

For the sake of the children

Preschool education was overshadowed in this election by student loans and NCEA. SARAH KACI looks at what is available for New Zealand's toddlers and how we match up against other countries.



Warren Wood chooses his kids over working full-time.

PHOTOS: SARAH KACI

Despite the variety of options available for New Zealand parents, access to early childhood education must be increased, says Stuart Middleton, an educationalist and executive director of student affairs at Manukau Institute of Technology.

Early childhood education is acknowledged as one of the keys to building a successful society — yet New Zealand's recent election focused on student loans and NCEA defects, leaving young children out.

In his only pre-election speech on early childhood education, Education Minister Trevor Mallard celebrated Labour's past policies on the matter without questioning the system.

Admittedly Labour promised 20 hours free early childhood education a week for three and four-year-olds from 2007.

"At the moment Manukau city access is running at about 62 per cent," Middleton says. "That's not high enough.

vately owned and provide all-day or flexible-hours care.

Playcentres — a service found only in New Zealand — are parent co-operatives where parents are the educators of their own children and take the responsibility for the management and supervision of sessions.

Warren Wood, father of two, chose the Auckland central playcentre for his twin four-year-old boys: "I can't think of a better environment than having your parents with you all the time."

Wood is at the playcentre four days a week. "The most important thing for me is that I don't leave my children. I couldn't ask, and they couldn't ask, for anything better.

"It is a choice my wife and I made," Wood says. "Other people's choice would be work and money. My choice was to stay with my children and we work hard to make this happen."

Barbara Backshall, director of early childhood education programmes at the University of Auckland, thinks early childhood education in New Zealand is improving thanks to the Government's 10-year strategic plan.

Set up by Mallard in August 2000, it aims to improve access to early childhood education, to raise the quality of the education and to close the gaps in participation between Maori and non-Maori children and Pacific and non-Pacific children.

Backshall says: "What it will do is that people will become qualified and that learning will enhance their ability to work in a very professional way with the younger citizens of the country."

Backshall appreciates the wide range of services available and says it is crucial parents are given choices.

"It is in the country's best interest that we have a variety of services because it better caters for families and for children."

She believes it is a good thing early childhood education is not compulsory so parents who want to can teach their children at home.

"There are two main issues for me concerning early childhood education," Backshall says. "One is the increasing number of parents requiring care and education for infants and toddlers and that we need to respond to this with a really safe environment for children.

"The other area is research. It is very important we research clearly what makes the difference to quality learning for young children."

Every country has a different approach on how to deal with early childhood education. In Australia, for example, the accessibility issue is taken care of by the Department of Education and Training which is committed to provide a place for all eligible children at the nearest kindergarten or at the kindergarten of their parents' choice.

Another difference is many kindergarten programmes in Australia are offered on the school site. Some pro-

grammes are run off-site but near the school.

The diversity of options in early childhood education is one of the characteristics of New Zealand system. In France, one institution organised by the Ministry of Education is the "maternelle" school.

Maternelle school takes children between two and a half and six years old. It is not compulsory but is a recognised educational institute before primary school. It runs every day, with morning and afternoon sessions, and the teachers are fully qualified. Being government-funded, it is free and offers complete access for every child.

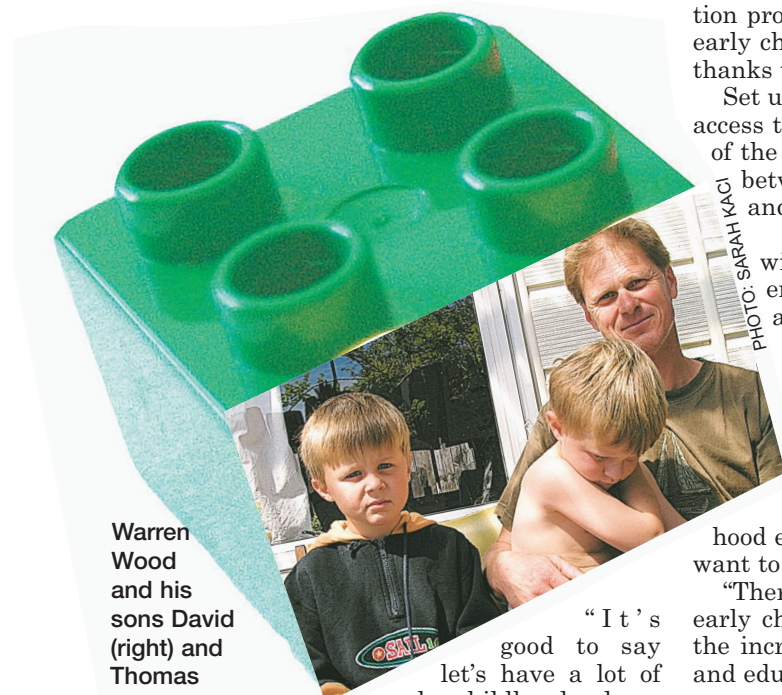
According to French Ministry of Education statistics, almost 90 per cent of young children attend.

Jacqueline Doublet, a teacher in a Parisian maternelle school, says maternelle is as important as primary school for children's development.

"It allows young children to be in contact with other children from as early as two and a half and to develop their ability to live in society," she says.

"Maternelle school prepares children for the process of learning reading and writing. It enhances children's autonomy in everyday life, from little things like getting dressed, washing their hands to more important things like interacting with their environment without the help of an adult.

"Maternelle school is also a space to do a whole lot of different activities that help kids to grow, like painting, drawing, listening to music, dancing, running, jumping, singing and the most important thing is to play and interact with others."



Warren Wood and his sons David (right) and Thomas

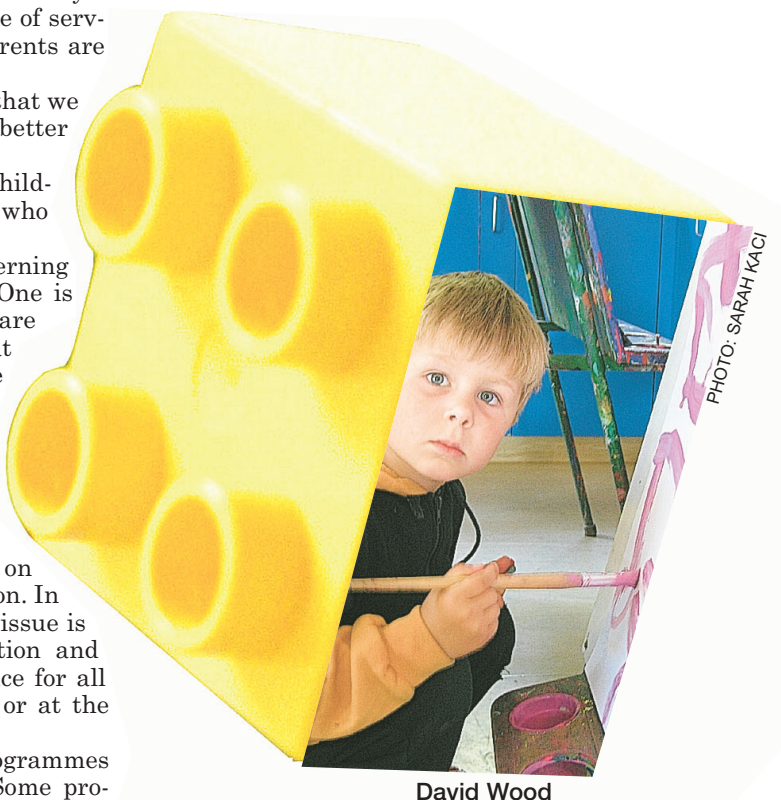
PHOTO: SARAH KACI

"It's good to say let's have a lot of early childhood education but who is going to run them? At the moment we have a very big backlog of people in early childhood education who are simply not qualified.

"We should be settling for nothing less than 100 per cent access. [Which means] no one who wants to go is denied because there's no space available."

The nine providers of early childhood education in New Zealand are kindergartens, playcentres, kohanga reo, Pacific Islands language groups, Anau Ako Pasifika, education and care centres, home-based care services, playgroups and Parents as First Teachers.

According to Ministry of Education statistics, the most popular service is education and care centres with about 44 per cent of enrolments in early childhood education in 2004. Many education and care centres are pri-



David Wood

PHOTO: SARAH KACI