FACT SHEET: LOWERING THE PREP STARTING AGE BY SIX MONTHS

WHAT IS BEING PROPOSED?
As part of the review of the Education Act, the Government is proposing to lower the compulsory school starting age (for Prep) by six months, from 5 years to 4 years and 6 months.

The proposed change to the school starting age will apply to children born in 2016 and means that beginning in 2021, a child who is 4 years and 6 months by the start of the year must be enrolled in Prep or be provided with registered home education.

Children will have access to Kindergarten up to six months earlier. Kindergarten in Tasmania is preschool and is not compulsory.

WHY IS THIS CHANGE IMPORTANT?
Evidence shows that quality early learning has significant benefits for our children that flow throughout their schooling years and later life.

While the research is clear that all children benefit from quality early learning experiences, this is especially so for those from a low socio-economic background. Providing more options for families in rural and remote areas who currently may have limited or no access to early learning education is also important.

Simply – this proposal is about equity in education and creating more options for families by offering every Tasmanian child access to quality early learning sooner.

WHAT DO OTHER STATES AND TERRITORIES DO?
We know that the minimum age in which a child can be enrolled in Prep across Australia ranges from 4 years and 5 months to 5 years.

Tasmanian children should have the same opportunities to participate as children in other States and Territories. Lowering the minimum school starting age will bring Tasmania closer to the average of other States and Territories. This means Tasmanian children will be about the same age in the same grade as children in other States and Territories.

WHAT CHOICES WILL BE AVAILABLE FOR MY CHILD IN THE YEAR BEFORE PREP?
Changes to the school starting age will provide you with greater choice for early learning options for your children. You may choose for your child to be enrolled in Kindergarten or remain in an education and care setting/service or remain at home until your child reaches compulsory age or a mixture of all these options based on what suits you and your child best. Many families find that participating in Kindergarten helps their child with the transition to school.

The Early Years Learning Framework is the main approved framework used across the nation in both education and care (child care) and early learning settings in Kindergarten for this age group.

“Inequality in early childhood experiences and learning produces inequality in ability, achievement, health, and adult success.”

Heckman, Spring 2011, American Educator, The Economics of Inequality: The Value of Early Childhood Education
WHAT IS KINDERGARTEN?

Pre-school arrangements are different across Australia. In 1968, a decision was made to attach pre-schools to schools in Tasmania and these were called Kindergartens. Kindergartens today use play-based learning. They are dynamic, interesting and fun places for children to discover the world around them. We know that it’s really important for very young minds to learn through play and play-based experiences, not through formal instruction.

Children are born ready to learn. In the first 5 years of life the brain develops more and faster than at any other time.

ARE SCHOOLS ABLE TO PROVIDE FOR CHILDREN UP TO 6 MONTHS YOUNGER?

Schools already have a range of early learning experiences for children from birth to four years with teachers supporting children at different points in their learning and development. Launching into Learning (LiL) provides an opportunity for children and families to begin interacting with school from birth and facilitates a positive transition into Kindergarten.

The Department will continue working with schools to ensure they are able to support all children in Kindergarten and Prep. For example, continuing working with schools to assist any teachers who may need to upgrade their early childhood qualifications, or to allow for any facility modifications. If Tasmania lowers the prep starting age, we have until 2020, when the first group of children will be eligible for Kindergarten, to make sure schools and families are ready for the change.

WILL TEACHERS BE ABLE TO SUPPORT MY CHILD AND THEIR SPECIFIC NEEDS?

Teachers are highly qualified and are equipped to support and nurture children throughout their many, and varied, levels of development. They will continue to be well supported with teacher assistant/s in Kindergarten. Children learn and develop at different rates and teachers and other staff will continue working with families to make sure all children are cared for and supported. This includes providing assistance with going to the toilet, comforting a child who is sick or upset and ensuring children get a rest should they need it.

“High quality pre-schooling is related to better intellectual and social/behavioural development for children.”


WHY AREN’T WE DOING WHAT FINLAND DOES AND STARTING SCHOOL LATER?

Most Finnish children attend early learning programs between the ages of 1-5 prior to starting formal schooling. While some countries with a later starting age do better than Australia in high stakes testing, such as Finland and Estonia, other countries with a later starting age do less well than Australia, such as Sweden, Hungary and Bulgaria.

There are many things to learn from other places in the world, including Finland. However it is not always beneficial to look at communities which do not have the same base community make-up and assume what works there will work here. For instance, the Finnish education system, and Finnish society more broadly, is very different to Tasmania. We need to promote ideas which will work best for children growing up in Tasmania.

HOW ARE WE WORKING WITH THE CHILD CARE SECTOR ON THESE CHANGES?

It is acknowledged that lowering the Prep starting age will have an impact on the child care sector in Tasmania. We are working with the sector to firstly understand the impact, then to ensure the impact is minimised in this important change for families.

CAN A CHILD CARE BUSINESS PROVIDE KINDERGARTEN?

Yes. Long day care centres can seek registration as a non-government school (through the Schools Registration Board, which registers non-government schools) in order to deliver Kindergarten.

A for-profit Long Day Care (LDC) that is approved to deliver Kindergarten as a non-government school would be eligible for funding under the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education (NP UAEC). It would not be eligible for State Government funding as funding is provided to non-for-profit schools only (as per the Education Act).

A non-for-profit LDC that is approved to deliver Kindergarten as a non-government school would be eligible for State Government funding and for funding under the NP UAEC.