

NEWS RELEASE

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Commissioner says new school year must be more than fingerpainting and sandpits

The Commissioner for Children and Young People says elements of early intervention programs for at risk children should be adapted for use in the new school year being trialled in Queensland schools.

Addressing the Queensland Association of State School Principals conference in Brisbane today (Saturday), Dr Robin Sullivan said lessons learnt in teaching younger developmentally-disadvantaged children should be used in the additional year of schooling.

Dr Sullivan told the conference that the extra school year (to be added before children enter Grade One) is vital to establish the early educational environment for Queensland students.

“One of the key questions we need to ask is what form should this extra year take?” the Commissioner said.

“Is it designed to qualify children in finger painting and sandpits - or are we planning on turning out whole orchestras of little Suzuki violinists?”

“My thoughts are that this year should include the key principles generally associated with early intervention programs for younger, developmentally disadvantaged children.

Ms Sullivan said it is essential that children’s early education include:

- encouragement of exploration
- mentoring of basic skills
- celebration of developmental advances
- guided rehearsal and extension of new skills
- protection from inappropriate disapproval, teasing or punishment, and
- a rich and responsive language environment.

“The additional year of school introduced in the ‘Preparing for School’ trials being held in 2002/2003 provides an opportunity to improve educational outcomes by intervening earlier where children are at risk,” she said.

Ms Sullivan also highlighted the need to develop a cost-benefit study to measure how investment in the extra year of school provides benefits and cost savings throughout life, reducing the cost to education, health, child protection and juvenile justice systems.

“Until we can quantify the effectiveness of early childhood programs with accuracy, early childhood funding will remain vulnerable to budget cuts,” she said.

“We need to focus on the fact that expenditure in the early years is an investment with life long returns, rather than simply outgoings vulnerable to pruning.”