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Subject
Advisory letter on provisions for young children

The President of the House of Representatives
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Dear Madam President,

Early childhood education (ECE) has for many years proved to be a successful means of promoting equality of opportunity in education in the Netherlands. The preschool phase is aimed at children aged between 2.5 and four years, and promotes their development in a number of areas. It is provided in preschool playgroups or childcare facilities, and can also be referred to as preschool provision. It is followed by the 'foundation stage', in the first two years of primary school. ECE is intended for children with (a risk of) an educational disadvantage. Special lessons for children in childcare facilities or at school help them learn through play to acquire a range of skills in language, emergent numeracy, motor skills and social skills, all of which give them a solid foundation for their primary school career. In this letter the Education Council calls for ECE to be guaranteed and strengthened.

Request for advice

There is currently a great deal happening regarding the provision for young children, for example the new Development Programme for Young Children (*Ontwikkeling jonge kind*) announced by the government in the summer of 2023, as well as a proposal to reform the funding system for childcare. Against this backdrop, the Dutch Parliament requested the Education Council to publish an advisory report addressing the question: *How can continuity in the provision for young children and education be achieved in a way which contributes to equal educational opportunities?*

Advice: Guarantee and strengthen ECE

The Council's advice is to continue to guarantee ECE and strengthening it in specific areas, including in the context of the reform of the funding system. This will enable all children to enter the third year of primary school properly prepared and equipped. That in turn will contribute to equal educational opportunity.¹

A further explanation of this advice is presented below. First, the Council addresses the key contribution made by ECE to equality of opportunity at primary school. The Council then draws attention to four problem areas within ECE which the government needs to address. This is followed by five recommendations for resolving those issues.

¹ See (in Dutch) Jepma, Y., & Vander Heyden, K. (2022). *De impact van voorschoolse educatie*. Accessed at: <https://www.onderwijskennis.nl/kennisbank/de-impact-van-voorschoolse-educatie>; Leseman, P., & Veen, A. (eds.) (2022). *Het pre-COOL cohort tot en met groep 8. Ontwikkeling van kinderen en relatie met kwaliteit in de voor- en vroegschoolse periode*. Amsterdam: Kohnstamm Instituut.

ECE is a successful means of promoting equal opportunity

Children who grow up in less favourable socioeconomic circumstances often need a little extra help to ensure they get off to a good start in primary school. The Education Council believes it is the government's responsibility to offer good provision to these children and so promote equal opportunity. ECE meets this need.

Equal opportunity

To ensure children get off to a good start in the third year of primary school, they are expected to have attained a certain level of development in language, numeracy, socio-emotional and motor skills.² For example, teachers assume that every child entering primary school year 3 is able to count to 20. However, for children growing up in less favourable circumstances, it is substantially more difficult to meet this (implicit) norm.³ More often than others, these children begin their primary school career with a smaller vocabulary and less well developed arithmetic skills than the school assumes.⁴ They often find it (virtually) impossible to make up the gap relative to their primary school peers who have grown up in a more favourable socioeconomic setting. Even worse, the gap between different groups of children at the start of primary education often tends to become entrenched and even to increase.⁵ The Council believes it is the government's responsibility to offer good provision to children from a socioeconomic background which means they need a little extra help to ensure they get off to a good start in year 3 of primary school. ECE is such a provision.⁶

Specific target group policy

It is known from international research that equality of opportunity at the start of primary education can be improved by offering a rich play-learning environment to specific groups of children in early childhood.⁷ In the Netherlands, ECE offers such a rich environment. The preliminary cohort study on pupils' school careers (pre-COOL) mapped the impact of ECE and confirmed that education programmes for children growing up in less favourable socioeconomic circumstances help narrow the gap between different groups of children, provided those programmes are of good quality and stimulate the children's language and cognitive skills.

² Artikel 5 Besluit basisvoorwaarden kwaliteit voorschoolse educatie; Ledoux, G. (2003). Ontwikkelingen in het basisonderwijs. In W. Meijnen (ed.), *Onderwijsachterstanden in basisscholen*. Antwerpen-Apeldoorn: Garant.

³ Roeleveld, J., Driessen, G., Van der Veen, I., & Ledoux, G. (2015). Ontwikkeling van onderwijsachterstanden in het basisonderwijs. In H. van der Werfhorst (ed), *Een kloof van alle tijden. Verschillen tussen lager en hoger opgeleiden in werk, cultuur en politiek*. Amsterdam: AUP.

⁴ See e.g. Zumbuehl, M., & Dillingh, R. (2020). *Ongelijkheid van het jonge kind*. Den Haag: CPB.

⁵ Leseman, P., & Veen, A. (2022). Het pre-COOL cohort tot en met groep 8. Ontwikkeling van kinderen en relatie met kwaliteit in de voor- en voerschoolse periode. Amsterdam: Kohnstamm Instituut. See also sources referenced there.

⁶ Boland, A. (2023). *Kansrijke aanpak: Werken met een vve-programma*. Onderwijskennis.nl (NRO); Hooge, E., Waslander, S., & Denessen, E. (2023). Kansengelijkheid in het onderwijs: sturen op een betwist ideaal. In T. Overmans, M. Noordegraaf & M. Honingh (2023), *Maatschappelijke bestuurskunde: Hoe verbindende bestuurskundigen (kunnen) inspelen op maatschappelijke vraagstukken*. Amsterdam: Boombestuurskunde, 1-351; Leseman, P., & Veen, A. (2022). *Het pre-COOL cohort tot en met groep 8. Ontwikkeling van kinderen en relatie met kwaliteit in de voor- en voerschoolse periode*. Amsterdam: Kohnstamm Instituut.

⁷ See Jepma, Y., & Vander Heyden, K. (2022). *De impact van voorschoolse educatie*. Accessed (in Dutch) at: <https://www.onderwijskennis.nl/kennisbank/de-impact-van-voorschoolse-educatie>; Zumbuehl, M., & Dillingh, R. (2020). *Ongelijkheid van het jonge kind*. For a more detailed overview of the impact of preschool education (including in the shorter term), see: Jepma, & Vander Heyden, 2022.

Reform of funding system

The Education Council believes that a newly designed childcare funding structure must continue to include a policy focusing on specific groups. This will enable the government to ensure that children without rich play-learning resources at home are equipped for a good start at primary school. It is however important to ensure that this policy is implemented in a way that does not lead to stigmatisation. Parents who are offered ECE for their children must not be given the erroneous impression that their own education level, income or cultural background implies that they are not capable of bringing up their children properly. It is important to be aware that Dutch education acknowledges and values the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of Dutch children from privileged milieus more than those of children from less privileged settings.⁸

Problem areas within ECE

The Education Council recommends that the government continues to provide guarantees for ECE and to strengthen it in specific areas. The Council identifies four key problem areas on which it believes the government should focus: (1) differences between municipalities in reaching the target group; (2) the alignment between preschool education and primary education; (3) the quality of ECE in a number of specific areas; and (4) collaboration between preschool providers and primary schools.

Differences between municipalities in reaching the target group

The Council notes that there are differences between municipalities in how successful they are at reaching all children who would benefit from preschool education. At present, central government draws up a framework of guidelines, and local authorities are then free to devise their own criteria to define the target group. This can give rise to differences between municipalities, with no possibility of national monitoring of the extent to which the target group is effectively reached. On average, around 80-85% of the target group for ECE is reached nationally,⁹ but this figure masks wider differences between individual municipalities. Moreover, the statistics suggest a reduction in the number of preschool places available:¹⁰ almost a quarter of municipalities had insufficient preschool education places available in 2021 to accommodate all children who would benefit from it, with moderately urbanised municipalities the most likely to have insufficient places available.¹¹

Even where there are enough places, this still does not guarantee that all parents will be reached. Some parents are not aware that their children are eligible for preschool provision.

⁸ Many factors are at play in educational inequality, both personal (how familiar parents are with what is expected of them, or how able they are to stimulate their children), and political choices (e.g. parents suffering stress because of poor housing conditions, poverty or their residency status).

⁹ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap (2023). *Uitwerking CA-maatregelen voor- en vroegschoolse educatie: start Programma Ontwikkeling jonge kind*. Kamerbrief, 4 July. Den Haag: OCW.

¹⁰ Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2022). *Technisch rapport jaarrapportage vve/lea 2021*. Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs.

¹¹ Ibid.

Others deliberately choose not to send their child to a preschool facility, for example because they disagree with the pedagogical philosophy, because the costs are an obstacle or because of practical issues, for example the fact that many preschool facilities do not offer full-day provision.¹²

Primary school education is not aligned with preschool education

A second problem area that warrants government attention concerns the alignment between preschool and primary school education. The teaching provided in the first two years of primary school is by no means always aligned with what is provided in preschool education. This leads to overlap and gaps in the programmes. The teaching provided in the foundation stage of primary school to children who have completed preschool education then does not match their skills, making it harder for them to catch up with their peers.¹³ The effectiveness of ECE stands or falls on the way it is implemented. It is key that teachers in the early years of primary school align adequately with the developmental level of every child and tailor their teaching accordingly.

Quality of ECE could be strengthened in some areas

The third issue relates to quality. Research shows that many things are going well, but also that ECE needs to be strengthened in some areas.¹⁴ The quality of preschool education is generally good, though it could be tailored rather better to the children's development.¹⁵ When it comes to the foundation stage of ECE, the approach taken by primary school teachers could be strengthened.¹⁶ Teachers themselves say the class sizes are too large for them to guide the children's play in a way that provides a positive stimulus for their development.¹⁷ The Council notes that primary school teachers in year groups 1 and 2 do not always feel adequately equipped; for example, while the current primary school teacher training programmes do incorporate specialisations focusing on young children, they largely or entirely ignore all kinds of aspects of working with ECE pupils, such as how to deal with multilingualism.

Conditions for collaboration between preschool facilities and primary schools often not met

The fourth problem area identified by the Council is that the conditions for good collaboration between preschool provision and primary education are often not met. Collaboration and coordination are by no means automatic everywhere, even where the two provisions are located near to each other or even share a location, as in an 'Integrated Child Centre' (IKC). The Council notes that preschool providers and primary school teachers have too little

¹² Den Blanken, M., & Van der Vegt, A.L. (2007). *Voorschoolse educatie: waarom wel, waarom niet? Overwegingen van ouders om hun kinderen al dan niet te laten deelnemen aan VVE-programma's*. Utrecht: Sardes/FORUM, Instituut voor multiculturele ontwikkeling.

¹³ Jepma, I.J., & Vander Heyden, K. (2022). *Verbeteren start in het basisonderwijs*. Utrecht: Sardes.

¹⁴ Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2023). *Kwaliteit voorschoolse educatie 2022*. Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs; Leseman, P., & Veen, A. (2022). *Het pre-COOL cohort tot en met groep 8. Ontwikkeling van kinderen en relatie met kwaliteit in de voor- en voerschoolse periode*. Amsterdam: Kohnstamm Instituut.

¹⁵ Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2023). *Kwaliteit voorschoolse educatie 2022*. Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs.

¹⁶ Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2020). *Kwaliteit van voor- en voerschoolse educatie in Nederland 2019*. Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs.

¹⁷ See also Van de Grift, B. (2020). *De kleutervriendelijke school*. Helmond: OMJS.

opportunity to work together to coordinate what children need and what they are offered. This applies both at group level (e.g. coordination of programme content and how it is delivered) and at individual level (seamless transfer of children). While there are also good examples of intensive collaboration, there is often a lack of coordination or the coordination depends on specific individuals within organisations. That creates a vulnerable situation.

Recommendations

In this section the Council makes a number of recommendations for guaranteeing and strengthening ECE, first focusing on guaranteeing the provision and the offering three recommendations for strengthening it.

Focus efforts on reaching the target group

To guarantee the provision of preschool education in every municipality, the Council first recommends continuation of structural funding for every municipality. In its recently launched Development Programme for Young Children, the government will align with the existing National Liveability and Safety Programme (NPLV). This will release additional funding for 20 urban focus areas.¹⁸ While this is a good step, it is also key to ensure adequate funding of preschool education in municipalities which lie outside these focus areas.

Not all children who would benefit from preschool education currently participate in it. To reach the target group better, local authorities need to listen to the obstacles faced by parents. Obstacles relating to pedagogical philosophy, costs or other practical matters could for example be identified and incorporated in the design of the preschool provision.

Second, the government needs to provide a uniform definition of the target group that is eligible for ECE. Establishing national rather than local (and variable) criteria would make it abundantly clear who is eligible for ECE and who is not. Uniform criteria would also make it possible to monitor at national level how well the target group is being reached. The national criteria should be periodically reviewed and adjusted as necessary in the light of changing social and demographic trends.

A uniform definition of the target group would reduce differences between municipalities and make it easier to determine the effective reach. It is important when formulating and revising the criteria that parents, child healthcare centres, preschool staff and primary school teachers are all involved.

Develop national targets for the provision of play-learning activities in ECE

It is important that preschool providers and primary schools are well aligned and that there is continuity in the development of the ECE target group. The Council therefore recommends setting national targets for the range of play-learning activities in ECE and giving these a

¹⁸ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap (2023). Uitwerking CA-maatregelen voor- en vroegschoolse educatie: start Programma Ontwikkeling jonge kind. Kamerbrief, 4 July. Den Haag: OCW.

legal basis in the Primary Education Act. That would be more in line with the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science for the quality of ECE. These targets should equip preschool staff and primary school teachers at local level to tailor their activities to their children. Targets which apply for the whole of ECE would enable preschool providers and primary schools to avoid gaps or duplication in what they offer.

The legislative and regulatory framework should provide a basis for the development of national aims or objectives for play-learning activities in ECE. In preschool education, for example, consideration needs to be given to legal standards for programme content which align with the attainment targets for primary education. The play-learning aims should encompass aims relating to what (pre)schools should offer students, aims relating to children's efforts and experiences and aims relating to educational outcomes.¹⁹ These aims should match the emotional, cognitive and motor development of young children. The provision could then be tailored further at local level. The Council also underlines the importance of close linkage with knowledge from scientific research and knowledge from the field. This should prevent preschool staff and primary school teachers adopting an overly 'formal' approach to young children simply because a programme has to be completed. Young children learn through play, and teaching staff must align with this.

Place external supervision of ECE quality with the Inspectorate of Education

The quality of ECE must be supervised on behalf of the government. The development of national targets for play-learning provision also calls for clear external supervision. Currently, primary responsibility for the quality of preschool education lies with local authorities, with annual supervision of basic quality conditions in the hands of municipal health services.²⁰ In exceptional cases, the Inspectorate of Education also supervises preschool education.²¹ The supervision of the quality of preschool education is thus fragmented. The Council recommends that the basis for setting quality standards for preschool education be anchored in the Primary Education Act rather than the Child Care Act. Primary responsibility for the external supervision of preschool education would then shift from local authorities to the Inspectorate of Education, which would carry out its supervisory task on the basis of a single legislative framework.²²

¹⁹ Agirdag, O., Biesta, G., Bosker, R., Kuiper, R., Nieveen, N., Raijmakers, M., & Van Tartwijk, J. (2021). *Doel en ruimte. Tussenadvies 2 Wetenschappelijke Curriculumcommissie*. Amersfoort: Curriculumcommissie. In this report a distinction is made between three 'types' of aims. One are educational outcomes, which specify what students are supposed to learn or achieve. A second focuses on aims that describe students' efforts and experiences (e.g. as educators, we cannot force our students to enjoy reading, but we can agree that it is a good idea that we ask from all students that they read a number of works of fiction. We require the effort.) A third type of educational aims focuses on what schools should offer students, which has to do with providing specific educational opportunities, such as a broad curriculum that includes the arts, physical education, outdoor education, and so on.

²⁰ The Inspectorate of Education (Inspectie van het Onderwijs) provides overarching supervision of the tasks for local authorities stemming from legislation and regulations in relation to child care and policy on educational disadvantage, including in ECE.

²¹ Art. 15j Wet op het onderwijstoezicht; Inspectie van het Onderwijs (2021). *Onderzoekskader 2021 voor het toezicht op de voorschoolse educatie en het primair onderwijs*. Utrecht: Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 64.

²² See also Onderwijsraad (2015). *Een goede start voor het jonge kind*. Den Haag: Onderwijsraad.

Invest in improving the quality of ECE

To improve the quality of specific aspects of ECE, the Council recommends that, in line with the Development Programme for Young Children, the primary focus should be on strengthening the professionalism of preschool staff and primary school teachers. Much progress has already been made here recently, and the quality has improved accordingly. However, staff must be given permanent training and professionalisation opportunities, focusing on what the target group needs and on how they can strengthen their approach to delivering ECE. Professionalisation activities must be of good quality and sufficient scope.²³ Preschool staff and primary school teachers should also engage in (some of) the professionalisation activities together.

The attention for training starts with the initial training; in general, a higher level of initial staff training leads to better results.²⁴ The training must focus on strengthening teaching methods in general, including dealing with multilingualism.

Another key condition for improving quality is the ongoing involvement of children's families and the community, both in the delivery and in the design, monitoring, evaluation and adjustment of policy. Alignment between the way a child is stimulated at home and what happens in preschool facilities and at school is known to have a positive impact. Research shows that a combination of family-focused and institute-focused programmes is the most effective.²⁵ The government resources provided to local authorities to facilitate the use of family-focused programmes align with this.²⁶

Improving the quality of ECE also requires attention for monitoring, evaluation and adjustment of policy at different levels. It is important that the government monitors and evaluates the use and effectiveness of programmes and policy, for example in order to determine why certain types of support have or have not proved useful and to adjust policy accordingly. The Council also believes it is important that childcare organisations, schools and professionals should themselves devote structural attention to the evaluation and adjustment of programmes and policy plans.

Hold school boards to their responsibility to collaborate

The Council notes that collaboration between preschool providers and primary schools does not always happen automatically. The Council therefore advises the government to hold school boards and childcare organisations to their responsibility for embedding collaboration. Together they must ensure that contacts are established and maintained between preschool and primary school professionals.

²³ See e.g. Van Veen, K., Zwart, R.C., Meirink, J.A., & Verloop, N. (2010). *Professionele ontwikkeling van leraren: een reviewstudie naar effectieve kenmerken van professionaliseringsinterventies van leraren*. Leiden/Utrecht: ICLON/Expertisecentrum Leren van Docenten. <http://www.nro.nl/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/PROO+Professionele+ontwikkeling+van+leraren+Klaas+van+Veen+ea.pdf>

²⁴ Onderwijsraad (2015). *Een goede start voor het jonge kind*. Den Haag: Onderwijsraad.

²⁵ OECD (2012). *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*. OECD Publishing; Sardes (2015). *Jonge kinderen zijn de toekomst*. Utrecht: Sardes.

²⁶ Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap (2023). *Uitwerking CA-maatregelen voor- en vroegschoolse educatie: start Programma Ontwikkeling jonge kind*. Kamerbrief, 4 July. Den Haag: OCW.

To ensure continuity throughout the ECE journey, collaboration between preschool and primary school professionals is essential in ensuring that they can coordinate their activities and that primary schools can build on the preschool provision. The Council therefore takes a positive view of the joint training and coaching of preschool and primary school professionals as proposed by the Minister in the Development Programme for Young Children. If professionals from preschool facilities and the foundation years of primary school undertake joint professionalisation activities, they will be able to align their vision, programme content and working methods. Joint training and coaching will also improve children's transition from preschool to primary school. Preschool and primary school teachers interviewed by the Council feel that this transition is currently a weak point. They believe it should be more objective (e.g. by making more use of observation data), with agreements on how a child's profile is established and what is subsequently done with that information. The Council also stresses the importance of professional learning communities in relation to young children. Various educational partners (preschool and primary school teachers, but also local authorities and teacher training providers, for example) would then share, improve and evaluate together what works and why. That would also strengthen continuity.

In conclusion

This advisory letter from the Council looks at early childhood education (ECE), an important provision aimed at creating greater equality of opportunity in education. The Council recommends that this provision be guaranteed and strengthened, and puts forward a number of recommendations for achieving this. The government's recently launched Development Programme for Young Children is also aimed at strengthening ECE. The Council underscores the importance of taking actions within the context of that Programme, and sets out where it believes the government needs to increase its focus, including with regard to reforming the funding system. The Council believes that properly functioning ECE forms an indispensable link in increasing equality of opportunity within education.

Yours sincerely,

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Chair

M. van Leeuwen
Secretary-Director