

Improving sustainability in rural kindergarten services



Kindergartens in rural areas play an important role for local communities and the early education sector in Victoria. This resource aims to provide rural service providers with practical actions to address common challenges faced by rural services, to optimise financial performance and remain financially sustainable.

Rural services throughout Victoria provide children with access to high quality early childhood education, however they commonly face unique and significant operating challenges in remaining financially viable.

This resource aims to provide rural service providers (particularly Committees of Management and Early Years Managers) and educational staff with practical actions which can be taken to address common challenges, to optimise financial performance and remain financially sustainable.

Geographic isolation

Many kindergartens in Victoria operate in geographically isolated areas, meaning considerable transportation time or effort may be required to reach these services for children, parents, and educational staff. Geographic isolation can present a number of challenges for kindergarten service providers and educational staff including:

- attracting qualified educational staff prepared to live, travel to, and/or work in a rural community
- obtaining relief staff at short notice
- developing session schedules to meet family travel requirements
- developing peer networks to allow the development of staff.

Rural services will often establish close working partnerships with kindergartens in surrounding communities, with service providers and educational staff meeting regularly to share expertise. Some kindergartens will share educational staff, or combine with another kindergarten or primary school, where practical, to create a kindergarten network. These initiatives can help to reduce some of the burden associated with geographic isolation.

Service providers may also be eligible to receive a travel allowance to help funded kindergarten programs in rural areas attract qualified early childhood teachers. This is available if the teacher (including relief teachers) delivers a funded kindergarten program at two or more services, where one of the services is funded at the rural rate. Further information is available in the Kindergarten Funding Guide which is available on the Department of Education and Training (the Department) website.

Kindergarten size

Most rural kindergartens are generally smaller in size and operate out of a single kindergarten room, with a single program offered for each of the three year old and four year old programs. There is often limited opportunity or benefit for kindergartens to increase in size and capacity due to relatively smaller population sizes in some rural communities. The size of the kindergarten can present a number of challenges for service providers and educational staff including:

- ensuring financial performance (including affordable parent fees) and viability with constrained enrolment levels

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- purchasing new equipment, resources and consumables, with limited financial resources
- providing full time employment to educational staff, with fewer number of sessions
- accommodating all children, where demand exceeds approved capacity
- potential limitations with parent fee setting.

There are a number of operational levers available to service providers which can assist to maximise enrolments and optimise available resources for the benefit of the kindergarten. For example, if enrolments for an age group exceed the number of approved places for the kindergarten, then the introduction of a rotational session structure can cater for additional enrolments, whereby children are allocated into smaller groups which are combined together on a particular day to create a larger group. Alternatively, if enrolments for either three year old, four year old, or both aged programs are low, then combining three and four year old children into a single multi-age group¹ can allow the kindergarten to accommodate all children, rather than turn families away, while making the most efficient use of staff and resources.

The ability of a service to accommodate three year old children, as well as children eligible for Early Start Kindergarten programs, in either their own three year old program, or in a combined multi-age group is extremely important - research shows an early start and more time at kindergarten prepares children, particularly children from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds, for success at school and has a positive impact later in life.

Local community profile

The diversity of local communities throughout Victoria continues to change, and a 'one size fits all' kindergarten program generally no longer meets the needs of each community. Communities today have families with varying levels of socio-economic advantage and household income, which means that the needs of children and families can differ and become more complex. These factors can create additional pressures and challenges for kindergartens and their staff in the form of:

- children with complex needs requiring additional and/or inclusive support and alternative teaching methods
- financial implications as kindergarten fees may not be affordable for the whole community
- supporting children learning English as a second language, or with diverse cultural or linguistic backgrounds
- adequate parent and community engagement and participation.

Kindergarten programs today are required to be flexible, and most importantly, be inclusive to increase their reach to the whole community. There are numerous ways in which a rural kindergarten may adapt to better meet the needs of the local community, including tailoring its program to meet the specific needs of families. Kindergarten service providers in rural areas can also consider additional kindergarten service offerings to support the inclusion of all children and the needs of the local community.

Additional service offerings in a kindergarten – integrating children, families and communities

Additional offerings which service providers can consider to further support local community needs include:

- **Supported play groups** allow children with complex needs and their parents the opportunity to attend a kindergarten program with children and families facing similar challenges. Such programs are supported by an educator specialising in inclusion support.
- **Occasional care** provides flexible child care for children when parents have other commitments. Service providers may consider occasional care as 'wrap around' care to kindergarten sessions and may also extend this care to children below kindergarten age, allowing them the opportunity to be introduced to the kindergarten, as well as give parents the opportunity to meet other parents.
- **Parent and community information sessions** allow parents, as well as the broader community, an opportunity to receive information on topical early education and development issues at a session presented by an expert.
- **Extended hours or wrap-around care** allow children to remain at the kindergarten in an early childhood program before or after the formal kindergarten session, providing parents the flexibility to attend to other commitments.
- **Holiday or vacation programs** allow children from the local area to attend a holiday or vacation care program as an extension of the existing kindergarten program. This program is often made available to children of mixed ages and may combine children from other local kindergartens onto the one kindergarten site.

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Kindergarten inclusion support packages are available from the Department and provide assistance for kindergartens to build capacity and support the access and participation of children with disability and/or complex needs. Preschool Field Officers, Koorie Engagement Support Officers, and Koorie Preschool Assistants are also available to kindergartens to provide consultative support and resources to support inclusion of Aboriginal children, as well as children with additional needs. Additional information regarding inclusion support packages is available on the Department website, or by contacting your relevant Departmental Regional Office.

Kindergarten services should aim to be proactive in socialising, interacting, engaging, and anticipating the needs of the community. For example, participating in the development of the early years strategy for the local region can help ensure that service planning and provision is optimised, and the benefits of early childhood education and kindergarten are promoted within the community. Working collaboratively with the local community including other local education services, such as kindergartens and local primary schools, can assist to increase local participation, community profile, and awareness of the kindergarten.

Rural kindergarten funding

The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring all eligible children can access kindergarten programs delivered by qualified early childhood teachers and educators in the year before school, and supporting families to understand and engage in children's learning. The Department provides a range of funding with the aim of improving service delivery, identifying vulnerability and promoting participation, particularly among children that require additional support, such as children with a disability and Aboriginal children.

Ensuring that the kindergarten service is accessing all available funding will assist to optimise service provision and financial sustainability of the kindergarten. All potential funding sources and grant opportunities should be explored, where eligible and practical to do so.

From 2017, the Department is providing a new base level of funding for rural kindergarten services, which increases funding at all enrolment points for rural kindergartens and provides a predictable level of funding to minimise the impact of year on year enrolment fluctuations.

The Kindergarten Funding Guide, published by the Department, should be consulted for all available funding and grants relevant to rural kindergarten services.

¹ A comprehensive outline of multi-age program is available in the resource titled Multi-age Groups: working with mixed age groups available at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/regulation/mixedagegroup.pdf>



Service planning

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