

Evening Standard

Editorial

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Commitment put to test

THE GOVERNMENT'S apparent commitment to early childhood education may soon be put to the test as New Zealand's kindergarten teachers prepare to build up some industrial clout in their fight for higher salaries. It was a significant move by delegates at the Kindergarten Teachers' Association's conference that compulsory union membership be investigated as one way of winning the forthcoming battle for better wages and conditions. It shows that the teachers are most determined that their current salary claim, the largest lodged in the past 10 years, is met with an acceptable response. The claim seeks increases of between 13 and 17 percent for most teachers, with increases up to 27 percent at certain points on the kindergarten wages scale.

Few would dispute the argument that kindergarten teachers, most of whom receive between \$11,500 and \$16,500, are underpaid in an unacceptable situation created by a gross undervaluation of their work by previous governments and other decision-making authorities. It takes a special skill and expertise, developed over years, to be a kindergarten teacher, and with the value of early childhood education now recognised, the attributes should be reflected in more economically desirable incentives. Although there is a large amount of public support for better working conditions and salaries, it has obviously not been a view held with similar feeling by those in control. More realistic salaries are desperately needed to attract the skilled and a cross-section of people representative of New Zealand society. The fact that less than one percent of kindergarten teachers are male is

almost totally due to the low salaries. There is also an urgent need to prevent experienced teachers leaving the service, which has the greatest loss rate among all the teaching groups. In 1983, the service lost 161 members, and this rose to 198 last year. It is a trend that is understandably worrying the association, which is convinced it will continue if the salaries are not improved this year.

It seems ironic in this sort of climate that the teachers, through the June budget, are to have their numbers boosted by 80 new positions, which will be advertised next term for a starting date at the beginning of 1986. Education Minister Russell Marshall has said the new positions will be some way toward reducing the pressure on the teachers who are working with children at the most receptive stage of their lives. It is hoped that many of these additional positions will be won by graduates, but there will also be a need to recruit ex-kindergarten teachers from the community pool. Funds have been approved to mount a recruitment campaign and 85 teacher relief days have been approved for the purpose of retraining teachers who have had time out of the service. This is all very well, but if the salaries are not an inducement to people to enter the service, then the chances of former teachers willing to return must, at present, be less than marginal. Association president Jeanie McCafferty is hopeful the Government will make a good offer. Let's hope so, or else the optimism and hope it generated when promising early childhood education as a high priority will be quickly extinguished.