children who, at the moment, have no supervision at all out of school hours.