

Universal Access to 15 hours of Early Childhood Education

Frequently Asked Questions



What kindergarten services are currently provided in Victoria?

Funded kindergarten programs are delivered in Victoria in a range of settings including long day care centres, community kindergartens, children's hubs and schools. A range of organisations manage these programs including local government, kindergarten cluster managers, parent committees, schools, churches and private operators.

Kindergarten is free for:

- Four year old children who hold, or whose families hold a Health Care Card, Pensioner concession card, Department of Veterans Affairs Gold Card, Temporary Protection / Humanitarian visas 447, 481, 785 and 786, Asylum Seeker Bridging Visas A-F, Refugee and Special Humanitarian Visas 200-217, and triplets/quadruplets in the same year of kindergarten (up to 10 hours and 45 minutes per week at no cost)
- Three and four year old Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children (up to 10 hours and 45 minutes per week at no cost).
- Three year old children known to Child Protection (up to 10 hours and 45 minutes per week at no cost).



What is universal access to 15 hours of early childhood education?

All states and territories have committed to moving to 15 hours of early childhood education for children in the year before school through a National Partnership on Early Childhood Education with the Commonwealth Government, to be implemented by 2013.

The National Partnership was signed in December 2008 with the aim that:

- By 2013 every child will have access to a preschool program in the 12 months prior to full-time schooling.
- The preschool program is to be delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher, in accordance with a national early years learning framework, for 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year.
- The program will be accessible across a diversity of settings, in a form that meets the needs of parents and in a manner that ensures cost does not present a barrier to access.



Is there any flexibility in the way 15 hours can be delivered?

The commitment to 15 hours a week, 40 weeks per year can be interpreted as a requirement for a minimum of 600 program hours in total over the year. For example, a service may alternate the hours offered over 2 weeks (12 hours one week and 18 hours the next), or provide a slightly different number of hours every week for set number of weeks per year that would be equivalent to 600 program hours (such as 12.5 hours per week for 48 weeks per year or 16 hours per week for 38 weeks per year).

What is the rationale for increasing the hours of early childhood education and why is it important?

There is significant benefit for children in attending a quality early childhood education program. Increasing kindergarten hours and access to programs in a range of different early childhood settings further increases that benefit. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study in particular demonstrated this.

The implementation of universal access to early childhood education in the year before school:

- Recognises that quality early childhood education programs improve children's learning, health and behaviour with positive impacts extending into adult life.
- Enables children and families to have access to a high quality developmental program in a range of settings such as public, private and community-based kindergartens and child care services.
- Supports a successful transition to formal schooling.
- Supports planning for integrated service systems.

How will universal access to 15 hours of early childhood education be implemented in Victoria?

The achievement of universal access will require major sector transformation in Victoria and it is dependent upon strong leadership and sustainable working partnerships between the State Government, Commonwealth Government, Local Government, kindergarten service providers and early childhood staff.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), consulted with key stakeholders in developing Victoria's approach to implementation of universal access. To successfully implement the increase in kindergarten program hours by 2013, ongoing consultation, communication and engagement with key stakeholders is important.

Victoria has identified seven key areas for action. We are currently in the planning and piloting phase to understand capacity and challenges and to develop models and solutions. More information will be available over time as plans develop.

Action 1 - Municipal planning

Local government in Victoria is recognised as the key planner of children's services within each municipality, undertaking municipal early years planning as part of the corporate planning process. Councils also own a large proportion of buildings in which early childhood education programs are delivered.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) allocated a total of \$3.1 million to local government in 2009/10 to plan for where and how universal access could be implemented by 2013 and identify any anticipated barriers or enablers to implementation.

Each local government has undertaken work with local communities and service providers to assess capacity and challenges to implementing increased hours and has developed a plan to implement universal access in their community. The plans encompass early childhood education programs for four year old children delivered in a range of settings including stand alone kindergartens, schools, integrated children's centres and private and community-based long day care centres. A high level Capacity Assessment Report was submitted by each council in March 2010 and a final plan was submitted in May 2010. These plans identified the impact that universal access may have on other programs such kindergarten or activity groups for three year old children and playgroups.

The information in these plans will provide a valuable contribution to the development of Victoria's approach to implementation over the next two years.

Action 2 - Optimising available places

Starting in 2010/11, and continuing until 2013, work will be undertaken to establish and implement a planned approach to optimise service and infrastructure use for kindergarten for four year olds, activity groups for three year olds and playgroups.

Local government, as the key planner of early years services, plays a critical role in Victoria providing universal access to early childhood education. A total of \$2.4 million is available in planning grants between 2010/2011 and 2011/2012 to support this work.

A total of \$4 million is also available to councils and kindergarten cluster managers between 2010/2011 and 2011/2012 to optimise available places and support the implementation of universal access in all community-based early childhood education and care services in Victoria.

Action 3 - Access to increased hours

Pilots are being undertaken to help develop strategies for how increased hours of kindergarten can be delivered in a range of settings. The services participating in pilots are increasing the hours available to children in the year before school to 15 hours per week. Pilots commenced in 20 locations in 2010, which will continue through 2011 (Round 1). These 20 pilots are all in cluster managed kindergarten services. A further 15 pilots of 15 hour programs will commence in 2011 (Round 2). A number of these additional pilots are in stand-alone, parent-run kindergartens and are currently providing kindergarten to at least two groups of four year olds as well as running other activities from the same room.

In addition to the above pilots, Latrobe City Council is implementing the increase to 15 hours of kindergarten in a staged approach. Latrobe City Council will move 22 services in its cluster towards 15 hours of kindergarten in two stages, increasing to 12 hours in 2011 followed by an increase to 15 hours in 2012.

The funded organisations that operate the pilot sites will receive a per child grant, over and above the kindergarten per capita rate, to meet the cost of delivering the additional hours.

For children currently in receipt of a Kindergarten Inclusion Support (KIS) package and attending kindergarten programs in pilot services, the package will be adjusted to reflect the increase in kindergarten hours.

The pilots will be evaluated to inform the policy and funding criteria for the roll out of 15 hour programs.

The kindergartens taking part in the Round 1 and Round 2 pilots are listed at: www.education.vic.gov.au/earlylearning/universalaccess.

Action 4 - Innovation: Trialling new approaches

Innovative models of 15 hours of early childhood education program delivery will be trialled.

Models providing wrap-around care through access to the approved Child Care Benefit (CCB) in stand alone kindergartens will be trialled jointly with the Commonwealth to provide a national evidence base, available for application in all jurisdictions, for the implementation of universal access in subsequent years of reform. Discussions between Victoria and the Commonwealth are continuing with the aim that the trials will commence in 2012.

The models will inform the state-wide roll-out of universal access in 2013. Further information will be provided as the models are developed.

Action 5 - Improving Access for vulnerable children

The Universal Access commitment includes a target of 95 per cent participation for all children in quality Early Childhood Education in the year before school. Victoria already has a high participation rate but we know that certain groups of children are less likely to attend a kindergarten program.

Barriers to kindergarten access for vulnerable children have been identified¹ and include the cost of accessing services, inaccessible locations and lack of publicity about services. Strategies will be put in place to support the inclusion of all children in 15 hour early childhood education programs.

Funding has been provided to DEECD regions to support the implementation of strategies to increase the participation of disadvantaged and vulnerable children in early childhood education programs.

In addition, municipal planning for universal access undertaken by councils includes proposed strategies to increase participation for children experiencing disadvantage.

Communications and professional development tools developed as part of the *Improving access to kindergarten for children experiencing disadvantage* project funded by the Commonwealth Government in 2008/2009 support inclusive practice and promote increased participation in kindergarten. These resources, including the *I Love Kindergarten* DVD, have been disseminated widely to support increased participation and are available at: www.education.vic.gov.au/kindergarten/brochures.

Early Start Kindergarten provides vulnerable children and children at risk of disadvantage; including three year old children known to Child Protection, and three year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with access to a kindergarten program for free.

For information on Early Start Kindergarten go to: www.education.vic.gov.au/ecsmanagement/careankinder/earlystart

Action 6 - Infrastructure

The implementation of universal access for all children in the year prior to schooling will require some centres to undertake infrastructure changes.

In July 2010, 23 services shared in \$4.6 million in Renovation and Refurbishment Grants (Stage 2 – Universal Access to 15 hours of Preschool Education) of up to \$200,000 each to assist them to increase their infrastructure capacity to deliver universal access.

More information on Children's Capital Grants can be found at www.education.vic.gov.au/ecsmanagement/funding/capitalprogram.

Action 7 - Workforce

The *Victorian Early Childhood Workforce Strategy* was launched in November 2009. The strategy supports the development of a workforce that can respond to current challenges in early childhood including universal access. The following key initiatives of the strategy will assist in achieving universal access through supporting the recruitment and development of a greater number of early childhood educators: *Employment Incentives for Early Childhood Educators* enable licensed children's services to advertise the availability of financial incentives for early childhood teachers and Diploma-qualified staff to attract early childhood educators to take up work in hard-to-staff positions, including in long day care.

The *Early Childhood Qualifications Fund* supports existing early childhood educators and Primary teachers to upgrade or attain an early childhood qualification. The level and type of support will vary according to the qualification undertaken. At the completion of their qualification recipients will be required to work in a licensed children's service for a minimum period of time.

For more information about the above initiatives and other incentives visit: www.education.vic.gov.au/careers/earlychildhood or contact the Early Childhood Strategy Division via phone on 1300 651 662 or email at early.years.workforce@edumail.vic.gov.au

What is the timing of the implementation of universal access to early childhood education?

It is expected that the majority of services will begin delivering increased hours in 2013.

In preparation for universal access services should be speaking with regional children's services advisers, local councils, kindergarten cluster managers and peak bodies such as Kindergarten Parents Victoria (KPV) and Community Child Care. Information and updates will also be available on the DEECD website at www.education.vic.gov.au/earlylearning/universalaccess

What does universal access to 15 hours of early childhood education mean for kindergarten services?

From 2013 Government funding for kindergarten programs will be for 15 hour programs.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development will be working with organisations such as Kindergarten Parents Victoria, the Australian Education Union, the Municipal Association of Victoria, Community Child Care, kindergarten cluster managers and private child care providers to develop possible models for the delivery of a 15 hour early childhood education program.

¹ Breaking Cycles, Building Futures, 2004, Prepared for the Department of Human Services and the Brotherhood of St Laurence Melbourne, Victoria, Australia at www.beststart.vic.gov.au and www.bsl.org.au

What does universal access mean for teachers?

The Government recognises the benefits to children that come from participating in an early childhood education program delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher.

More early childhood teachers will be needed to achieve increased kindergarten program hours by 2013. Further planning will tell us more about this.

Victoria's primary focus is to meet the substantial challenge in recruiting or developing the additional early childhood teachers required to increase program hours by 2013.

What does universal access mean for kindergarten cluster managers?

Kindergarten Cluster Management is promoted as an option for managing community-based kindergartens where parent committees of management so choose. The Department will continue to promote kindergarten cluster management as a strategy to build a stronger service network for children and families.

Kindergarten cluster management services are based on partnerships with parents, the community and all levels of government and are part of strong local networks and effective local planning.

Kindergarten cluster managers are particularly well placed to implement universal access and to participate in the trials and pilots of universal access to inform the state-wide rollout.

What funding will be available to deliver the additional hours?

The Commonwealth Government has committed \$970m over five years for this reform, including \$210.6m for Victoria.

The Pilots that have commenced in a range of settings, including some in small rural areas, will help to understand the cost of the additional hours and inform the state-wide roll-out.

The National Partnership on Early Childhood provides for a review to be undertaken at the 18 month point of implementation and is now underway. The review will consider the progress made by Victoria against the National Partnership and will specifically address the adequacy of funding and timelines for implementation.

Will all services be providing increased kindergarten program hours for four year old children in 2013?

All states and territories have committed to moving to 15 hours (or 600 program hours in total over a year) of early childhood education through a National Partnership on Early Childhood Education with the Commonwealth Government, to be implemented by 2013.

What will happen to other early childhood services that are delivered in the same locations as kindergarten, such as kindergarten/activity groups for three year old children and playgroups?

The importance of maintaining existing early childhood programs, including programs for three year old children and playgroups whilst implementing universal access is understood.

Funding support is available for three year old children at risk of disadvantage to attend kindergarten. Three year old Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children and three year old children known to Child Protection can attend up to 10 hours and 45 minutes of kindergarten at no cost.

Municipal planning has assisted the local community, local government and the State Government to understand the impact that increased kindergarten program hours will have on other early childhood services such as kindergarten/activity groups for three year old children and playgroups and has provided possible strategies to respond where necessary.

The pilots of 15 hour programs will also inform the strategies available to minimise the impact of universal access on other services. Funding of \$4 million has been made available to local councils and kindergarten cluster managers over the next two years to assist community-based services overcome the barriers to implementing universal access.

What is likely to be the impact on cost to families?

Universal access will be delivered in all funded kindergartens by 2013, in a form that meets the needs of parents and in a manner that ensures cost does not present a barrier to access.

The pilots of universal access to 15 hour kindergarten programs have been designed to help determine the cost of the additional hours and inform the state-wide roll out of universal access.

Can parents choose to send their child for fewer than 15 hours a week or fewer than 600 hours in total over a year?

Early Childhood Education is not compulsory. Parents will continue to have the choice whether or not their child will attend the hours offered by their child's early childhood education provider.